

## War Stories in Future Memory

By Tyler E. Boudreau

In his recent essay, Bob Meagher demonstrates through literature something I have come to understand through my personal life over the past several years—the importance of the war story to an individual soldier’s healing process. But the war story holds great significance for the collective of society as well.

Meagher brings our attention to Tim O’Brien who makes a valuable point about war stories, that they are crucial to understanding our own history. O’Brien writes in *The Things They Carried*, “Stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can’t remember how you got from where you were to where you are.” And while he is referring specifically to the individual, I suspect the same argument could be made about society. We all need our country’s war stories to remember what happened to us and how we all got to where we are today, a point that is reiterated rather poignantly, I think, in the June ‘09 issue of the *Atlantic* by Joshua Wolf Shenk.

Shenk describes an interesting 72-year study starting in 1937, which tracked the fates of hundreds of young men attending Harvard University (including John F. Kennedy) as they progressed through their lives. The “Grant Study,” as it was called, sought to discover patterns for lifetime health, prosperity, and happiness. Many of its subjects fought in World War II and the Harvard data show some interesting phenomena about their memories of war. Shenk writes:

In 1946, for example, 34 percent of the Grant Study men who had served in World War II reported having come under enemy fire, and 25 percent said they had killed an enemy. In 1988, the first number had climbed to 40 percent—and the second dropped to about 14 percent. “As is well known,” Vaillant [the study’s Director] concluded, “with the passage of years, old wars become more adventurous and less dangerous.”

It is fortunate for society that it did not wait forty years to hear their stories; otherwise, they would have given a very different impression indeed. As an Iraq War veteran this revelation heaves upon me a sort of urgency to write down quickly whatever I can remember about my own experience—what I saw, what I felt, and any particular technical data I can summon. The stories gathered close in the wake of war, raw though they may be, represent our only source of unexpurgated truth. Even embedded journalists, who are as close to the fight as the soldiers, cannot capture the full picture of war because of their status as observers. Only the soldier living within his own consciousness and pressed to kill in a superficially induced ‘survival situation’ can accurately convey the full meaning of combat. Furthermore, journalist too often come bundled with the agendas of their employers. Skepticism toward the media’s true impartiality dates at least as far back as World War I. Charles Montague, a WWI British soldier, wrote in his essay *Disenchantment*,

The most bloody defeat in the history of Britain...on July 1, 1916, and our Press came out bland and copious and graphic with nothing to show that we had not had quite a good day—a victory really. Men who had lived through the massacre read the stuff opened mouthed...They felt they had found the Press out...Anything then could figure for anything else in the Press—even it’s own opposite. So it comes that each of several million ex-soldiers now reads every solemn appeal of Government, each beautiful speech by a Premier or earnest assurance by a body of employers with that maxim on guard in his mind—“You can’t believe a word you read.”

I am intrigued by the role of memory in the creation of our present and vice versa. James Johnson notes in his book *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War*. “Human activity in the present and in history is reciprocal, not one of determination of the present by the past nor one of total freedom of the present from the past. We are our past, yet more; we shape our past in our memories. In a certain sense we find in history what we want to find there; yet we are restrained from the exercise of sheer imagination by the nexus of actual happenings.” And Paul Fussell points out similarly in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “Everyone fighting in modern war tends to think

of it in terms of the last war he knows anything about. The tendency is ratified by the similarity of uniform and equipment to that used before, which by now has become the substance of myth.”

I joined the Marine Corps fifteen years before I went to war. For me and my contemporaries, it was the Vietnam War which pervaded our training and our images of heroism. The sudden shift in boot color and uniform pattern right before our deployment to Iraq contributed, I think now, to a real sense that we were entering a new type of war. And yet, the old myths endured. In an environment that demanded a great degree of civil-military operations, we tended to think and act in the spirit of traditional ground warfare. It was the arena in which we felt most comfortable and worthwhile as Marines.

The observations of Johnson and Fussell are only possible though and verified by the firsthand accounts of soldiers. It is the war story that has revealed not just the ugliness of the battlefield but the troubling tendency of humanity to contort it into beauty. The war story is the primary text, so to speak, from which we learn about warfare and about ourselves. We discover the patterns of thought and our habit of relaying new war stories within the mythical frameworks of old ones.

The war stories and all that they have revealed about history may enable us to predict the future attitudes of our children towards the wars we fight now. Having three young sons of my own, already enraptured to some extent by the myths of battle, I must think hard about the way I tell my war stories. Everything matters, clearly. The details I recall, the tones I use to convey them, the attitudes I project, all matter as my boys begin to absorb my history into their own futures. What I think matters most of all is that I record these details, tones, and attitudes now while I’m still young and before I forget what war really is and start telling stories of what war really is not.

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