Simone Schwär

Storyfying War

Writing Lives and Combat in Contemporary American War Memoirs

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Introduction

> "For most Americans, the war in Iraq is an issue, rather than an experience."
> (Paul Rieckhoff 2006, 155)

In the beginning of his Vietnam War memoir *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1975), Tim O'Brien reflects upon the moral and didactic value of war literature, especially of accounts written and published by veterans. Wondering whether or not the soldier's tale offers any lesson of morality to the reader, he is uncertain about whether *his* account in particular should "take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war" (23), or if it should "confirm the old beliefs about war," namely that war is "horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events, and in the end, it makes more of a man out of you" (23). For O'Brien, as for other soldier autobiographers, the question remains: what exactly does war literature offer to its readers, if not a tale of morality? Can the regular soldier, a subject oftentimes torn between what O'Brien describes as a physical and intellectual standoff between pacifism and patriotism (22) teach us anything about warfare simply for having been there? Is warfare, as the writer cautiously ponders, still an initiation into manhood? For O'Brien, the answer comes quite simply and quite clearly: "I think not." Instead, according to O'Brien, the soldier can and must tell his war stories (23).

About twenty years later, Anthony Swofford takes a similar stance. In *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (2003), his personal account of his experience as a soldier in the First Gulf War (1990-91), he likewise prioritizes a vital desire for recounting subjective impressions from the battlefield and a desire to voice personal wartime experiences over being overtly moralizing and didactic. He plainly observes: "The warrior always fights for a sorry cause. And if he lives, he tells stories" (186), highlighting the role of the survivor as a story-telling mediator between the warfront and the home front. In a similar manner, John Crawford states in the preface to his *The Last True Story I Will Ever Tell: An Accidental Soldier's Account of the War in Iraq* (2005): "All we do in the army is tell stories to each other" (xiii).

As these writers highlight, it is the telling of stories itself, ostensibly devoid of any ulterior purpose, recounted by soldiers and veterans that

lies at the heart of soldiers' autobiography, and this is the central point of interest for *Storyfying War*, too. It argues that contemporary war literature is born out of the need to bear witness to the recent conflicts, to convey the characteristics of modern warfare and how it affects the soldiers who fight in it and experience the onslaught of warfare on their personal lives. Swofford, Crawford, and O'Brien are war veterans, and even though they return from and recount different conflicts fought by the American military, all three soldiers clearly voice a common intention: to give an authentic depiction of their battlefield experiences, and to portray the daily struggles of the regular soldier. Contrary to commonly held presumptions about war literature, which often try to foreground educational and instructive values, Ross McGregor (1990), analyzing the Vietnam War literary canon, maintains that most narratives by veterans do not seek universal truths; instead, the veteran is interested in communicating what warfare in the twenty first century really *feels* like:

> The majority of writers are pushed by the stimulus of events rather than attracted by literary ideas. Because they are driven to register the emotional impact of their experiences, shock or rage tends to outweigh any tendency to extrapolate, analyze, or place events in historical or philosophical perspective. (5)

McGregor clearly sees the need to simply reveal personal, often disturbing experiences on the battlefield as the motivation for telling wartime stories as more important than ostensible didactic purposes. He reads the soldiers' reluctance to draw conclusions from their war experience as one major characteristic of Vietnam War literature deriving from the soldier's rather emotional and intuitive contact with war and the indefinite nature of warfare (cf. 5).

Likewise, highlighting a sense of timelessness anchored in war literature, Samuel Hynes claims in the preface to *The Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (1997) that in order to make the impact of warfare on the individual soldier graspable, it is necessary "to turn away from history and its numbers, and seek the reality in the *personal witness* of the men who were there" (xii; emphasis added). Even though both scholars refer to the accounts of soldiers from earlier conflicts, *Storyfying War* claims that it is possible to reach a similar conclusion for current war accounts.

Contemporary soldier-author Jason Christopher Hartley confesses in *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq* (2005): "I'm obsessed with trying to recount events as accurately and honestly as possible, but in practice the only thing I am really good at is telling you how I feel" (59). With similar self-depreciation and a hint of an apology, Crawford notes in his preface: "I wrote most of my stories while in Iraq, the rest just after I returned. I hope all of these stories continue to convey the

immediacy of when and where and how they were composed" (xiii). Pointing out the importance of the story-telling act as a means to process frontline experiences for the individual soldier, albeit aware that some of his stories are only read and understood by a limited audience, he continues:

> I have too many of these stories to tell, and just a few of them get read, the ones that real people will understand, then maybe someone will know what we did here. It won't assuage the suffering inside me, inside all of us. It won't bring back anyone's son or brother of wife. It will simply make people aware, if only for one glimmering moment, of what war is really like. (xiv)

Like his predecessor Tim O'Brien, Crawford tries to draw the reader's attention away from possible didactic goals of a war story and towards the importance of the chance to tell about his own experiences, classifying war stories as an immediate response communicating subjective battlefield impressions.

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Since we are told to refrain from approaching a war story from an educational perspective, the question remains, how exactly can we describe and categorize them, especially the very recent ones? What do they thematize? How are they composed and how do contemporary soldiers represent their war experience? What does the text reveal about the self in relation to one of the most extreme situation men can experience – modern warfare?

In his *Vietnam War Stories: Innocence Lost* (1992), Tobey C. Herzog claims that "[b]ecause of the similarities amongst soldiers' experiences, literary war stories, across time, wars, continents, and cultures, have common elements: narrative patterns, images, characters, themes, inner conflict, and an overall ironic perspective" (4). He suggests that the stories are characterized by "timeless themes of literary war stories" such as "fear, courage, cowardice, heroism, camaraderie, survival, brutality, helplessness, alienation, and nostalgia for combat" (32). He also notes that usually, the soldiers bring a set of similar emotions and mindsets to the battlefield: a desire to prove their character and courage, a host of romantic illusions about war, and a patriotic spirit based on highly portentous catchwords such as honor, liberty, democracy, freedom, and in the case of the conflict in Iraq, national security, and countering terrorism (cf. 33). Thus, *Storyfying War* asserts that even though the war narratives are written by individuals about individual experiences, to a great extent, the accounts discussed thematize common issues such as manhood, brotherhood, growing up, initiation rituals, heroic and shattered ideals, and the breakdown of preconceived values and traditions in the context of a bat-

tlefield environment. These are certainly thematic aspects they share with traditional war literature.

In contrast to this unifying aspect, many scholars, in particular those preoccupied with the literature of the Vietnam War, argue that historical and aesthetic changes happen simultaneously, and that consequently, each war requires its own aesthetics. That each war is fought differently and thus produces new literary forms is particularly evident in the literature of the Vietnam War. Scholars such as Thomas Myers (1988) or Philip Beidler (1991) highlight that Vietnam War memoirs do not conform to previously established techniques and present a radical break with the traditional generic features of war literature. Similarly, in his *Fighting and Writing the Vietnam War* (1994), Donald Ringnalda, analyzing the characteristics of the Vietnam War narrations, argues that the Vietnam War writers had to invent new categories to make their experiences credible, categories which did not correspond to the established linear patterns of the realistic war novel deriving from World War II where "the author selects a group of recruits from the affirmative action stockpile […] puts them through basic training, where they become somewhat robotized, gives most of them nicknames" and sends them to the battlefield (17). He observes that:

> Many of the writers – whether in their works themselves or public statements – have pointed to the absurdity of trying to reveal the Vietnam experience with conventional means. Nothing in Vietnam corresponds to those means. In military operations, there was no front, no rear, no sense of progression; poof – there goes the structure of the conventional narrative. GIs rarely even dared to become close to another highly expendable person, and the enemy was indistinguishable from the ally; there goes the matrix of character. The days numbered down, not up; there goes the linearly conceived plot. Events did not move inexorably toward a necessary and meaningful collision; there goes the conventional climax. […] 'Nobody knew what was going on'; there goes the omniscient narrator (but he stubbornly remains in many Vietnam novels). And as many writers have said, you didn't learn anything from the Vietnam experience – you either survived or you didn't; there goes the machinery of the novel of initiation. (34-5)

One example of this new literary mode defying conventional patterns inherent in Vietnam War narratives is Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1977), which Ringnalda describes as "a freewheeling collage of straightforward, remembering, hallucination, irony, acid sarcasm, jump cuts, freeze frames, stream of consciousness, incongruous juxtapositions, realism, surrealism, Dadaism, and meta-fiction" (81) instead of a linear and chronologic battlefield memoir which begins with basic training and ends with the return from the battlefield (cf. 81). Other scholars such as Cornelius A. Cronin (1988) or Herzog also assert that most secondary literature on the Vietnam War "tends to see that literature and the events which pro-