

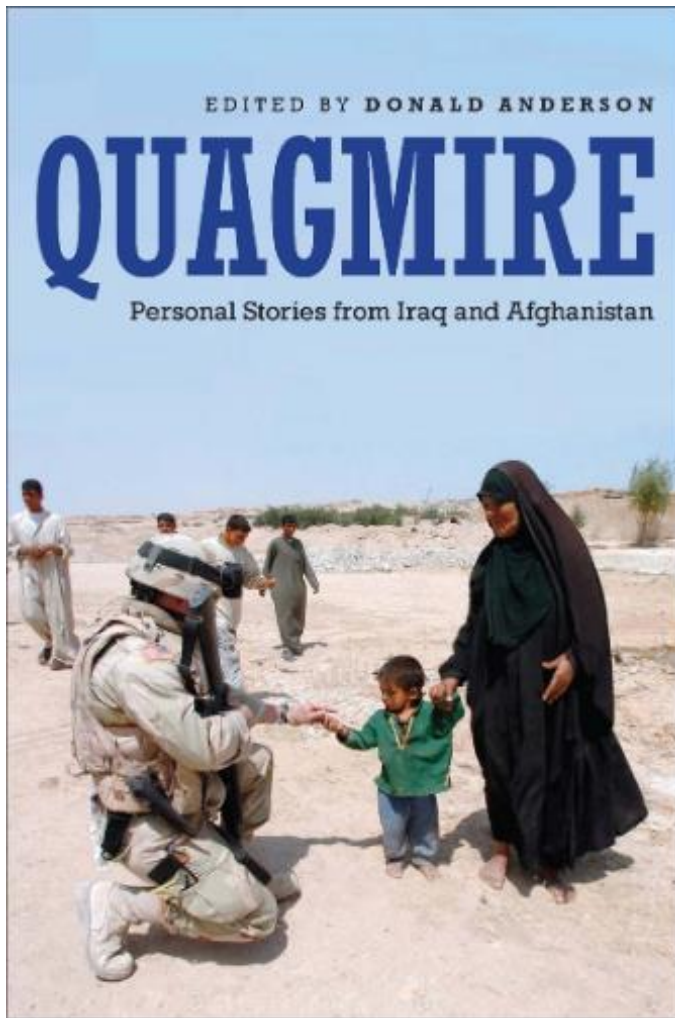
Donald Anderson's *Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan*

Allison Trueblood

In an increasingly connected world, we find ourselves becoming ever more isolated from one another. With our devices, endless chats, and notification pings, we are consumed by bytes of connectivity. Our purpose seemingly limited or scaled to the ability of our technology; our concerns reflective of the ethical limits of the tools we wield. And yet, in our disconnect, we forget (or worse, do not seem to value) the meaning of another's experience. The very devices intended to keep us linked have groomed us to prefer isolation and curated narratives—why do I need your experience when I can find my own? In the face of screen time, War Literature, both in form and material, ground us in lived experiences. The art produced by veterans preserve their change from who they once were to who they are no longer. Art, with its ugly honesty, draws our gaze to this transformation—a transformation which, without care, can be subtly replaced by endless commentary and criticism intent on prescribing feeling instead of eliciting it.

With the Taliban's reclamation of Afghanistan, the narratives of our service members quickly moved to the front of the nation's consciousness. The deaths of 13 troops during the final week of U.S. withdrawal ignited the tinder stacked by our veterans during the last 20 years. Days after the bombing, the *New York Times* published an article featuring social media photos and captions honoring the service members killed in Kabul. The smiling images of our service members aiding evacuation efforts had been uploaded only days before their deaths. The media's question for our veterans: What do *you* have to say?

Sadly, what they have to say has already been said, just not listened to. In *Quagmire*, we are offered stories of the past, but with a twist. Our veteran's voices are now joined by noncombatants: family members, reporters, and political columnists. In his Foreword, Philip Beidler suggests that *Quagmire's* collection of narratives is but a starting place to comprehend



the decades-long war in Afghanistan.

What the collection asks us to do is to face our own sense of the truth of America's longest war. That said, service members have been, of course, reflecting on their roles in the Middle East for years, their voices seeking to be embedded in our collective understanding of war. We are familiar with the stakes associated with loss, amputations, medals, and sacrifice. As Donald Anderson puts it, we "list more toward the authority of experience than we do the authority of imagination." War belongs to those who

lived it; or so we wrongly keep telling ourselves. It belongs to all of us. Oddly though, modern warfare seems both a video game and someone's reality.

We understand the language of war and how to talk around it. We know what an 'IED' is, perhaps even that the 'E' stand for explosive. We "know" the signs of post-traumatic stress

disorder and we know how you might get it after being at war. We know how, really, that might only affect a distant cousin, the neighbor's nephew, or someone's family when scrolling past a retweeted tribute to a fallen troop. We also know, subconsciously, that once we put our phones away, we will likely forget about another's loss. Our prescription to this ailment of long-drawn conflict is to "thank" a service member, offer military discounts, and gift a free meal on Veteran's Day. We know more than we ever have, yet that knowledge makes the separation gap all the more noxious. *Quagmire's* collection of personal essays inspires a thought: as a nation, should we not carry more responsibility now that we *know*?

The complexity of this question is confronted in Rebecca Kanner's "Safety," a portrait of a sister's guilt as she watches her brother reintegrate into society. It is difficult for her to separate his wounds from her own actions. She tries to find the source of her brother's pain, reaching back into her childhood for explanations, but instead finds her guilt matched with helplessness. After months of obsessive bodybuilding, Kanner's brother performs at his first competition. In the audience, her cheers mask her anguish:

No matter how loud I yell I can't get all the emotions out. I'm yelling at the top of my lungs not only because he doesn't hear well but because I feel like I might explode.

Beneath what I'm screaming aloud is what I'm actually screaming: *You're damaged and brave and bleeding from the wounds we gave you which you've made beautiful, and everyone is cheering because they are large, and in perfect proportion to each other, and flexed so that they are shining through your skin like something godly.*

Kanner does not name the disorder that follows her brother home, but she recognizes it, just as she recognizes the power of numbness in their new world together. In this moment, what she sees differs from those in the audience and yet, neither can look away. We have learned about survivor's guilt, but what is the name for a family's?

While Kanner chronicles her brother's attempt to find meaning, an airman discovers another unnamed horror of being witness to war. In "Lucky," Nicholas Mercurio documents the graphic, ambulatory intake process for wounded personnel. The scenes are shockingly surreal as he finds reality other than expected. On television, Mercurio writes, actors deliver their pain with confidence. In war, there are no screen-writers to tell us how to feel.

[The blood] looked fake, a high-fructose fraud cooked up for some low-budget production, which, in turn, explained the bad acting. The A-listers whom I was accustomed to watching had to delve deep into the well of their memories to tap into the faint echo of past trauma. Their pain was deep and searching and delivered confidently. The war-wounded in this scene portrayed pain that was too immediate, their delivery too diffident, to be believed. I started worrying that I might be fucked up.

The horror is less about the wrecked humans in front of him and more about *how* we've been taught to think of them. We want to stop Mercurio from his self-berating monologue because we don't blame him. We empathize with his brutal honesty. But when we motion to stop him, are we in turn shielding ourselves from blame? When did we start expecting finesse in death? When we "delve deep" to portray "real" suffering, we are confronted with the realization that we

have been dissatisfied with reality, especially when faced with trauma. Its meaningless is jarring; we cannot justify immense suffering for something that feels pointless, especially preventable. It doesn't feel like there is *enough* to justify it. Instead, we rely on overriding the moment with applied meaning. How else are we to live with ourselves?

In chronicling their experiences, a nightmarish obligation plagues many of the voices in *Quagmire*. After being touched by the war, the individuals encounter a reoccurring responsibility to feel a certain way, to fix oneself if not one another, but above all, to remember. Though most cannot justify what has happened, the desire to preserve the memories proves critical to shaping the veracity of experience. Brian Duchaney's "The Man I Killed," illustrates the banality of large bureaucracies. In this case, the Army's deployment system. His supporting role is admittedly mindless as he finds himself running errands for his unit in a stateside, simulated deployed environment. After grabbing Wendy's at the request of his superior, he opines "It was moments like this that made me think of my service as a joke, probably because I knew I was safe." What heightens the gravity of even banal work is his proximity to death. While Duchaney operates in logistics, the loss of one of their soldiers downrange can be traced back to him, particularly through the supplies he has issued. Though not directly responsible, Duchaney carries the guilt of association. By the essay's end, we feel his shame as he tries to hide his military identity in public. It is as if only through loss that we are made aware of our role in national conflicts. If Duchaney, straddling the deployed soldier's reality and the comfort of home, is capable of being responsible, what is our part in its creation?

In "Phalanx," Gerardo Mena compels the reader to remember a different reality. Instead of highlighting the heroism of a fallen Marine, Mena's focus is on the cowardice of another.

Though the circumstances for the Marine's death is vague, we learn how it is directly linked to a Staff Sergeant Harris. Ambiguous like his name is his culpability, though it is clear how we should feel about him. This story is not one of honor, but of disgrace and asks the reader to remember this aspect of resentment sharpened by the betrayal of a teammate. As his title implies, Mena makes it our responsibility to close in on this Marine's dishonor, urging us to form a united front against self-importance in the face of the ultimate sacrifice. In war, the enemy is not always anonymous. Sometimes, it can be the person on duty with you.

In "The Long Goodbye," we follow Thomas Simko as he documents the loss of his friend, Dom, to respiratory illness. As Simko recounts, the death is the result of prolonged burn pit exposure, a long and painful decline that gradually strips Dom of his mobility. Simko's account is shadowed by guilt, then anger. What he couldn't face then is what he has chosen to document. "Fear," he writes, "drove me away from him in the end."

I left a part of me there, on that couch where he died, and I don't want it. If I could, I'd send it to the president. I'd send it [to] the sergeant who sent him to the pits for the first time. I'd send it to the recruiter, who promised him a good job away from an abusive father and a neglectful mother, who traded him his shitty life for a long painful death. He was so brave to be so scared and still pretend for us.

Simko's fear is contrasted to what he considers Dom's bravery. The difference between the two is how they face the circumstances leading up to Dom's death. In the wake of Dom's passing, Simko searches for accountability. And though he names people, Simko's blame is cast upon a

system that has failed his friend. Dom's ability to project hope in the face of death, Simko wants us to remember, is more than we will ever be asked to do.

Though it seems the veteran's narrative is fading from the media's attention again, it must not be absent from any American's understanding of the Middle East. With this chapter seemingly closed, there is no better time to shift our gaze toward lived experiences that have been awaiting our attention. Any interest in War Literature optimistically reflects an increasing value on individual experience. As we look backward for clarity, we do so knowing there is more to come in the future. More voices to be heard as we continue to discover our connections to one another, whether we want to acknowledge them or not. At the same time, we are still missing voices. The dearth of female veteran perspectives casts a question of not where they are, but when will we hear from them? Technology may have shown us how easily we can retreat into ourselves, but it also reveals that it cannot replace Art's ability to communicate the complexity of human experience for us. What's more is that we bear a collective obligation to those we send to fight our wars. To encounter personal war accounts is to be willing to see yourself at war, if not face your direct link to it. Regardless of our proximity to combat, we all are held responsible for understanding it.

Allison Trueblood (AT): How did *QUAGMIRE* come about?

Donald Anderson (DA): In 2008, I edited a volume of memoir culled from WLA titled *When War Becomes Personal: Soldiers' Accounts from the Civil War to Iraq*. The collection was well-received and that interest compelled me to compile a second collection from WLA's pages,

focusing solely on our two most recent conflicts. A further incentive was that at the inception of the QUAGMIRE project, we were marking the 30th anniversary of the inaugural issue of WLA. One of the pleasures of being the journal's editor over that long period is to have witnessed the continuing (and growing) attention to the production and consuming of the literature of war. As I have written elsewhere: *The human race needs stories. We need all the experience we can get.*

AT: Is war writing necessary?

DA: What is remembered or imagined becomes reality. And if we don't create our personal versions of the past, someone else will do it for us. This is a frightening and political fact. How many books, for instance, seek to refute the fact of the Holocaust, complete with footnotes, et al.? And who can forget the opening pages of Milan Kundera's novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, which describe a photograph from which a party official has been airbrushed from history? Then there is Cynthia Ozick's short story "The Shawl," a strafing account of a death camp murder of a stick-limbed child. Though born in time to have been interned in a death camp, Cynthia Ozick wasn't; she was, at the story's fictional time, a cheerleader in high school in New Jersey. Memory and imagination are the what and how we have as artists and readers and citizens. To which we must cling, as if to luck or safety.

AT: How does war literature work?

DA: Of course war needs to be written about, and, from time out of mind, it has been. From the earliest rendition of the *Iliad* to the latest showing of *Black Hawk Down* or *Jarhead* or *The Hurt Locker*, war and art have reflected one another. War frames our lives. Look behind or ahead and war will find you. Though war has been convincingly written about by outsiders, I believe we

turn to insiders—combatants—for our weightiest insights. A soldier's response to war lays claim to a special visceral authority.

If it seems to fall to the historian to make distinctions among wars, each war's larger means and ends, the trajectory for the artist, regardless of culture or time, seems to fall toward an individual's disillusionment, the means and ends of war played out in the personal. For the individual soldier, the sweeping facts of history are accurately written not in the omniscient, third-person plural but in the singular first. We live in a culture that values the individual. Our works of art about war mirror this welcome bias.

However, if art were as powerful as we might wish it, then war might well have stopped after the *Iliad* was first sung. Aristotle's notion that history accretes but poetry unifies is a notion worth subscribing to. Art grants access to a larger world. We have the chance to live other lives.

AT: What responsibilities do war writers (soldier or not) have to their readers?

DA: Soldiers more than anyone know what they are capable of destroying, and I believe when they write about war (or paint it or photograph or film it), they are trying to preserve the world. Of course Art and Life are different—if they weren't we wouldn't need art. And if Art generally strains toward making sense, most of us have lived long enough to know that Life is under no such obligation. W. H. Auden, who came into his fullness as a poet as fascism was creeping across Europe, wrote about that scourge and then concluded that "poetry makes nothing happen," that nothing he ever wrote saved one Jew from the gas chambers. Yet, art markets authority. Else why would officials at the United Nations have decided to cover the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica* as council members met to discuss the start of Gulf War II? There is an

obligation—is there not?—as Neruda advised, to “Come and see the blood in the streets”? It is dishonest to create art that does not reflect the world that art exists in. To ignore what we do in war and what war does to us is to move willfully toward ignorance and pretense.

At their best, all war writers affirm the power of word and image and the human craving for meaning. And if one of the functions of such art is to disturb the status quo, to force us to view the world anew, to consider our capacities to build or tear down, then we must welcome these disturbances.

AT: What is your favorite work about war? What would you recommend?

DA: As a journal editor, I’ve often been asked to single out the world’s *greatest* war literature—a fool’s errand at best. New war literature shows up unexpectedly. Forty years after the fact, here comes *Matterhorn* by Karl Marlantes, a fresh and fierce probing of Vietnam. Or Denis Johnson’s *Tree of Smoke*. Most readers readily know the name of Philip Caputo, but few know his novella *In the Forest of the Laughing Elephant*, a Vietnam tale that, by my lights, rivals *Heart of Darkness*. By the way, is *Heart of Darkness* a “war” novel? See what I mean? In Ben Fountain’s *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk* only a couple of pages are devoted to combat, yet it is a formidable book about war and American notions about what war means. But, as I say, this is a fool’s errand, so I’ll stop.

Allison Trueblood, a graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, is, at present, an Instructor in the Department of English & Fine Arts there.

Donald Anderson, since 1989, has been editor of *War, Literature & the Arts: an international journal of the humanities*.

QUAGMIRE

Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

EDITED BY DONALD ANDERSON

FOREWORD BY PHILIP BEIDLER

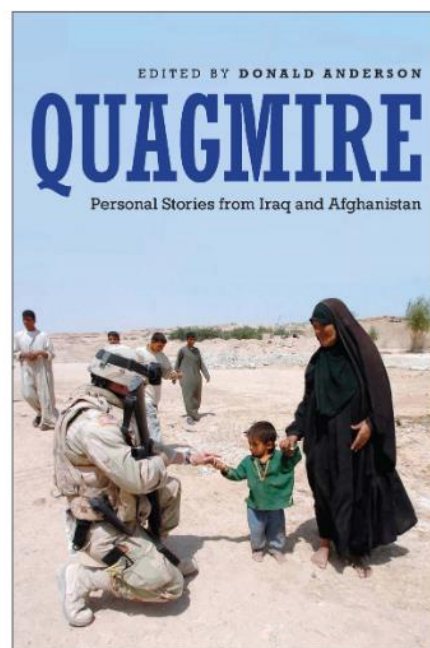
"The breadth and range of work collected in *Quagmire* is a remarkable chronicling not only of war but of art."—Elliot Ackerman, author of *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning*

"*Quagmire* is an invaluable anthology of the U.S. military's experience of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The voices are diverse: we hear not only from servicepeople but their loved ones, as well as journalists and Iraqi and Afghan civilians and soldiers, all delivering their immediate and often unvarnished accounts of loyalty, duty, valor, regret, guilt, and fear. But it is the quagmire of ambiguity and complexity that enlightens and compels the reader. . . . Many of these are stories that the tellers feel they should not or cannot share because the world will not listen. But the tellers break the taboo of trauma anyway—they make us listen with their generosity and artistry—and in so doing they offer healing to us all."—Dan O'Brien, author of *War Reporter* and *The Body of an American*

In *Quagmire* you'll find a range of voices—men and women, military and civilian—and a range of perspectives from the homeland, the combat zone, and war's aftermath. These personal responses to war in Iraq and Afghanistan have been selected from *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* to mark the thirtieth anniversary of its inaugural publication. The responses cover approximately fifteen years of the United States' conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and demonstrate the aftermath of war and the degreed ripples that extend beyond soldiers to families and friends, lovers, hometowns, even pets.

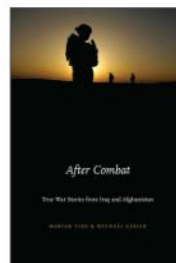
As citizens, Pablo Neruda advised, we have an obligation to "come and see the blood in the streets." To ignore what we do in war and what war does to us is to move willfully toward ignorance. To ignore such reminders imperils ourselves, our communities, and our nation.

Donald Anderson is a professor of English and writer in residence at the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he edits *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*. He is the author of *Gathering Noise from My Life: A Camouflaged Memoir* and the editor of *When War Becomes Personal: Soldiers' Accounts from the Civil War to Iraq*, among other books.

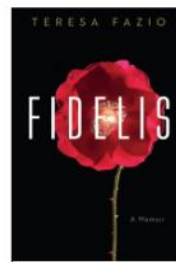


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