The Soldier's Tale
Places and Names: On War, Revolutions, and Returning
by Elliot Ackerman, Penguin Press, 2019

Donald Anderson / From the Editor's Desk

War is God's way of teaching Americans geography.

—Ambrose Bierce

A Marine who served five tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, Elliot Ackerman must be credited with earned knowledge of combat and its consequences. That's a given, especially when backed by the awarding of the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart. Moreover, Ackerman took part in the Second Battle of Fallujah, widely accepted as the most intense urban combat for Marines since Hue in Vietnam. Yet, for all his personal knowledge, it has taken until this, his fourth book, *Places and Names: On War, Revolution, and Returning*, to veer from fiction to personal essays. "Often, since coming home," he writes, "I've had strangers tell me they can't imagine what I went through."

> These comments are always made with kindness, with deference and sympathy; but I have always found them disempowering. If somebody can't imagine what I went through, it means I've had experiences that have changed me and yet have made part of me fundamentally unknowable, even inaccessible, and disconnected from the person I was before. If that's the case, it means I never truly get to return home: I am forever cut off from the person I was before these wars.

Is it this unknowingness and awkwardness that is behind a seasoned combatant's desire to return to the place of battle? Ackerman, writing from Syria's northern border with Turkey,

explains in his Prologue: "All I know is I have come to be close to something familiar." Early in *Places and Names*, we are introduced to Abu Hassar, a father of three, and "former" jihadist. On opposite sides during the war in Iraq, Hassar and Ackerman now face one another in a roadside restaurant sharing chai and baklava.

> "Why did you fight?" Abu Hassar asks. "Did you think the war was a good idea?"
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> "No," I answer. "I thought it was a bad idea."
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> "Still you fought?"
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> "When you are a young man and your country goes to war, you're presented with a choice: you either fight or you don't. And you'll always remember what you chose. I don't regret my choice, but maybe I regret being asked to choose. And you? Why did you fight in Iraq? It wasn't your country."
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> "That isn't true," says Abu Hassar. "My decision was like yours. I am an Arab and a Muslim. That is my country. America invaded Iraq. As a Muslim man, it was my duty to fight."

Abu Hassar goes on to explain how he'd gotten involved with al-Qaeda. He was taught that the straightest road to paradise was jihad. He felt blessed to be a part of the jihad, explaining the pro-active operations and ambushes he successfully participated in. Ackerman complains that the American missions were mostly defensive.

> "We never got to do anything like that," I say. "Being in the marines, most of our missions involved walking around on patrol, waiting to get blown up by you and your friends. We were almost always on the defense."

> "Yes, fighting you, we knew this. It was your nature, but it wasn't ours. Jihadists are as keen for death as Americans are for life."

At the same restaurant table, Elliot and Abu begin to draw maps with dates, portraying their war experiences in this concrete way, recalling, of course, Hemingway:

> I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. . . . Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.

Ackerman puts it this way:

> Only the dates and place names matter. These are a common language to us, one that not even Abed can translate. Had I understood Arabic or had Abu Hassar understood English, I don't think we would have spoken. The small log we make on these two notebook pages contain the truth of our experience. Soon we've filled most of the map. Between us one thing is missing: we have many places that overlap, nearly all of them, but we don't have a single date that does. Abu Hassar looks at me for a moment. I think he's noticed this too. Neither of us says, or tries to say, anything about it. But I think we are both grateful, or at least I am.

I believe it true that we accord a certain visceral authority to combatants who recount their experiences. Of course war has been written about convincingly by non-combatants, but *still*.

Philip Caputo:

> My old editor at the *National Geographic Adventure* magazine used to be a Golden Gloves fighter in Ohio, and he was talking about the young interns they had working at the magazine. He said, "You know the trouble with a lot of these people, a lot of them have never been cut."

Ackerman's been cut, and he knowingly guides us through sixteen chapters, traversing more than a decade in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Part of this journey, maybe most of the journey, is to account for war's aftermath, noting that extremists will always step into power vacuums, and that a certainty of war is that friends *will* die, and that all warriors are eventually permanent expats. Though so much of war will always be the same, the perception of the true artist is always original.

> If purpose is the drug that induces happiness, there are few stronger doses than the wartime experience. The soldier leaves home at a young age and begins taking this strongest drug, in effect freebasing the crystal meth of purpose. But eventually the war ends, the soldier returns home. He must reintegrate into society, find his happiness. Find a new purpose. He evaluates his options: a job at Home Depot, going to college, working in real estate. Nothing compares to what he's just done. He looks around and his world is no longer crystal meth. His world is Coors Light. A certain depression sets in: the knowledge that the rest of his

> days will be spent sitting on his front porch, sipping Coors Light, watching life pass by.

How not to recall a final scene in *The Hurt Locker*, where the returned bomb disposer, instead of selecting the correct colored detonator wire to cut, is attempting to select the correct colored cereal box in the grocery lane. The next scene, of course, is the soldier, properly suited up, heading down the street, toward the bomb, his lifeline unspooling behind.

Halfway through his account, Ackerman, having returned to the country where he fought his war, realizes that because that country is still at war, he is unlikely to experience closure. His experience is not ended, but only added to. "And if what I am doing is additive," he writes, "then my war is not over." He's reminded of saying in his old platoon, during the Battle of Fallujah: "It's your favorite war movie and you're the star."

As *Places and Names* accelerates, we become privy to one of Elliot Ackerman's private quests. Though he has worked gracefully and lucidly, enabling a clearer comprehension of the inflamed sectarian tensions along Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish lines—the complicated balances among peoples of the area of the Earth where civilization is said to have emerged—he has also worked to permit us to calculate his war's personal cost:

> In Fallujah there is a doorway I want to stand in. Dan Malcom was shot and killed trying to cross its threshold as he stepped onto a rooftop twelve years ago. A sniper's bullet found its mark beneath his arm, just under the ribs.

In Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*, Billy notes to himself that "Part of being a soldier is accepting that your body does not belong to you." This was brought home to me by my own son when he was serving as a Force Recon Marine. I had asked him about dog tags, and

where were they? He lifted his shirt to show me his tattooed ID info and blood type on the side of his chest beneath his armpit. He was a piece of meat, stamped with FDA approval.

In Fallujah, there is also a building that Ackerman wants to stand on top of. The day after Dan Malcom was killed, Ackerman's platoon fought a twelve-hour firefight from its rooftop. He explains, that once there, on the rooftop, he recognizes not so much the building as the vantages it offers. How not now to see the world as battlefield? How to not now, he writes, define a city by creation, but rather by destruction?

In what feels like a bonus, Ackerman concludes his personal and nonfiction account with "A Summary of Action." Here we find the official report of Ackerman's actions during the Battle of Fallujah, leading to the awarding of the Silver Star. The report, penned by his company commander, is augmented with Ackerman's current interpretations and reflections as to what had actually occurred. A sample:

> **Under the cover of darkness in the early-morning hours of 11 November, Lieutenant Ackerman's platoon was tasked to attack to gain a foothold on the south side of MSR Michigan in order to open the MSR as an east-west line of communication.** (. . . no one has slept, and we won't really sleep for another two days. We are also running low on food and water. I catch the Marines stealing glances at me as I talk on the radio. They will do this constantly in the days and weeks to follow. They know that what is said over the radio—an order, a mission—can get them killed, but they have little control over these decisions. When we come home, one of the Marines in our platoon has to see the base psych, or "wizard," for PTSD symptoms. When I tell him I understand what he went through, he tells me that I don't. He says, "If you had to drive a hundred fifty

> miles per hour down the freeway, what's scarier—driving the car or riding shotgun?" . . .) **He quickly seized a building with minimal resistance and once again became the forward trace for the battalion.** (. . . we shot a few rounds from a gunship—a cargo plane with a 120 mm cannon—into the first building we had wanted to fight from. It collapsed. So we had to go even deeper into the city, probably too deep. I've always wondered if we should have turned back . . .) **As the sun came up on 11 November, his platoon was in a position to engage multiple formations of enemy personnel moving into positions to attack the government complex.** (. . . we occupied a candy store. We ate Pringles and chugged soda. We reinforced our windows with bags of salt, using them like sandbags. When we saw the first insurgents we couldn't believe how casually they were walking around. They didn't expect us that far into the city. When we killed them it felt like murder . . .)

In *The Soldiers' Tale*, Samuel Hynes takes on the issue of "truth problems." Hynes, a Marine veteran himself, knows that any individual's perspective, especially in the carnage, chaos, and fog of war, is limited, not only by one's place in the field (a trench, a tank, a cockpit), but by the "infidelities of memory" and the "distortion of language." But, nonetheless, the individual's vision, confined or not, helps make up the larger, more accurate picture, the truth of war "being the sum of witnesses, the collective tale that soldiers tell":

> We don't need to call that convergence of witnesses historical truth, if that seems too confident; call it instead the recoverable past of war. Such recovery is possible; it is more than possible: it is imperative. What other route do we have to

understanding the human experience of war—how it felt, what it was like—than the witness of the men who were there?

The best war writing does not simplify. The truest accounts draw out contradictions and then sharpen them. *Places and Names* is ironic and heartbreaking and angry and hopeful, full of memory and love and loss and blood and sacrifice and courage and sorrow—testimony of the most important kind, giving voice to what seems so often, unaccountably, mute.

Donald Anderson is the longtime editor of *War, Literature & the Arts*. His most recent book is *Below Freezing: Elegy for the Melting Planet*. See http://donaldanderson.us