

N . E . A N D E R S O N

Writing War: An Analysis and Deconstruction of the
Contemporary Combat Memoir in
Nathaniel Fick's *One Bullet Away*

Fick's book makes the war become real,
with all the heroism and the mistakes
that still come with ground combat.¹

FOR A NONCOMBATANT, THE ALLURE OF READING THE MEMOIR of a combatant, one credited with the authority of having 'been there,' can be read as an attempt to understand that from which they are excluded: combat. The desire to understand the essence, the raw purity of this activity exclusive to soldiers—sanctioned bloodletting—propels some to read these soldiers' experiences with a voyeuristic and near-vicarious eye: what is the face of battle *really* like; what does it *feel* like; how can someone seemingly *just like me* set a gun-sight on another living person and pull the trigger, again and again? Outside the individual mind of the individual soldier behind the gun-sight, one not there can only imagine.² Does a blissful memory of childhood—one of those nondescript moments of soft light, smiles, and laughter—blink before the gun-sight, only to be blinked away and the focus returned to the cross-hairs, the adversary targeted between them, and the beads of sweat, fear, and thrill threatening above the brow?

Does rushing adrenaline silence the otherwise thunderous combat zone, and seemingly disorder real-time to a crawl, turning minutes into silent years? Does the blood of the slain burn forever into the memory of the slayer, to be blinked forward indiscriminately with the memories of youthful past? For this is how I imagine it.

‘This is war! Isn’t it Bloody?’

The gravitas of writing about war is the weight of the blood of the battle dead. War writing stands, therefore, within the philosophic problematic of being both a creative process and a eulogy to the dead.⁴ Toward that end, it is unlike writing on any other phenomena.⁵

How, then, is one to write about war? What words should one use to write about war? Do the ‘right’ words even exist in language as we know it? Does the very act of writing conceal more than it reveals? How best can one work within the confines of language to articulate the inarticulate? The words used to write war need to be pressed and rattled against their ‘referential instability.’⁶ Nothing should be read lightly, and nothing glossed over in the writing on war.

This paper will rigorously examine the war writing of a contemporary soldier’s memoir⁷: Nathaniel Fick’s *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*. The combat memoir was selected for analysis in this paper for its proximity to the violent nucleus of war, written as it is by the same hands that soiled, sweat, and bled in war—the trigger pullers who have the intimate knowledge that only one behind the trigger could have.⁸ Fick, an officer in the US Marines direct from Dartmouth, a Classics scholar with High Honors, served in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11. Fick and his memoir offer the ‘insider’ authority of having ‘been there.’ This proximity to and agency within war gives a soldier’s words the perception of exposing the ‘truth’ of war.⁹ But what happens when the possibility of ever representing the ‘truth’ is denied, as Deconstructionists posit it to be?¹⁰ What, then, of the combat memoir and its words of war?

Adventure

Fick writes that he joined the military for its Romantic, capital ‘R,’ promise of Adventure, capital ‘A.’ ‘I wanted to go on a great adventure, to prove myself, to serve my country. I wanted to do something so hard that no one could ever talk shit to me... I felt that I had been born too late. There was no longer a place in the world for a young man who wanted to wear armor and slay dragons.’¹¹ This statement is so rich, it begs unwinding. A gallant image of a Medieval knight caught out of time against the modern revolution of military affairs. Fick writes his decision to serve

with reference to the Classic war epics, which seem to have affected him toward his decision to serve; or at least, in the way he later wrote about his decision in his memoir.¹² Fick dismisses the consulting careers some of his fellow college graduates have chosen: 'I didn't understand what we, at age twenty-two, could possibly be consulted about... None of that appealed to me.'¹³ Fick further dismisses the Peace Corps: 'Dartmouth encouraged deviation from the trampled path, but only to organizations like the Peace Corps or Teach for America. I wanted something more transformative. Something that might kill me.'¹⁴

Here, let us pause to press Fick for the weight of his words. Admittedly looking for the 'something that might kill [him],' Fick found a solution in the military. That one seeks adventure in the military, whose violent business is killing, as Bourke rightly argues in *An Intimate History of Killing*,¹⁵ is that not problematic? Must 'adventure' be bloody to be valid? What does the element of 'adventure' have to do with the violent core of war? What does this element of 'adventure' really mean? There are other adventures in the world, besides war—if war is really an adventure, and not a political instrument.¹⁶ Why the military? Why the Marines Corps and not the Peace Corps? Fick 'chose the Marine Corps over the Peace Corps for the adventure, the leadership, the physicality of it.'¹⁷ He turned to the military for his want of a career more challenging than consulting, as consulting does not, at least not directly, have the capacity to kill him. Which the military clearly does. Do men join war because it is there to be joined, as Hynes posits?¹⁸ Why is war so elementally fascinating to men, as van Creveld posits it to be?¹⁹

The Test of War

The violent core of war is not unknown to Fick; he purposely selected to serve in the Infantry. Fick knew that only one MOS (military occupational specialty) would suit him, that of an infantry officer:

I wanted the purity of man with a weapon traveling great distances on foot, navigating, stalking, calculating, using personal skill... I wanted to be tested, to see if I had what it takes. The Marine Corps had recently unveiled a recruiting campaign using the motto 'Nobody likes to fight, but somebody has to know how.' It was dropped because Marines *did* like to fight and aspiring Marine officers wanted to fight. The grunt life was untainted. I sensed a continuity with other infantrymen stretching back to Thermopylae. Weapons and tactics may have changed, but they were only accoutrements. The men stayed the same. In a time of satellites and

missile strikes, the part of me that felt I'd been born too late was drawn to the infantry, where courage still counts. Being a Marine was not about money for graduate school or learning a skill; it was a right of passage in a society becoming so soft and homogenized that they very concept was often sneered at.²⁰

This passage needs to be examined closely so as not to gloss over without challenge the Romantic conventions. To start with, the scene of simple purity: the soldier and his weapon, out in nature, being tested. This is an elegant image, and Romantic, capital 'R.' The soldier as hunter, as sportsman, as gentlemanly in his pursuit.²¹ Fick forges a continuum with the classics, writing the Test of War back to Thermopylae. Soldiering is not always killing, as these memoirs remind us; it is also an intense test of skill. Enter the Test of War: men enter the military to be tested. But, what makes this test unlike any other? Scarry philosophically ponders in *The Body in Pain* whether there could not be conceived another 'test' that could replace war and promise of bloodless victory:

That the central activity of war is injuring; and that war is in its formal structure is a contest—it is possible to assess the nature of war by approaching it through the question, what is it that differentiates war from other kinds of contests? In any contest, the participants perform some activity *X* and must out-*X* each other... If it were strategy, two sides could simply submit war plans, and the more elegant maneuvering, the more brilliant path of choices, could be determined and a winner designated without ever having had to enact those plans... Is there something that differentiates war from other contests, is there something that differentiates injuring from every other act or attribute on which a contest can be based? One of two possibilities is true: either there is nothing or there is something.²²

Martin van Creveld answers Scarry with the resound of war's inimitability as The Test:

War, far from being merely a means, has often been considered an end—a highly attractive activity for which no other can provide an adequate substitute. The reason why other activities do not provide a substitute is precisely because they are 'civilized'; in other words, bound by artificial

rules... War alone presents man with the opportunity of employing all his faculties, putting everything at risk, and testing his ultimate worth against an opponent as strong as himself. It is the stakes that make a game serious, even noble... war [is] the game with the highest stakes of all.²³

However, van Creveld's assertion is vacant; he fails to answer his own paradox of why the most 'uncivilized' act of man should be his greatest Test, his most ennobling feat. Further, that the stakes of war are serious and noble, van Creveld fails to identify them in specific remove from other tests. van Creveld does not press to the absolute the 'stakes' of war or the 'ennobling uncivilized' paradox—*why* is it the ultimate act of nobility to *kill* and risk being killed? His absolutist retort to Scarry is false; and Scarry's question remains resolute and unanswered.

Fick writes: 'I think we are hard-wired to need a rite of passage of some sort. Look through history and we see that nearly all societies have a rite of passage for their young people. We are losing that. It doesn't have to be the military—it can be backpacking across Europe or rafting the Colorado, but we have to get out and live by our wits for awhile before coming back as more mature people and more vested citizens.'²⁴ That Fick elaborates to include non-military, the alternatives he poses, rafting and backpacking, are inadequate comparisons. Building bridges in the DRC, schools in the Caucasus—even bridges and schools within the domestic confines of his native United States, in hurricane-ravaged New Orleans, for example, might be more equitable in terms of civic-duty applications. However, even these remain inequitable to the Test of War. Though they may be physically demanding by way of manual labor, they decidedly lack the same physicality that, as Bourke, Clausewitz, Hynes, Scarry, Sontag, and van Creveld argue, is central to the 'contest of war': killing.²⁵

What is important to stress here is that the bloodless career alternatives to military service employ the same language as that used to describe war. And this is a dangerous position for the writing on war. A rite of passage, adventure—rafting on the Colorado or waging war in Afghanistan; the words seem unjust to their disparate signifieds.²⁶

That the Test of War is unique, its elemental uniqueness needs be elaborated: *Why? How?* Otherwise, it becomes empty rhetoric that will proliferate as a convention that conceals rather than illuminates. If, ultimately, the Test is elementally unique in its risk of death, as Fick posits the thing that 'might kill him,' does not the Test compare with other efforts in death-defying behavior? That other Tests and Adventures, such as solo expeditions across the North Pole, likewise

carry a risk of death, as do many nonbelligerent activities, what then of the Test and Adventure of War? How does Ernest Shackelton's 1914-5 Antarctic expedition compare yet differ from the Test of War? Fick writes: 'strong men hauled heavy loads over rough ground... It was elemental and dangerous. It was exactly why I'd joined the Marines.'²⁷ Replace 'joined the Marines' with 'expeditioned across Antarctica,' and the diction of both Fick and Shackelton would presumably be the same, though writing dramatically different ends. That Shackelton risked death and survived in the Antarctic, the Test of War must be more than facing and besting the threat of death. Further, if it is more than surviving, what does it mean to pass the Test of War?

Fick closes his memoir with: 'I took sixty-five men to war and brought sixty-five home. I gave them everything I had. Together, we passed the test. Fear didn't beat us. I hope life improves for the people of Afghanistan and Iraq, but that's not why we did it. We fought for each other.'²⁸ Here again the comparison with Shackelton is valuable; he too saved all of his men aboard the *Endeavor*. The Test of War is personal; it is a test against uncommon, violent conditions; it is a test of survival, of leadership, of physical and mental endurance, of besting your enemy. But these anecdotes do not reveal the unique essence of the Test of War, that which separates it from other tests, similar but decidedly not the same. And the 'Test,' so easily and loosely spoken of—and written—as if it was as empirically obvious as the element aluminum, remains elusive and threatening as a hollow, yet readily perpetuated convention.

As Scarry writes: 'If then, the question, "What is it that differentiates [war] from any other act on which a contest can be based?" is not a question that can be easily answered, neither is it a question that can easily unasked.'²⁹

Killing

'We spent the day making [combat] veterans.'³⁰

That the violent nucleus of war is killing, it should clearly write massively into the combat memoir of Fick, which it does. Here is Fick on killing:

Aside from insects and plants, I'd killed one living thing in my life. While mowing my parents' lawn as a teenager, I'd accidentally wounded a chipmunk with the mower blade. Gritting my teeth, I'd cut off its head with a shovel. Even this mercy killing had bothered me... Now shooting grenades at strangers in an unnamed town, I was kind of enjoying myself...

I saw a young man crouching in an alley... He held an AK-47 and sighted down the barrel as he fired at us. The rifle jumped in his hands, and little spurts of flame flashed from the muzzle... I lobbed a grenade at him and the round exploded against the wall just above his head. I watched him fall over the rifle. We flashed past the alley, and I reloaded, firing more grenades into the windows and open doors.³¹

It is notable that Fick prefaces his description of killing men in war, with his 'first kill' of the chipmunk by mower blade. It is a strong reminder of his not so distant civilian past, reminding his memoir's non-combatant readers that he is someone *just like them*. And that someone so similar could not only kill in war, but *enjoy* the killing furthers the inquiry into *what* it is about war that is so simultaneously hideous and thrilling. How can the mercy killing of the chipmunk bother, and the shooting of grenades excite? It is the same process of bringing death, taking life, making absence of presence. To that end, it is notable as well to examine the words Fick selects to write of killing: *falling*. This man impaled by Fick's grenade, did most certainly not simply 'fall over,' which is to imply a dull passivity, a gentle movement. Nothing about that moment was gentle for the man on the receiving end of Fick's grenade, surely. Fick further writes of killing:

Two men jumped out of the cab and ran for the embankment on the side of the highway. If only they'd raised their hands in surrender, they could have survived. Instead, Sergeant Espera took aim with his M4 and dropped them with well-placed shots to the chest. Both men crumpled to the ground and lay still in the full glow of our headlight.

Here, again, the words Fick selects to write of killing: *dropping* and *crumpling*. These are again words of gentleness and passivity, whose distance from pain is made more apparent against the contrast of praise for Espera's 'well-placed' shots to their chests, *well-placed* in having successfully killed. And again:

Lower, Christenson. You're shooting too high...
Christenson dropped his rounds, and the men fell.³²

These men did not simply *fall*, *drop*, *crumple*—their bodies fared the ultimate alteration from presence into absence. As Scarry writes eloquently of the violent process of unmaking:

The arms that had learned to gesture in particular ways are unmade; the hands that held within them not just blood and bone but movements that made possible the playing of the piano are unmade, the fingers and palms that knew in intricate detail the weight and feel of a particular tool are unmade... the head and arms and back and legs that contained within them an elaborate sequence of steps in a certain dance are unmade; all are deconstructed along with the tissue itself, the sentient source of all learning.³³

The *falling, dropping, crumpling* that euphemize killing in Fick's memoir threaten to weaken the violence of war as wrote. These are deaths that are violent. In the selection of words that dismiss the inherent violence of war, death by grenade and sniper fire, war is misrepresented. War's death is not a passive experience for its recipient, though it clearly is only given passive mention in the combat memoir of the shooter. Each of these men killed is not without name, family, personality, skill, and the various 'makings' of his civilization, as referenced above by Scarry. He does not simply *crumple* and vanish. His death is visceral and deep, as could only be from a grenade, and should not be quickly glossed over. What of the death brought by this grenade? Was it instant? Or did a collapsed lung sever the last attempts at breathe, drowning the slain in blood deprived of oxygen? *What? How?*

Fick writes of war's effects: 'Sometimes it is better not to know.'³⁴ Yet this 'not knowing' amounts to not knowing war. Destruction is war. Killing is war. As Scarry writes: 'reciprocal injuring is the obsessive contest of war; that its centrality slips from view needs to be examined.'³⁵ Not to know of war's effects is to remain ignorant of absolute war; it is to deny the destination of the bullet's trajectory. War may be about camaraderie, leadership, trust, purpose, stress under extreme pressure, but it is foremost about killing. To write over the killing is to deny the ultimate essence of war, the unique elemental that makes war unlike any other contest or Test or Adventure.

It is notable in the passage cited herein of Fick's first kill that he slows time in the lead up to his grenade-throw, pausing there as if in still life: the enemy aiming his AK-47, Fick taking the time to register this, and then throwing his grenade. After this, time again accelerates, as Fick's Humvee accelerates forward, and Fick throws more ammunition into windows and doors, void of personal identification of an enemy, though they are presumed to be inside. For Fick, clearly, *his* moment of killing is very important to *his* combat memoir, but a more representative writing of war would not so softly write of the assured pain of the enemy, the 'other' on

the opposite end of the bullet. Scarry finds resonance with this in the writings of Homer, where each death, whether Trojan or Greek, comes before one's eyes in four aspects:

the name of the person; the weapon ("freighted with dark pains") as it approaches the body; the site of the entry and the slow motion progress of the widening wound (for we are to understand that it is the deconstruction of the sentient tissue that is taking place, and that this deconstruction always occurs along a specific path); and fourth and finally, one attribute of civilization as it is embodied in that person... So the bronze point that enters Phereclus through the right buttock, pierces bladder and bone, and pierces as well the shipbuilding and craftsmanship bodied forth.³⁶

Homer's *Iliad* is not a combat memoir, clearly, but the sentiment of deeply personal recognition in death is one that the combat memoir should remember not to forget.

One can only *imagine* the deaths of the enemy killed in war; it is of course ridiculous to assume otherwise. But even writing the process of wondering admits a ready willingness to reveal more the violence of war as it exists on both sides of the bullet, not just from the perspective of the shooter. Fick: 'I imagined two guys, probably my age... sit[ting] in that hole and shoot[ting] at [us] when they came. They would be protecting their village, their mothers and sisters, from the infidels.³⁷ Further: 'I wondered whether any of [my bullets] would end up inside another human being before the night was over.'³⁸ The destination of the bullet must be imagined: 'I see the faces of men I have never seen.'³⁹

Fick writes of war as killing the Shia way of life:

I enjoyed the shade and greenery, the water and crops and glimpse of survival in the fabled southern marshes. This Shia way of life was vanishing, and I wished that we could enjoy it without the taint of war.⁴⁰

That Fick can simultaneously serve as an active agent of war and lament the disappearance of the Shia way of life, causally linked to the war being waged, is a fabulously complex contradiction. However, Fick stops short of lamenting his involvement in 'the taint of war;' it is as if he separates his agency from the scene he surveys. But Fick *is* an active agent; his commission was voluntary, after all.

That Fick fails to press his contradiction to its logical conclusion limits his reader's understanding of a soldier's self-justification of killing in war.

Fick further describes the killing in war:

Bloody hands pawed at the doors, leaving plaintive prints. Bullet holes frosted the windshields. Congealed blood, more blood than I thought a human body could hold, pooled around the flattened front tires.⁴¹

Here is a literary photograph of war's bloodied dead. Without commentary, this scene could read of either the enemy dead or of Fick's own. Void of context, as Sontag has argued of the war photograph, this image belongs to both and neither opponent, belonging ultimately to War.⁴² As Walzer writes in *Just and Unjust Wars*: 'war kills, that is all it does.'⁴³ However, Fick does preface this scene, with the horror that this death is of *his* side:

Over the past four days, we had seen dozens of wrecked Iraqi vehicles. Tanks hit by American jets, trucks and anti-aircraft guns blown up on the roadsides. Now we saw more wreckage in the southbound lanes. But something was different. I stared.

'Holy shit, Gunny. Those are Humvees'... These were the sad remains of the Army's 507th Maintenance Company... it looked like those Americans had died.⁴⁴

The distance and near-blasé description of the four days of Iraqi dead is startling. These tanks and trucks incinerated by fire from American jets clearly contain drivers, all of whom are now dead, destroyed in the same fashion as the machines in which they were riding. Scarry speaks of this common displacement of 'wounds' away from the human body onto the humans' weapons, reversing the animate with the inanimate, and distancing the ultimate source of the wounding.⁴⁵

Fick suggests that killing in the combat memoir is akin to a surgeon's clinical detachment:

A third fighter looked as if he'd died the clichéd death by a thousand cuts. One of the Cobra's flechette rockets had hit next to him, sending thousands of tiny metal slivers into every inch of his body. There was no blood, only razor thin cuts.

I found no joy in looking at the men we'd killed, no satisfaction, no sense of victory or accomplishment. But I wasn't disturbed either. I fell back on an almost clinical detachment. The men were adults who chose to be here. I was an adult who chose to be here. They shot at us and missed. We shot at them and didn't miss. ⁴⁶

This passage is notable, first, for its graphic, yet passive description of the battle dead. Image: a man, lifeless, whole yet fragmented with 'slivers' from a 'flechette rocket.' 'Flechette,' meaning little arrow in French, combined with the selection of the word 'sliver,' suggests of a delicate, near poetic death. Surely, death by rocket was anything but delicate for this deceased. That this death is so unusual, so similar to the cliché, it loses its ability to shock, and becomes 'surreal,' which Sontag argues is 'the euphemism behind which disgraced beauty cowers.'⁴⁷ Fick writes this scene in awe of the absurd strangeness of war, and the likewise strange deaths that war brings—so strange they are nearly beautiful.⁴⁸ Yet he also writes it with a passive, 'clinical' remove; he is an observer, observing without feeling, as if viewing an autopsy. Though detached, Fick does admit of his connection to this man's killing. The killing of war is as a duel for Fick, between two willing, self-selecting participants; this man tried and failed, his failure directly crediting superiority to Fick. This description writes into the convention of understanding war as a game, the Test.

Fick further writes of the effects of war's killing with the aid of the conventional intertextuality, the 'Valley of the Shadow of Death':

We passed by a minibus that had recently exploded. Its occupants were charred lumps, some hanging from the shattered windows... On the sides of the road, dead gunmen sprawled from the fighting holes. We drove gingerly past one still clutching his RPG launcher. Rocket-propelled grenades littered the ground around the corpse... I found myself mouthing the Twenty-third psalm: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.'⁴⁹

Paul Fussell in his *The Great War and Modern Memory* traces the invocation of the Psalm by First World War combat memoirists to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which he argues was well-read among the soldiers of that war.⁵⁰ That Fussell seeks to target the origin of the Psalm's intertextuality to Bunyan is notable. But more notable would be the inquiry into *why* the Psalm continues to proliferate

among war writing: what value does it add to the writing and understanding of war? Does it make Fick's scene of charred lumps of human flesh any more grotesque? Or does it make them less grotesque—serving instead to distance the horror of war's killing, removing it to an unreal, 'other' world of shadows and demons, not men at war?

Fick is not writing his memoir from a void; he has read, and by reading, he has coded, both consciously and subconsciously, means of articulating his perceptions. Fick writes of reading Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*:

I spent the evenings after Rudy's workouts in a chair at the ship's rail, watching our bow wave push toward the setting sun and reading Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. 'The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken place. But those that will not break, it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure that it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.'⁵¹

The Hemingway quote Fick selected is about strength, resistance, and ultimate defeat—how does that write into a war memoir? That the very gentle and the very brave are killed impartially, what does that write into a war story of an individual at war—what happens to skill—does the sacred geometry of chance, life and death being but 'one bullet away' trump? What does it mean to be neither good, nor gentle, nor brave—and therefore be killed less quickly? Fick leaves the Hemingway quote hanging without explanation; as such, it is empty rhetoric, ambiguous and indeterminate. Cloaked behind the authority of Hemingway as another soldier-writer, the quote adds no value to his reader's understanding of war. Fick uses Hemingway to link himself with the continuum of war writers before him, and in doing so, proliferates an obtuse quotation as a truism of war.

Hynes, in his otherwise formidable *A Soldiers' Tale*, writes without adequate rigor on the influence of this important intertextuality on the combat memoir:

In most war [memoirs] there is nothing to suggest that the author is aware of any previous example: no quotations or allusions or imitations of earlier models, and no evident knowledge of previous wars... War writing is a genre without a tradition to the men who write it.⁵²

Fick's memoir writes refute to Hynes. Fick, a classics scholar writes his memoir with clear reference to this tradition, opening each of his three sections—Peace, War, Aftermath—with a direct quote, Peace: Thucydides, War: Plutarch, Aftermath: Augustine of Hippo.³³ 'The quotes beginning each section were lines that stuck with me from reading the classics.'³⁴ Fick clearly affects the codes of the war-story tradition into his war writing. As challenged twice above, the invocation of the tradition does not advance the understanding of war's essence, but instead obfuscates it under hollow literary tapestry.

Again, Fick writes of killing by invoking another text from the past, that of the Vietnam War films:

My first reaction was to laugh. We had stumbled onto the set of a Vietnam war movie. I half expected the notes of 'Fortunate Son' to come drifting through the trees. An artillery round crashed into the field across the road. It sliced through the power line, which spring back and whipped through the air like angry snakes, spitting sparks. Wounded marines fell, and calls of 'corpsman!' rose from the fire.³⁵

Fick seems to make sense of his experience through the inherited filmic canon of the Vietnam War; the tradition before him serves as a near heuristic device: equate the surreal in war with Vietnam. Fick notably does not challenge the tradition, but again carries it forward. Though there is much going on here literarily—intertextualization, animation of the inanimate, distancing of pain, memorialization—Fick does not pause his narrative, but pushes forward onto a new topic, leaving the rigorous reader to challenge the words he leaves in his wake. This is not a pivotal scene for Fick's narrative; it is merely one scene of many 'warscapes.'³⁶ But, being as it is so rich with convention, it is critical to draw pause and deconstruct these moments of the combat memoir if war as written is to be properly understood.

The focus of this paper has been on the words used by Fick to write of his decision to become a soldier and of his job killing as a soldier in war, to the necessary exclusion of other elements of soldiering and war that feature in his memoir. It was argued herein that the violent nucleus of war is killing, and the analysis of this paper was structured accordingly. Though many more questions have been raised than answered, it is argued that there is much worth in asking questions, challenging conventions, and forbidding assumptions if war is ever to be understood as it is written. A complacent reader fed on hollow conventions will dismiss the graphic

violence swathed in delicate, distanced rhetoric; the violence of war will be overwritten, to the detriment of the study and understanding of war, and the spilled blood of the battle dead. As Fick himself writes of his less rigorous readers:

I am bothered sometimes when I get notes from people who've read [my] book, particularly from young guys of military age, and who seem to focus exclusively on the romance of it. They look past the death and destruction and pain.⁵⁷

The ultimate challenge of writing war thus becomes the exposure of war's violent core in such a way that defies the passivity of reading. It is imperative that the dull eyes and wet lips of bloodlust that race through war writing from one battle scene to the next as entertainment pause to *feel* the carnage and pain of war's death and destruction. Writing war that could collapse the walls surrounding its readers, lacerate the readers' bodies with the heat, sand, and noise of combat, infuse the readers' senses with the confictions of fear, thrill, honor, agony, and pleasure, and loosen the bullets from its very pages: this would be war writing as an absolute. That the limitations, or frictions, detailed herein frustrate this absolute, the application of taking 'written war' to its absolute, will, as with Clausewitz's study of war, aid in the understanding of that which is possible: total war and total written war.⁵⁸

Notes

1. Nathaniel Fick, *One Bullet Away* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), back-jacket review.
2. Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined* (London: The Bodley Head, 1990).
3. George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1938), 95.
4. Fick dedicate his memoir to his fellow soldiers, as do Fussell and Hynes with their analyses of war literature: Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Hynes, (1990); Samuel Hynes, *A Soldiers' Tale* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).
5. The problem of articulation is one for all metaphysical phenomena.
6. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and UnMaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 121.
7. The focus of this paper has limited its examination to purely western accounts, exclusively American and British combat memoirs. While an examination of a properly multi-national—as well as a multi-dimensional, inclusive of noncombatant memoirs and fictive war writing—is clearly necessary for a complete understanding of the literary relationship with war, it is beyond the research scope of this paper.

8 Hynes, (1997), xvi Adopting Hynes' definition of the 'personal narrative,' the combat memoir studied herein has been defined as 'first-person prose by participants in the events recorded.'

9. See: Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1967); Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Mark Taylor, *The Vietnam War in History, Literature and Film* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2003).

10. *On Deconstructionism*, see Derrida, (1967): Deconstructionists posit that 'truth' only exists in the present moment of its happening, and that representations of the past are necessarily doomed to inaccuracy, because time changes the perception of the event. Deconstructionists, as Post-Structuralists, further posit that language is a structural system limited by its very structurality, that meaning is unstable and often unsharable, especially in the case of sentient experience. On sentence: Scarry, (1985).

11. Fick, (2005), 4.

12. Hynes, (1990).

13. Fick, (2005), 4.

14. Fick, (2005), 4.

15. Bourke, (1999).

16. Carl von Clausewitz, trans.J.J. Graham, *On War* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004).

17. Interview with Nathaniel Fick: 8 August 2006.

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N.E. ANDERSON completed her BA in English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania in 2002 and her MA in War Studies at King's College London in 2006. She is now studying Modern European History at Yale.