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**Gold Stars on Bleeding Scars: The Cult of the Veteran vs the Cost of War in  
Fallon's *You Know When the Men Are Gone***

FEW SUBJECTS OF ITS MAGNITUDE ARE AS REMOTE from the lived experience of most Americans as war. But for those who fight, their families, and the civilians bound up in the military apparatus, war and its ramifications are an immanent reality. Siobhan Fallon, the wife of a soldier, wrote an interwoven anthology titled, *You Know When the Men Are Gone*, which discusses what exactly military life is. Fallon's writings challenge the assumptions that many civilians have about war. Ultimately, what is at stake here is whether the experiences of those who lived war are going to be heard or, if only the narrative promoted by the media will be. Whether war, in the abstract, or in the specific case of Iraq, is justified is out of the scope of this paper; however, the way in which the machinery of violence, directed at Mesopotamia, by the United States, consumes those caught in it is. Fallon shows that soldiers, their families, and civilian contractors serve two roles; on the one hand, they are fundamentally expendable cogs in the war effort, and on the other they are valorized tools of propaganda.

According to Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, "War is hell." The military tries to ritualize war, to make it into a secular religion. It promises salvation to those who sacrifice, but as Sherman noted, can only give them hell. In "The Last Stand," Specialist Kit Murphey, a soldier who became disabled after an improvised explosive device blew up his vehicle, returns to the United States where he, like many of his comrades, is greeted as a hero: "...he had been dreading this moment of standing alone, of being selected to get a pity hug from the too-dressed-up FRG leaders or too-dressed-down Red Cross volunteers who greeted the soldiers standing unloved amid the embraces." (Fallon, 132) The FRG, or family readiness group, fills a vital ideological role in this moment. America is supposed to champion its warriors, to give them laurels, as they fight for family, God, and Country. The spectacle of this fiction would be unraveled if those soldiers, who had sacrificed their bodies to it, were not met with cheers and hugs. Kit, not directly conscious of the fraud, senses the insincerity when

he terms the embraces of these volunteers “pity hugs.” It isn’t organic. The FRG leader, highly dressed, is playing a part in a ritual, while the Red Cross volunteer is underdressed, as if there were no gravity to the situation. The pomp and circumstance rings as false for Kit as it did for me when I returned from war.

Like Kit Murphey, Sgt. David Morgeson, or “Moge” as his men called him, narrates “Camp Liberty,” and senses the truth about the bullshit ideology that sold the war to the public and was shoved down the soldiers’ throats. The religious fervor that swept up many young men, including Moge, turned out to not matter in a world where children were blown up by mines and your country’s bombers. “Civilians thought they were patriots, but they understood that they were just more naïve than the rest of the country; they had heeded the call that most had not, and now they were biding their time, waiting to get out. They told themselves that they would tell their war stories to their kids, their grandkids, and then it would be all worth it.” (Fallon, 38) The only positive Moge can find in being an occupier in a foreign land, is that he will have stories to tell his grandchildren. Moge will, one day, give the truth of war to future generations. The civilians back home never had to face the incongruity between the patriotic yarn, spun by media hucksters and political charlatans, and the reality of war; but they also didn’t have the courage to heed the call, so their laudations are opportunistic at best. This is not to shame civilians for not understanding war, or argue that they are lesser than those who did serve, but it highlights what veterans and our families experience.

In “Gold Star,” Josie Schaeffer, the wife of a fallen soldier, acutely feels this fraud when a Purple Heart medal recipient thanks her family for their service after she parked in a spot reserved for families of fallen soldiers. “I’m grateful for your sacrifice,’ he said. ‘Our country can never thank you enough.’ He made it sound as if she willingly offered Eddie up; Josie shuddered but gave the man her hand. This is why she avoided the Gold Star spot: ‘Gold Star,’ with its imagery of schoolchildren receiving A’s and stickers for a job well-done, was the military euphemism for losing a soldier in combat.” (Fallon, 210) No medals, parades, ‘thank you for your service’s’, or special parking spots can bring back a husband, whose flame roasted flesh left ashes in the Iraqi sand or bring back a leg blown to bits by an IED. For Josie, the glorification of her loss only increases the pain. Celebration quickly becomes pity. Veterans, and our families, are perceived as charity cases, rather than humans with agency who are simply owed their side of a bargain. The military masks the true costs that soldiers and our families pay, with words like “gold star,” “service,” “sacrifice,” “duty.” Some readers may feel that

these words do convey real meanings and are important values but, as a veteran, I can assure you, that for the military they mean little in practice.

When the military is done with soldiers and their families, after the requisite tribute is paid and things look seemly, they are cast aside. “Two months after Eddie’s funeral, the army held a memorial service, awarding him the Bronze Star with the V for Valor, suddenly claiming he had saved someone’s life. Josie didn’t go. Eddie’s father had flown down from Michigan to accept the decoration, taking it home with him. That was around the time the soldiers stopped standing guard over Josie and the wives no longer brought food, as if the community had ascertained she was no longer a risk to herself. Without their vigilance, Josie started just stretching on her couch all day” (Fallon, 215). The military and its community auxiliaries only stayed as social graces demanded. Having the wife of a fallen soldier kill herself or fall into destitution would look exceedingly bad, but now that her husband was a hero, and she seemed stable enough, the military had no more obligation to Josie. They didn’t owe her her husband’s life, the baby they were going to have, or Josie’s future. She sacrificed for her country and America put a few extra points on its GDP. Major General Smedley Darlington Butler, the most decorated Marine at the time of his death put it aptly, “War is a racket. It is the only one international in scope. It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives.” The military could dress up Josie’s situation all it wanted, but the balance sheet remained the same. The wives, and by extension the rest of the military community, didn’t care about Josie, if they did, they would have stayed and helped her through her grief, not just made the formal motions of bringing food as expected. Her role had ended, and, for the military it was time for her to pack up and move on.

Moge too saw how callous the military machinery is, when his interpreter, Raneen Mahmood, disappeared, only to be met with indifference when he tried to get the military to show the same level of commitment she showed to them. When he asked about her to another interpreter he was told, “She is missing.’ Khaled finally said, carefully wrapping up his bag of nuts so he would not have to look at Moge. ‘There has been no ransom. Her family no longer has hope she will return’ He coughed into his hand. ‘This is the risk we face. But we must remember it is God’s will. Inshallah.’” (Fallon, 65) Khaled doesn’t want to admit to Moge the fact that his, and Raneen’s, lives are of no consequence to the military. Khaled is a mercenary, but Raneen chose to work for the Americans, in part, out of ideals. But, Raneen’s belief in America, in the project to bring democracy and women’s rights to Iraq, only got her killed.

This mirrors so many young soldiers who went overseas with star-spangled eyes, only to return in star-spangled caskets.

And, when Moge brought Raneen's disappearance to his superiors, "The colonel pushed his tray away and stood. He glanced at the first sergeant and then back to Moge. 'Sergeant, I sympathize. But we found eleven bodies on the Ghazaliya Bridge yesterday, and they had three separate reports of kidnappings in the last twenty-four hours.' He started to collect his trash and when the first sergeant tried to take it, he waved him away. The colonel strode to the garbage can and jammed his empty cup and crumpled napkins inside." (Fallon, 66) Raneen, an educated woman, who liked Turkish coffee, and raised a daughter was nothing but a paper cup, to be bought, carry information, and be tossed aside, to the military. Moge already knew that the war wasn't about ideals, but he had, until this point, believed in the brotherhood of his men. He felt a duty to them, and he felt alive leading them. The ease with which his commanding officer tossed Raneen aside exposed to Moge that the brotherhood of soldiers didn't matter to the military any more than it was useful.

Moge, Raneen, Kit, and Josie each experienced, from a different perspective, the reality of war and the secular religion used to humanize it. To the military, they were means to an end, not ends in and of themselves. Kit, Moge and Josie were offered trinkets that we are supposed to revere like holy symbols. Raneen was offered the promise of a better future for her daughter. Kit's leg, Raneen's life, Josie's husband and, Moge's faith his country, were taken by the military. Is a medal a fair trade for a life or a limb? Fallon demands that her readers at least consider it.

### **Work Cited**

Fallon, Siobhan. *You Know When the Men Are Gone*. New American Library, 2012.

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