

## letters from librarians

## A Different Iraq: Writings from the Front

MARK BAUERLEIN

IN AN OFFICE IN THE OLD POST OFFICE BUILDING ON PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE IN WASHINGTON, DC, SITS A TROVE OF TWELVE THOUSAND pages of writing about war. Nearly two thousand compositions fill the collection, all of them composed since 9/11. Most are on the conflict in Iraq; some are on Afghanistan. Almost none of the 771 authors are professionals. Each contributor is a member of the military or a spouse or parent of one. The writings—poems, letters, journals, short stories, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts of skirmishes, bombings, camp life, and local customs—range in tone and quality. The outlooks jump from prowar to antiwar, gung-ho to fatherly, somber to angry. The entries recount events in progress or ponder them after the fact, but death, distress, and pride suffuse them all. The authors come from all parts of American society—they are prosperous, poor, black, white, brown, army regulars, misfits, suburbanites. They write as fresh recruits entering combat eager to kill and as weary veterans reflecting on the lives they have taken; as a mother pacing the halls of Walter Reed Hospital, where her son recuperates in an amputee ward; as a seaman boarding ships in the Gulf of Oman in search of smugglers. . . .

The archive owes its existence to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In 2004–05, the NEA sponsored workshops on military bases to help troops and loved ones record in fiction and fact their wartime experiences. The chairman, Dana Gioia, envisioned Operation Homecoming, as the project was called, as a historical and therapeutic endeavor assembling combatants' accounts of their actions and meeting their need to register their perceptions. The fact that the writing took place in the midst of the fighting, before its geopolitical meaning had taken shape, boosted its clarifying value. The workshops were led by twenty-three writers and teachers, including Judith Ortiz Cofer, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, Mark Bowden, and Marilyn Nelson, who encouraged attendees to submit their works to the NEA for a volume organized by civilian writers, not by their superior officers. No contributor had to submit his or

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her work for review on any grounds except military security, and no censorship affected the process. An independent panel of nineteen writers spent three months selecting the writing that best fulfilled the criteria of “literary excellence, historical importance, and a desire to present a diversity of genres and life experiences” (“Operation Homecoming”). By May 2005 the process was complete, and Random House published a selection, edited by Andrew Carroll, with the title *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*. The *New Yorker* reprinted ten entries in its 2006 summer fiction issue (“Dispatches”), and the following spring the Public Broadcasting Service aired a documentary on the project (MacNeil).

Popular audiences watch the televised interviews and read the published accounts for their human interest, captivated, for instance, by an infantryman who recalls hearing stories in Sunday school such as Abraham’s journey from Ur to Palestine and who “never dreamt as a kid that I would actually see these places in person.” Marching toward Baghdad, he sees that, “[l]ow [sic] and behold, Talil is sitting on the ancient city of Ur! In the middle of the compound was Abraham’s Ziggurat” (file 817). Or by a soldier led into the hills for what seems to be an ambush only to find three local men shot in the legs by insurgents for taking jobs as painters at a United States base. One of them expires on the ground, and the soldier tries to shut his eyelids, but they keep popping open. Or by a mother with a son in Fallujah who stares at the live feeds on CNN and wonders if each explosion has taken the life of her son. She waits in terror for twenty-four hours until he calls.

The stories attach real people to the casualty figures and play a crucial role in representing the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan to ordinary Americans back home. The participants in the workshops, their teachers discovered, reviled the media for passing on

distorted and incomplete descriptions of the action, and they attended the workshops not only to cope with their ordeals but to add their testimony to the public record.

The public attention is important, but it shouldn’t obscure the scholarly value of the collection. Every work submitted has been filed and preserved, so that researchers can have ready access. To historians, social scientists, and cultural critics interested in the conflicts, the truthful representation of Iraq and Afghanistan remains an unresolved matter, and they need all their methodological tools and further material evidence to address it. To explain the causes and consequences of the invasions and to determine how individuals interpreted the events, researchers need accurate information, a good sense of what happens on the ground—precisely what hasn’t consistently emerged. The Iraq invasion began with a misapprehension—that Saddam harbored weapons of mass destruction—and four years on the uncertainties have multiplied. At this time, only nine reporters are embedded in military units across the country. According to Michael Yon, “The Pentagon permits an extremely limited number of journalists access,” leaving the reporting up to “mainstream media correspondents who, because of the danger, generally gather information from the safety of their fortresses by using Iraqi stringers” (31–32). No politician has emerged as a nonpartisan judge of the occupation, and, in the words of Michael Fumento, who was embedded three times, “[t]he vast majority of self-styled Iraqi experts at the think tanks and in the media have not in fact been there.” Since much inconsistent and unreliable information is circulating, the debate on Iraq unfolds in fits and starts, as supporters and opponents grasp at bits of news to support their case.

All the contributors to the Homecoming archive have been on the front lines or have had a loved one there. The record of their direct contact with the land and its

people supplies an alternative rendering of the events, valuable in part because of its unofficial, amateur nature. The renditions are partial and personal, narrowed to the eyes and ears of one individual, and compassion, zeal, fear, and frustration mingle with their impressions. But for observers on the ground, partiality and limited perspectives are a strength as well as a weakness, especially given the particulars of the Iraq occupation. In late 2005 the superintendent of the military academy at West Point, General William J. Lennox, Jr., offered an illuminating remark about the United States involvement in the region. When I asked him why the West Point curriculum required cadets to take several humanities courses, he observed that every graduate of the academy would soon lead thirty men and women and that many would end up “at the edge of our ethical world.” He meant that young Americans accustomed to certain civic and moral values and norms would have to operate in cultures with radically different values and norms and that to do so responsibly would require, in addition to military training, the kind of ethical reflection that humanistic studies encourage. In other engagements, United States troops entered foreign lands with (what seemed to them) strange customs and mores, but their duties did not immerse them so much in nonmilitary affairs. In Iraq and Afghanistan, though, United States troops quell sectarian violence, construct basic services, negotiate with chieftains, and assist in elections. Most important, they face an enemy they often do not recognize or understand. The personal accounts of contact give the ensuing culture clashes immediacy and concreteness, imparting the tensions and stakes of these encounters more effectively than do the nightly news reports and political statements.

Intellectuals generalize the situation as a clash of civilizations, an imperialist enterprise, or a utopian neoconservative gamble, and after United States forces withdraw, de-

bates over the meaning of the Iraq venture will continue for years. Their contentions are put to the test by the actual encounters between United States soldiers and hostile or friendly Iraqi citizens. The hundreds of stories and poems, the facts and feelings of combat life, explain what men and women have experienced in the course of the war—the pain of leaving home, the horror of mangled bodies, the camaraderie that sustains them through it all. One example, by a young serviceman from San Antonio, begins, “Well, I am still here in Iraq, and with regards to this war, I can say I have seen and done some amazing things.” A three-page list of bullet points follows, including these:

- I’ve been confident and terrified, both at the same time
- I’ve grown to love and hate people with a fierce passion
- I’ve seen the pain and uncertainty in a man, woman, and child’s face right before they died
- I’ve looked a man in the eyes right before I put a sandbag over his head
- I’ve learned Arabic from a 12 year old girl who was my friend
- I’ve been in three newspapers, and was amazed at the inaccuracy of my story
- I’ve seen dozens of marriages fall apart on both ends
- I’ve seen Iraqis cry, they were so happy that we were here
- I’ve had Iraqis swear me up and down because I had to search them
- I’ve seen men in the cross hairs of the scope mounted on my rifle and I’ve pulled the trigger so they will never ever be seen again
- I’ve seen a 13 year old prostitute bring money home to her father to live
- I almost shot a 14 year old kid who pulled a gun on another kid, the toys look very real here
- I’ve gone on my two weeks of R&R and enjoyed the downtime, however was anxious to get back to this strange place
- I’ve come to the conclusion that some soldiers here will return home by the grace of

God, and other soldiers will come home  
 simply because the man to the left or right  
 of him did his job (file 1213)

Others, however, impart something more about the root problems of the occupation: how troops face the religious beliefs, sexual views, work ethic, and raw humanity of a people different from themselves.

Here is an entry by a sergeant checking on Iraqis in the Al Asad hospital just after a skirmish at a checkpoint:

It is amazing how brutally honest a man on his deathbed becomes. The Iraqi quickly told me that there were two cars and a half a dozen people and one had weapons, and how he tried to charge the checkpoint and there was gunfire and somebody was dead. . . . He asked me about his son. At this point, I didn't realize there was a boy involved so I told him his son was in the next room and was going to be fine. He grabbed my hand with his. It scared me. His blood was flowing onto my fingers. He looked me straight in the eyes and asked me to take his son out of Iraq, but to raise him Muslim. . . . The dying man uttered something very serious in Arabic while he burned a hole through my head with his eyes.

After the man dies, the sergeant approaches the son, a ten-year-old boy whose skull has been fractured by an M-16 round:

I suddenly felt ashamed of my M-16, so I placed it on the floor under my chair. Rafael told the boy who I was and that I was here to help him. I placed my hand on his shoulder. The doctor asked me to tell the boy his father was dead because he was still needed to save the other man's life. . . . He reached up and took my hand in his. I noticed his father's dried blood on my

fingers. I don't even remember what I said, but it didn't matter, because I think Rafael didn't translate my words anyway. He, I am sure, said something much better than I ever could have. The boy seemed to take it okay, but he let go of my hand. (file 149)

Over the next year, the files will be transferred from the offices of the NEA to the Library of Congress, where they will be available to the public as part of the Veterans History Project ([www.loc.gov/vets/](http://www.loc.gov/vets/)). Accompanying them will be data on the authors and their correspondence with workshop leaders and editors at Random House and the *New Yorker*. Scholars who wish to have more information or to arrange for rapid access to the archive should contact the project manager at the NEA, Jon Peede ([peedej@arts.endow.gov](mailto:peedej@arts.endow.gov)).

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