

Human Costs of the Forever Wars, Enough to Fill a Bookshelf

Photo



From left, Phil Klay, Kayla Williams, Michael Pitre, Brian Castner, Matt Gallagher and Brandon Willitts. Credit Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

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In books by soldiers and reporters about Iraq and Afghanistan, it's the details that slam home a sense of what the wars were like on the front lines: a suicide bomber's head pulled from the rubble of the mosque he'd bombed; the sonogram of an unborn child found among a soldier's remains; a bomb technician writing NKA (No Known Allergies) and his blood type on his boots in permanent marker "because feet survive detonations."

War cracks people's lives apart, unmasking the most extreme emotions, fuels the deepest existential questions. Even as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan morph into shapeless struggles with no clear ends in sight, they have given birth to an extraordinary outpouring of writing that tries to make sense of it all: journalism that has unraveled the back story of how and why America went to war, and also a profusion of stories, novels, memoirs and poems that testify to the day-to-day realities and to the wars' ever-unspooling human costs.

All war literature, across the centuries, bears witness to certain eternal truths: the death and chaos encountered, minute by minute; the bonds of love and loyalty among soldiers; the bad dreams and worse anxieties that afflict many of those lucky enough to return home. And today's emerging literature — including Phil Klay's debut collection of stories, "Redeployment," which won this year's [National Book Award](#) for Fiction — both reverberates with those timeless experiences and is imprinted with the particularities of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq: changes in technology, the increased presence of female soldiers and, most importantly, the all-volunteer military, which has opened a chasm between soldiers ("the other 1 percent") and civilians.

Photo



Left: Mr. Gallagher in Baghdad, in 2008; right: Ms. Williams in Iraq, in 2003. Credit Left: Matt Gallagher; right: Justin Edgecombe

With no shared sacrifices being asked of civilians after Sept. 11 and a ban (with origins in the first Gulf War and lifted in 2009) on photographing coffins on military bases, it's no surprise that the disconnect between life "over there" and life "back here" has emerged as a central theme in much of today's war writing.

In his biting, poignant 2012 novel, "[Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk](#)," Ben Fountain (who did not serve in the military) [looked at America](#) through the eyes of "a barely grown grunt making \$14,800 a year." Billy Lynn (who possesses some of Billy Budd's innocence, and some of Billy Pilgrim's sad knowledge of war) and several comrades have become instant heroes after surviving an intense firefight with Iraqi insurgents. They've been brought home briefly for an over-the-top celebratory ceremony at a Dallas Cowboys game.

Still disoriented from the trip home, Billy looks at all the wretched excess, at the junk food and fancy clothes and obsession with status and money, and wonders when "America became a giant mall with a country attached." It's a sentiment echoed in one of Mr. Klay's stories by a military chaplain who thinks that even with all he's witnessed in Iraq, it is somehow "holier" than "gluttonous, fat, oversexed, overconsuming, materialist home, where we're too lazy to see our own faults."

Distances and Voids

The emotional distance between Iraq or Afghanistan and the United States cannot be measured in miles, and many soldiers and journalists have felt caught somewhere in between, even after leaving the combat zone. In his searing book about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, "[The Forever War](#)," the former New York Times correspondent Dexter Filkins recalls that when he was in Iraq, he "might as well have been circling the earth from a space capsule, circling in farthest orbit. Like Laika in Sputnik. A dog in space." Leaving was just as hard, he recalls, having "become part of the place, part of the despair, part of the death and the bad food and the heat and the sandy-colored brown of it."

Brandon Willitts, a Navy intelligence veteran, said in a recent interview that when he came home from Afghanistan, he “felt more alone than I knew possible.” He missed his sister, who had committed suicide while he was in boot camp, and missed his friends from the military: Some had been killed in Afghanistan; some were still serving there. He was 23 and felt like a “man who had no past and no connection to the two things that he held most dear: his family and his service.”

What changed everything for Mr. Willitts — a co-founder of [Words After War](#), a literary organization that provides a support network for veterans and helps bridge the military-civilian divide — was being introduced to the work of William Faulkner by a professor and the realization that he needed “books, like a drowning man needs oxygen.” Reading Homer’s “Odyssey,” with its emphasis on the difficulty of homecoming, and Tim O’Brien’s “[The Things They Carried](#)” made him feel less alone, he said, and helped situate his war experiences in a kind of historical continuum. It also fueled his commitment to Words After War, which has become a magnet for literary-minded vets.

The stories that today’s soldiers tell are partly shaped by where and when and how they were deployed. Early successes in Afghanistan made for very different sorts of narratives than those that would come out of Iraq later, when knowledge of just what a misguided enterprise it was (cherry-picked intelligence, bungled decision making in Washington and a dysfunctional occupation) had created a dark undertow to many soldiers’ perception of their own experiences.

Brian Castner did three tours of duty in the Middle East, two in Iraq as the head of an Explosive Ordnance Disposal unit. In a [fascinating essay](#) in The Los Angeles Review of Books, he notes that Afghanistan has yielded a lot of special-operations memoirs that pivot around specific missions with beginnings, middles and ends. (No doubt, the best known mission was the raid in Pakistan that took out Osama bin Laden, recounted by a former member of the elite SEAL team, Matt Bissonnette, in “[No Easy Day](#),” written under the pen name Mark Owen, with Kevin Maurer). Iraq, by contrast, was more of a big military operation, and because of the anger and regret that swirled around it, both Mr. Castner and Mr. Willitts suggest, it tended to elicit more fiction and reflective nonfiction — forms suited to exploring its ambiguities.

Mr. Castner’s memoir, “[The Long Walk](#),” a candid and unflinching account of his postwar efforts to cope with a [traumatic brain injury](#) suffered from being exposed to countless bomb blasts, warps the arc of the traditional coming-of-age story, as do many of today’s war books that tell the story of how youthful determination, idealism or innocence gave way to post-traumatic stress, dislocation, anger or despair.

Photo



From left, Mr. Castner and Mr. Pitre serving in Iraq. Credit Left: Brian Castner; right, Michael Pitre

In two heart-stopping books, “[The Good Soldiers](#)” and “[Thank You for Your Service](#),” David Finkel of The Washington Post chronicled the experiences of men from the Second Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment during a grueling tour in Iraq and their difficult journey home.

One of those men is Adam Schumann, who thought he had “a front seat to the greatest movie I’ve ever seen” during the initial invasion. He became a great soldier — the “smart, decent honorable” one, who insisted “on being in the right front seat of the lead Humvee on every mission.”. But, as Mr. Finkel reports, Mr. Schumann came home broken — unable to forget all the death and loss, unable to stop seeing his friend Sgt. First Class James Doster “being shredded” by a roadside bomb “on a mission Adam was supposed to have been on, too.”

In “Thank You,” Mr. Finkel writes that an estimated 20 to 30 percent of the two million Americans who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Today’s war literature echoes with a sense of the emotional and psychological toll exacted on soldiers: the stress of multiple deployments in an overstretched military; the anxiety of working in chaotic conditions where it was difficult to distinguish between the people you were trying to protect and the people who were trying to blow you up; and where I.E.D.’s, sniper fire and roadside bombs turned daily patrols into a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

Capturing a War’s Rhythms

That rhythm of random, helter-skelter fighting interspersed with boring lulls is reflected in the jagged, staccato pulse of a lot of Iraq and Afghanistan writing: Short stories, authors have realized, are an ideal form for capturing the discontinuities of these wars, their episodic quality, and so are longer, fragmented narratives that jump-cut from scene to scene.

Instead of traditional battles and campaigns, there was often a terrible “Groundhog Day” quality to the

fighting in Iraq as soldiers were charged with repeatedly taking and retaking streets and towns from the insurgents. Michael Pitre — a Marine who was deployed twice to Iraq — captured those absurdities in his novel, “[Fives and Twenty-Fives](#),” by focusing on a road repair platoon’s dangerous but unglamorous assignment of clearing and filling potholes, 157 out of 157 of which contain some form of explosive device.

In his elegiac 2012 novel, “[The Yellow Birds](#),” Kevin Powers took a different tack, turning the Sisyphean nature of war in Iraq into a kind of sad parable. “We’d go back into a city that had fought this battle yearly; a slow bloody parade in fall to mark the change of season,” writes Mr. Powers, who joined the Army when he was 17 and served as a machine-gunner in Iraq in 2004 and 2005. “We’d drive them out. We always had. We’d kill them. They’d shoot us and blow off our limbs and run into the hills and wadis, back into the alleys and dusty villages. Then they’d come back, and we’d start over by waving to them as they leaned against lampposts and unfurled green awnings while drinking tea in front of their shops. While we patrolled the streets, we’d throw candy to their children, with whom we’d fight in the fall a few more years from now.”

Mr. Powers is also a published poet, and his novel has a haunting, lyrical feel to it, as does Brian Turner’s memoir, “[My Life as a Foreign Country](#).” Mr. Turner, a seven-year Army veteran, has written two books of verse, and his writing often takes on a dreamlike mood reminiscent of Mr. O’Brien’s Vietnam novel, “[Going After Cacciato](#).” But the phantasmagorical quality that has come to be associated with Vietnam in novels like Stephen Wright’s “[Meditations in Green](#)” and movies like Francis Ford Coppola’s “[Apocalypse Now](#)” seems relatively muted in Afghanistan and Iraq literature written by Americans.

Part of this is because literary innovations associated with earlier wars have long since trickled down into the culture at large and been absorbed into our jangled, aesthetic DNA: A modern sense of irony, Paul Fussell argued in his brilliant book “[The Great War and Modern Memory](#),” was birthed in the horror of the trenches of World War I; black humor was used by Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut to depict “the good war,” [World War II](#); and Michael Herr employed a fragmented narrative, along with his singular electric language, to capture the Vietnam War on a synesthetic gut level.

At the same time, the sources of a lot of today’s war writing — M.F.A. programs, veterans’ writing workshops and therapy-based writing programs used to treat post-traumatic stress disorder — have tended to emphasize directness of expression and more naturalistic approaches.

Photo



From left, the journalists Dexter Filkins and David Finkel. Credit Left: James Hill for The New York Times; right: Lucian Perkins

While the stories in Mr. Klay's "Redeployment" have a taut precision that contains and counterpoints the chaos of the war, memoirs by [Matt Gallagher](#) ("[Kaboom: Embracing the Suck in a Savage Little War](#)") and [Colby Buzzell](#) ("[My War: Killing Time in Iraq](#)") were begun as war blogs and radiate a powerful you-are-there immediacy. Mr. Gallagher's book underscores his love of language, acquired as an avid reader, and his elastic voice as a writer — his ability to move effortlessly between the earnest and the irreverent, the thoughtful and the comic.

Like Mr. Klay and Mr. Powers, Mr. Gallagher, who is finishing his first novel, earned an M.F.A. after coming home from war. Through N.Y.U.'s Veterans Writing Workshop and Words After War, he and other [New York-based veterans](#) have become friends and colleagues. "We check one another's work," Mr. Gallagher said in an interview, "push one another, inspire one another. It's much like the military in that respect — while it can be competitive, it's not the awful passive-aggressive competitiveness most other writer scenes are infamous for."

New Perspectives of Battle

More than a decade into these wars, books representing a growing array of perspectives are being published. There are still far more war books by men — and not only because they outnumber women in the military. As [Kayla Williams](#), a former Arabic linguist and intelligence specialist in the Army and the author of two tough, funny and affecting memoirs ("[Love My Rifle More Than You](#)" and "[Plenty of Time When We Get Home](#)") observes, people frequently say, "You join the infantry to become a man," but no one says, "You go to war to become a woman."

As for Iraqi-born writers, [Hassan Blasim](#) ("[The Corpse Exhibition](#)") and [Ahmed Saadawi](#) ("[Frankenstein in Baghdad](#)") — who have used Kafka-esque scenarios and magic realism to convey just how surreal and nightmarish day-to-day life for Iraqis has become — are gaining recognition in the West.

So far, fiction about the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has tended to have a chamber music quality, using

short stories, fable-like allegories or keyhole views (from individuals and platoons) to open small windows on those conflicts.

Why has there been no big, symphonic Iraq or Afghanistan novel? For one thing, “War and Peace”-like epics take time: Tolstoy published that novel some five decades after the French invasion of Russia, and Denis Johnson’s Vietnam novel, “[Tree of Smoke](#),” appeared more than three decades after that war. With Vietnam — as well as with the AIDS crisis and the Holocaust — there has been a distinct trajectory, with reportage, personal testimony and more documentary works leading the way, followed by fiction that grows increasingly panoramic and experimental as the event recedes in time.

Certainly in the case of Iraq and Afghanistan and the fight against Al Qaeda, nonfiction — most notably, Steve Coll’s “[Ghost Wars](#),” Lawrence Wright’s “[The Looming Tower](#)” and George Packer’s “[The Assassins’ Gate](#)” — have provided the wide-screen picture. Such books have chronicled the back stories to those wars, their unreckoned consequences, and how they became pivot points in American history, signifying the limits of our moral exceptionalism and power on the world stage.

The one book that most fluently and kaleidoscopically captures both the micro and the macro of Iraq is Mr. Filkins’s “[The Forever War](#)” — a harrowing and urgent book that combines a reporter’s legwork and sense of historical context with a tactile, novelistic understanding of the human sorrow and unbearableness of war. It gives us indelible snapshots of the young American soldiers who fought there and the Iraqis who knew they would have to go on living there long after the Americans had left. It is also a book that many veterans have embraced as capturing both the historical and emotional dimensions of their own experiences.

With the rise of the Islamic State and the resurgence of the Taliban, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan lack a punctuation point at the end of the sentence — the so-called war on terror is indeed the “the longest war,” “the forever war,” “[our children’s children’s war](#)” — and many veterans find their own experiences there being continually reframed by current events and the bloody, escalating consequences of those wars.

Having been an artilleryman in the Army from 2002 to 2006, Roy Scranton — an editor of the anthology “[Fire and Forget: Short Stories From the Long War](#)” — says he had long “relied on a rhetoric of professionalism, camaraderie and a narrow focus on personal experience” to “ignore heavy questions about the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq.” But revisiting Baghdad this summer on assignment for [Rolling Stone](#) brought a dark realization: “We let loose a grisly pandemonium in Iraq, then walked away and tried to wash our hands of the whole affair.”

Mr. Willitts, of [Words After War](#), who is the fourth generation in his family to have served in the Navy, says that at this point he isn’t sure what the United States is fighting for there or what those wars “say

about us as a country.” But he does know what those wars say about the all-volunteer generation of the military. “These men and women signed up knowing they would go to war,” he said, “and that says a lot about who they are as people: They were willing to go to war — one unpopular war and one forgotten war — and they fought there for each other.”