

A PLACE OF OUR OWN

Intended audience: Readers with some background in poetry/prose reading and/or composition that also have an interest or limited education in military institutions and forces, as well as military veterans or any reader with acquaintance or family involved in any military force.

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PROJECT SUMMARY / ABSTRACT

The project will result in a chapbook of mixed forms (poetry/prose) detailing the long-ranging effects (social, psychological, economic, et al.) of those both directly and indirectly affected by military forces or institutions. The chapbook will contain 16 poems and 5 micro-fictional stories (fiction composed of between 250 and 750 words). Considering that most, if not all, citizens of the world culture have experiences related (directly or peripherally) to post-traumatic stress disorder or wartime (though some many not actively realize it), the texts will focus primarily on factual, headline events that manifest these experiences and concepts in short forms and, through these forms, give a detailed and more complete picture of the effects of combat out of the combat zone.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Discussion

Fundamentally, war and conflict are both large agents of change in a person's method and ability to cope with external, real world situations. This expression of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is extant in some military veterans' lives, and is an important part of how they have been and will be defined and remembered. However, ignorance and the continued failure by some governmental agencies and medical professionals to recognize and properly treat PTSD perpetuates the emergence of the problems caused by untreated PTSD, and changes the way that these military veterans will interact with their friends and families forever. Though most veterans will never experience the extreme traumatic situations that some PTSD-affected veterans do, some will be affected on a less profound and more invisible level.

Well before trauma became a standard and recognized mental health topic, soldiers participating in military operations endured psychological trauma that went (and arguably still

goes) untreated. Dating back to even the Civil War, as Bruce Bowers details in his February 2006 article in *Science News*. Bowers merely describes a study of Civil War soldiers detailed in the November 2005 edition of *Archives of General Psychiatry*, one that present the conclusion that “many psychological symptoms of Civil War veterans look a whole lot like posttraumatic stress disorder,” verifying the existence of PTSD long before modern mental health professionals encountered the effects of post-combat trauma (Bowers 84).

While to the general public, this idea of “shell shock” is a seemingly accepting mental health concern, it is apparent that even those in the United States Department of Veterans' Affairs is ignoring the validity of their own soldiers' claims challenging their own mental well-being. In the May 27, 2006 issue of *The Lancet*, Bradley Axelrod of Veterans' Affairs exhibits this lack of concern when he writes that one cannot diagnose self-reported trauma “when the cause of the symptoms is thought to result from rarely occurring events,” and that these reports of PTSD are simply erratic episodes. He continues claiming that professionals treating soldiers showing symptoms of PTSD were giving “automatic acceptance of patients' reports” from “individuals with infrequent events,” saying that these self-reported events “seemingly deemed acceptable” (Axelrod 1709).

In a January 13, 2008 article in *The New York Times*, Deborah Sontag and Lizette Alvarez trace modern cases of post-traumatic stress disorder that have ended in tragedy. In researching crimes committed by military veterans, their research showed an 89 percent increase during the present wartime period, from 184 to 349 cases, three-quarters of which involved Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. The increase occurred even though there have been fewer troops stationed in the United States in the last six years and the American homicide rate has been, on average, lower. Obviously murder and other massively violent reactions are an extreme

manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder for returning veterans, and as Sontag and Alvarez write “many...struggle in quieter ways, with crumbling marriages, mounting debt, deepening alcohol dependence or more-minor tangles with the law” (2).

Sontag and Alvarez spend the first part of their article following the case of Matthew Sepi, a 20-year-old veteran of the most recent Iraqi conflict. Having returned to Las Vegas in 2005, he began to fall into the “deepening alcohol dependence” described by Sontag and Alvarez. Sepi was also extremely paranoid. As Sontag and Alvarez write,

Mr. Sepi did not like to venture outside too late. But, plagued by nightmares about an Iraqi civilian killed by his unit, he often needed alcohol to fall asleep. And so it was that night, when, seized by a gut feeling of lurking danger, he slid a trench coat over his slight frame -- and tucked an assault rifle inside it.

"Matthew knew he shouldn't be taking his AK-47 to the 7-Eleven," Detective Laura Andersen said, "but he was scared to death in that neighborhood, he was military trained and, in his mind, he needed the weapon to protect himself."

Surprised by several people in an alley, he fired on them, killing one, and ran home. When interrogated by police, he still used phrases associated with military technique. He claimed to have “engaged the targets,” after asking “who did I take fire from” (Sontag and Alvarez 2). Nevertheless, Sepi was sent to prison, an example of the more drastic ends to which those affected by un-treated PTSD resort.

When considering PTSD, one must also pay attention to the post-Vietnam era, and the soldiers (estimated at between 500,000 and 700,000) whose “PTSD can be acute or chronic and/or delayed. Vietnam veterans, the largest group of people currently being treated for PTSD, have the chronic/delayed form; that is, their symptoms began at least six months after the traumatic event and persisted for six months or more” (Norman 1696). Thus, when the soldiers experience the symptoms of their trauma, it is often delayed enough that, perhaps, the medical professionals take the same attitude as Axelrod, that these “[presentations] of medically unsubstantiated claims” amount to “panic attacks or some other psychosomatic presentation”

(1708), but not the post-traumatic stress that causes soldiers like Matt Sepi, and others unable to adjust to popular social culture, to commit heinous acts that could well have been prevented through provision of specialized trauma mental care.

Thus, one can easily see that, though the disorder manifests itself in multiple extreme cases, others, such as failing marriages, alcoholism and variations of dangerous and depressive behaviors await those suffering PTSD. After serving their various tours of duty, soldiers often come home with delayed symptoms of various trauma onset by any range of situations witnessed while serving in their military posts. These symptoms go undetected, and ultimately untreated, causing these veterans to dissociate with society, causing major problems in their relationships with all with whom they interact.

While wartime trauma and experience have been chronicled and detailed in both poetic and prosaic forms, these narratives and collections focus primarily on experiences that come from a “present” position; the narrative voice is directly embroiled in the conflict being reflected by the text. Most recently, one can see this phenomena (poetically) in Brian Turner's *Here, Bullet* and many of the Vietnam-era poems of Yousef Komunyakaa as well as a majority of the prose of authors such as Tim O'Brien. Not attempting to detract from their merit, the work focuses on the idea of one's being in the moment, rather than enduring the experience of recently-identified trauma symptoms and their continuously-emerging effect on both those involved in military service and their loved ones. family and friends.

It is the duty of modern authors with any connection to either the direct experience or satellite events to capture these ideas in forms that serve to propagate and publicize the widespread prevalence of the effect of PTSD. Causing even previously psychologically healthy individuals to come under extreme duress, it is often a singular incident that brings these stories

out to the public. Often, these stories are reported in newspapers, and are included almost as short clippings or afterthoughts, a distorted and massively cropped image. Thus, authors should respond in kind. Being an artist concentrating on the use of poetry (and some limited, short-short fiction) to advance some form of relative truth, the forms intended for use allow for the re-appropriation of these under-developed images and snippets. Through the use of the form, one can sculpt, edit, and fashion mere headlines into organic statements.

As can be seen through a read-through of Bradley Axelrod's article in *The Lancet*, not even the Veterans' Administration wants to confirm the deep-rooted psychological effects caused by wartime experience, experiences and effects felt by nearly everyone across the world, whether directly and consciously, or benignly. Therefore, it is up to the artistic community to develop expressive methods to communicate the necessity and urgency of care for veterans and their families.

Areas of Research / Project Division

The major research behind this project will consist of trauma reports and case studies of those affected by post-traumatic stress disorder brought on by combat or military service. I am currently attempting to get some texts on logotherapy and also attempting to obtain some additional, in-depth trauma texts such as Kirby Farrell's *Post-traumatic Culture : Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties*. Since my particular writing style does well with specific, and personal case studies, most of the research left to complete lies in reading about specific PTSD cases, and attempting to use the details in these cases to construct personas / speakers around which to write meaningful, rich texts.

Reference Sources / Working Bibliography

Axelrod, Bradley N. "Interpreting Symptoms in Military Personnel After Combat." The Lancet

367 (2006): 1709-1710.

Bower, Bruce. "Combat Trauma From the Past." Science News 169 (2006): 84.

Bower, Bruce. "More Stress Disorder for Wounded Viet Vets." Science News 133 (1988): 6.

Furey, Joan. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam Veterans: for Some, the War Rages On."

The American Journal of Nursing 82 (1982): 1695-1696.

Seltzer, Mark. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." October 80 (1997):

3-36.

Sontag, Deborah, and Lizette Alvarez. "Across America, Deadly Echoes of Foreign Battles." The

New York Times 13 Jan. 2008, Late ed., sec. National Desk: 1-5.

Talbott, John E. "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma." Journal of Interdisciplinary

History 27 (1997): 437-454.

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

The following are reflective of the coursework that will have informed the creation of this chapbook (for further description see Appendix B):

WRITING

Creative Writing 1 (207)

Creative Writing 2 (307)

Exposition (300)

MILITARY LITERATURE, FORCES, INSTITUTIONS

Military Forces and Institutions (HIS 326)

20th Century American Literature: War, Narrative (336)

International Policy Theory (I S 250)

My experience in creative writing curricula has exposed me to the tools necessary for the creation of texts: attention to form, function, mechanical and technical technique, along with

many others. In these classes, the exercises and assignments helped to build and sculpt my writing, allowing it to take on artistic and confident dimensions which I would otherwise have not had. The experience gained through these classes has also helped me to identify potential publishing and contest opportunities, with my writing (“Opening Address for the New York Marathon: November 4, 2007”, see Appendix C) being accepted for forthcoming publication, and also gaining placement for me in the 2007 Chester Sipple Poetry Prize contest and American Academy of Poets competition at Bradley University(both honorable mentions), as well as a winning entry in the 2008 American Academy of Poets Prize (also at Bradley University).

Outside of writing, my education in military forces and their analysis has left me well-equipped to pursue the overarching goals of this project. While taking these courses, I was not only educated on the practical history of conflict, but also on theory and literary manifestations of these concepts. All but one of these classes being above the 300 (Junior) level, they afforded me a detailed and specialized education in wartime literatures and their underlying principles. Throughout my pursuit of an education at Bradley University, I have also gained research skills through my classwork that are well-developed. As evidenced in the beginning of this proposal, the application of my research skills yields the best evidence, and also allows me to find sources for all dimensions and facets of a given topic (See Appendix D for sample research).

My personal qualifications, in terms of coursework, are not the only factors that govern my ability to create my desired chapbook project. Throughout the coursework listed in the “Writing” portion of the above cited courses, I have grown greatly in ability through the process. Samples of the development of my work can be seen in Appendix B. Taking these courses has greatly expanded my ability to experiment with form, and has also helped me to understand that form is an essential part of text creation, whether it be formal, standardized formats or more

liberal, free-verse types.

The poetry that I have written is also very much relevant in terms of contemporary composition. Comparing my work to that of Allison Funk, a contemporary poet, can further enhance the meaning of calling my work “relevant.” Though Appendix C contains her poem, “The Wreck of the Essex, 1819,” one only needs to look at poems like “Irvin McDowell, Brigadier General, After a Loss at Bull Run,” to see noted similarities. Both poems are very much rooted in factual historical events, and show evidence of deep research into the topic. Funk's poem is rooted in the real concerns that the crew of the *Essex* had to undergo. Starving and extremely desperate for survival, Funk's poem writes that the speaker “had no choice but to draw lots,” an event that happened in one of the longboats escaping the wreck of the whaling ship. Similarly, I prefer to use historical fact to write. Irvin McDowell, a Brigadier General in the Union Army, lost at the first battle of Bull Run, and was, as the poem claims, in charge of a “list of responsibilities,” that of “four hundred lost/ one thousand missing/ one thousand wounded.” Beyond such a superficial comparison, the both the poem “Living at the Epicenter,” and “The Wreck of the Essex, 1819” use these fictional histories to attempt to teach a contemporary lesson – a kind of past story for a present use. In the same way, “Irvin McDowell, Brigadier General, After a Loss at Bull Run,” and, “Lewis and Clark, A Conversation Spring 1804” attempt to fictionalize and use historical fact to illustrate a contemporary lesson or point.

APPENDIX A – WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alexrod, Bradley N. "Interpreting Symptoms in Military Personnel After Combat." *The Lancet* 367 (2006): 1709-1710.

Begin, Sherri. "Reporter's Notebook; DMC: Treat More Vets Here." *Crain's Detroit Business* 3 Dec. 2007: 11.

Bower, Bruce. "Combat Trauma From the Past." *Science News* 169 (2006): 84.

Bower, Bruce. "More Stress Disorder for Wounded Viet Vets." *Science News* 133 (1988): 6.

Elias, Marilyn. "Stress Disorder Linked to Soldiers' Ill Health; First-of-its-kind Study Assessed Iraq War Veterans." *USA Today* (23 May 2006), Final Edition, sec. Life: 10D.

Furey, Joan. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam Veterans: for Some, the War Rages On." *The American Journal of Nursing* 82 (1982: 1695-1696.

McKenna, Phil. "stress Syndrome Affected One in Five Vietnam Veterans." *The Boston Globe* 21 Aug. 2006, sec. Health and Science, C3.

Seltzer, Mark. "Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere." *October* 80 (1997): 3-36.

Sontag, Deborah, and Lizette Alvarez. "Across America, Deadly Echoes of Foreign Battles." The New York Times 13 Jan. 2008, Late ed., sec. National Desk: 1-5.

Talbott, John E. "Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma." Journal of Interdisciplinary History 27 (1997): 437-454.

Zoroya, Gregg. "Psychologist: Navy Faces Crisis; Military Needs Mental Health Workers, Commander Says." *USA Today* 17 Jan. 2007, sec. News: 10A.

APPENDIX B – DETAILED COURSEWORK

WRITING

Creative Writing 1 (207)

Provided the basic tools and knowledge for the creation and revision of texts, provided the genesis for workshop-driven creative review.

Creative Writing 2 (307)

Writing instruction based in experimentation with (mostly poetic) form, another course that encouraged and strengthened metacognitive skills and reinforced the workshop method of creating and revising texts.

Exposition (300)

Mainly concerned with creative non-fiction, emphasized research in the creative approach, analyzing texts in order to supply short summaries and models of the actual workings of the creative non-fiction read in the class; ultimately an exercise in synthesizing and simplifying work.

MILITARY LITERATURE, FORCES, INSTITUTIONS

Military Forces and Institutions (HIS 326)

Supplied information about military tactics, forces, history and overall theoretical basis for much of the jargon and dialogue used in any war-time references.

20th Century American Literature: War, Narrative (336)

A class mainly concerned with a theoretical basis for the foundations of war-time and conflict-driven texts. The class used many theoretical writings that will be used in the research behind the chapbook such as Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (amongst others).

International Policy Theory (I S 250)

A class concerned with governments and their underlying theoretical structures as an important determinant in tracing and predicting policy movements and decisions. Greatly affects the ideas behind war-time operations and the mandates passed down from leaders to troops.

APPENDIX C – PREVIOUS WORK

Irvin McDowell, Brigadier General, After a Loss at Bull Run

I.

Vast plains of Virginia
cannot be any comparison
to six thousand
marching
in rows
three
by
three
into dew soaked
fields and damp,
dirt veins of passage.

The brown roads
to Manassas,
home to mustang,
the wild horse,
yield to war steed
and sword.

II

Soldiers,
I would die three deaths
for anyone out on the field.

III

The clerk reports
four hundred lost
one thousand missing
one thousand wounded,
a list of responsibilities.

Report comes in the morning
that I am to be moved
to the Western front.

Lewis and Clark, A Conversation Spring 1804

Merriwether, we were never interested
in horizons.

I had seen the striped colors
of a vibrant red and orange sun
setting over mountains
back in the East
when things were small
and complicated.

Jefferson told us to be agents
of the new government
promoting peace, trade.

Hands and arms on the dappled
pirogue claimed difference
with the national interest.

We left St. Louis
with more than these meager
men.

You keep to your botany
and I'll reserve my solitude.

Opening Address for the New York Marathon: November 4, 2007

To those marrying soon and others giving the subject some serious thought:

Pay no attention to Wagner
and weaved words of ceremonial binding;
listen for the starting gun.

Tell them to run
like marathoners
through the boroughs of New York City wearing
wedding gowns
and black tailored tuxedos.
Run until lungs and hearts burn
with familiarity only known
to veteran runners crowding
the bridge over the Verrazano Narrows.

After twenty-six point two miles,
they'll realize that this isn't a coming together
it's a competition.