

Military Resistance 7J8 [GI Special]

WELCOME TO OBAMAWORLD



During a lull in a firefight with Taliban militants, a U.S. Marine takes cover at the edge of a muddy irrigation canal, in Nawa district, Helmand province, southern Afghanistan, , Oct. 4, 2009. Taliban militants engaged the Marine patrol Sunday. (AP Photo/Brennan Linsley)

**“The Things That We Were Able
To Accomplish Tactically
Obviously Were Useless”
“U.S. Gen. Dan McNeill, Said In An
Interview ‘Well Over 400,000’
Troops Are Needed To Tame The
Country””**

“The Taliban Are My Brothers, The Taliban Are My Sons. The Taliban Are My Cousins”

“They Did Not Come From Another Earth. They Are All From Afghanistan”

Oct . 11, 2009 By Jason Straziuso, The Associated Press [Excerpts]

As generals, politicians and pundits in Washington debate the next best step for America's eight-year war in Afghanistan, the Taliban takes new territory by the day, despite the record 64,000 U.S. troops here.

I arrived in Afghanistan in spring 2006, just as violence began to explode. I leave after three years as the chief correspondent for The Associated Press, and never have things seemed so ominous. As one of America's top military analysts, Anthony Cordesman, says: The U.S. “is now decisively losing.”

The quiet truth whispered by soldiers in the field and aid workers in Kabul is that the Afghan government is not likely to ever control southern Afghanistan's wildlands, the foreboding territory beyond the provincial capitals.

Villagers fear thieving police more than militants, and the August presidential election laid bare how pervasive corruption is here. The Taliban is playing to the general disgust with corruption by offering itself as an alternative.

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, a large man with a woolly black beard, once served as the Taliban's ambassador to Pakistan. He always greets me with a smile and seems an unlikely representative for a hardline regime. He uses an iPhone — though his grandson recently broke it.

Zaeef is a conduit between the Afghan government and Mullah Omar's Taliban.

Zaeef told me the militant leadership refers to its forces not as Taliban now, but as “mujahedeen,” a throwback to the Afghan “holy warriors” who ousted the Soviet Union at the end of the 1980s.

The reason is that only one out of 10 militant fighters is a true “Taliban.”

The rest are ordinary Afghans, Zaeef said.

That bodes extremely ill for U.S. and NATO efforts.

“Every day you are killing people. Dozens of people. They have brothers, they have fathers, they have sons,” Zaeef said.

“The Taliban are my brothers, the Taliban are my sons. The Taliban are my cousins.

“They are not different from us. They did not come from the sky. They did not come from another Earth.

“They are all from Afghanistan.”

McChrystal [U.S. commander Gen. Stanley McChrystal] knows the issue of civilian deaths caused by U.S. forces has turned many Afghans against the West.

I witnessed my first such deaths in the summer of 2006, when I shadowed Lt. Will Felder and his platoon on a night-time helicopter invasion of Helmand province’s Baghran valley.

Felder, a West Point graduate who left the Army in June after fulfilling his five-year commitment, battled in Helmand, Kandahar and Paktika provinces. He is frank about his time here.

“The things that we were able to accomplish tactically obviously were useless.

“You can pretty much point to every area we gained, to any sort of tactical success, and in the intervening years those areas have been lost and gained tactically many times,” Felder told me from Atlanta, where he is a first-year law student.

The U.S. was also slow to identify the Taliban comeback for what it was. A top U.S. military official in Kabul told me that for too many years the rising violence here was mistakenly seen as a rise in crime, the drug trade and corruption. Instead, he said, it was the beginning of an insurgency against the government.

As Washington debates whether to send 10,000, 20,000 or 40,000 more forces, it’s worth remembering that a former top commander here, U.S. Gen. Dan McNeill, said in an interview with NPR last summer that “well over 400,000” troops are needed to tame the country.

He then called it “an absurd figure,” because Afghanistan will never see that many troops.

U.S. and NATO forces now number 100,000.

That’s why, Zaeef told me, Taliban leaders, militant commanders and ordinary Afghans are already laying the groundwork to prevent another civil war when the U.S. and NATO draw down.

“Afghans have to decide the future, to make a solution for the future. I think many people they are trying to do that,” Zaeef said. “It’s not guaranteed that civil war will not happen, but the people are trying to prevent it.”

He would not elaborate.

Russia's ambassador to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, recently told AP that McChrystal is trying his best to succeed, but that "at this stage it will be very difficult for him to change the direction" of the war.

"The more troops you bring the more troubles you will have here," said Kabulov, who knows from the experience of the Soviets, who were defeated bitterly in Afghanistan more than two decades ago.

AFGHANISTAN WAR REPORTS

U.S. Service Member Killed Somewhere Or Other In Afghanistan

11 Oct. 2009 ISAF Public Affairs Office

One U.S. service member was killed in an improvised explosive device strike Oct. 10, in western Afghanistan.

Swedish Soldiers Attacked In Sayyad

2009-10-11 National News

Yesterday around 12.30 pm, there was an attack against Swedish soldiers in Afghanistan. A Swedish patrol together with Afghan policemen were travelling together when they were attacked. The attack took place in Sayyad which is located in the western part of the Swedish-Finnish area of responsibility in Afghanistan.

All Swedish soldiers are now reported to be back on their respective bases. According to the Swedish armed forces' homepage, nobody was injured seriously but one soldier got an eye-injury. They also write that he is now taken cared of and will be back in duty in a couple of days.

There was one attack earlier on the same day. The group that was attacked consisted mostly of Finnish soldiers but there was one Swedish soldier in the group also. Nobody was hurt in that attack.

<p>IF YOU DON'T LIKE THE RESISTANCE END THE OCCUPATIONS</p>
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FUTILE EXERCISE: ALL HOME NOW!



Soldiers from the U.S. Army's Alfa Company, 3rd brigade of 10th Mountain Division based in Fort Drum, New York, search for IEDs laid by the Taliban along the road near the village of Eber in Logar province September 26, 2009. REUTERS/Nikola Solic



Soldiers from the U.S. Army's Alfa Company, 3rd brigade of 10th Mountain Division based in Fort Drum, New York, search for IEDs laid by the Taliban near the village of Sha Mazar in Logar province September 26, 2009. REUTERS/Nikola Solic



Soldiers from the U.S. Army's Charlie troop, 371 Cavalry, 3rd brigade of 10th Mountain Division based in Fort Drum, New York, patrol in Kherwar district in Logar province October 2, 2009. REUTERS/Nikola Solic



Soldiers from the U.S. Army's Charlie troop, 371 Cavalry, 3rd brigade of 10th Mountain Division based in Fort Drum, New York, patrol in Kherwar district in Logar province October 4, 2009. REUTERS/Nikola Solic

Notes From A Lost War:

“An Elderly Afghan Woman Shouts As She Aims A Gun At U.S. Marines Who Are Arresting Her Husband As A Suspected Taliban Insurgent”

Oct 11 by Claire Truscott Claire Truscott, AFP [Excerpts]

KOTALAK, Afghanistan: An elderly Afghan woman, her hair dyed red and a black shawl draped over her shoulders, shouts as she aims a gun at US Marines who are arresting her husband as a suspected Taliban insurgent.

A Marine points his assault rifle at her and is ready to pull the trigger until the woman drops her rusty pistol.

Members of the 2nd Battalion 3rd Marines, accompanied by Afghan soldiers, were sweeping villages for militants early this week as part of Operation Germinate.

“It’s to disrupt Taliban forces in the Bhujji Bhas Pass because within about a five-kilometre radius of here we have hit about 30 IEDs in the last five months, and that’s just us,” said Lieutenant Shane Harden, 29, of Germinate.

“We are trying to instill in the people of these villages a responsibility for their own security.” **[The Lt. is blind, and clueless. They’re already “responsible for their own security.” Their own security lies in doing everything possible to help the Afghan armed resistance fighting the U.S. occupation army killing them, and they are right to do so. T]**

In the first two days of Operation Germinate, two IEDs were made safe and another three were found.

Back at the mud-brick compound in Kotalak -- one of a number of hostile villages lining the Bhujji Bhas Pass -- the Marines are arresting the elderly woman’s husband and one-armed brother.

A search of their home turned up 15 bags of ammonium nitrate and 12 bags of sugar, common ingredients for making IEDs, as well as ammunition.

As the camouflage-clad Marines search the compounds -- mostly finding scrawny farm animals and dried poppies -- the village women in sequined burkas huddle in a corner, away from the eyes of the men.

“So far the operation has been pretty successful. I think we’ve definitely disrupted activity. This is a good find,” said Harden.

A thorough search of the village also turns up grenades, Soviet-era rifles, more ammunition and Taliban propaganda.

As the Marines tried to bed down for the night in one village compound, machine-gun and rocket fire from the nearby hills were a constant reminder of the proximity of the enemy.

**“The Insurgency Was So Fierce,
According To One Soldier, That
The Troops Couldn’t Get To Their
Mortars To Fire Back”**

**“There Were Five Main Buildings At
The Post And Four Of Them Burned.
Soldiers Eventually Ended Up Going
Into One Building”**

“A Few” Aircraft Were Damaged

October 11, 2009 (CNN) [Excerpts]

The assault began at dawn, as bullets and rockets peppered the remote outpost in eastern Afghanistan.

The insurgency was so fierce, according to one soldier, that the troops couldn’t get to their mortars to fire back.

“They were under heavy enemy contact,” Sgt. Jayson Souter said, describing the October 3 attack that pinned his comrades at Combat Outpost Keating, a remote base in Nuristan province.

The battle started early on October 3 and lasted for 12 hours. At the end, eight American soldiers and more than 100 militants were killed and buildings at the outpost were destroyed.

Fire support officer 1st Lt. Cason Shrode said the initial round “didn’t seem like anything out of the ordinary.” There was a lull and then there was a heavy attack.

“We started receiving a heavy volley of fire. Probably 90 seconds into the fight they ended up hitting one of our generators so we lost all power,” Shrode said in the interview posted online by the Defense Department.

“At that point I knew that this was something bigger than normal.”

Chief Warrant Officer Ross Lewallen, the Apache pilot, said a few aircraft were damaged in what was a “time-consuming endeavor” governed by tough terrain. He said the morning battle was “significant,” but later troops were able to identify targets and eliminate larger weapons.

“One of the primary reasons for the fight taking so long is that it is an extreme terrain,” he said in the same interview.

Lewallen said the valley sits beneath mountains to the west and north.

“There’s a lot of cover so you really can’t detect the enemy until they start moving again,” he said, adding that it was tough for medical evacuation aircraft to land “because we were still trying to control” the outpost.

The intense assault on Keating led to fires. There were five main buildings at the post and four of them burned. Soldiers eventually ended up going into one building.

“The next morning it was pretty much ash besides that one building. I mean that’s the way to describe it. Most of it had burned down.

“So we were pretty much at one building and the rest was just a shadow of what it used to be,” Shrode said in the Defense Department interview.

Eighth Anniversary Of U.S. Government Invasion: Afghan Resistance Says “We Are Ready For A Long War”

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Resistance, who sent this in.]

Oct 7, 2009 By Sayed Salahuddin, KABUL (Reuters) [Excerpts]

The Afghan Taliban pose no threat to the West but will continue their fight against occupying foreign forces, they said on Wednesday, the eighth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion that removed them from power.

“We had and have no plan of harming countries of the world, including those in Europe ... our goal is the independence of the country and the building of an Islamic state,” the Taliban said in a statement on the group’s website www.shahamat.org.

“Still, if you (NATO and U.S. troops) want to colonize the country of proud and pious Afghans under the baseless pretext of a war on terror, then you should know that our patience will only increase and that we are ready for a long war.”

It recalled the defeat of British forces in the 19th century and the fate of the former Soviet Union in the 1980s in Afghanistan as a lesson to those nations who have troops in the country.

Qari Mohammad Yousuf, a spokesman for the Taliban, said the withdrawal of foreign troops was the only solution to a conflict that has grown in intensity and has pushed some European nations to refuse to send their soldiers into battle zones or to speak about a timetable to withdraw from the country.

U.S. OCCUPATION RECRUITING DRIVE IN HIGH GEAR; RECRUITING FOR THE ARMED RESISTANCE THAT IS



A foreign occupation soldier from the U.S. Army uses a battering ram to break down a door in Baraki Rajan, Baraki Barak district in Logar province October 10, 2009.
REUTERS/Nikola Solic

Afghani citizens have no right to resist home invasions by occupation soldiers from the USA. If they do, they may be arrested, wounded, or killed.

[There's nothing quite like invading somebody else's country and busting into their houses by force to arouse an intense desire to kill you in the patriotic, self-respecting civilians who live there.

[But your commanders know that, don't they? Don't they?]



[images.google.com]

English soldiers search an American settler's house (1770's)

Declared Bill Ehrhart, a marine in Vietnam:
In grade school we learned about the redcoats, the nasty British soldiers that tried to stifle our freedom. Subconsciously, but not very subconsciously, I began increasingly to have the feeling that I was a redcoat. I think it was one of the most staggering realizations of my life.

TROOP NEWS

In Deadly '08 Afghan Battle, U.S. Weapons Failed: Study Confirms What Critics Have Said: M4 Rifles Jam At Worst Possible Times

[Thanks to Clancy Sigal & Alan Stolzer, Military Resistance, who sent this in.]

Oct. 11, 2009 Associated Press

WASHINGTON - It was chaos during the early morning assault last year on a remote U.S. outpost in Afghanistan and staff Sgt. Erich Phillips' M4 carbine had quit firing as militant forces surrounded the base.

The machine gun he grabbed after tossing the rifle aside didn't work either.

When the battle in the small village of Wanat ended, nine U.S. soldiers lay dead and 27 more were wounded.

A detailed study of the attack by a military historian found that weapons failed repeatedly at a "critical moment" during the firefight on July 13, 2008, putting the outnumbered American troops at risk of being overrun by nearly 200 insurgents.

The study by Douglas Cubbison of the Army Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., hasn't been publicly released. Copies of the study have been leaked to news organizations and are circulating on the Internet.

Cubbison's study is based on an earlier Army investigation and interviews with soldiers who survived the attack at Wanat.

He describes a well-coordinated attack by a highly skilled enemy that unleashed a withering barrage with AK-47 automatic rifles and rocket-propelled grenades.

The soldiers said their weapons were meticulously cared for and routinely inspected by commanders.

But still the weapons had breakdowns, especially when the rifles were on full automatic, which allows hundreds of bullets to be fired a minute.

The platoon-sized unit of U.S. soldiers and about two dozen Afghan troops was shooting back with such intensity the barrels on their weapons turned white hot.

The high rate of fire appears to have put a number of weapons out of commission, even though the guns are tested and built to operate in extreme conditions.

Cpl. Jonathan Ayers and Spc. Chris McKaig were firing their M4s from a position the soldiers called the "Crow's Nest." The pair would pop up together from cover, fire half a dozen rounds and then drop back down.

On one of these trips up, Ayers was killed instantly by an enemy round.

McKaig soon had problems with his M4, which carries a 30-round magazine.

"My weapon was overheating," McKaig said, according to Cubbison's report.

"I had shot about 12 magazines by this point already and it had only been about a half hour or so into the fight. I couldn't charge my weapon and put another round in because it was too hot, so I got mad and threw my weapon down."

The soldiers also had trouble with their M249 machine guns, a larger weapon than the M4 that can shoot up to 750 rounds per minute.

Cpl. Jason Bogar fired approximately 600 rounds from his M-249 before the weapon overheated and jammed the weapon.

Bogar was killed during the firefight, but no one saw how he died, according to the report.

**THIS IS HOW OBAMA BRINGS THE TROOPS HOME:
BRING THEM ALL HOME NOW, ALIVE**



The casket of Army Staff Sgt. Nekl B. Allen at Arlington National Cemetery Oct. 8, 2009. Allen, 29, from Rochester, N.Y., died Sept. 12 in Wardak province, Afghanistan, when nationalist forces attacked his vehicle with an improvised-explosive device and small arms fire. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)

**POLITICIANS CAN'T BE COUNTED ON TO HALT
THE BLOODSHED**

**THE TROOPS HAVE THE POWER TO STOP THE
WARS**

“The single largest failure of the anti-war movement at this point is the lack of outreach to the troops.” Tim Goodrich, Iraq Veterans Against The War

FORWARD OBSERVATIONS



“At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. Oh had I the ability, and could reach the nation’s ear, I would, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.

“For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder.

“We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”

Frederick Douglass, 1852

**“Hope for change doesn’t cut it when you’re still losing buddies.”
-- J.D. Englehart, Iraq Veterans Against The War**

**I say that when troops cannot be counted on to follow orders because they see the futility and immorality of them THAT is the real key to ending a war.
-- Al Jaccoma, Veterans For Peace**

**“While there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free”
-- Eugene V. Debs**

**“What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms.”
Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 1787.**

**“The mighty are only mighty because we are on our knees. Let us rise!”
-- Camille Desmoulins**

On My Back At The Gangster 20 In Pittsburgh



From: Mike Hastie
To: Military Resistance
Sent: October 07, 2009
Subject: On my back at the Gangster 20 in Pittsburgh

While I was photographing the anarchists rolling dumpsters down a hill at the cops, I got so involved in what I was doing, I did not see another dumpster coming at me. So on my back I went, but was picked up quickly by other photojournalists. I had so much adrenaline in my system, I didn't feel the pain until the next day. Since there is no crying in baseball, I just kept taking pictures of the events happening in front of me.

Eventually, the jobless in America are going to be doing a lot of crying, as the corporate elite continue their assault on poverty in this country. Fasten your seat belts, as U.S. labor has never been so desperate in its history. You can only use Scott Towels for diapers so long. We will be seeing jobless chaos in America real soon. Even during the Great

Depression, the vast majority of products sold in America were made by American workers. Manufacturing jobs have now gone over a cliff to slave labor around the world.

Mike Hastie
Vietnam Veteran
October 7, 2009
8th Anniversary of
America's quick
resolve in Afghanistan

Photo and caption from the I-R-A-Q (I Remember Another Quagmire) portfolio of Mike Hastie, US Army Medic, Vietnam 1970-71. (For more of his outstanding work, contact at: (hastiemike@earthlink.net) T)

One day while I was in a bunker in Vietnam, a sniper round went over my head. The person who fired that weapon was not a terrorist, a rebel, an extremist, or a so-called insurgent. The Vietnamese individual who tried to kill me was a citizen of Vietnam, who did not want me in his country. This truth escapes millions.

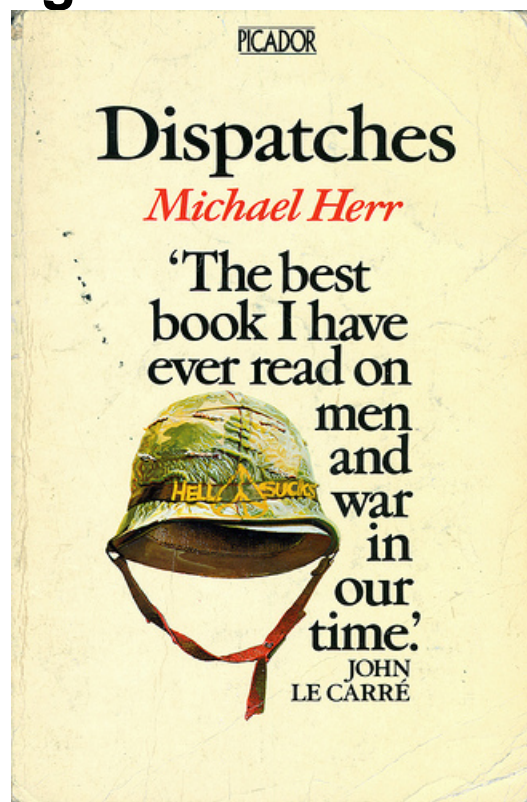
Mike Hastie
U.S. Army Medic
Vietnam 1970-71
December 13, 2004

DO YOU HAVE A FRIEND OR RELATIVE IN THE MILITARY?

Forward GI Special along, or send us the address if you wish and we'll send it regularly. Whether in Iraq or stuck on a base in the USA, this is extra important for your service friend, too often cut off from access to encouraging news of growing resistance to the wars, inside the armed services and at home. Send email requests to address up top or write to: The Military Project, Box 126, 2576 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10025-5657. Phone: 888.711.2550

**“What They Understood And Their
Leaders Refused To Acknowledge
Was That Battles And ‘Victories’
Didn’t Add Up To Anything. The**

**Number Of Communist Dead Meant
Nothing, Changed Nothing”
“There Is A Point Of View That Says That
The United States Got Involved In The
Vietnam War, Commitments And
Interests Aside, Simply Because We
Thought It Would Be Easy”**



[Farm4.static.flickr.com]

[Thanks to Mark Shapiro, Military Project, who sent this in.]

While a colonel in Saigon was declaring that the enemy “no longer maintains in our view capability to mount, execute or sustain a serious offensive action,” out in the countryside soldiers were looking around uneasily, saying, “Charlie’s up to something. Slick, slick, that fucker’s so slick. Watch!”

By Wendy Smith, The American Scholar [Excerpts]

Michael Herr’s brilliant, bitter, and loving book was hailed as a masterpiece when it was published in 1977, and the critical consensus has held steady ever since.

Somehow, a young journalist whose previous experience consisted mostly of travel pieces and film criticism managed to transform himself into a wild new kind of war correspondent capable of comprehending a disturbing new kind of war.

“Herr is the only writer I’ve read who has written in the mad-pop-poetic/bureaucratically camouflaged language in which Vietnam has lived,” wrote playwright and Vietnam draftee David Rabe.

It created enough of a sensation to prompt me to shell out \$8.95 for the hardcover, a lot of money for a college undergraduate in 1978. That was less than three years after North Vietnamese troops had marched into Saigon, during the odd political lull between Richard Nixon’s resignation and Ronald Reagan’s election.

I read *Dispatches* then through particularly rose-colored glasses, confident that we had learned the lessons of Vietnam and Watergate. In the ensuing 29 years, my awe at Herr’s achievement has never lessened, but each of the three times I’ve re-read it, I’ve found new things.

The book hasn’t changed, of course, but I have.

ON FIRST READING, the images *Dispatches* implanted in my mind were unquestionably harrowing: the corpse-strewn streets of ruined Hue, Vietnam’s imperial city; the spooky vistas of Khe Sanh, where the Marines endured near-perpetual fire from ghostly North Vietnamese divisions invisible in the jungle. But those blasted landscapes painted in swaggering rock ‘n’ roll brushstrokes were as remote from my own experiences as the implacable rituals of guilt and expiation in Greek drama — indeed, I naively thought the book offered overdue catharsis for the Vietnam tragedy and expressed a new national consensus about it.

Herr’s contempt for the authorities who had dumped American troops into combat, his matter-of-fact depiction of that combat as senseless, dehumanizing, and futile, seemed like givens.

Didn’t everyone feel that way by 1978?

My liberal, urban friends certainly did, and few voices anywhere were being raised in defense of a military and political strategy whose ultimate fruits (helicopters evacuating the last Marines from the roof of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon while desperate, abandoned Vietnamese civilians swarmed the grounds below) were a painful recent memory.

What impressed me most forcefully about *Dispatches* was the window it opened on the surreal texture of ordinary soldier’s lives.

Liberated from deadlines by his freeform assignment from *Esquire* magazine, Herr spent much of his time hanging around with grunts like the exhausted kid who replied to the standard question, “How long you been in-country?” by half-lifting his head and saying, very slowly, “all fuckin’ day,” or the soldier detailed on

reconnaissance patrol who told the reporter that the pills he took by the fistful “cooled things out just right” and that “he could see that old jungle at night like he was looking at it through a starlight scope.”

Unlike his colleagues working for mainstream media, Herr was under no obligation to solicit and report the military command’s unwaveringly optimistic statements; instead, he listened to “grungy men in the jungle who talked bloody murder and killed people all the time,” men who despised sugar-coated official platitudes about what they were doing there as much as the most committed antiwar activist did.

Dispatches made it clear, I assumed, that hating the war didn’t mean hating those stuck with fighting it.

The virtually unanimous praise lavished on this searing text, the general conviction that it was a definitive portrait of the American experience in Vietnam, suggested that Vietnam was behind us now.

How young I was, and how much I missed.

I still didn’t get it in 1982, when I stood weeping in front of Maya Lin’s memorial lined with the names of Americans killed or missing in Vietnam from 1959 to 1975. Looking at the flowers and the handwritten notes placed along its black granite wall, testament to the anguish we still felt over the loss of so many lives, I couldn’t understand the veterans who angrily viewed the unconventional memorial as a “black gash of shame,” one more example of the way their service had been stigmatized.

I didn’t realize it then, but Vietnam was on its way to becoming the war we weren’t allowed to win.

During the 1980s, I heard that revolting phrase uttered with increasing frequency by people who sought to erase our national trauma, not by acknowledging the mistaken analysis that entangled us in Vietnam and the stubbornness that kept us there, but by shoehorning it into a conventional saga of courage and sacrifice in an honorable cause betrayed by the weak and the disloyal.

Every scathing word in Dispatches belied this pat scenario.

WHEN I PICKED UP Herr’s book again in the late ‘80s, however, I became uncomfortably aware that it also belied my blithe collegiate certainties. The first time through, I had breezed right over Herr’s description of the questions people asked him upon his return as “political, square, innocent . . . I’d practically forgotten the language.” I didn’t even remember the troubling passage in which his pal Tim Page, solicited by a publisher to write a book that would “take the glamour out of war,” erupted with glee: “The very idea! Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody glamour out of bloody war!”

Herr and his fellow misfits among the press corps, dope-smoking longhairs though they might have been, not so secretly saw themselves as belonging to the time-honored, movienourished image of the swashbuckling war correspondent. They hailed

helicopters like taxis, hitching rides into places like Dak To and the Ia Drang Valley, where they risked their lives to observe the nightmare reality buried underneath words like body count and pacification.

Then they grabbed the next chopper out, heading back to Saigon to print their photos and write it all down. There was glamour in war, and they got to experience the buzz of combat from a uniquely privileged position.

“Whatever else, I’d loved it there,” Herr admitted.

Soldiers felt that way too, William Broyles Jr. acknowledged in “Why Men Love War,” a 1984 essay in *Esquire*, which I read not long before I tackled *Dispatches* for the second time.

Broyles probed war’s “great and seductive beauty,” the enduring comradeship created among men who trusted each other with their lives, the knowledge that in battle you touched the fundamentals of human existence.

A Vietnam vet, he didn’t scant the uglier aspects: the sense of power inherent in killing, the covert joy when someone else got wasted instead of you, the unpalatable fact that being surrounded by death was, in some weird ways, a turn-on.

His polished, articulate prose was light years removed from the pop-apocalyptic urgency with which Herr tried to capture the particular nature of Vietnam. And yet both conveyed a message I hadn’t been able to hear in 1978.

For those who were there, the Vietnam War, like every war, was horrible and wonderful, the greatest experience of their lives as well as the worst thing that ever happened to them.

There was an important political discussion to be had about Vietnam, but there was another level on which politics was beside the point.

Dispatches was more than simply a great book about Vietnam, I began to understand.

I spend a lot of my professional time interviewing authors, and over the years I heard several of them refer to Herr’s work with a reverence that bordered on awe.

Dispatches was “one of the greatest memoirs of all time,” remarked Mary Karr, no slouch in that department herself. “It intimidated the pants off me,” confessed novelist Bob Shacochis, who, when I talked with him, had recently completed a nonfiction portrait of American soldiers in Haiti. “I can’t imagine writing a better book than *Dispatches*; it’s a blast of genius.”

The blasts of Herr’s rage, scorn, and agonized tenderness have been disturbing my peace for nearly three decades now; few works in any genre have haunted me the way *Dispatches* has.

IN 1999, IT REENTERED my life in the oddest way, forcing itself anew on my attention when I least expected it. I'd had a baby at age 39 and sank happily into the swamp of my son's all-consuming demands and my equally consuming love for him. The domestic world was my kingdom; war was one of those absurd male pastimes that had no relevance to me. (I know this is ridiculous: remember, I was a new mother.)

One day, reading a book about helicopters to my vehicle-obsessed four-year-old, I came across a photograph of a Huey landing under fire somewhere in South Vietnam. The next thing I knew, *Dispatches* was back in my hands.

It was placed there by my recollection of Herr's amazing description of the Vietnam chopper: "the sexiest thing going; saverdestroyer, provider-waster, right hand-left hand, nimble, fluent, canny and human; hot steel, grease, jungle-saturated canvas webbing, sweat cooling and warming up again, cassette rock and roll in one ear and door-gun fire in the other, fuel, heat, vitality and death, death itself, hardly an intruder."

Rereading that fabulous effusion, I remembered Mary Karr's appreciative appraisal: "Just at the level of sentences, it's never boring." The third time around, I was swept away by the sheer magnificence of Herr's prose as much as by what he had to say. Of course, the two were inextricably connected, and *Dispatches* had something new to say to me in my 40s.

The book was a personal testament, I belatedly grasped.

Herr wasn't just showing me what the war did to other people; he was examining what it did to him. He was terrified, naturally — take a look at his defoliating depiction of being under fire:

That passage took me through Vietnam to the eternal terrain of stark, animal fear.

At its existential heart, *Dispatches* was about what happened to someone living for months on end with that kind of fear, about what the omnipresence of death did to your soul.

Herr summed it up for himself in a single bleak sentence. Walking through the streets of Hue during the Tet Offensive, past hundreds of bodies decomposing in the cold rain, he wrote, "I realized that the only corpse I couldn't bear to look at would be the one whose face I would never have to see."

The grunts' moments of individual reckoning were blunter. "All that's just a load, man," said one young soldier, dismissing the domino theory and other official rationales. "We're here to kill gooks. Period."

Being a mother, I flinched at the thought of my son growing up to say something like that. Being a journalist, I flinched again at Herr's sardonic addendum: "(That) wasn't at all true of me. I was there to watch."

I'd never covered a war or grilled a duplicitous politician, but anyone who writes nonfiction is familiar with the queasily mixed emotions inherent in using other people's experiences as your raw material. Herr dissected that complex, fraught relationship in a situation where the stakes were mortally high.

He thought of himself as the grunts' brother, sharing their miseries and dangers in the field. On the surface, they seemed to agree. They gave him their helmets and flak jackets, found him mattresses to sleep on, threw blankets over him when he was cold. "You're all right man," they said, "you got balls."

But then would come "that bad, bad moment . . . the look that made you look away," or the comment of a rifleman watching a jeepload of correspondents drive off: "Those fucking guys, I hope they die."

Then the distance was clear.

"They weren't judging me, they weren't reproaching me, they didn't even mind me, not in any personal way," Herr wrote. "They only hated me, hated me the way you'd hate any hopeless fool who would put himself through this thing when he had choices."

He was not their brother, and he came to a conclusion many reporters prefer not to draw: "You were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did."

There was only one way to honor that responsibility, and the grunts told him what it was.

"They would ask you with an emotion whose intensity would shock you to please tell it, because they really did have the feeling that it wasn't being told for them, that they were going through all this and that somehow no one back in the World knew about it."

Herr told as many of their stories as he could cram into a narrative burning with his fierce belief that "conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it."

He told the story of a freaked-out Marine, throwing away fatigues soaked with the blood of "some guy he didn't even know (who) had been blown away right next to him, all over him."

There was no way to wash them clean, the soldier said, near tears: "You could take and scrub them fatigues for a million years, and it would never happen."

He told the story of a battalion in the midst of the Tet Offensive's worst days, afflicted with despair so terrible that men from Graves Registration going through the personal effects of dead soldiers sometimes found letters from home "delivered days before and still unopened."

All wars produce horror stories, but in most wars before Vietnam reporters were constrained from telling them, by censorship, of course, but also by their sense that there was a greater goal that at least partly justified the horrors.

Herr cared very little about the big picture — and who could blame him, when one month Khe Sanh fit into the big picture as “the Western Anchor of our Defense” and the next it was “a worthless piece of ground”?

He cared more about what he could learn from the Special Forces captain who said, “I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I’d killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?”

THE HUMAN TRUTHS of Dispatches were also political truths,

I could see when I angrily reopened it on the eve of the 2006 midterm elections.

Because Vietnam was an unpopular war that we lost, it was possible for Herr to say things about the essential nature of combat that it had been unacceptable to say about, for example, World War II. (The U.S. Army was so upset by John Huston’s Signal Corps documentary about veterans suffering from what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder that it suppressed the film for more than 30 years.)

Herr took full advantage of that freedom.

He took very seriously his commitment to tell the grunts’ stories, but he made no pretense of telling them from the grunts’ point of view, and he told stories they undoubtedly wished he’d kept to himself.

He wasn’t “embedded,” the cynical tactic invented by the Bush administration to enmesh reporters in a conflict they were supposed to be covering impartially. “I crossed the line from observer to participant,” said Time correspondent Michael Weisskopf, who lost his right hand when he picked up a live grenade tossed into the Humvee carrying him and four soldiers on patrol in Baghdad. “It became very difficult to objectively assess the role of U.S. soldiers who were housing, feeding, befriending and protecting me. After three weeks in a platoon, I came dangerously close to adopting the mindset and mission of a soldier.”

Herr never fell into that trap.

His affection for the grunts didn’t prevent him from seeing what Vietnam had done to some of them. “They were killers,” he wrote of the soldiers hunkered down at Khe Sanh. “Of course they were; what would anyone expect them to be?”

With the appalling photographs from Abu Ghraib still vivid in my memory, I found my fourth journey through Dispatches halted time after time by grim glimpses of the atrocities committed in Vietnam.

Herr heard stories about “the man in the Highlands who was ‘building his own gook,’ parts were the least of his troubles”; about the door gunner, asked how he could shoot women and children, who replied, “It’s easy, you just don’t lead ‘em so much.”

He saw a photo of a Marine “pissing into the locked-open mouth of a decomposing North Vietnamese soldier”; albums with pictures of smiling soldiers holding up severed heads or necklaces of ears. “There were hundreds of those albums in Vietnam, thousands,” he noted wearily. The inevitable snapshot of a dead Viet Cong woman stripped naked was inevitably accompanied by “that same tired remark you heard every time . . . ‘No more boom-boom for that mamma-san.’”

Herr was sickened by what he saw and heard, but he didn’t judge the grunts. He knew what they were up against. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were not good guys; he observed without surprise that they were supplied by the Soviets and the Chinese, that they were responsible for plenty of atrocities themselves.

What unnerved American soldiers about their enemy — and drove the brass purely crazy — was that he wasn’t playing by their rules.

Over and over, Herr described major battles with massive casualties on both sides that didn’t so much end as stop when the North Vietnamese picked up most of their dead and vanished into the jungle.

Command proclaimed them victories, but it was hard to feel victorious at the top of Dak To’s Hill 875, which hundreds of Americans had died to take, where there were exactly four Vietnamese bodies.

“Of course more died, hundreds more,” Herr wrote, “but the corpses kicked and counted and photographed and buried numbered four. . . . Spooky. Everything up there was spooky . . . you were there in a place where you didn’t belong.”

The grunts knew it, and they didn’t make their commanders’ mistake of underestimating their opponents.

While a colonel in Saigon was declaring that the enemy “no longer maintains in our view capability to mount, execute or sustain a serious offensive action,” out in the countryside soldiers were looking around uneasily, saying, “Charlie’s up to something. Slick, slick, that fucker’s so slick. Watch!”

What they understood and their leaders refused to acknowledge was that battles and “victories” didn’t add up to anything.

“They killed a lot of Communists, but that was all they did,” Herr wrote of the campaign in the Vietnamese highlands.

“The number of Communist dead meant nothing, changed nothing.”

Iraq is not Vietnam. The desert is not the jungle.

The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, infuriatingly hard to pin down though they were, were miracles of coherence compared to the rat’s nest of sectarian death squads and fundamentalist splinter groups accountable to who knows who that toss IEDs at American jeeps in the streets of Baghdad and Mosul.

What is shockingly, shamefully similar is the arrogance, criminal blindness, and willful obfuscation that ensnared America in both places.

In 2006, no other sentence in Dispatches distressed me more than an almost casual aside in the midst of Herr's exegesis of "the bloody, maddening uncanniness" of Vietnam's terrain.

"There is a point of view," he wrote, "that says that the United States got involved in the Vietnam War, commitments and interests aside, simply because we thought it would be easy."

Like all great books, Dispatches is inexhaustible.

I have learned from it, changed with it, made mistakes about it.

It was never the document of national reconciliation I once thought it was.

It was and is the timeless portrait of war's bedrock realities — fear, death, murder, madness — that I was finally ready to confront in my 30s.

It's also a revelation of the beauty that unfolds in extreme circumstances, the clarity of vision possible when everything extraneous has fallen away. It's a brazen display of unbridled romanticism and extravagant prose.

It's a chastening exploration of our complicity in what we see from a safe distance.

It's beyond politics, but we ignore, and have ignored, its political lessons at our peril.

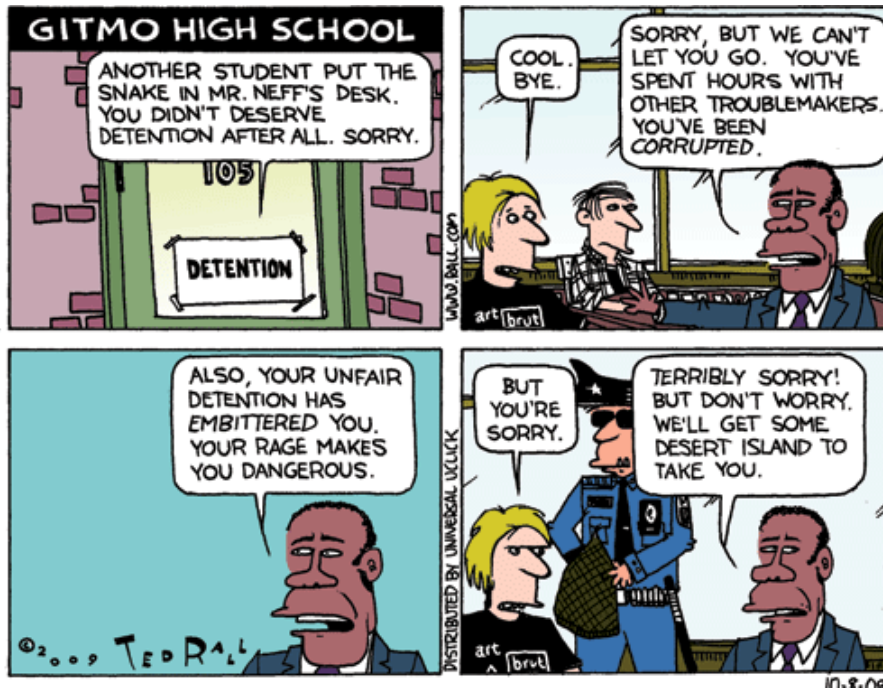
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