Taking the Fight to the Page

By John Sheehy | JANUARY 01, 2017

'I'm having a little trouble seeing this character's motivations,' I tell the writer in workshop.

The story is good, compact, the action carried by a punchy, unpretentious prose. It's about a group of soldiers clearing a house in Afghanistan.

"I mean, I get the tension in the scene," I tell him, "but I'm just not sure why it's rising right here for the central character in particular."

The writer, a slim young man in his late 20s who sits quietly across from me in a short-sleeve cowboy shirt, doesn't fit any of my stereotypes of the combat veteran. He looks at me like I just don't get it.

"Well," he says, but trails off. It's been a long time since he's had to explain this to anybody.

"It's the stairs," explains one of the other students, a Marine who has served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "He's going up the stairs." The Marine talks to me as if he's talking to a small child — not condescending, but kind. "It's hard to fight upstairs. Scary."

The others nod in agreement. Most are veterans, many of them combat veterans, although you might not guess it to look at them in their cargo shorts and flip-flops. They are angled around a cherry table in an airy room at the Marlboro College library, the soft greens and blues of a Vermont summer framed in the open windows behind them.

"That's it," says the writer. "The stairs."

I look at this young man, his soft eyes and his smooth face, and try to think of him 6,500 miles from here, carrying a rifle and 40 pounds of armor and gear, in a mud-and-concrete house full of people shouting in a language he doesn't understand. I try to think of him at
the bottom of a narrow, darkened stairway, knowing that he must ascend but not knowing what he’ll find at the top. I try to think of that moment, the adrenaline, the terror of it. And then I try to think of the moment, later, when that terror became so ordinary, so much a part of his day-to-day, that it became inexplicable, almost inexpressible.

"I see," I say. "Fighting upstairs. I did not know that."

We move on.

Since the summer of 2014, I have been teaching this workshop, a summer writing intensive sponsored by Marlboro College and the New York-based veterans’ writing group Words After War. We follow Words After War’s two-pronged philosophy. First, we focus not on writing as therapy but on literary production. Second, while veterans are our core demographic — Words After War is a veterans’ group, and Marlboro was founded by veterans just after World War II — our workshops, by design, bring veterans together with civilians. Many of the veterans write about war, but not all of them. So do many of the civilians. But we come together as poets, novelists, short-story writers, memoirists. We are writers together, regardless of the experiences that brought us here.

What becomes apparent in workshop is how few of us civilians know about fighting upstairs. Less than half a percent of Americans currently serve in the military, down from roughly 12 percent during World War II and about 10 percent during the Vietnam era. If you are reading this, there is a good chance that you have not served in the military. If you are white, middle class, not from a military family, and not from the West or the South, it’s possible that you don’t know anybody currently serving in the military. You know a story about war, but it’s an old one, told at second or third hand.

And you live in a country that has been at war since 2003.

"Sometimes I don’t really know what to say to the veterans," a civilian novelist tells me at the end of her one-on-one conference. "I mean, I get the stories. But I’ve never been in the Army. I’ve never been in combat." She pauses. "It just seems like something I can’t say anything about."

I know what she means. The veterans in workshop are not Hawkeye or John Yossarian or Septimus Smith. They are young and old, rich and poor, men and women, black and white and brown. They do not share a politics or an ideology. They do not even really share an experience. Some have been in combat, but for many the military has been an office, a garage, a bureaucracy.

Still, the workshop table can feel like Thanksgiving with somebody else’s family, which welcomes you but laughs at jokes you don’t understand, delivered in a jargon full of acronyms you’ve never heard, with an approving "Yut!" every once in a while from the
corner. They speak of one another as brothers and sisters. And when they do, if you are not a brother or a sister, you know it.

It goes both ways. After lunch one day, as we gather to workshop the day's stories, we realize that one of the writers, a former infantryman, is missing. He has drafted a beautiful, tight, unadorned short story about a road-clearing mission, and I've been looking forward to discussing it. But he's not there, and the people we send to find him on campus come back shaking their heads. He sends us an email a couple days later from a hotel in a distant city, not exactly to apologize but to explain: He didn’t know there would be so many civilians there.

At the library table, I read to the participants the beginning of Hemingway’s "Soldier’s Home," a World War I story about a man who comes home from war unable to articulate the experience to others or to himself. This is not a story about war, I tell them, but about the vocation of the fiction writer: always to resist cliché, to rescue the real from our ideas about it by telling the lie that can become truth.

I tell them Hemingway said to write what you know. I tell them about Henry James, too, who believed that your experience is only the beginning of what you can know. "Try," James advised, "to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!"

Between Hemingway and James we, soldiers and civilians, try to make truth out of stories, which are all we have to make it out of. We have things in common. We have all loved, we have all lost brothers, sisters — albeit some violently and far too young.

Some of us have killed, too. They don’t talk about that, usually, and we don’t ask: because we are polite, and because all the old stories we know have made of that killing a Holy Secret which we do not know how to share. We have not told or heard a new story yet. We are here because we hope it will emerge.

We also don’t ask because we are afraid — afraid that when the secret is told it might be this: When the soldiers killed, when they entered that darkened stairway, they did so because we asked them to.

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