

War Stories



by Carl Nelson

"In the end, folks fight for self-interest, and a just war is one you win."

– Major Clay Steerforth USMC from "War Story" by David Richardson

"Their principles were in their feet. Their calculations were biological. They had no sense of strategy or mission. They searched the villages without knowing what to look for, not caring, kicking over jars of rice, frisking children and old men, blowing tunnels, sometimes setting fires and sometimes not, then forming up and moving on to the next village, where it would always be the same."

– Narrator in "The Things They Carried" by Tim O'Brien

There are two books about war I recently finished reading. One was a novel written about the Vietnam conflict that was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and a *New York Times* 'Book of the Century', which my wife bought and read for a recently joined

book group. The other was a more contemporary novel about the Iraq conflict, which I found on Amazon after following a social media link from a posting by the fellow who wrote the introduction. (I almost always buy a book published by anyone I know.) Both revolve around a tour of duty in a foreign war written by authors who fought in these wars. The Vietnam story is a partly fictional accounting of an unwilling draftee's induction into the terrors of a guerrilla civil war. The Iraq story is the same of an officer who volunteers for hazardous duty in a small unit war. What most interests me in these accounts is how they mirror the yin yang of the contemporary political divide. It's easy to see on first accounting that this divide has been generations in the making. The chickens coming home to roost have left a long trail of broken eggs.

War Story's protagonists are Major Clay Steerforth, USMC, and Lieutenant Colonel Abdul Mujeed, for the Iraqi forces. Both are military professionals. The Major's orders are to work with the Iraqi forces so as to eliminate the resistance to the U S presence, and to support the Iraqis, until such time as they can support the American withdrawal. We follow the Major throughout his tour, as he directs and participates in various of the daily assignments to pacify the resistance in the surrounding locale. Each mission is planned, executed with necessary improvising, and de-briefed. The larger strategic vision floats in the back of the Major's mind, which now and then comes to the fore when it collides with the reality on the ground. Basically, the tour is a day to day battle with resistance met through roadside IUDs, snipers, and urban recon, which sometimes leads to blazing gun battles. Interminable fighting has reduced much of the surrounding towns to rubble. Over the term of the Major's deployment little changes; mostly, soldiers on both sides die fighting over dirt and piles of rock.

The Things They Carried has a narrator/author/soldier, but the

protagonist slot shifts through the platoon of soldiers alighting on the lieutenant, the medic, the various grunts as we read their back stories, accompany the platoon throughout a tour of duty, and meet their fates. "What they carried varied by mission" and role, whether platoon leader, medic, machine gunner, radio person, etc. The missions varied from recon, to establishing a presence and to investigate villages where high levels of enemy activity were occurring, perhaps to "search out and destroy elaborate tunnel complexes", or to perform nighttime ambushes. The jungle and the war damaged the soldiers. Villages were burned and lots of people were killed and maimed on both sides without much change in the strategic situation. In this respect, the war carried out within the two books was much the same: a grinding, fruitless adventure in boredom, cruel carnage and terror. What interested me most however was how the attitude taken by the participants towards both ventures varied. The Vietnam platoon were often draftees, eighteen or nineteen year old kids plunged into the mire of war. The Iraqi conflict used enlistees of near ages, who could then choose whether to serve in a supporting role or combat. Practically, though, the line was somewhat blurred. A bad economy, especially in our nation's rustbelt, made enlistment a survival decision for many. Moreover, combat directed troops in Iraq weren't as gung ho as might be assumed. Concerning the women enlistees, (whom the platoon doesn't think too well of, leaving them to eat off by themselves), we are served this dialogue:

"Where's your first sergeant?"

"Don't have one, but one's inbound. She's due anytime."

"*She?* I've never worked with a female marine before," I said.

"You will now. There's forty-seven females in the battery."

I made a sour face.

“Yeah. When the word came out that the division was headed to Iraq, half of them got pregnant, nearly overnight. In other words, they shot themselves in the foot.”

In *The Things That They Carried*, it's the medic, Rat Kiley, who shoots himself in the foot for discharge when reaching his limit after mentally fraying.

A contrast between the two books is their use of detail. In *War Story* the details are used to illustrate the fighting strategy and morale of the unit. In *The Things They Carried* the details are used generally to underline mood, establish credibility, to tether the spiritual, and to bob along lyrical waters. If weapons of war are mentioned, they are as burdens to be humped for an engineered juggernaut of national purpose.

To a non-veteran citizen, such as myself, there is a clarifying metaphor which might be drawn here between business survival and corporate sales as I experienced it – and the war effort as described in these two novels. To those outside of sales, the profession is often perceived as a mercenary, selfish, predatory ‘profession’ utilizing bullsh*t conversation to intimidate and cow innocents (or marks) into paying too much for what often appears less than promised. To such a partisan, sales is a perversion of that most humane of endeavors, the conversation.

A conversation, according to Google, is “a talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people, in which news and ideas are exchanged”. It is perhaps the most civil action two strangers might engage in.

To those inside the world of sales though, a conversation is not selling. A conversation is something a novice has engaged in instead of securing the sale. Sales, and its professionals, take verbal command in order to achieve a result. The salesperson heads out, visits, sifts for

prospects, determines their needs, qualifies them for purchase, and leads the customer to recognize a better choice. Twenty tries gives you one meeting. Two or three meetings give you a sale. This is much the same practical attitude of our battalion commander in *War Story*:

“A mission never goes as one foresees it. You make a plan for one hundred percent success; if you get eighty of that you’re lucky. If you get sixty percent and live, you declare victory...”

The author of *The Things That They Carried*, however, has no real objective other than to have a conversation with war:

“For the common soldier, at least, war has the feel – the spiritual texture – of a great ghostly fog, thick and permanent. There is no clarity. Everything swirls. The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can’t tell where you are, or why you’re there, and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.”

The author of *The Things That They Carried* is trying to have a relationship with war, inveigle it into conversation. As if he were trying to describe his bad first marriage, as he sleeps with it, listens to it, is horrified and carries a great grief from it. It is as if the narrator were trying to bond with a crocodile. In a much later interview he says, “Literature in not happy hour time,” and that we need “to move beyond the mythology” – which, of course, is exactly where he is stuck. In fact, as he states, he has “devoted a lifetime to suffering from it.”

I doubt the mythology he means is the “great ghostly fog” he is suffering from. I would garner that it is the traditional professional soldier’s mythology that he resents. Though, if

he had internalized some, it is my guess that he would have fared better both during and after enlistment – as would his platoon mates. As is, they would seem to violate the soldier's code wantonly – such as the ugly torture-mutilation of a baby water buffalo, which other non-participants in the platoon seemed powerless to condemn. Rather they appreciated Rat Kelly's cruel unleashing of frustration as serving their enlightenment:

“Afterward we sat waiting for Rat to get himself together.”

“Amazing,” Dave Jensen kept saying. “A new wrinkle. I never seen it before.”

Mitchell Sanders took out his yo-yo. “Well, that's Nam,” he said. “Garden of Evil. Over here, man, every sin's real fresh and original.”

As if participating in a re-creation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, their personal growth seems pointed directly towards evil, as if they intend to “beat the Devil”. Up is down, and down becomes up. Like the individual, who knows nothing of sales, the author's platoon might have survived their war a bit better if they had understood and practiced the professional soldier's traditions, codes, and the time-honored “Oorah!” As it was, in *The Things That They Carried*, rather than practicing a soldier's best practices, they made a hashtag virtue of their deplorable state:

“You feel an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self – your truest self, the human being you want to be and then become by the force of wanting it. In the midst of evil you want to be a good man. You want decency. You want justice and courtesy and human concord, things you never knew you wanted. There is a kind of largeness to it, a kind of godliness.”

This might occur, but is more likely, an instance

of character inflation common to people unequal to a situation – while within the situation – only to relapse when beyond it. At least, as released veterans, this “largeness ... a kind of godliness” seems to have abandoned them.

The story leads us into the pathos of grunts bivouacked and dying by mortar fire in the village sewage field because of a poor command decision. But as the failure and sordidness escalate, so too does the received wisdom. I’m sympathetic. Their situation is moving. Nevertheless, it smacks of the current woke: failing children parroting wisdoms with which to lead the world – a platoon of Ishmael-like characters who have spoken with the Devil rather than the Lord and brought back pages of contradictions.

The author of *War Story*, seeks a spiritual convergence likewise, between their actions and meaning, but locates this in their professionalism and as the honor guard of their tradition. The soldiers of both wars most fear, even above death, embarrassing themselves before their platoon either by cowardice or from incompetence or slackness. But while the dialogue and morale of the Vietnam soldiers’ is rather somnolent and lyrical, that of *War Story* is abbreviated, laconic and mostly abridged. It is rather by what the Iraqi platoon of soldiers don’t say that their creed is upheld, the tradition cemented. “Ooorah!” encapsulates it. Their duties are clearly described and the hierarchy strictly observed. It is a fierce male environment, likely because war is a fiercely male endeavor.

Uncharacteristically, the Marine protagonist is also a painter (visual artist). When he is back from the front, he meets with a senior artist friend, his gay (the protagonist is not) mentor:

“I picked up John on Monday, and we drove to Adams Morgan for lunch.

He was distant on the way over, and nothing I said could get him talking. ... After we sat down I asked what had his tongue.

"You're different when you come back," he said.

"Different?"

"Your speech, your demeanor – it's aggressive, crass. It was like that last time too."

"That's the environment of the Marine Corps. The strong eat the weak. If you don't fight back, you end up bloody and at the bottom of the pecking order. It's like that twenty-four-seven."

"Don't you have friends?"

"Sure, but I don't see them much. Most are deployed."

...

"I'd never considered the effect that being amongst Marines all the time had on me and how it was perceived by civilians. "I know what you mean," I said.

He looked up. "So you know?"

"Sure. It's a cycle I go through. I'll be back to normal eventually. We keep telling ourselves that."

In both novels, re-entry seems the hardest part. I would guess that it is something like Moses coming down from the mount, wild eyed, after speaking with the Lord for forty days and forty nights. He certainly looked a bit queer to the others, and likely felt likewise. If the Lord hadn't required stone tablets into which Moses' notes were etched durably, the poor fellow might have not known what to say and lost his way again – perhaps permanently.

Nobody, however, gives the combat-vet the message of what to

say. They have to try and make sense of the experience on their own, and communicate it to those without the experience.

The humdrum, safe, and anything but grand experience of normal American life can be quite alienating to someone still orbiting to the carnage, amorality, thrill and stark terror of war. It's as if they've seen the backside of God, and the people they come home to aren't going to like what they hear. Or these listeners will misunderstand and pollute the truth in innumerable ways, a blasphemy of sorts. This makes it hard on humans, who are first and foremost, social creatures, returning from an alienating combat.

The soldiers of both books left their tours with new brothers, but not necessarily the same memories nor outlook. The *War Story* narrator and the soldiers who treated their time in the theater of war as a special moment in their lives, and carried on (often with wounds), wearing the experience like a medal. The soldiers of *The Things They Carried* seemed much more unable to either incorporate the war experience or to blend it with their civilian lives – and had no strategy but to wander afterwards as if the shellshocked un-dead.

Our Vietnam author would seem to be quite ahead of his time in wanting a just war with diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging in which the grunts might self-actualize. But like sales, you have to take the customer as is. Professional soldiers have a skill set and a rich tradition which helps them to navigate these waters – and hopefully an honored place in society which to occupy on their return. Without this traditional outlook and esteemed position, the characters of *The Things They Carried* returned to a nation which no longer had a place for their changed selves – a self without honor – and from a situation which was seemingly dishonorable to people outside of the military (i.e. they lost). What they had learned damaged them.

Not every situation and activity can bear, nor is conducive to

a fully integrated, healthy human condition. This would seem to be why we have professions with their traditions. You cannot take your family and loved ones everywhere. A lot of life is not G-Rated. You cannot have a humane conversation with the inhumane. In dealing with a crocodile, one needs a strategy. You are no longer in your mother's world and need a father's skills. Soldiers and salespeople are professionals with the tools to live strategically in order to keep their psyche's and/or souls attached to flesh. The woke don't seem capable of embracing the imperfect, trade-offs of life. They seem determined to wander through this world in gossamer nightgowns, like waifs, waiting to be ravished.

These two books seem to roughly provide some harbinger of the great divide in what I would deem our Feminist Century – which I hope to consider further in a future essay.