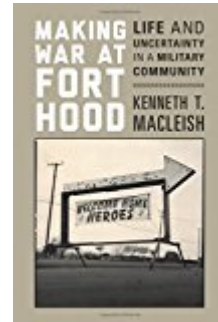


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth T. MacLeish. *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. 280 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-15274-5.



Reviewed by Jacqueline Whitt

Published on H-War (February, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

What does it *feel* like to be a soldier? In *Making War at Fort Hood*, this is the central question, and Kenneth T. MacLeish seeks to explore both its physical and emotional dimensions. Physically, what is it like to carry a heavy pack, to be in the desert, to have chronic joint and muscle pain, to engage in physical training (PT) until you are exhausted, to be broken and put back together, to be in debt and to have something owed to you, to have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or to be on medication to treat PTSD? And psychologically, what does it *mean* to be a soldier, to wear the uniform, to be part of the army “family,” to train, to deploy, to come back, to be a wounded warrior, to have people thank you for your service, to see friends and comrades die, to be stationed at Fort Hood, or to make war in the modern world?

For expectations’ sake, let us start with what *Making War at Fort Hood* is not. It is not a history of Fort Hood or Killeen, Texas, the military-industrial complex, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the First Cavalry Division, or the Fourth Infantry Division. It is not about battle, or the face of it. It is not a narrative. It is not filled with archival and documentary references or long historiographical passages. It does not make a historical argument. It is not objective or dispassionate.

It is ethnography, sociology, anthropology, and oral history. It is about soldiers’ bodies and their minds. MacLeish lives with and among his subjects—he befriends them, goes fishing with them, drinks beer with them, and sits in their apartments while they talk. It contains more-than-passing references to theory. It displays a postmodern, constructivist sensibility (albeit one grounded in the reality of war and what it does to individuals and families and communities). There is a fair bit of sociological jargon (the book is based on the author’s dissertation, and it occasionally shows). It is about language, and emotion, and ideas, and meaning. Military historians should read it anyway.

If John Keegan’s 1976 *The Face of Battle* introduced us to the question of what battle looks and feels like from the perspective of a soldier on the ground, the continued inquiry into the soldier’s experience has both broadened and deepened our understanding of military history. We have become well attuned to trauma and the experience of battle—of killing and being killed, of technology and ideology, of morale and cohesion. And beyond the battlefield, war-and-society studies have focused our attention on the home front, the political context of wars, and the social implications of war and the military. But for the most part, soldiers stay on the battlefield (or at least on

military bases) and civilians at home, and “war” is made somewhere out there, abstracted, and somehow detached from everyday existence. MacLeish challenges his readers to understand that war is made, materially and mentally, in the humans who embody its purpose.

MacLeish’s study goes some way toward highlighting and perhaps resolving the larger issue of what one might call the mind-body problem in military history. On the one hand, war is physical, corporeal, bloody, material, and tangible. On the other hand, it is mental, ideological, psychological, ephemeral, and perhaps even spiritual. And most scholars privilege one view or the other. How the two are related remains something of a mystery. To this end, the fields of anthropology and sociology can contribute significantly to our understanding of war and the military as they offer theoretical and methodological approaches to unpacking the mind-body problem. MacLeish might be criticized for his emphasis on soldiers’ “broken” bodies and minds—many of the study’s subjects are part of the Warrior Transition Unit or have a PTSD diagnosis. MacLeish analyzes the idea of “brokenness” in some depth and explores the persistent pattern of associating injury and sickness with “bad” soldiers. Still, one wonders how the story might have unfolded differently if MacLeish had befriended and studied the unit’s fittest, most exemplary soldiers.

The physicality of war is central to the book’s premise, as the soldier’s body is instrumental to the war effort. From rigorous and occasionally punishing PT, to the heavy loads that soldiers bear in combat, to their injuries sustained in training and combat, the soldier and his or her body is the “agent, instrument, and object of state violence” (p. 12). MacLeish spends considerable time analyzing the physical markers of life on an army base: the uniforms and haircuts, the buildings, and the signs. Soldiers’ bodies are also analyzed in relation to injury and medicine, physical fitness, and physical intimacy with family and fellow soldiers. A future ethnographic study of soldiers, airmen, sailors, or marines who work in cyber, robotic, or other unmanned realms of war that examines the mental and physical implications of making war when (American) service members’ *bodies* are largely taken out of the equation would be a welcome and logical extension of MacLeish’s work.

MacLeish’s study is organized thematically into five chapters, but they are, in his words “wide-ranging, porous, and extensible,” which occasionally makes the overall organization and thrust of the book less than obvious (p. 25). The first chapter confronts many appar-

ent contradictions about life and work on a military base, identifying it as a “site of exception” where the same rules and regulations that regiment and routinize army life are also the source of constant comment and critique by the people who are subject to them. MacLeish’s observation that “listening to the people who live in and with the military, one could be forgiven for wondering whether the institution is the basis for normalcy or an egregious intrusion on it” is both accurate and intriguing (p. 27).

Chapters 2 through 4 are about physical and social vulnerability and kinship. The second chapter covers the soldier’s vulnerability to violence and the body’s physical response to war, even after its return stateside. The chapter turns on its head the conventional image of the U.S. soldier as a “lethal, heavily-armored agent of violence” and looks instead at the vulnerabilities that soldiers’ bodies present to the war machine (p. 52). Then the third chapter examines “how vulnerability to violence takes intimate form through technology, time, medicine, and structures of institutional support” (p. 26). Chapter 4 examines the social relationships and networks that these vulnerabilities create, sustain, and strain. MacLeish explores the various ties of intimacy and kinship that emerge on an army base—between groups of soldiers, between soldiers and their families, between spouses, with the community, and with the “Army Family” as a whole. Each of these relationships and networks is critical to understanding the social role that communities play in the overall effort of making war.

The fifth chapter, “War Economy,” is the most theoretically interesting and the most complex in terms of its presentation. It is not, as the title might suggest, about the economics of making war—the millions of dollars of procurement, the cost of military pay and benefits or contracting, or the military-industrial complex. Rather it is a broad examination of the ways in which soldiers and society negotiate the value of the labor and lives of military personnel. It examines the language of “sacrifice” and the rhetoric of “support the troops.” It asks questions about obligation and debt in an All Volunteer Force. There is a long section on the “gift of death” and the idea that this gift is, in fact, what defines war, but is complicated by the fact that the soldiers who give it are not free agents, but rather agents of a state that claims the right to give their lives. The gift of death thus creates a social obligation on the part of the society that receives it, but that can almost never be repaid. These are complex and interesting problems, and MacLeish navigates them deftly.

Just as soldiers’ bodies are a primary focus of the

book, so too is the landscape of Fort Hood and its environs. Fort Hood, one of the biggest army bases in the United States, serves as the center of gravity for MacLeish's study. MacLeish undertook his fieldwork in 2007-2008, as "The Surge" in Iraq was planned, announced, and executed. By the time of publication, the war in Iraq had (officially) ended, and the war in Afghanistan was winding down. Between the initial dissertation writing and publication, Fort Hood became a site of national attention, mourning, and outrage in 2009, after a mass shooting left thirteen dead and thirty-two wounded. The shooter was Army Major Nidal Hasan, a psychiatrist, who has since been convicted at court-martial and sentenced to death. The Fort Hood shooting prompted anew discussions about extremist religious views, mental health, gun control, soldier and community resilience, and the effects of extended wars and mul-

iple deployments on the armed services. Though it occurred outside of the chronological boundaries of his study, MacLeish briefly explores the shooting, its aftermath, and its effects on the Fort Hood community in an epilogue that serves to tie together many of the book's themes. Though it is not a book about Fort Hood, per se, the massive military installation and its west Texas environs almost become characters in MacLeish's rendering—place and people tied inextricably to one another.

Making War at Fort Hood is an ambitious, provocative book. It will be of significant value to historians of contemporary military conflicts, the organizational culture of the U.S. Army, and the lived experience of war. It may not be an easy read for historians who are attuned to narrative and who privilege archival sources over other sorts of evidence, but it is an important work that deserves attention.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Jacqueline Whitt. Review of MacLeish, Kenneth T., *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. February, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38421>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.