



Donald Anderson, ed. *Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan*. Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2021. 258 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-64012-452-3.

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In the book *Quagmire*, Donald Anderson pulls together twenty-one essays, each with its own unique perspective, and presents them as one holistic saga on the effects that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq had on those who fought them, their families, and America as a whole. Each story stands as its own individual “tile” in a larger mosaic that paints a harrowing and often haunting picture of the effects that the two long overseas conflicts had on Americans. At a minimum, reading this book should make most readers more aware of individual sacrifices made by those deployed in service to their nation over the first two decades of this millennium. Even moreso, this collection of stories will give the rest of us a far greater appreciation of the complex nature of a war’s effect on those fighting it, as well as its effect on humanity overall.

As if to ease the reader’s transition from civilian life to the realities of the Iraq and Afghanistan battlefields, the editor begins the collection with an outstanding piece called “Things to Pack When You’re Bound for Baghdad,” written by B-2 bomber pilot Jason Armagost, who chronicles his thirty-nine-hour flight from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri to bomb targets in Iraq. Among the interesting items packed by this aerial warrior

during the flight were two dozen books kept in a library-like helmet bag that included many classics, such as *Gilgamesh* and Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as the possible inspiration for this essay’s title, *The Things They Carried* (1990) by Tim O’Brien about the things soldiers carried in Vietnam. The highlight of Armagost’s piece is a section where he discusses how he bowhunts near his home station, stripping down to just running shorts while hunting barefoot. This description comes with an outstanding look back at the different historical warriors who used the bow and arrow while stalking human “prey” throughout the centuries. In Armagost’s case, he just relies on his skill with the bow, stealth, and surprise to successfully bring down a deer. The singular hunter with only a bow stalking his prey contrasts starkly with this same warrior flying a two-billion-dollar, high-technology national asset into combat to drop more than a dozen two-thousand-pound bombs onto targets in Iraq. This contrasting image also sets the stage for the essays to follow, as we see so many contrasting yet fascinating personalities that make up the composite of the American spirit as represented in its military members.

Quagmire’s remaining essays primarily deal with soldiers or marines who served on the

ground in America's two sentinel conflicts of the first two decades of the twenty-first century but also includes writing from a few family members, friends, or others connected to those who did the ground fighting. This review focuses on the main themes that come across in the various personal accounts and illuminates the significant impact that going to war has on military members, on their families, and on society overall. The first theme that jumps out is that deploying to a combat operation has a significant impact on those directly involved. This has been the case throughout time, and each military generation that survives such an ordeal never forgets the experiences therein. However, one of the differences with the current generation's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan versus many past conflicts is that US soldiers were often dealing directly with the civilian populations in which the enemy often operated in and around, making it difficult at times to determine friend from foe. Correspondingly, with the conflict occurring among these civilians, the essayists not only saw tragedies occurring to their fellow soldiers but also felt the negative impact of these two conflicts on the civilian populations, including women and children. For example, in "A Bridge to Nowhere" by Jason Arment, the marine infantryman author explains the reason he joined was to "go to war and kill someone," but when he finally gets his chance, cleared by the rules of engagement to kill a potential combatant running a roadblock, he looked through his scope and saw the driver in his business suit and was stopped cold (p. 192). Arment "felt that man's struggle to survive, thought of the commute and how shitty it must have been, knew his frustration for not being able to make ends meet, saw him at the table with his wife and children" (p. 203). The reader is left wondering how many innocent civilians were killed in similar situations by young Americans, who, while trying to serve their country and do the right thing under difficult conditions, were instead unintentionally taking the lives of the very civilians they were there to help.

The second theme running throughout these stories is one that is also a familiar struggle going back through the ages: the difficulty for those who see combat to share their experiences with those back home. These veterans believe that family members and friends cannot possibly understand what it was like to be in Afghanistan or Iraq because you just had to be there to "get it." The *Quagmire* essay that best captures this idea is "Service with a Smile" by Bobby Briggs. After a combat tour in Afghanistan, he recounts having brunch with a bunch of former classmates following a college football game the evening prior. Warily he tells a "war story" from his deployment, which includes a description of a gory death of one of the Afghan interpreters in a rocket propelled grenade attack. When he finishes, the light, cheerful mood of the morning is lost, and there is awkward silence as the young men and women with Bobby struggle to come up with things to say. He perceives that he should not have told the story, because they do not understand, and he ponders "If our lives are a collection of the stories we carry, what does it mean to exist in a world where you cannot share them?" (pp. 102-3). Knowing that sharing these experiences helps them deal with post-combat stress, we are left wondering how we as a nation can facilitate safe conversations with these veterans and contribute to their healing.

A third theme that links many of these stories is the apparent randomness that often separates those maimed and killed from others who escape injury. This idea is mentioned or implied in several of the essays, with it most directly touched on in "Lucky" by Nicholas Mercurio. The story deals with the medivac of several soldiers who were injured, at least one critically, in a vehicle rollover accident likely caused by poor road conditions entering a bridge, with the truck falling sixty feet into the water. After witnessing the soldier who had been driving the truck, seemingly already dealing with survivor's guilt, sitting uninjured talking to a chaplain at the hospital, Mercurio re-

marks to his fellow medivac airman that the driver was lucky. His companion says, "I don't know man, he's gotta live with this." Mercurio then writes, "I looked at the driver again. Tears had started to form in his eyes, he would have probably hidden them if he'd noticed" (p. 130). Elsewhere in the essay, the author describes the medivac team as pondering their own fate. "I knew they were thinking that their bodies were just as fragile, that any number of times it could have easily been them, all [messed] up on a litter, staring up into strange faces, and wondering if they were dying" (pp. 127-28). Mercurio's story is a reminder to us all not to take life for granted, because it can be snatched away in an instant.

The final thread that runs through these stories is the idea that combat survivors share a unique camaraderie that binds them together. Despite the diversity of background, race, hometown, or other factors, those who serve together have a special connection unlike most other professions. There is a sense of comfort in seeing those you served with again and even simply meeting someone who you find out has served in the same combat zone that you have. I have experienced this phenomenon, unexpectedly running into a war buddy from my one-year tour in Afghanistan on a DC subway, feeling an overwhelming sense of warm reminiscence, as did he, causing us to embrace earnestly. The best story in *Quagmire* that captures this idea is Nolan Peterson's "Scars," where he and another American, named Kevin, meet each other in the dining room of a lodge in the mountains of Nepal. After talking, they discover not only that they both served in Afghanistan but also that, coincidentally, one had provided air support to the other in a firefight during their tours. They were, as Peterson states, "two men who unknowingly depended on each other in combat meeting for the first time on the eve of climbing a remote Himalayan peak." They talked for hours of their experiences in Afghanistan and the "attraction we both had for the mountains." Two days later, they met on the mountain and ex-

changed brief comments about the climb, and then parted. Peterson states, "I haven't seen Kevin since, and I've lost touch with him over the years. But meeting him on the base of the climb was something that I will never forget. The things that I had so badly wanted to leave behind ended up being my greatest comfort" (p. 48). It is this phenomenon that make veterans groups so important as they serve as places to revisit wartime experiences with others who understand the hardships involved firsthand.

A collection of firsthand accounts of a subject is a great way to weave together a comprehensive perspective that provides the reader an excellent overall view of the topic. However, there is a danger that the editor of the collection (in this case Anderson) could slant the narrative in one direction or another, even if unintentionally, based simply on the particular essays selected to go into the collection. Moreover, it is likely that those suffering a more dramatic impact from their combat experience are more likely to write about their experience than those who might have a relatively more benign or perhaps even positive experience from their deployment. Thus, a reader unfamiliar with combat vets or not well versed with the military in general may come away thinking that every returning veteran struggles with post-traumatic stress or is otherwise jaded in some way from their experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. This view of the veteran as "victim" is not new and was held by many after the Vietnam War as well, primarily because the preponderance of stories, both published in written form and depicted in film, reinforced this stereotype. Notwithstanding the danger of the same phenomena occurring after the dust settles on US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, I think *Quagmire* is well worth the read. It is difficult to determine the exact extent to which these essays contain some level of bias, subconscious or otherwise, from the individual authors or from Anderson. However, my own combat experience during my twenty-seven-year military career (including a year in Afgh-

anistan), combined with extensive research on this subject, leads me to believe that the stories in this book, while not exhaustingly comprehensive, do a first-rate job providing the reader a generally accurate, informative, interesting, soul-searching, and even gut-wrenching look inside the American experience in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Reading this collection of personal narratives leaves the reader with many conflicting emotions, particularly after the American exit from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. The reader is also left with many questions that are likely unanswerable. Was our participation in Afghanistan and Iraq worth it? How many of the survivors from these two conflicts are permanently physically and/or emotionally damaged? What does the amalgamation of these individual accounts say about the American military member? What does it say about America itself? The reader is left to conclude that the American military members who fought, suffered, and occasionally died in Afghanistan and Iraq were a collection gathered from the great melting pot of America itself. They were imperfect, conflicted outsiders from a variety of backgrounds in the United States who were suddenly thrust into a foreign culture. Nonetheless, these men and women were truly exceptional in that they volunteered for service, and when it was their turn to fight America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they went and did the best they could. They were a small minority of Americans who sacrificed on the front lines for the rest of us. They unwittingly became "family," not just to their fellow unit members but also with all the other veterans who took part in these two wars. Most of them consider themselves not as heroes, nor do they see themselves as exceptional. Instead, they view themselves as just normal Americans, like you and me. However, as this book shows, they did very hard things, and for the most part, they did not complain, nor shirk the task, but instead continued to "toe the line." The stories in this collection show that they probably will not be able to effectively communicate their experiences to the

rest of us. However, reading this book will give us an idea of what they may have endured and how they may feel about it. Anderson has done a great service by collecting these personal narratives and weaving them into an excellent overall story of the American experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Quagmire* is not just a top-notch book but an impactful historical experience as well.

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