The Poet & The Wounded Warrior's Return

by J.A. Moad II

> *Sing to me of the man, muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy…*
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> - The opening line of *The Odyssey* by Homer

In January of 2011, a fall on an icy incline did enough damage to warrant rotator cuff surgery back in the U.S. I'd just retired from the Air Force and was living in Germany. A single visit to a nearby military hospital was all it took to recognize that I wasn't a priority there, and nor should I have been. While the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center serves the local military community, it has another mission as well. It's the first stop outside the war zones for many of those wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As I left the hospital, I watched a crowd of medical personnel gather around a bus that had just arrived. They began offloading stretchers, one after another, filled with the wounded warriors who'd just arrived at Ramstein Air Base on a C-17. I examined the faces of those young soldiers, and after twenty years of service, many of them looked like little boys to me. With IVs hovering above blanketed bodies, the stretchers moved briskly past me toward surgeons and doctors waiting to treat the physical wounds of war. After watching the work unfold before me, a trip back to the U.S. for surgery seemed like a modest inconvenience.

So, I returned to Colorado Springs for my surgery—my old stomping grounds, where I'd taught War Literature and helped edit the International Journal, War, Literature & The Arts (WLA) at the Air Force Academy. After a four-hour procedure to piece together my shoulder with seven screws, I spent a dozen days convalescing at a friend's condo in town. It was a perfect setting on the eighth floor overlooking the city and the mountains beyond. There were only two limitations: no Internet access, and a limited number of TV channels provided by the TV's tabletop antennae. Knowing I wouldn't be inclined to read much in the first week after the surgery, I'd checked out a stack of DVD's from the library—documentaries on the Greeks and Romans, a biography of Winston Churchill, a few movies, and the Ken Burns' histories

of Jazz and World War II. Each of them meant to augment my research for a collection of short fiction I'm writing on the peripheral effects of war on society.

I started with the Greeks, reintroducing myself to the myths and warrior culture depicted in the epic poems of Homer. Like many students of literature, the Odyssey has always held a special fascination for me. I was reminded that The Trojan War lasted ten years, but what I'd forgotten was that it took another ten years for Odysseus to find his way back home to Ithaca. Homer's narrative imparts the return of the warrior-king in such a magical way that it's easy to forget the poem is also about the struggle warriors endure as they assimilate back into society. The trials that Odysseus and his men faced echo the challenges that all warriors endure as they attempt to adjust back into the life they once knew.

In addition to watching DVD's, I'd occasionally surf aimlessly across those six channels. Mostly for the local and national news, but on one of my last night's there, PBS re-aired an episode of Frontline, entitled, *The Wounded Platoon.* Tired and low on sleep, I came across it toward the end of the episode, and almost skipped over it. Before I could switch the channel, though, the narrator mentioned Fort Carson—the army base on the south side of Colorado Springs. An image of the mountains and the city's skyline lingered on the screen—an exact rendering of the view outside my window at the condo.

The documentary tells the story of the Third Platoon, Charlie Company of the 1/506 infantry—a forty-two man unit that spent two tours in Iraq. It details their struggles after returning home to Colorado Springs. The same year they'd return from Iraq, I was teaching on the north side of town, using the Literature of War to highlight the mental challenges soldiers endure after the wars are fought. As future leaders, my colleagues and I considered it imperative that the cadets understood the complexities of those challenges and the need for moral leadership in the conduct of war.

I wish the documentary had been available when I was teaching. It would have been a perfect way to echo what the literature was telling us. *The Wounded Platoon* recounts the disintegration of the unit over a four-year period and a failure of leadership. By 2009, seventeen members of the platoon had "been charged or convicted of murder, manslaughter or attempted murder." And that was what they did back home. The documentary also highlights (in the words of the soldiers themselves), the

murder of innocent Iraqis, the widespread abuse of illegal drugs and those prescribed by army doctors to help them cope with the pressures of war—many of which have highly suspect side effects that don't warrant their use in a combat zone.

None of this, of course, is new to me or to the cadets I taught in my four years at the Academy. The actions of these soldiers both in the war zones and back at home echo the same experience of veterans from the Civil War to Vietnam. The literature of war—stories, letters, essays, and poetry reflect this in vivid detail. Within the psychiatric community, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has been accepted since the 80's as a condition that warrants professional help—one which continues to plague a military culture that stigmatizes the warrior in need of mental help. As for the misuse of legal and illegal drugs on the battlefield, there's no surprise there, either. In World War II, a variety of methamphetamine drugs were used by all participants (the U.S. included) to keep soldiers and airmen focused on the mission. In Vietnam, beer was airdropped to units in the jungle and amphetamines were issued to soldiers to keep them alert. Not to mention all the illegal drugs used by troops to suppress the horror of what they'd seen and done.

So, while shocked at the level of violence occurring in my own backyard, the rampant drug and alcohol abuse seemed almost a given to me. All of this and more is detailed in, and can be seen in the documentary online. It also didn't surprise me that the commander of the 1/506, Colonel David Clark, said that he was unaware of his soldier's mental status. There are over 200 men in an infantry unit, and a there's a necessary distance between a commander and junior soldiers, as well as a distinct difference between what a Colonel experiences on the battlefield compared to a young enlisted man. Col Clark's assessment is that if a soldier seeks solace in alcohol or drugs, he's "wrong minded." The Colonel may be correct, but it's as if he doesn't understand the temptation to silence the demons through alcohol and drugs. Odysseus, as the great captain and leader, forced himself to listen to the sweet Siren's call so that he would know the power of temptation on the men he fought beside.

As a commander, there's no question that Col Clark is expected to accomplish the mission first, but there's more to being a leader than accomplishing the mission alone. In his words, "the army can't cure all the ills of society… you still got a mission to do and you can't do it with this guy. He came from society, he needs to go back to society." Somewhere, though, Col Clark either forgot, or never understood, that the

person the Army recruited from society and then sent off to war, is forever altered by what he or she is asked to do on the battlefield. They aren't the same person anymore, and many of them need the dedication and help from a leader committed to their recovery.

Lastly, it made sense that the Army, under pressure from the media, decided to conduct an investigation to get at the root cause. What did surprise and astound me, though, was the reaction to the Army's investigation, which highlighted a "failure of leadership" as a major contributor to the events. Many of the soldiers failed to get treatment for conditions that leaders were aware of (some were simply kicked out of the military), while others acquiesced to a cultural code of silence built on the notion that only the weak seek help for mental problems. When asked whether anyone should be held accountable for this failure of leadership, Col George Brandt, the head of Behavioral Health at Ft. Carson said, "If I had fought this war before and had learned these lessons before, I might hold people accountable."

Let me stop here and take a long, deep breath before I go on…

The question was asked of an Army Colonel who specializes in Behavioral Health. And his answer was that if only the army "had learned these lessons before?" Hmm… I wonder if he'd heard of the terms Shell Shock, Battle Fatigue or PTSD before. If so, does he consider them to be convenient phrases with which to paint, in broad strokes, the suffering of soldiers in the last hundred years of war, but not "this war?" Could this really be the perspective of someone in charge of Behavioral Health in the Army, and if so, how is this possible? Is there something else at work here? The artist, writer and Veteran, John Wolfe, wrote in his essay *A Different Species of Time* (for War Literature & the Arts) about being wounded in Vietnam. At the end of the essay he reminds us that those who study the human psyche, have, for the past hundred years, defined the trauma of war in many ways and that:

> *Each reappearance [of this trauma] is confronted by a psychological community that, though perhaps more sophisticated, is less in touch and familiar with the forces unleashed than our ancestors who painted themselves blue and pranced naked in the snow before Caesar's legions, challenging the absolutism, the dominion, of Rome. There is a criminal, spiritual cowardice in this evasion, because in examining the effects of war, we might well discover just what inveigles humanity to its blackest deeds.*

Yes, writers have been telling the world for thousands of years that war consumes those who engage in it, and it is the role and obligation of leaders to understand this. It's why it's imperative that we teach the Literature of War. The lessons are not for the faint of heart, but necessary for those who will one day be in command. When I retired in 2010, West Point didn't have a core English course teaching War Lit to their Corp of Cadets . It was an elective, usually for English majors. I don't know if they have one now or not, but I hope so. When I directed the course at the Air Force Academy, the course motto was expressed in the words of the Greek historian, Thucydides: "The state which separates its scholars from its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools." It's a statement I believe in with every fiber of my being.

Thinking back on *The Wounded Platoon*, I realize that if nothing else, the army's report on transgressions by members of the Third Platoon was spot on in many respects. There was clearly a failure of leadership, up and down the chain, and if the chief of Behavioral Health needs to learn more lessons, then the failure is more widespread than I would have guessed before seeing the episode. As the poet John Balaban, who served as a civilian in Vietnam during the war, wrote for an essay in the 2010 edition of War Literature and the Arts:

> *In ancient China, generals returning home with their armies re-entered the capital through a so-called Gate of Mourning. This was true whether the campaign had been a success or a defeat, because war is a pollution and ceremonies are required to protect the living from the inevitable spiritual consequences.*

While the complexities of this war may be unique, the effects on the individual are not, regardless of how effective the military is at dehumanizing the enemy. This is not a new field—a new science—or a new phenomena in which the individual soldier needs to be studied to discern the emotional toll wrought from killing another human being or watching a friend die beside them. The war poet of our era, Brian Turner, expresses the natural human reaction to accomplishing what is asked of the soldier in this amazing poem of his. He read it (or rather, yelled it) to my class a few years ago.

SADIQ

"It is a condition of wisdom in the archer to be patient because when the arrow leaves the bow, it returns no more."
—SA'DI

It should make you shake and sweat,
nightmare you, strand you in a desert
of irrevocable desolation, the consequences
seared into the vein, no matter what adrenaline
feeds the muscle its courage, no matter
what god shines down on you, no matter
what crackling pain and anger
you carry in your fists, my friend,
it should break your heart to kill.

Despite all the education and training over long careers, I wonder, how is it still possible for military leaders to deny or minimize the toll that war takes on the individual soldier. After ten years of the proclaimed, War on Terror, headlines abound on the problems associated with treating the hidden wounds of war in both the physiological and psychological manifestations.

At the 2010 Association of Writers and Publishers (AWP) conference in Denver, I was fortunate enough to meet two poets associated with the Warrior Writer Project, Lovella Calica and Laren McClung. In short, they've worked with veterans at writing workshops, helping them to impart their wartime experiences on the page as part of the healing process, and they've published the work in a book, *Warrior Writers: Remaking Sense*. Like many, they find that the creative process is a powerful way to combat the effects of war on the individual—creation as a cathartic antidote to the destructive nature of war.

When I learned that Laren and I have fathers who fought in Vietnam—men who both became carpenters after the war, I could understand the shared commitment to our own art and the central role it plays in our life. We know, as the children of Vietnam Vets, that the burden our fathers carry is borne by us, as well. If the nation and it's military continues to dismiss, underfund, or minimize the need to address the effects of war on those who fight them, they do a disservice to all of society, and especially the spouses and children of those wounded warriors.

As for my own father, I always thought that the act of building and creating things as a carpenter was a way of keeping the memories at a distance, but not a means of confronting or moving beyond them. On trips along the highway, he would point, with a sense of pride, at buildings and tell my siblings and me he'd built that school, house or church. Over the years, I've sent him copies of our journal, my favorite war books, and some of my own work, all in the hope that I could persuade him to write about his experiences, but to no avail.

When I was finally healthy enough to depart Colorado Springs and attend this year's AWP conference, I received a phone call from my father. He said he was writing some things down about the war. Things he needed to put down on paper and that he wanted to send them to me. It's been over forty-five years since he left the military, and I was overjoyed for him—for finding the courage to sit alone and reacquaint himself with that eighteen year old boy who joined the military and lost a part of himself in a war that none of us will ever fully understand.

As a child, I remember him telling me about being a weapons specialist, taught to disassemble and then reassemble any weapon while blindfolded. For some reason that story always stuck with me, and last year when I was reading the poetry from the Warrior Writers: Remaking Sense, the words of Nathan Lewis brought that story back to me. Nathan asks a simple question in his writing: "Why did I know the difference between an M-16 and an AK-47 before I could compare a Hindu to a Muslim or a sonnet to a Haiku?" It's a great question, I think, isn't it?

At this year's AWP conference, I met up with several old colleagues from the Academy—those associated with the War Literature Journal. On our last night together, I turned the conversation to some of my ideas for this essay, and I was reminded about a recent attempt to get the troops at Fort Carson to engage in a writing program. Like the Warrior Writers project, it was meant to help them work through their problems, but it never got off the ground. Evidently, soldiers were quietly dissuaded from taking part in the program. Needless to say, I wasn't surprised.

As for me, I've been back home for over a week now. Between the travel time, surgery, visiting friends and attending the conference, I was gone for nearly a month. I start therapy in a few days to rehab my shoulder. They say it's the first part that's the most difficult—just getting started—fighting through the pain of scar tissue, getting movement back, and pushing the muscles to remember what they are capable of. It'll

take a lot of time and patience before I'll be able to get back to flying, but I will recover.

Shortly after I returned home, the letter from my father arrived in a package along with other mail my mother has been collecting for me. The letter was marked in my mother's handwriting: "James from Dad." At the time, I was outlining this essay, fighting the jetlag and shoulder pain, but also trying to focus on spending time with my wife and kids. I told myself that I'd open the letter once I finished writing this blog. After a few days, though, realizing how much writing I was doing on this and other projects, I finally picked up the letter and turned it over, prepared to open it. On the back, written in the thick, chalk-like print of carpenter's pencil, are the words from my father: "Correct my spelling and add whatever it takes. I could have said more about what these men went through, but one memory is enough." I put the letter back down, deciding that I needed to finish this before I opened it. The letter has been sitting beside my computer ever since.

As I come to the end of this essay, I realize that ultimately, each soldier ever sent to war begins his own personal odyssey. Driven by the call of a nation or by the desire for adventure, many will be searching to find themselves in the shattered ruins of a life forever altered by war and conflict. Some may never find their way home, while others might cope and assimilate quickly after they return from war. The process can begin well before they go off to fight or it might take forty-five years for a person to start.

Nothing is certain, but a failure of leaders to understand the complexities and repercussions of inaction or to address the problems with honest conviction is both unacceptable and an abdication of responsibility. This mission, though not accomplished on the battlefield, may be the most challenging of all. It may require the military to heed the lessons that the poets offer us, and a new generation of commanders with compassion and a willingness to truly lead. To abandon or marginalize our wounded warriors is to abandon ourselves as well.

You'll have to excuse me now. I've written far more than I meant too, and it's taken longer than I planned. I've got a letter to open.