

Veterans Turn War Experiences Into Poetry

Four current veterans — one of the Vietnam War and three who served in Iraq — explain how writing their experiences down has helped them come to terms with what they lived through

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In late March 2003, while standing outside Nasiriyah, Iraq, former Marine Sgt. Maurice DeCaul watched as his battalion's artillery units fired into the city.

“On the outskirts of the city of Nasiriyah, on our right and left flanks, you had Marine battalions bombarding the city,” he said. “Hearing the guns going off and then seeing the effect —that’s just something I’ve been thinking about for a very long time.”

DeCaul, who joined the Marines in 1997 and deployed to Iraq at the start of the war in 2003, recalled this moment specifically as something that stayed in his memory long after coming home.

“It was a pretty long barrage and it was pretty devastating,” he said. “Just trying to express that, grapple with what I knew was happening on the other side.”

It wasn't until six years later that he turned to poetry to analyze his experience in the war. Like many who have served, post9/11 veterans have turned to poetry as a medium to document, interrogate and understand their war experiences. In the 20th century, particularly, American soldiers have produced some of the starkest and resonant poetry on war.

In “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” WWII Army Sgt. Randall Jarrell wrote about life as an airman. “Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life, / I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.”

Other WWII military veterans — such as James Dickey, Karl Shapiro and Richard Hugo —

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also wrote of the war in the Pacific and European theaters.

Richard Wilbur, who served in the Army between 1943-1945 in Europe, considered the snow falling on the dead in “First Snow in Alsace.” “You think: beyond the town a mile / Or two, this snowfall fills the eyes / Of soldiers dead a little while.”

Kristi Garboushian, who served with the Army in the Persian Gulf War in 1990-91, wrote in her poem, “The Ribbons on Hell’s Tree,” of the ominous desert ground.

“In Iraq the land mines nap like sand dollars,” she wrote. DeCaul explained that because of poetry’s immediacy and brevity of form, it can sometimes mirror how memory works. “If you’re writing about the memories of war,” he said, “poetry can give you a space to mimic the way these thoughts might occur.”

In his poem titled “Shush,” where each line begins, “I’ve been talking in my sleep,” DeCaul wrote about recurring nightmares and memories which stayed with him after his service, specifically some of those moments in Nasiriyah. “I’ve been talking in my sleep again, I see the muzzle flash / I’ve been talking in my sleep again, died by gunshot.”

DeCaul said the poem gave him a chance to make sense of his experience. “It was me just trying to get it out,” he said. “That was me trying to deal with what had just happened.”

DeCaul said a 2009 veterans workshop at New York University allowed him not only to express a sometimes ineffable experience but, maybe more importantly, connect with other veterans who had similar experiences. For DeCaul, writing and sharing poetry gave himself and other veterans “a space to be with each other ... where the catharsis happens.”

‘War ... Gave Me My Voice’

Bruce Weigl, who served in 1967-68 in Vietnam as a sergeant with the 1st Cavalry Division, is ambivalent about his war experience and the poetry it produced.

“The paradox of my life as a writer,” he explains in his book *The Circle of Hanh: A Memoir*, “is that the war ruined my life and in return gave me my voice.” Weigl, the author of more than a dozen poetry collections, translations and a memoir, began writing after the war and has continued over the past 40 years. He said his English teacher at a community college in Ohio urged him to write about his experiences.

“Without that encouragement, I don’t know what would have happened with my life,” said Weigl, a professor at Lorain County Community College in Ohio.

Although Weigl argues that “poetry is not therapy,” its presence in his life has helped sustain him and create a sounding board for his time in Vietnam.

Because poetry is often a combination of lived experience and imagination, Weigl tells his student-poets that “we allow our imagination to shape work that is powerful and accessible, so that others can understand this part of who we are.”

‘Song of Napalm’

In one of Weigl’s most well-known poems, “Song of Napalm,” the speaker writes of seeing a young girl “running from her village, napalm / stuck to her dress like jelly.”

At the poem’s close, the speaker wants to imagine that the girl survives, that someone can save her, but instead we face the reality of the situation: “...she is burned behind my eyes / and not your good love and not the rain-swept air / and not the jungle-green / pasture unfolding before us can deny it.”

This poem, like many of Weigl’s, confronts war without glorification and attempts to acknowledge its horror without blinking. Other veterans, such as former Army Sgt. Jessica Faue, see poetry as inextricably linked to the transition into civilian life.

“Writing poetry, for me, is very therapeutic,” said Faue. “Poetry helps me process my emotions, which inevitably helps me to adjust. The more I revise a poem about a painful experience, the more I can read it or say it out loud without breaking down, and the more healing I experience.”

Faue, who joined the Michigan Army National Guard in 2002 and served in Iraq in 2005 as an automated logistical specialist, speaks of this “healing,” or “mending,” in her poem titled “Post Traumatic Relationship.” “war / tears apart what arrives / then / sends us home to / try to reconnect and / mend the broken pieces.” Poetry, according to Faue, can sometimes create a cathartic release when a person is finally able to transfer a difficult war experience into language.

“Poetry affects me on all levels. There is an emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual release when you’ve finally got down the words that have been living inside for so long,” said Faue, whose maiden name is ‘Bentt.’ Like DeCaul, Faue attended a poetry writers’ workshop for veterans after her service. There, she found both solace and friendship. “Poetry has a way of bringing people together,” she said. “I found that I am not alone in my day-to-day struggles with PTSD. I also found that I am not alone in healing and working hard to overcome and persist through traumatic experiences.”

‘I Was a Coffin’

Gerardo (“Tony”) Mena, who served with the Marines as a Navy corpsman in Iraq from 2006-2007, cannot emphasize enough how poetry affected and helped him transition into life as a civilian.

“The ability to look at situations that happened from multiple points of view helped desensitize me to a lot of the pain I brought back with me,” Mena said.

He also explained how reading other veteran-poets — such as Vietnam War veterans Yusef Komunyakaa and Doug Anderson, along with Brian Turner, an Iraq War veteran — helped him feel less isolated on a college campus. “The more war writers I read,” Mena said, “the more I realized that they went through similar experiences.”

In Mena’s award-winning poem, “So I Was a Coffin,” he personified various objects such as a flag, a spear, a bandage and a coffin, all in order to discuss the death of a friend, Marine Cpl. Kyle Powell, who died in Mena’s arms on Nov. 4, 2006, in Iraq’s Anbar province.

“They said you are a bandage, so I was a bandage / I jumped on Kyle’s chest and wrapped my lace arms together around his torso and pressed my head to his rib cage.”

Using various objects, the poem carries us through the soldier’s experience, especially the failed attempt to save a dying comrade. Of poetry’s form and style, Mena believes it’s liberating because “you can create in any form or style or choose any object or thing to be the narrator.” **RELEASING PAINFUL MEMORIES** Much like the speaker in “So I Was a Coffin,” Mena’s poetry helped him to begin “experimenting with narrating scenes and events from the war from other perspectives, even those of the enemy.

This helped me become compassionate and understanding.” Mena said his book of poems, *The Shape of Our Faces No Longer Matters*, was inspired by his deployment. “It was my way of attempting to make sure that my friends who were wounded or KIA were still remembered,” he said.

Besides remembering and memorializing the dead, poetry also seems to be one of the most powerful mediums to communicate the experience of war. “I do think there is power in using poetry to tell veteran stories,” Faue said. “The process is transformative and can help release painful and traumatic memories and experiences by writing them down. Sharing helps others bear witness and allows empathy and connection to take place.”

Weigl also believes poetry transforms readers and those who write it. “I think the goal of all poetry is to change our lives,” he said. “Our lives are precious because they come to an end. That’s the same reason we write poetry.”

This article is featured in the 2020 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Hugh Martin. Hugh Martin is an Army veteran of the Iraq War. He is the author of two poetry collections and is currently working on a doctoral degree at Ohio University.