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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Michael Ernest Warren entitled "Telling War Stories." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

# **Telling War Stories**

A Thesis Presented for  
the Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Michael Ernest Warren  
May 2008

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Foremost I acknowledge that without the guiding hand of my God, Jesus, I would not be the man I am today. I thank Him for saving me from myself and for provisions beyond what I could ever imagine. Though it may sound peculiar, I also thank the Army for providing me the opportunity to complete a Masters degree in English. It was my objective since I first pinned on the butter bar to become an English instructor at the United States Military Academy, and every superior I have had the privilege to serve under since that time has helped me achieve that goal by their support and written endorsements. I thank LTC Patrick Bremser, LTC Greg Lane, Mr. John Soos, and Professor Barry Kitterman for their supportive letters of recommendation that apparently portrayed me well enough to allow the University of Tennessee to accept me into their program. During my two years here at UT-Knoxville, my professors have been accommodating and sympathetic toward my unique thesis project, but none more so than Dr. Michael Keene, Dr. Mary Jo Reiff, and Dr. Allen Wier. Their assistance has served to prove my point in “Section Four” regarding the value of collaborative writing. I’d also like to thank LTC Les Knotts for advising me and serving as my liaison to the English Department at West Point. Finally, my wife, Leah, and three wonderful girls provide me the willpower to strive for excellence. I thank you all.

## **ABSTRACT**

Telling war stories reveal the truth of soldiering from the eyes of soldiers. This thesis is a project that aims to make that statement a reality for the soldier of today who has endured a different sort of war. This project consists primarily of a proposal addressed to the writing committee and English Department faculty of the United States Military Academy which seeks to establish a new curriculum allowing cadets to correspond with deployed Soldiers or veterans of the Global War on Terror, and assist them in the writing of their telling war stories. The sections which follow the proposal expound upon the pedagogical profit of fiction as a medium and collaborative learning as a teaching technique. The thesis ends with a piece of short fiction written by the author as an example of a telling war story.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.

--C.S. Lewis

I make no claims that what I present to you here represents either “literature” or “reality,” but rather an attempt to “irrigate” a necessary competency that the entirety of humanity requires: knowledge. Not knowledge in general, but specifically, the knowledge of warriors—soldiers<sup>1</sup> like those you’ve read about before presenting stories you’ve never heard before. We could call them “War Stories,” but that wouldn’t do the soldiers who’ll tell them any justice. They aren’t stories about “war” any more than “love stories” are only about “love.” By reading these stories you won’t know more about war than you did before, but you will know more about the warriors whose lives cannot be understood apart from the war in which they fought. These soldiers will write *telling* “war stories” that reveal more about life than death, more about love than war, and

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the proposal section of this thesis you will notice that the word “Soldier” is capitalized, though it is not in the remainder of the thesis. This is intentional as it was commanded by the former Army Chief of Staff, General Peter J. Schoomaker, in December 2003 for all U.S. Army information products such as newspapers, memorandums, and emails. Since the final audience for this project will be those to whom this order holds jurisdiction, I have ensured that the word receives the respect due the Americans it represents. Also capitalized is the phrase “Global War on Terror” because its usage depicts our country’s current deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. Since this proposal is for those who have served in the recent conflicts abroad rather than the veterans of prior wars, I have used this term to delineate the difference.

more about friendship than enmity. But they will only tell these stories *if* they are given the chance.

Following this introduction is first a proposal addressed to civilian professors and military personnel serving as the faculty of the Composition Committee at the United States Military Academy in West Point. My intention is the initiation of a new curriculum whereby cadets correspond with soldiers—both deployed and veterans of past deployments—helping them to write their stories about their lives amidst America’s Global War on Terror. I have written the proposal as a “stand-alone” document in case the committee disregards the remainder of the project due to its length. Following the proposal is the bulk of my thesis project broken up into four additional sections. Throughout the proposal, I have interjected comments taken from the other sections that follow the proposal, and are ordered according to their occurrence within the proposal itself.

Presented in “Section Two” is an essay delving into Tim O’Brien’s metafictional collection of short stories, *The Things They Carried (TTTC)*. I have titled it “How to Tell True War Stories: Using Fiction to Tell the Truth,” because of my close reading of *TTTC*’s chapter similarly called “How to Tell a True War Story.” In this section, I’ve highlighted how writing serves a cathartic value for both the writer and the reader and have presented a proposed genre melding together “historical fiction” with O’Brien’s example of metafiction with a sampling of “creative nonfiction.” The end result is an attempt to get back to Western society’s pedagogical roots.



The third section is pedagogical theory tracing the telling of fiction back to the Greek's *Progymnasmata*, the first handbook or textbook created for the classroom. The purpose of this section is to further illustrate the value of fiction for teaching "truth," and then to equate that value into a pedagogical need. Using the logical reasoning of Socrates and Plato, this section reaffirms the importance of teaching fiction and proposes that fiction is the genre cadets are encouraged to pursue when working on these telling war stories.

"Section Four" marches from the story to the classroom by accenting the benefits of the cumulative learning experience. Cadets will learn from their cadre; this is a given. But cadets learn best when they are fully engaged in the process of learning—not only the reception of knowledge, but also the teaching of it. This section explains how collaborative learning practices like "peer tutoring" can be applied to cadets assisting soldiers in the writing of their stories, and how this assistance can ultimately produce better cadets. The section is meant to answer two questions raised in the proposal: how do we implement this and why change our current pedagogical model?

The final section is entitled "Then There Was Applause," and is an example story written by me with the express purpose of being the first story shared with a cadet for their piece of the authorship. This story is my fictional account of the time I spent deployed to Iraq in 2003. Though little of it is factual, I would argue that all of it is "true," and that it, like other stories we will receive, is the war from the eyes of a soldier and not as it was displayed on TV.

Finally, I have titled the project *Telling War Stories* because the art of storytelling is one which does not belong solely to the historian, or the gifted author, or even the student enrolled in a writing program at any American university. Stories are telling because they show us the “truth” with or without the facts. War stories do the same by providing us the historical backdrop of a war—a conflict between peoples that can only be resolved by people willing to hear the other’s side of the story. This project’s purpose is to provide an opportunity for those sacrificing their lives for their country to share their story with those whom they serve.

## SECTION ONE

### *Telling War Stories: The Proposal*

Stories clarify life as similes amplify ideas. When we speak of love, we may share a story like *Romeo and Juliet*. When we talk of war, we may discuss *The Red Badge of Courage* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*. When I think of rhetoric or the pedagogy of composition instruction, I cannot overlook the classroom stories of Donald Murray or Robert Coles. Soldiers' lives deserve such stories.

Throughout America's history, Soldiers (and other military members) have lacked their own venue for sharing their stories. As a future instructor at the United States Military Academy (USMA), I propose a way for us to change history by providing a means for Soldiers' stories to be brought from the battlefield to the reading rooms of those who want to hear them.

### *Bottom Line up Front*

I propose that cadets enrolled in the USMA's English 101 Composition Course correspond with deployed Soldiers or veterans of past deployments in order to collaborate<sup>2</sup> with them in the writing of stories about their military service during America's Global War on Terror. By drafting narratives together as articles for public release, cadets will gain additional insight into the war they are about to enter, and the Soldiers will receive a venue for expressing themselves as both parties improve their

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<sup>2</sup> I have written more on the benefits of the collaborative writing experience for cadets involved in this project in Section Four.

writing skills. Cadets will “develop clear, logical, and grammatically correct expression in written discourse” (USMA Course Catalog) by analyzing their counterparts’ writings for clarity and conceptualization. Cadets will ensure the writing is organized, has substance, is correct grammatically and logically, and that the author’s style of writing is enhanced by the cadet’s collaborative efforts. Engaging cadets in this project while enrolled in English 101 will prepare them for English 302 by developing within them a “critical editorial sense with respect to the cadet’s own composition and the writing of others.” These stories will then be reviewed by their instructors, with the best stories finding publication through a proposed professional and academic journal entitled *There I Was*.

This proposal establishes the significance of the project by first expounding upon the telling of true war stories, the value of fiction for teaching truth, and the benefits of the collaborative learning experience. Then I will examine current initiatives that mirror this project’s objective such as blogs, documentaries, and a book comprised of stories written by military servicemen and women. Finally, I will present a theoretical methodology for implementation and conclude with some logistical considerations.

Following this proposal are three additional sections elucidating the use of fiction as a genre and the pedagogical value of collaborative learning. Throughout the proposal you will find these sections referenced through footnotes. The final section consists of a story written by me for use as the first of many stories to be written by a Soldier about life in a time of war.

## *How to Tell True War Stories*

Publication will not serve as the sole motivator for Soldiers to write or for the cadets to assist in the writing process. Instead, the desire to tell history through the writers' experience will be what inevitably propels these writers to their computers. True war stories aren't true by virtue of being factual (like history), but because they reveal the truth as the author sees it; what Tim O'Brien describes as "seemed truth."

In any war story, but especially a true one, it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed .... The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (*The Things They Carried (TTTC)* 71)

O'Brien writes that "in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it's safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true" (*TTTC* 82). To tell a "true story," the author must convince the reader that he or she has not contrived reality out of imagination. As Mark Twain explains it, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." We want our fiction to be realistic but we want reality to be uncontestable fact.

The Soldiers writing these stories should not be obligated to stick to the facts; neither should they feel forced to create fiction out of their experiences. Rather, the hope is that writers will be granted the opportunity to share their stories as it *seemed* to them

without concern for getting every minutia of detail exactly accurate. The significance of telling the tale is not in the facts it will reveal, but in the cathartic release that comes for the author from the sharing of his or her emotions in a controllable manner. In their book *Writing and Healing*, Charles M. Anderson and Marian M. MacCurdy write: “Through the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and to exert a measure of control over that which we can never control—the past.” Anderson’s and MacCurdy’s book, which details the benefit of writing for those who have experienced traumatic events such as war, explains that the healing effect of writing was more fully examined after the Vietnam War as veterans faced difficulty in sharing their experiences with an audience the vets assumed didn’t care. Writers have the ability to capture an emotionally or physically traumatic event outside the timeframe in which it occurred, examine the event with all the scrutiny available in hindsight, and deliver details deemed pertinent by the author for the teachable ears of a receptive audience. If given this opportunity now, rather than years after the conflict when memory is more distant than the pain, veterans from this generation’s war can undergo this same healing through writing<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Telling Fables—Using Fiction to Tell the Truth***

Though cadets are not likely to experience the therapeutic value that the Soldiers will inevitably obtain, they have an integral part to play in the project; the advantage of which can only be measured by the intensity of their participation. From the beginnings

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<sup>3</sup> I have written more about the curative value of telling truth through fiction in Section Two.

of Western civilization in the meeting halls of ancient Greece and Rome, teachers have mentored their pupils with the knowledge of the ancients through logical reasoning and skillful discourses. Wise men like Socrates, Plato, and Quintilian taught their pupils with a pedagogy that established the foundation for modern curriculums. These teachers did not begin with lectures about politics, philosophy, or philanthropy, but rather with fables.

By their engagement in this project, cadets will learn what our educational forefathers taught—that the story, especially the fictional one, is the basis upon which rhetoric is built. This is why the *Progymnasmata*, the first scholastic handbook, begins with the fable—a fictitious story giving an image of truth—because it allows the reader the opportunity to hear “truth,” or a life lesson, without hindrance from the facts. Hearers and readers of fiction are not persuaded to believe that the story or characters are factual, but are instead invited to experience the story for the value of the moral, the lesson of the narrative. As cadets read the Soldiers’ stories, their ability to examine the exegesis of the story, the moral or lesson every story attempts to convey, and to provide critical feedback to the Soldier about the story’s conveyance, will increase the cadets capacity for learning and applying more advanced educational concepts as their scholastic years continue<sup>4</sup>.

Even if the Soldier and cadet decide not to use fiction as the genre for their storytelling, both will still gain a greater advantage from the project than any educator alone could ever instill: the benefit of a collaborative learning experience.

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<sup>4</sup> I have written more about the benefits of fiction to early pedagogical practices in Section Three.

## *Telling Stories and the Collaborative Learning Experience*

Collaborative learning's greatest benefit to both the student—the cadet and the Soldier—and the teacher is positive interdependence—the ability to become a participant in knowledge sharing rather than merely a consumer of it. Through this project, cadets will engage Soldiers one-on-one—through email or telephone—and collaborate with them on the creation of a story, using the Soldier's experience and the cadet's willingness to participate. As the cadets connect with the Soldiers, they will learn from a reliable source the stress of soldiering and have an opportunity to encourage and empower their fellow Soldiers to “soldier on” despite their hardships. Cadets will also become better writers by understanding form and style, and better members of academia by realizing that writing is a social process and not solely an individual effort. They will learn by teaching—by actively transforming the writing of another—and not by only soaking in feedback concerning their own efforts at authorship.

As may often be the case, however, the Soldier writing the story could be more educated, more versed, more grammatically gifted—simply put, a better writer than the cadet assisting him or her. As any writer will tell you, however, this does not dismiss the value to the author of a willing reader able to provide encouragement, offer critique, and point out errors oblivious to the eyes of the one making them. The truth is that if the Soldier is a better writer than the cadet, then it will likely be a better learning experience for the cadet than if the Soldier wasn't as skilled<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> More detail concerning the relationship between the Soldier and the cadet will be outlined in the Implementation section of this proposal and in Section Four of this thesis project.



Soldiers already tell war stories as they have since wars were written in our history. They find any willing ear, be it a family member, a fellow Soldier, a friendly face, or a microphone stuck in their face by the media. They have told their stories and they always will. But this war is different; it is a war where their lives are constantly on display through blogs, through video, and through the writings of others.

### ***Telling Stories through Blogs***

Some stories beg to be told, and those whose desire is storytelling will find the means; even if those means aren't proper military procedure. What's different about our current Global War on Terror is that new technologies have enabled Soldiers' voices to reach beyond their intended audience. The Internet, particularly weblogs (blogs), provides outlets for Soldiers to post their war stories, their political views, their feelings, and even their impassioned diatribes for an audience adept at "Googling" for what it wants to hear. In a September 2007 article entitled "Troop Blogs Show Increasing Criticism of War," Robert Weller reports: "The military is so petrified it will lose information, control screensavers were installed on military computers warning blogs could jeopardize security." As of April 2007, the Army announced new rules on blogging that required Soldiers to clear them with a superior and denied access to MySpace and other popular websites. Prior to this censoring, Matthew Currier Burden, a former Army Reserve major and gatekeeper of a blog entitled *Blackfive*, wrote *The Blog of War* with the intent to "pay lasting tribute to those men and women who have opened this window into their lives and to convey a better understanding of what it's like to be in

the war zone” (Burden 5). Burden writes that there are traditionally three kinds of combat reporting: imbedded media correspondents, press releases from the government, and Soldiers who tell their own stories. The last method has historically been the most censored and slowest, and therefore, the least available and most demanded, creating a commodity out of a particular sort of information—stories from Soldiers about soldiering.

Soldiers had stories to tell and they were posting them without regard for proper military procedure because they did not know what proper procedure looked like. Weller states, “It’s the first digital war .... Technology has caught up with the soldiers, who have always known what was really going on but didn’t have the tools to tell their story.” Two problems arising from the use of blogs were the possibility of leaking classified information and stories that inadvertently portrayed the military in a way not favorable to its mission. These threats, though highly volatile in the eyes of military leaders, were never the intention of those Soldiers who blogged their stories. They merely had a story to tell and told it the only way they knew how.

To a reader, one of the attractions of a war story is the discovery of the unknown—an experience the reader may never possess. Readers want to know what it’s like to face death and survive. Burden writes about this desire: “One of the most sought-after items in the military blog arena is the story of a battle” (Burden 140). But because of the very nature of modern combat—ubiquitous improvised explosive devices (IEDs) around every corner and insurgents who ambush and then melt into the homogenous crowd—these sorts of stories aren’t prevalent. Since these stories aren’t available,

mainstream media overlooks blogs like those found in Burden's book which share heartwarming narratives of Soldiers providing medical aid to civilians, building schools and playgrounds for Iraqi school children, or romancing their spouses from abroad, and instead focuses their headlines on troops' cynicism toward the Global War on Terror. Though the original intent of the majority of military blogs was likely to provide personal stories from the front like an open journal to the world, they have all too often been reverted to "the kind of public relations Madison Avenue would drool over" (Weller) as members of the media slice out Soldiers' criticism of the war from their blogs leaving behind the less sensational stories of life in the warzone.

Soldiers share their lives with family, friends, and even the media; therefore, they share the Army with the world. Their stories are our Army's stories. Because of our Declaration of Independence's bold statements regarding the right of the people to alter or to abolish destructive governments, many Americans have always possessed an innate desire to buck the system and criticize their government. One of these American voices that first found its way to the headlines was Sergeant Thomas Strickland, who went by the blogging name, "Rev Wayfarer." Strickland drowned in a vehicular accident two days after writing these lines, "What the [expletive] has my chain of command been doing? ... What kind of [pardon the mutated expletive] *fucktarded* plan have we been half-assedly executing?" Any Soldiers who have felt the weight of hierarchal pressure pushing them to do what they don't want to do, have also uttered either under their breath or amidst their cohorts, words similar in scope and identical in nature. Those lines of

Strickland's were published, but this lovely story of an encounter with an Iraqi teenager wasn't:

What struck me about the boy was that while we talked he stopped mid sentence and asked to touch my face. Sure, says I. He places his hand on my cheek feeling stubble and bug bites and in a sort of surprised and contemplative voice says "So you are human too." ("One Foot in the Grave")

Soldiers complain but good Soldiers obey orders despite their criticisms. These bloggers were apparently, from what I've read, good Soldiers whose criticisms of the war provided an opportunity for reporters to market their headlines.

One of the more recent and popular blogs is entitled "Army of Dude" by Specialist Alex Horton, who spent fifteen months deployed with the Stryker Brigade out of Fort Lewis, Washington. The young Soldier took it upon himself to "chronicle my experiences in a way for people to understand and interpret what was going on beyond what was being filtered, distilled and spat out of the mainstream media" ("Dude!"). One of his blogs disparagingly titled "Stupid Shit of the Deployment Awards!" chronicled what he considered ridiculous and asinine decisions made by the U.S. Army during his service in Iraq. The line he blogged that garnered him national attention was honest and unfavorable to our country's commitment to the citizens of Iraq:

President Eisenhower warned of the growing military industrial complex in his farewell address. Since Dick Cheney can now afford solid gold oil derricks, it's safe to say we failed Ike miserably .... In the future, I want my children to grow

up with the belief that what I did here was wrong, in a society that doesn't deem that idea unpatriotic. (qtd in Weller)

I do not believe Horton is unpatriotic or a radical or un-American. He is just a Soldier complaining about things he doesn't understand in ways he does. But his blogs acquire the headlines while many less cynical ones never will.

Soldiers act like Soldiers whether they are putting their lives on the line or blogging about their lives online and will not purposely put their friends in harm's way by leaking secrets any more than they would if a terrorist came up and asked them to do so. They tell stories to relate the truth as they know it, but they do it from their skewed angle, from their perspective, and they do it with the passion of a voice that must be heard above the chattering of mainstream media. Soldiers have stories to tell and are already telling them. The Army has tried to silence them by outlawing blogs, and yet the blogging continues. Instead, we must establish a means to enable Soldiers the opportunity to share their stories.

### ***Telling Stories through a Documentary***

One attempt to air the voices of America's Soldiers that differed from the blogs was *The War Tapes*, a documentary released in January 2006. The director, Deborah Scranton, issued digital cameras to 21 Soldiers assigned to Charlie Company 3/172<sup>nd</sup> Infantry (Mountain) of the New Hampshire National Guard who volunteered to film their deployment to Iraq beginning in March 2004. Of all these Soldiers, three were selected as the featured characters in this documentary of modern combat. Sergeant Zack Bazzi is

an Arabic speaking Lebanese-American student whose love for his country propels him to her defense. Sergeant Steve Pink is a witty writer whose journal provides narration for some of the film's 97 minutes stripped from over 1000 hours of footage. The third is Specialist Mike Moriarty who is the one initially most eager to serve after driving to Ground Zero to assist with the aftermath of 9/11. Like the blogs mentioned earlier, these three shared their criticisms concerning the war in front of the camera well aware that one day the world would hear it.

Working through over 1000 hours of footage in order to select the right 97 minutes of usable material must have been a difficult task for Deborah Scranton. What was left out is unknowable to us, but what was presented is what one critic called, "decidedly antiwar, and its use of video diary from the front lines isn't mere exploitation—it's powerful reportage" (Rowin). This movie critic continues, "Even if *The War Tapes* allows us to view the war directly from Soldiers' points of view, it is still filtered, edited, and selected to manufacture distinct effects." Though presented as "the first war movie filmed by Soldiers themselves" ("About the War Tapes"), the reality was that it wasn't the first movie to ever be edited according to the bias of the producer.

What Scranton's award-winning documentary shows are three Soldiers initially gung-ho for combat who returned despondent about America's involvement in Iraq. As the film follows the Soldiers from New Hampshire into the desert, the viewer will hear them critique Kellogg, Brown and Root (KBR), which serves as one of the primary contractors in Iraq. The Soldiers suggest that the company lines Vice President Chaney's pockets since he once served as chairman for Haliburton, which owns KBR. The

Soldiers tell the camera that KBR insists every other one of their trucks be assigned a shooter in order to secure the safety of the cargo that could range from cheese to less seemly items like what Bazzi calls the “Shit truck.” Several minutes are spent following Bazzi’s Soldiers as they guard a truck spilling hundreds of gallons of fecal matter into a river, accompanied by the comment that Army recruiters ought to include their current mission in their sales pitch: see foreign lands, meet interesting people, and guard a “shit truck.” The heart of the documentary is the short time the unit spent in Fallujah, where one of their own was wounded in the leg. After returning home, Sergeant Pink reports to the director’s camera that the Army censored his filming of “the dead guys” in Fallujah getting eaten by dogs, though Scranton obviously didn’t censor Pink’s disclosure of this sensitive information. Later while standing in his civilian clothes, Sergeant Pink reports to the interviewer, “We are in Iraq for money and oil ... it better be about the money” or, he suggests, every life lost has been in vain. In what appears to be an answer to a question, Sergeant Bazzi says, “We all make our living off it,” meaning the war. Though these are words spoken by Soldiers, they are words people like Scranton want us to hear.

Some people will watch a documentary like *The War Tapes* and overlook the theme that runs throughout it. One such reader is a fellow officer who writes: “Unlike some documentaries, this one takes no sides. It uses scenes of laughter, heartbreak, discouragement, and danger only to show us the war as it is for those we ask to fight it, reminding us of their foibles, but, in the end, highlighting their strengths as they negotiate the murky terrain of nation-building and counterinsurgency” (Rice). If *The War Tapes* shows us the war as it is for those Soldiers who fight it, then it is a war fought for money

and oil where American lives are wasted in order to line the pockets of our country's leaders.

The goal of my proposal is to realize the obvious need for the Soldier's story to be told as illustrated by these blogs and documentaries like *The War Tapes*, and to present to our Soldiers a medium whereby their stories will find an audience. If left in the hands of those outside the Army—like Scranton, cynical bloggers, or headline seeking journalists—the stories will be told, but they won't be as amiable to the Army as its Soldiers and their stories deserve. This is where the faculty and cadets at the United States Military Academy come in. Helping the Soldiers to write fictional accounts (or creative factual narratives) of their deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan will fulfill the need of many servicemen and women to tell their stories. It will enable the "Army," through the Academy, to expurgate those stories, or portions of stories that intentionally leak classified information or disparaging opinions about our military and its leadership, and to present stories more about the Soldiers who serve than about the criticisms they share.

### ***Telling the Servicemen's Story***

This proposal derives from a desire to help my fellow Soldiers share their stories about their deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan. But I am also compelled by a pedagogical need to help my future students understand the world around them through writing. One recent publication has established a precedent whereby the first of my desires has already been shared by others far more qualified than I. *Operation*



*Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front, in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families* is exactly what it claims to be: an assortment of personal essays, short stories, poems, emails, and other writings written by servicemen from all branches. “The National Endowment for the Arts exists to bring the best of the arts to all Americans” (xii) but had yet to do anything for military men and women. In 2004, the NEA sent out a call for papers from service members listing several good reasons for *Operation Homecoming*’s development but none more compelling than the “historic importance, creating personal accounts of the war—from the combat zone to the home front—by individuals who would not normally be heard” (xiii). They sought to enable the troops to voice their own stories by providing fifty writing workshops that reached twenty-five bases in five countries, as well as an aircraft carrier and a fleet ship. Many prestigious writers joined this endeavor including Richard Bausch, Mark Bowden, Tom Clancy, Bobbie Ann Mason, Jeff Shaara, and Tobias Wolff, as well as an editor who served completely pro bono, Andrew Carroll.

Carroll writes regarding his initial conception of the idea, “Sending prominent novelists, poets, and historians to lead workshops on military bases was, I thought, an inspired and truly commendable idea. But I doubted much would come of it” (xx). After a year, the NEA received over 10,000 pages of submissions, causing Carroll to rethink his previous doubts and ask, “What compelled these men and women to share their writings?” (xxvi).

Some explained that they do so purely for enjoyment: It’s a hobby, a way to pass the time. Others consider it a necessity. They find the act of writing to be

cathartic, enabling them to gain a measure of control over their feelings as they unravel tangled knots of emotions .... I also heard contributors lament how little civilians know about the armed forces, and they hoped these writings would foster a greater understanding of the military .... The answer that proved to be the most memorable, however, was actually the first I was given .... ‘This is the first time anyone’s asked us to write about what we think of all that’s going on.’ (xxvii)

Only a scant five percent of these submissions could be published in this 386 page anthology, leaving the rest to anonymity. And every year there are more voices begging to be heard. Carroll writes, “But as discouraging as it is to consider what has been lost or gone unrecognized before this initiative began, now that the idea of seeking out the undiscovered literature of our nation’s troops and their loved ones has taken hold, it is exhilarating to think of all that is yet to be found and of everything, ultimately, that is still to be written” (xxviii). What is yet unwritten requires help for the authors of such writings and needs a place to call home.

### ***Implementation***

The mission of the United States Military Academy is "to educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country and prepared for a career of professional excellence and service to the Nation as an officer in the United States Army" (“USMA mission”). Cadets learn early that leadership is more than giving orders but it’s about what the Army values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless-service, honor, integrity, and

personal courage. Cadets must learn that leaders serve those who follow them and that this service entails investment in the person, involvement in the mission, and improvement in character. Creating a program whereby cadets correspond with veterans of America's Global War on Terror not only enables these future officers to provide a much needed service, but it gives them the honor of helping those who have served us all. Blogs, documentaries, and books like *Operation Homecoming* have provided precedents for telling Army stories to the world, but they lack the internal power of an Army journal sponsored by the Army. If this project is successful, then cadets will provide a service to their fellow Soldiers that will forever leave an indelible mark upon the Army as we know it. How will this happen?

Once this project is approved, I envision it occurring in four phases. The first consists of inviting Andrew Carroll to the Academy in order to speak with faculty and cadets about *Operation Homecoming* and providing an editorial workshop that will prepare the cadets for participation in our project. I also plan to solicit stories by contacting various units (active, reserve and guard) requesting that Soldiers willing to participate forward their narratives to me at the Academy and by writing a "call for papers" article in both *Soldiers* magazine and *The Army Times*. The second phase will consist of pairing up the cadets with their story (or perhaps stories) of choice, helping them contact the author and begin a correspondence that endures the entire scholastic year. During this time, cadets will learn by helping the authors write their stories, offering advice to facilitate understanding, encouragement to complete what they've

started, and a willing ear to learn about war from someone who has been there<sup>6</sup>. The third phase will occur when the cadets turn in their completed collaborations by the end of the year to their instructors who will choose the best for publication. The final phase will be the publication of the proposed journal *There I Was*.

### ***Logistical Concerns***

Currently, the Army does not offer any periodical in which stories like these could be published. *Soldiers* magazine focuses its articles, written primarily by civilians, on issues which concern Soldiers' ability to fight—technological advancements in warfare and morale, welfare, and recreation (MWR) stories. The *Army Times*, like any newspaper, seeks current news stories from the frontlines that will draw the readership it desires. As a part of the U.S. Army's professional writing collection, the Army also supports various professional journals that publish articles relating to the sponsor branch's particular field. But there is no established precedent within the Army for what I am proposing, which should be all the more reason for its inauguration.

The online component, a dedicated website for the posting of these telling war stories, won't be difficult to implement, though it will require invested time to maintain. The more monetarily challenging endeavor will be the creation of the print journal. Though this may not seem like a necessity, the truth is that anyone can "publish" their stories online through blogs or other websites, but very few ever find their work bound within the pages of an actual book. Soldiers will be far more delighted to tell their

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<sup>6</sup> I have written more about the pedagogy of allowing students to participate through collaborative writing in Section Four.

friends and family, “My story is printed in this book,” rather than “Go to this website, click this link, scroll down to this section, search for my name, and then print.”

Therefore, we will need to find subsidies from those eager to help Soldiers tell their stories. Finally, of utmost logistical concern will be the support of my fellow instructors and professors. But I have faith that no great idea will go unheard and that this project is one such great idea.

### ***Conclusion***

Every person with whom I have shared this project has said, “Mike, that’s a great idea.” I’d like to see this idea become something more than just another lost opportunity. Personally, I have not experienced what my comrades in arms have endured while deployed in our Global War on Terror. My seven months weren’t devoid of “action,” but you wouldn’t expect combat lessons from an AG officer who spends more time on the computer than he does holding a rifle. I know my friends “downrange” have stories they need to tell for cathartic reasons, for families to know about their lost loved ones, and for America to know what its sons and daughters are sacrificing for their country. We will make no monetary profit from this endeavor, unlike other efforts to package Soldiers’ stories, but we will gain something far more valuable: the knowledge that we have helped our fellow Soldiers share their experiences with those who most need to hear them, not only now, but for generations to come. Imagine a journal dedicated to stories written by Soldiers. Who else but the faculty and cadets of the United States Military Academy is capable of accomplishing such a feat?

## SECTION TWO

### *How to Tell True War Stories—Using Fiction to Tell the Truth*

While considering a feasible genre for this future collection of short stories written by soldiers for soldiers, I felt like I was deliberating between telling the truth or a lie. My own story from my time spent in Iraq would've lulled even the most chronic insomniac to sleep, unless I spiced it up with what "seemed" to happen rather than merely what did. If I were to use my example as the paradigm for how other soldiers might feel, then only telling "what happened to me" seemed less attractive than stories that involved combat or the struggle between life and death. Would my "true" story go unread while those involving more enticing material survive? What if my story wasn't just about me and what I experienced but was instead about life in the midst of a warzone? Could a war story be more telling than a story about war? History is made up of stories written by authors depicting reality as they perceived it. The thing that makes fiction different is the fact that the author is honest about his perceptions. The story may not be factual, but that doesn't keep it from being a truth-containing revelation.

Rudyard Kipling says, "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten." Truly history remains a part of our memory only because we know the stories of men and women who have lived and learned through life and an inevitable death. Each of us has her or his story to tell, which when stacked together like books in a library, cumulate to form a history of our generation. None of us wants that history to amount to a line in a disposable newspaper listing names of loved ones lost to enemy

sabotage or ambush. We don't want history to record our war with the simple words, "Thousands of Americans lost their lives for the sake of oil." We want our history to tell the story of our lives. Why not allow those who lived it to be the ones who tell it? But why introduce "fiction" into the story-making process instead of sticking with the "facts?"

In his reference book *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life*, Philip Gerard writes, "The term [nonfiction] ... doesn't make much sense. No other genre suffers under this metaphysical definition by negation" (4). In answering his own question concerning the reason for such a significantly awkward means of defining, Gerard writes:

Our natural tendency in real life seems to be to tell stories .... And, in telling stories, we invariably surrender to the delicious temptation to make fiction—or, less politely, to lie. When we're kids, being accused by our parents of "telling a story" means being caught in a lie .... So when we label a piece of writing *nonfiction*, we are announcing our determination to rein in our impulse to lie. (4)

To tell a "true" story, the author must convince the reader that he has not contrived reality out of imagination. As Mark Twain explains it, "Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." We want our fiction to be realistic but we want our reality to be uncontestable fact.

To this end, I decided to search out authors who told "true" war stories through the genre of fiction. A plethora of writers have used war as the backdrop for their novels, short stories, and poems, and many of their works have achieved literary greatness:

Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage*, William March's *Company K*, Robert Olen Butler's *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, or *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway also created his own anthology of war stories applicably entitled *Men at War: The Best War Stories of All Time*, which incidentally included several of his own stories. However, for this project I decided on two authors who might help me better understand why fiction produces far more telling stories than reality.

The first author was Jeff Shaara, the son of Michael Shaara, who wrote *The Killer Angels*, a historical novel about the Battle of Gettysburg which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1974. Jeff Shaara authored several historical fiction novels of his own including *Gods and Generals*—a precursor to his father's story—and *The Rising Tide*. In a personal email, I asked Jeff why he used historical fiction rather than a more factual account. He responded:

The choice of historical fiction was not really a decision based on that genre, as opposed, say to nonfiction. My father was always a writer of fiction .... What inspired him to tackle the story of Gettysburg was that he simply recognized a good story when he saw one .... His primary goal, throughout his entire career was to entertain through storytelling. It just so happens that his finest work revolves around the Battle of Gettysburg—but, as you know, neither his work nor mine focuses on a simple history lesson. What he taught me was to pay attention to the characters, find the voices, through which the story can best be told. When it comes to history, most books (even some fiction) can be deadly dry, because the storyteller leans too heavily on facts and figures. That holds very little appeal for



anyone who is not studying history as a full-time pursuit .... It helps if I get my facts straight, which I am painstaking to do (though, writing fiction, that isn't necessary). I think what separates my books from other historical fiction is the accuracy of the events .... Using fiction to teach history sounds at first like a pretty risky thing to do. Thus, it adds to the sense of responsibility I feel to "get it right." That probably separates me from most writers of historical fiction. At the end of the day, my primary goal (as was my father's) is to tell a good story. It has to start with that, or the book will never work.

A story is fictional because the author admits that everything isn't factual. It's historical because it depicts important accounts of historical events the reader could not personally experience.

Historical fiction is typically the fictionalization of a historical event or figure or both, whereby the author was not involved in the event or a known acquaintance of the historical figure. With this definition in mind, these Soldiers' stories would not be considered "historical fiction," even though the Soldiers would be effectively creating history through their fiction. Therefore, if the Soldiers take great care to, as Jeff Shaara related to me, "get it right," then we can expect that these stories to teach history despite the fact that they won't bear that title. My hope is that when people look back at this war, they will read these stories, be they fictional or factual, and say, "That's what it was like to be there."

Tim O'Brien's metafictional collection of stories, *The Things They Carried* (*TTC*), is one such story from the Vietnam War. *TTC* is a work of fiction and yet

simultaneously a work of nonfiction: a memoir of times past, battles fought and hopes loved and lost. To isolate it as only a factual retelling of history or a lie spun like a fable is to look into the reflection of our own past, our own self and say, “You never really existed the way I remembered but only the way I want to remember.” Metafiction is often associated with the modern and postmodern reference to works which use fictional devices that remind us that they are works of fiction. O’Brien’s use of himself as a fictional Vietnam War veteran and writer in his self-referential book, and the fact that he includes chapters aptly titled: “How to Write a True War Story,” as well as “Spin,” “Notes,” and “Good Form,” all serve as reminders that his factual-sounding story is fiction. It is a work of fiction and it is true. O’Brien’s writings, as well as the whole sum of fiction inspired by personal experience, must be contradictorily accepted as both fact and fiction—truth retold subjectively and lies disguised as reality. The realization of memory as nothing more than selective retelling of experiences, real or felt, allows the author and the reader to write and read a work of fiction or nonfiction as truth told from the perspective of belief, and not unadulterated knowledge. That is, what we write and read is what we empirically believe to be true or false and not what we categorically know, without any shadow of doubt, to be as real and sure as a simple mathematical equation.

O’Brien’s goal in writing his stories is not the education of the reader concerning the Vietnam War or even of O’Brien’s personal account of his participation in the war, but rather his own salvation. As his character Linda tells him:

“I’m not dead. But when I am, it’s like ... I don’t know, I guess it’s like being inside a book that nobody’s reading.” “A book?” I said. “An old one. It’s up on a library shelf, so you’re safe and everything, but the book hasn’t been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody’ll pick it up and start reading.” (245)

The telling of painful experiences, be they war inspired or not, propose a desire for recovery that allows one to relinquish guilt and remorse, and thereby gain “salvation,” through personal confession in the form of storytelling.

Mark Heberle, in his book *Trauma Artist*, pinpoints O’Brien’s tendency to include a wide range of discursive gestures to include explicit storytelling, a little sermonizing, allegory, recollection and ultimately confession.

This ceaseless replication of the fictive process witnesses to the mutual dependence of trauma and narrative as O’Brien reinvents himself as a soldier and as a writer. In the end, the work exemplifies both the need to write one’s way beyond trauma and the impossibility of ever doing so. (178)

The examination of war as a self-reflexive glance at one’s own soul through the horror of a hell in illustrated form focuses stories like *TTC* towards reinventions of the author’s self through the therapeutic exercise of writing. *TTC*’s narrator of the vignette, “Sweatheart of the Song Tra Bong,” Rat Kiley, told a “true” story with such literary liberty that it would likely be more believable as fiction than fact. “It wasn’t a question of deceit. Just the opposite: he wanted to heat up the truth, to make it burn so hot that you would feel exactly what he [the author] felt” (89). The author writes to cure his own

ailments, to investigate his soul, but he does it for an audience he wants to feel just as he does. In her article “O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*,” Robin Blyn writes, “The idea of stories as a curative force is attractive, particularly because it ... redeem[s] the reader and the writer at once.” The telling of war stories is a win-win situation for both the writer and the reader in that as its telling heals the author, so its reading educates the reader.

In the chapter of *TTC* entitled “Speaking of Courage,” Norman Bowker orbits around a lake telling a story “you don’t ever tell” (76). Audience becomes a real issue when deciding to write a war story as you have to consider who is listening or would want to listen. Though Norman “imagined the feel of his tongue against the truth” (142) he could never bring himself to speak it and ended his life quite possibly because of his own lack of personal therapy. It was a story he could never tell but which must be told. Much like the disparaging saying, “Those who can’t do, teach,” so also should we say that those who can’t write, can read. Therefore, the telling of a story is fundamentally necessary not only for the therapy of the one writing, but also for the vicarious salvation of those who can’t find the words to speak it. In his thesis chapter “How to Tell a True War Story,” O’Brien writes:

In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. The angles of vision are skewed .... The pictures get jumbled; you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it,

there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (71)

Because memory is “jumbled” a writer cannot consider the happening truth to be of any more value than the “seemed to happen” truth; in the same way we can’t always separate thoughts inspired by critics we have read from thoughts autonomously and originally all our own. Authors can annotate what they believe to be true, summarize what only seems to be true, and fictionalize everything in between. They do this not to deceive, but because what is told through the eyes of another is as real as what is seen by our own. Courage comes from writing though “the truths are contradictory” (*TTC* 80) and reading even though “in war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself, and therefore it’s safe to say that in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true” (*TTC* 82). This is why a therapeutic, self-reflective story must draw attention to its true nature; it isn’t as factual as it sounds.

In *Tim O’Brien*, Toby Herzog provides another angle about O’Brien’s use of metafiction. He believes that the stories aren’t merely self-reflexive of either the author or the reader, but are really a trick mirror presented by the author desiring the reader to see “truth” as nothing more than felt experience. “Working with and against the conventional notions of truth and lies as well as conventions of author-narrator and author-reader relationships, O’Brien in *The Things They Carried* once again lies to tell the truth” (105). It’s as if truth and lies don’t really matter in the face of a reality as terrible as war. “The confusion and ambiguity of the form and content, as noted earlier, mirror the disorder of the Vietnam War. More important, the narrator’s inability or

indifference to presenting the events in a chronological or sequential fashion merely reflects the workings of his mind” (107-108). *TTC* reminds us that fiction is a device used by the author to provide a pastiche of history, of autobiography and of fiction itself. He has chosen fiction for a reason and that reason isn't to tell lies.

The narrator O'Brien tells the reader, “I'm forty-three years old, true, and I'm a writer .... Almost everything else is invented. But it's not a game. It's a form ... I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (179). Have you noticed that when we recall a car accident, we almost always elaborate upon the details? What happened was that our car was rear-ended. But when we tell the story, we talk about the purpose of our trip, the reason we were at that location, the feelings we had before and after, the dialogue with the police officer or the person who hit us, and even our theory concerning the perpetrator's intent. It feels more real when we flesh out the sketchy details believing the hearer will more readily identify with our predicament, feel our pain and justify our story that now sounds more truthful than if we had merely stated, “We were rear-ended.” As readers, we want the truth, but we don't necessary desire the facts.

Maybe, we ought to ask the question: “What are stories for?” “Stories are for joining the past to the future .... Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story” (*TTC* 38). We tell stories to tell the truth as we see it. In their book *Writing and Healing*, Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy explain about the value of using stories to heal the soul of those who have endured traumatic events in their lives: “Re-externalization of the event can occur and

take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again” (6). The transmission of the story relieves the author, not because he or she has revealed the facts, but because he or she believes they have told the truth, even if the truth is veiled within the moral of a story. Stories are factual and they are fictional. They show us trauma and they bring relief. But one thing the story will never be is finished. Charles Anderson remarks about the obviousness of this truth: “It is both commonplace and accurate to say that we live our lives inside an endless network of stories” (58). It is time Soldiers’ stories joined this network; it is time we helped them to do so.

### SECTION THREE

#### *Telling Fables—Use of Fiction in Classical Era Education and its Benefit for Telling War Stories*

I prefer to use fiction to teach “truth” rather than factual narratives, because “story” is the foundation upon which civilizations are built. The Bible says, “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear” (Hebrews 11.3, KJV). The story of creation is one upon which millions today place their faith. The story teaches truths—by truth I do not mean merely a statement of facts, but the much more metaphysical, more debatable meaning of truth as that abstraction which teaches us to live “right.” “Right,” “life,” and every other abstract concept can be debated for years as to the correct, acceptable terms; but for the purposes of this project, I submit to you that truths are life lessons that help men and women live productive lives in a world made up of men and women equally mystified about the meaning of truth and life. And stories are one of the primary means by which these truths are transmitted.

In his article about using stories to teach ethics to businessmen and women entitled “Telling Stories is at the Heart of Knowledge Management,” John Monroe writes, “Stories also make it easier for listeners to stay engaged and absorb information. That is because storytelling is part of human nature, an age-old way of sharing information and cultural values.” The truth is that most people would rather hear a story (or write one) about the classical use of fiction in education than to read a section of a



thesis about it. The pure study of facts has never been the means to understanding life. If this were true, then television programs would consist more of documentaries than sitcoms and the books we read would be conducive to science and not romance or fantasy.

Asking soldiers to share their stories about their service during the Global War on Terror is a project that has already been undertaken by Hollywood and book publishers. Asking them to fictionalize their stories so that the lessons might be more readily understood and the healing effect of the writing process more fully realized is also a practice already in service. But asking academic students—academy cadets—to help Soldiers transform their war stories into *telling* war stories that reveal “truth” is a task not yet undertaken. This section establishes the pedagogical foundation upon which fiction—fable—became the catalyst for understanding all forms of rhetoric. Using the principles shared here, we can help cadets comprehend the value of fiction and their part in the process of story-making and storytelling.

The “story,” or *muthos* as the ancient Greeks called it, is the foundation upon which the Classical Era educators built Western Civilization as we know it. For these early educators, the teaching of fiction was the first of fourteen steps in training students of rhetoric to become functioning members of society. In his book *Plato the Myth Maker*, Luc Brisson cites this passage from Plato’s *Republic*:

Socrates: And under music you include discourses (*logous*), do you not?

Adeimantus: I do.

Socrates: And the discourses are of two kinds, the one true and the other false?

Adeimantus: Yes.

Socrates: And education must make use of both, but first of the false?

Adeimantus: I don't understand your meaning.

Socrates: Don't you understand that we begin by telling children myths (*muthous*), and the myth is, taken as a whole, false, but there is truth in it also?

And we make use of myth with children before gymnastics.

Adeimantus: That is so. (105-106)

Socrates believes that the teaching of fictional discourse is the first step in educating younger generations in the art of rhetoric. It is with this premise of educating the young that a handbook entitled *Progymnasmata* was first created.

*Progymnasmata* means “preliminary exercises” assigned to Greek and Roman boys after they learned to read and write properly—typically between the ages of twelve and fifteen. Only four handbooks written by different authors actually survived the Classical Era and have been chronicled together in one volume with a fifth chapter consisting of a commentary by John of Sardis (*Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* translated by George Kennedy). Quintilian was a famous first century Roman educator whose instructions concerning the perfect orator are considered the precedent for the later published *Progymnasmata*. He provides these instructions regarding the orator's training: “Let them learn then to tell Aesop's fables, which follow on directly from their nurses' stories, in pure and unpretentious language; then let them achieve the slender elegance in a written version” (Quintilian I.9.2). The orator then teaches the student to provide a close reading of the fable, or poem, then

paraphrase it, abbreviate, embellish, and ultimately, explicate it in such a way that the lesson can be taught to anyone. Quintilian says, “[It] is difficult even for the fully trained teachers; any pupil who handles it well will be capable of learning anything” (Quintilian I.9.3). In *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman World*, Teresa Morgan writes, “At the earliest stages of learning to read and write children are recommended to write out moralistic sayings, which will inform their minds with appropriate ethics as they learn the practical skill of literacy” (146). Young students began with the study of morally didactic fiction because it was the foundation upon which all other skills in rhetoric were built.

The primary of the fourteen preliminary exercises was entitled “fable.” John of Sardis believed it was “assigned first as being something encompassing the seeds of all the art [of rhetoric]” (John, *Progymnasmata*, 181). He explains:

We start with fable because we are introducing the young to the great mystery of rhetoric, by which I mean what is persuasive; for if in fables we succeed in teaching how to form speeches and actions appropriate for the characters, it is clear that we shall become competent for the rhetorical task of composing speeches worthy of the persons in complete hypotheses. (John, *Progymnasmata*, 180)

Our goal in teaching the art of rhetoric and composition to students is to assist them in the creation of persuasive arguments through their writing. John tells us that the great mystery of rhetoric, the ability to alter people’s perceptions and to change their minds, begins with discerning truth in fiction.

According to each of the four handbooks, the word “fable” derives from the Greek word *muthos* and means “a fictitious story giving an image of truth” (Theon, *Progymnasmata*, 23), but does not necessarily entail the use of personified animals (as the word is often defined today), though it always includes a moral providing ethical advice. Homer is cited as an example of one who wrote “fables” before they were so called because as one author of the handbooks comments: “Fables originated with poets but has come to be used also by orators for the sake of the moral” (Aphthonius, *Progymnasmata*, 96). For this first exercise students listen to the fable and then argue the credibility of it based upon the principles of invention—the message or advice the author wished to convey. Of the fourteen exercises, this study of morally didactic stories is preeminent because further education hinges upon its comprehension.

The word “fable” also derives from the Latin *fabula*, which means “conversation, story or play” and is defined as morally guided stories that, either at the beginning or the end, offer wise advice. In English, we would regard both “fable” and the Greek equivalent “myth” (*muthos*) as genres within the broad umbrella of “fiction” itself. To the Greeks and Romans, this delineation among fictional genres was nonexistent. Instead, they were collectively bundled under the title “fictive statement,” whether they were fable, myth, legend, or narrative. “If narrative is an exposition of events and fable contains an exposition of events, then fable and narrative are the same?” John of Sardis answers this question:

Fable, being fictitious by nature, when activated for advice, looks to what benefits the hearer, while narrative ... has the actuality of teaching the hearer what has

resulted. The purpose of narrative is the teaching of the narrative, the purpose of a rhetorical fable is not the teaching of the fable but the deduction of the moral.

The exercises differ, then, in the way each has a different function. (John, *Progymnasmata*, 192)

Fiction serves varying functions based upon the practicality of its use. Historical fiction teaches lessons from history exemplified by actual characters or events fictionalized according to the will of the author. Myth teaches about heroes and gods. But fable is preeminent because it is from this lesson that the student learns to decipher truth from what is knowingly fictitious by nature.

One common opposition to the *Progymnasmata* handbooks was that since the fable was false, and the first of all the exercises, a preliminary study of it would lead to falseness in all other exercises. John counters this issue, “But if we set out the fiction in a simple way, teaching something credible from the fable while desiring only to give advice, the exercise is a useful invention for the young” (John, *Progymnasmata*, 182). The young begin with fable or fiction rather than history or truthful depictions of reality, because the story establishes the paradigms upon which the students’ perception of “reality” is based. The inventive value of fiction creates an atmosphere of amazement to readers so that when they encounter what they know to be fiction, they are not persuaded to believe these characters or events to be “real,” but rather are persuaded that the moral of the tale, the lesson behind the story, is truer than even the voice that is speaking it. Aristotle writes, “Fables are suitable in deliberative oratory and have this advantage, that while it is difficult to find similar historical incidents that have actually happened, it is

rather easy with fables” (Aristotle 2.20.7). Aristotle explains that fiction is more pliable than history because it allows us to construe “truth” without fear of deception in order to impart lessons that history could not otherwise teach.

As stated in my proposal section, allowing soldiers the opportunity to fictionalize their factual stories will free them from the worrisome burdens of ensuring every minutia of detail is exactly accurate. When the reader sees “fiction” as the genre, they will assume the details are not factual and will therefore read the story for the value of the lesson it is attempting to impart. However, if the Soldier decides to use nonfiction, then the reader will likely first determine the validity of the provided details before he or she even considers the lesson or moral the story teaches. But nonfiction does have its place in history.

During his brief discussion of the *Progymnasmata*, Quintilian writes concerning the three species of “Narrative,” “One is fable, found in tragedies and poems, and remote not only from truth but from the appearance of truth. The second is Plot, which is the false but probably fiction of comedy. The third is History ... which are more grown-up because they are more real” (Quintilian I.2.4). Though he considers the reading and writing of history to be more “grown-up” than what is considered less “real,” he later admits:

Above all, the orator should be supplied with plenty of examples, both ancient and modern; indeed, he ought not only to know things which are recorded in histories ... he should not neglect the fictions of the great poets either. For while historical examples can take the place of evidence or even legal precedents, those

from the poets also are either sanctioned by the guarantee of antiquity or believed to have been invented by great men as moral lessons. (V.12.4)

What Aristotle and Quintilian taught their students was that although “history” was the narrative depiction of what was fact, “fiction” provided the examples that made the facts more understandable by the hearer or reader. The Greeks and Romans would think little of Trojan War history apart from the myths concerning Achilles, Hector, and Ulysses that accompany it. As a matter of fact, to them history and myth weren’t that different.

In the translator’s introduction to Luc Brisson’s *Plato the Myth Maker*, Gerrard Naddaf writes that the Greek word *muthos* “is never employed or associated, in Homer, in the popular and pejorative sense of a false or unbelievable story or fiction” (Brisson vii). Brisson writes, “In its broad sense, myth designates a discourse—not very rigorous in form or in the organization of its content—that transmits unfalsifiable information and that gives rise not to certainty but to belief” (11). To the Greeks and the Romans their myths were history. Though the details were not believed wholeheartedly, the people were persuaded by the message to believe in something they were collectively willing to accept as true. In *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths*, Paul Veyne writes, “For ... the ancient Greeks, historical truth was a vulgate authenticated by consensus over the ages” (6). Later he explains, “The Greeks could criticize the details of fables, but they could not disregard the fables themselves .... Myth is truthful, but figuratively so. It is not historical truth mixed with lies; it is a high philosophical teaching that is entirely true, on the condition that, instead of taking it literally, one sees in it an allegory” (62). Veyne sums up his point and mine: “For the Greeks, the medium disappears behind the

message” (65). The value of fiction to the Greco-Roman world and ours today is not in its truthfulness but rather, uncannily, in its ability to relay “truth” by its innately persuasive tendencies.

The Bible is a book some call “myth,” others “fiction,” or “history.” Within its pages is the Gospel of Jesus, who claimed to be God incarnate and spoke to Jews dwelling within a Greco-Roman society. This prophet used fiction in order to communicate lessons through parables: stories about farmers, traveling Samaritans, and prodigal sons, each presented in order to persuade people accustomed to learning by stories to believe in the truths he sought to convey. The television shows or movies we watch today, which attempt to tell us something about life through their stories, are adamant proof that our society is no different. Fables, myths, parables, or whatever other name we’d like to label our modern fiction all serve the same purpose. We use what is “unfalsifiable” to persuade others, not to believe the story, but to believe the message allegorized through the story. Brisson writes, “Myth plays the role of a paradigm, and it is by means not of education but of persuasion that all ... are led to embrace this paradigm in order to adapt their behavior to it” (121). Storytelling is our primary paradigm for revealing truth and reality. We use it daily when we attempt an explanation for what we feel, or when we entertain others with commentary about our life’s mundane activities, or when we want to persuade a child to believe in a fairy dentist or an obese gift giver. We tell stories to depict the history of our lives and ultimately, the history of our world. Some may call it “fiction,” but the truth is that our stories are as real as we believe them to be.



Cadets at the United States Military Academy will learn about history, including today's Global War on Terror, and they will learn fiction: but can they learn history through fiction? Or better said: can their fiction, their part in the Soldiers' telling war stories, play a part in writing what the next generation will refer to as history? Our educational system begins with fiction, with the fable; even today, children are taught Mother Goose before they learn about American history. We begin our children's education with the story but we apparently end it (in college) with the essay (or thesis). This project seeks to slightly alter that trend by helping cadets and Soldiers teach truth—life lessons learned amidst a time of war—through the art of storytelling.

The story, the one which seeks to imbue the tale with “truth,” ought to be fiction because it will allow the author the freedom to explore the possibilities that exist outside the confines of the facts, of what really happened. When the stories are published, readers will see the word “fiction” and dive into the story, not to decide if what they are reading is factual, like they would a newspaper article; but rather, to determine what the point of the story is—what lesson they will learn. Fiction has a rich history, and strong tradition of teaching “truth” through that which is not fact. I hope the cadets will learn its value through this project, to know that though they are not writing history; they are, in essence, creating it.

## SECTION FOUR

### *The Pedagogical Benefits of Stories and the Collaborative Learning Experience*

Robert Coles' *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, is about a teacher learning from his pupils; in this case, a Doctor of Psychology who learned that patients' medical histories are, in essence, an assortment of stories from their lives. He was instructed by his mentor, Dr. Ludwig, to hear his patients teach him through their narration, believing that "the patients will learn the lessons a good instructor learns only when he [the doctor] becomes a willing student, eager to be taught" (22). Later in life, Dr. Coles became a renowned teacher who used literature to instruct life lessons to his students that they could in turn use to make ethical and moral decisions in their workplace. For this purpose, he used those authors whose stories best presented ethical dilemmas requiring thought on the part of his students.

Some novelists, of course, are forthrightly concerned with ethical reflection.

Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had no reluctance to place religious and philosophical questions in the center of their plots. Contemporary American fiction writers such as Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor address matters of the soul as they construct narratives .... The secular reader need not subscribe to Flannery O'Connor's religious outlook in order to gain a moment of ethical instruction from a tale that is, at the same time, arresting and humorous in its narrative presentation. (82-83)

Coles' book reiterates the point I've been making over the course of this thesis project—people learn from stories, both about themselves as authors and about life as readers. “So it goes, this immediacy that a story can possess, as it connects so persuasively with human experience” (204-205). Our collective lives are like intertwined storybooks waiting to be read. We need only open up our lives and let others read what we have written.

Using stories to teach life lessons isn't a new concept, as I have attempted to explain using Tim O'Brien, the classical use of fables, and now a snippet of Cole's teaching expertise. As a matter of fact, if our collective lives are intertwining stories, then together, as a society, these stories themselves make up our history. The story is our life. The lessons of life are the morals of our stories. The truth is that we do not write our story alone, nor does any written story ever exist outside the confines of the society in which the characters are placed. A story is about individuals living together, individuals who learn, not as autonomous beings residing in the absence of society, but as human beings existing together as people whose stories intertwine with our own. In the same way, cadets and soldiers reside within the same community of the United States Army. Helping these two separate groups (academics and soldiers) collaborate with one another to create lesson-imbued stories is an endeavor to unite the community by intertwining their stories one with another in a journal of short stories. This section delves into the pedagogical benefits of collaborative learning as it pertains to cadets and soldiers working together to create telling war stories.

Though our educational system was patterned after those first established by the Greeks thousands of years ago, our contemporary model has attempted to shift to a more interdependent view of knowledge-sharing than in times past. Kenneth Bruffee identifies this issue in *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*: “Collaborative learning makes the Kuhnian assumption that knowledge is a consensus: it is something people construct interdependently by talking together. Knowledge in that sense, Kuhn says, is ‘intrinsically the common property of a group or else nothing at all’” (134). Coles’ students shared their stories with one another in the hopes of learning from their peer’s interpretations, sharing in their applications, and ultimately, collaboratively teaching what they’ve learned to those they were training to one day help. Bruffee’s students in his English classroom did the same. He suggests we need a paradigm shift in our teaching to ensure this goal is achieved.

As a pedagogical technique, collaborative learning seeks to place the responsibility of learning squarely upon the shoulders of the student with the teacher acting less like a pillar of truth, and more like a facilitator of learnable knowledge. My project aims to follow this collaborative learning model by encouraging cadets to understand their future career field by hearing from the soldiers they will one day lead (or officers they will follow). As cadets take the responsibility of “peer” evaluation by examining the drafts of the stories we’ll receive from soldiers, they will learn first-hand this Kuhnian concept of knowledge Bruffee endorses. Bruffee continues by introducing a philosopher whose theories formed the basis upon which Bruffee defines knowledge:

Michael Oakeshott places this notion of knowledge as a community-owned social construct in an even broader context: our ability to participate in unending conversation distinguishes human beings from other animals. ‘As civilized human beings,’ Oakeshott says, ‘We are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves .... And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human activity and utterance.’ (134)

Therefore, students, teachers, and writers in general enter into this conversation daily as they share knowledge with each other and engage communally. If this is truly the way knowledge is shared and society exists, then helping soldiers and cadets become involved in our country’s conversation concerning the Global War on Terror seems evermore vital to understanding their role in it.

Collaborative learning’s primary goal is positive interdependence—the ability to become a sharer of knowledge rather than a mere consumer. In their article “Student Involvement in Learning: Cooperative Learning and College Instruction,” Jim Cooper and Randall Mueck write, “Perhaps the most characteristic feature of cooperative learning is positive interdependence; that is, all members of a learning team are responsible for the learning of other members” (68). Everyone learns together, including the instructor, as well as, obviously, the students involved. Bruffee writes, “There is no more important skill to learn in acquiring the craft of interdependence than learning to

write effectively” (54). Concerning the examination of one’s own writing, Bruffee writes, “That is why writing can sometimes feel as awkward, and on occasion turn out as badly, as cutting your own hair while looking in a mirror. The complex decisions we have to make when we write are complicated even further by the fact that we write to suit the goals, interests, and knowledge of as many as three communities of readers” (58). These three communities are our own intertwining mix of relations in which we already maintain membership, the community (or multiple) we wish to join, and the community of English speakers in general. It is this last community that we (teachers of writing) ought to concern ourselves.

Cadets in English 101 and 303 will learn from their instructors the art of rhetoric; that is a given. They are engaged in a community of cadets, with their friends, with their clubs and social groups, and with the academy in general. With this project we will introduce them to soldiers at large, not for the cadets’ military training (they are already thoroughly engaged in this manner), but for the edification of Soldiers who want their stories to be heard. In his chapter concerning writing and collaboration Bruffee teaches,

Thinking of writing as social, collaborative, and constructive tells us a good deal about how college and university teachers (and textbooks) should be teaching writing and expecting students to learn it. One implication is that, as much as they might like to, college and university teachers (and textbook writers) cannot *tell* students how to write. Instead, because writing is itself a displaced form of conversation, teachers have to find ways for students to learn to engage in constructive conversation with one another about writing. (58)

My project aims to help cadets learn to engage in this constructive conversation about writing with one another and with the soldiers they will inevitably help.

The method for accomplishing this feat, the cadets' collaborative learning, is related to what Bruffee refers to as "peer review." By his accounts, conversations conducted with our peers are the "most productive kind of conversation. So students have to converse with their peers about writing both directly and indirectly. They have to talk with one another face-to-face about writing. They have to write to one another about writing" (59). Asking a cadet to correspond with deployed soldiers or veterans of our Global War on Terror is asking them to write to another person who shares their values—Army values—and their passion for service to our country, and help them learn more about writing. This method of writing—two or more people working together to create a written document—is what the authors of the textbook *Collaborative Learning Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* refer to as "Collaborative Writing."

Working together can help students to learn and perform the stages of writing more effectively. Additionally, students typically write better and take more pride in their writing when they are writing for an audience .... Finally, since many professions require collaborative writing, this technique can help prepare students for tasks they will have in their careers. (256)

The written product produced by the collaborative work of the soldier and the cadet would inevitably act as a catalyst for learning that could not result from traditional pedagogies implemented by the fine cadre of the U.S. Military Academy. The sort of

education they will receive from this project will be unique and unattainable through any other means.

In many ways, we will be asking the cadets to engage in what Bruffee refers to as “peer tutoring,” though in this case, the product created by the coauthoring of the cadet and soldier will be a symbiotic construct rather than a merely a soldier’s work edited by a cadet. By “symbiotic,” I mean that the finished story will be a cooperative effort made by both the cadet and author; the soldier provides the story and the cadet an “editorial ear.” In taking the principles from Bruffee’s book and applying them to this project, I am by no means claiming ignorance to the differences between them. Bruffee’s subjects are typically older students or graduate students helping younger students or undergrads. With this project, the soldiers who will be presenting their stories will likely be older than the cadets reading them and in many cases, better suited to provide editing than to receive it from another. And yet, I will argue, the principles discussed in Bruffee’s chapter concerning “Peer Tutoring” and the results students receive from such an endeavor, are enticingly conducive to the project I am proposing.

First, Bruffee emphasizes that “the educational effects of peer tutoring ... depend on the degree to which tutors and their tutees are real peers” (95). In this case, please allow me to substitute “tutors” with cadets and “tutees” with soldiers, though I have already claimed that this ought not to be the implied relationship. What is important to our understanding of the relationship, and what must inevitably be communicated to the parties involved, is the issue Bruffee goes on to explain: “Students involved—peer tutor and tutee alike—believe that they both bring an important measure of ability, expertise,



and information to the encounter and, second, that all the students involved believe that, as students, they are unequivocally institutional status-equals” (95). Whether a soldier is an officer, a noncommissioned officer, junior enlisted personnel, or cadet; they are equally soldiers. The cadets will learn this principle quickly by dealing with soldiers outside their academic world as peers who possess the expertise and experience regarding a subject the cadets will one day hold near and dear. What the cadets bring to the encounter is the value of a reader to an author, an ear to a confessing mouth, and a heart to feel what another shares.

As cadets receive these stories, they will likely encounter what Bruffee says every tutor endures during his tenure:

In such a course, collaborative peer tutors can also learn some of the practical skills of dealing with people under stress. They can learn where students’ most debilitating academic difficulties lie and how to deal with them, how to open conversations with reticent or fearful students, how to evade overdependent tutees, how to empower and encourage without raising expectations too high, and so on. In short, the course can help peer tutors bring to bear in an academic context the highest degree of social maturity they are capable of. (99)

In like manner, cadets would learn the stress of soldiering from the soldiers themselves and discern how to encourage and empower the soldier to achieve excellence without expecting more of them than they are capable of achieving. Isn’t this also what the Army desires for its leaders?

Secondly, cadets will become better writers themselves by learning to read and provide constructive guidance for the telling war stories they will share. “They develop writer’s awareness as readers by developing their sense of form. Because writers are always their own first readers, the better readers they are, the better writers they are likely to become” (Bruffee 62). Through this collaborative process, cadets will learn about organization, form, and style by providing feedback regarding these very things for the stories they will read and help to create. As the feedback is received by the soldiers, the corrections made, and the revised version submitted, the cadets will feel a sense of pride knowing that they’ve not only helped to create a better story (both grammatically and contextually), but have become better writers themselves. In their chapter “What is Collaborative Learning?” Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T. MacGregor provide evidence regarding the positive influence peer writing affords:

Getting and giving feedback helps students understand that writing is a social process, not a solo performance .... Peer writing also makes better writers. A major research study from the University of Chicago compared results of all the major approaches in teaching composition. It concluded that ‘having students work independently in small groups on purposefully designed and sequenced tasks produces significantly better results, as measured by the quality of thinking revealed in the writing, than does the current lecture method, whole class discussion methods, or open-ended group work.’ (16)

Another study conducted by Alexander Astin in 1993 concluded that “research has consistently shown that cooperative learning approaches produce outcomes that are

superior to those obtained through traditional competitive approaches, and it may well be that our findings concerning the power of the peer group offer a possible explanation: Cooperative learning may be more potent than traditional methods of pedagogy because it motivates students to become more active and more involved participants in the learning process” (427). Though Bruffee admits that research concerning university and college’s use of collaborative learning practices “remains inadequate” (264), there is still ample enough proof that collaborative learning has its merits.

As Seneca writes *docendo discimus*—“by teaching we are learning” (*Epistulae Morales* I, 7, 8)—so also should we expect cadets to learn by helping their peers, the soldiers they will assist. In “Preparing Teachers and Students for Cooperative Work: Building Communication and Helping Skills,” Sydney Farivar and Noreen Webb write, “From a theoretical perspective, both the help-giver and the help-receiver may benefit from elaborated help much more than from non-elaborated help. Giving explanations encourages the explainer to clarify, restructure, and reorganize the material in new ways to make it understandable to others, which in turn helps the explainer to understand it better” (170). By explaining to Soldiers what is necessary to make their stories more understandable to their audience, cadets will, in turn, more readily comprehend this process for their own writing. Bruffee adds, “Tutoring and its classroom counterpart, the organized, collaborative process of peer review, led in a single semester to dramatic improvement in the writing of some of the tutors, according to almost any measure: organization, style, perspicacity, balance, depth of understanding, tact. The tutors’ willingness to read one another’s writing and their ability to make constructive

suggestions about it improved dramatically as well” (102). If the goal of collaborative learning is to enhance the skills of everyone involved by getting the writers more intensively engaged in the activity, then having cadets correspond with soldiers about storytelling will obviously lead to improvements by both the soldier and the cadet. Bruffee includes another “happy by-product,” “Tutors understood, in some cases for the first time, some basic aspects of thought and conceptualization . . . . Their own work improved because, as a result of identifying these problems in the work of their tutees and their fellow tutors, they began to identify and resolve them in their own thought and writing. As one put it, the academic problems he confronted as a peer tutor ‘seemed to be a mirror image of my own’” (104). Cadets will recognize their own issues concerning logical sequencing, organization, and thought conveyance as they assist soldiers with the issues they will face regarding their stories. In short, the cadets will improve their own writing by helping others to improve theirs. But that’s not the end goal.

The third likely positive effect of this project on the cadets’ understanding of and ability to write is how it will transform the dynamic of the Academy itself. Concerning peer tutoring, Bruffee writes that “peer tutors can improve the overall quality of the undergraduate student body by fostering interdependence—social and intellectual maturity—in college and university students” (110). The goal of Bruffee’s book is not simply to change the students teachers will encounter or to improve upon a pedagogy perfect in its practice. Instead, Bruffee is hoping to revolutionize the face of education as we know it by creating programs more student-centered than teacher-centered. I believe that instituting this program will also change the face of the United States Military

Academy as we know it. Though we already possess the finest students any university could hope to muster, we can always improve in ways perhaps yet untapped. “Peer tutoring can quite simply make students more interesting to teach. Specifically, peer tutors can help colleges and universities bring about changes of four kinds: changes in human relations among students, among professors, and between students and professors; changes in classroom practice; changes in curriculum; and even (often the last domino to fall) changes in the prevailing understanding of the nature and authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers” (110). By engaging them in the process of developing telling war stories written by the soldiers themselves, we will effectually enhance our cadets’ ability to relate to their community forever.

In like manner, academy professors and instructors who involve themselves in the project will change, and our understanding of life in a war will forever alter. We will be on the brink of the next step in Bruffee’s “master plan.” It will be difficult, as “most college professors have received little or no instruction in pedagogy. As a result, they tend to teach students the way they were taught, using lecture and lecture-discussion methods.” (Cooper 74). The temptation will be to leave things as they’ve always been and let cadets learn about writing the way they have for centuries. But can we so easily dismiss the benefits? Barbara Leigh Smith and Jean T. MacGregor warn us that “collaborative learning represents a radical departure from contemporary practices in postsecondary education” (9). It’s not the norm to allow students to take center stage, but if they are allowed to do so, then they will never be the same. Smith and MacGregor explain,

Collaborative learning holds enormous promise for improving student learning and revitalizing college teaching. It is a flexible and adaptable approach appropriate to any discipline. Nonetheless, teachers who adopt collaborative learning approaches find it challenging. They inevitably face fundamental questions about the purposes of their classes, teacher and student roles and responsibilities, the relationship between educational form and content, and the nature of knowledge itself. (9)

Perhaps, our project will be the next milestone on the revolutionary practices of collaborative learning. But if implemented, the cadets will inevitably receive the benefits of positive interdependence. We will make better cadets, improve our Academy, and ultimately provide a great service to the entire Army community.

Through this project, cadets engaged in the collaborative learning process will become better members of the Army by helping soldiers share their stories. As Robert Coles taught his students that doctors learn most about their patients by listening to their stories, and as Kenneth Bruffee illustrates that knowledge shared is better than knowledge taught, so also can we say that cadets helping soldiers with their telling war stories are more likely to understand the lessons of war than if this project never comes to fruition. Throughout their military careers, cadets will collaborate with their fellow officers and soldiers in the creation of memorandums, operation orders, regulations, or a unit newsletter. Should we not start their collaborative learning now by helping cadets assist soldiers with the writing of telling war stories?

## SECTION FIVE

### *Introduction and Conclusion*

The purpose for including this story in this thesis project is to serve as an example for other soldier stories we are likely to receive. By no means should the story be considered the paradigm upon which all others are patterned, as that would be foolish and contemptuous, but rather consider it a prototype—the first of its kind. Not in its present form, but once adopted by a cadet, it will be read, written feedback along with verbal discussion will commence, revisions made, and then a final story completed by the author and the cadet will be ready for submission. Everyone who writes has undergone a similar exchange, but not everyone—especially soldiers deployed to a hostile environment—possesses a person willing to participate in the writing of their story.

Therein lies the motivation for this thesis project: a desire to help soldiers' stories find a home they can call their own. But that wasn't enough; I also wanted to help my future students, the cadets at the academy, grasp the value of telling stories by helping their fellow soldiers to do just that. This project unites my passion for creative writing with my zeal for my future profession—teaching rhetoric and composition to college students—by including the following short story, a pedagogical explanation of collaborative learning, and the use of fiction to teach truth.

What drew me away from the teaching of literature to the art of Rhetoric wasn't the quote by Dr. Michael Keene: "You'll find a job." I already have a job. What draws me to Rhetoric and Composition is the focus on writing's curative power—its ability to

draw out of the author what no other medium possibly could. As teachers, we become readers of authors who potentially will become America's future political leaders, spiritual shepherds, business entrepreneurs, or whatever their hearts desire. By helping them communicate their story, we will become an agent of change for this world. In essence, we will be making our world a better place by helping students write better.

That's the power of a story. I think that's what the Bible means when it says that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate—by reading it, we are interfacing with God's very Soul. The story presents the soul of the author for the study, the dissection, and the appreciation of the audience—the reader, without whom the story would be but words on a page.

My story, "Then There Was Applause," isn't a presentation of facts about my service during Iraq. Instead, it represents a story I want to tell about my service to my country. It's about a Soldier's death, a family's loss, and a Soldier's telling of the tale. But it's also about sacrifice, it's about love, and it's about the power of storytelling.

### ***My Example Story: Then There Was Applause***

It was the day of their mission and Chaplain Zimmer was showing Lieutenant Stone a video on his laptop. As he clicked "play," a tiny dancer slid out from under her abaya, tossing it onto the floor like dirty laundry, and then unbuttoned her ACU pants, wiggling her hips until they slithered into a pile at her feet. Then the dancer pirouetted, her hands performing fluttering circles onto her bed, her eyes glancing over her shoulder, and her lower back curved so that her lacy panties filled the screen. She bent her knees,



bouncing up and down to the rhythm of the rap song, her red hair unraveling from the Army approved bun until it wrapped around her shoulders as she spun her head back and forth shouting: “You want to love me,” in English and Aramaic. LT Stone turned off the volume and folded the screen.

“There’s more.” Chaplain Zimmer attempted to open the laptop.

“I get the point, Tom,” Stone said.

“Jenkins calls herself ‘Private Dancer,’ and posted her vids to Youtube, and blogged about everything we say and do, or worse yet, don’t say and don’t do.” He paced to the front of the tent, grabbed Stone’s rucksack like he was testing its weight, and then said, “She’s your troop. Talk to her.”

“You’re the Chaplain,” Stone said. “This seems like a moral issue.”

“It’s a morale issue as well and that’s your department. Look, I’ve tried. She doesn’t like ‘holly rollers.’”

“Holy crapper.”

“What?”

“That’s what they call you—the holy crapper. You remember when you dropped your Bible into those wooden latrines we made before we got the Port-a-potties? The story goes that before Jenkins started stirring the gasoline into the bucket of waste; she spotted the Bible and fished it out with her shovel. She strolled away from the latrine area and started washing it off at the water buffalo. Just about the time she read your name on the cover, Jenkins, and everyone around her, heard the whistling of an incoming mortar round. Before she thought to dive under the buffalo, the round impacted that

bucket of crap. Your crap, and likely everyone else's, splattered all over other soldiers who happened to be standing nearby, onto the Port-a-potties, and even reached some of the tents; but not a drop touched Jenkins."

"I remember that day, but I never heard that story," Zimmer said.

"You just never had someone to tell it to you."

"Just talk to her about the videos."

"What about her NCO's?"

"Yeah," Zimmer said as he winked, his teeth bared like he couldn't shut his mouth. He always wore that expression whether they were getting mortared, learning of the death of a soldier, or finding out they'd be home in three months. "Command thinks they're biased."

"I'll have her report here tomorrow."

"You need to talk to her before your mission." Zimmer looked down at his watch. "That's in ninety minutes. We'd better go to her."

"All right, just let me put my stuff away."

"What you got there—a care package?"

"A 'don't care' package is more like it. Take a look." Stone handed a tiny picture with a note written on a Post-it. Zimmer rubbed his fingers together as he plopped onto the folding chair, glancing from the photo to Stone's fixed stare.

"I don't understand," Zimmer said.

"I called to talk to her about it but she changed the topic to life insurance. Life insurance, Tom. She wants me to sign these papers."

“But this?” Zimmer handed the picture back.

“It’s her decision, she says. Her choice.”

“How long was she?”

“Five months.”

“Why?”

“Sacrifice was all she would say. Sacrifice.” Stone tucked the photo into the pocket below his nametag and patted it like it was a child’s head.

“You want to ditch the mission?” Zimmer asked.

“No. Sitting here sulking isn’t going to help.”

“You ought to go home.”

“Yeah,” Stone said. “We all ought to go home.”

“Male entering,” Stone said, as he and Zimmer ducked under the entrance to Private Jenkins’ tent. Neither of them had ever ventured into what was called “The Red Light District.” Typically, Chaplain Zimmer stayed at the chapel, the command tent, or his personal tent and Stone didn’t want to fraternize.

“Jenkins,” Zimmer said, “front and center.”

Red hair cascaded down her shoulders as she skipped into view. Her physical training shirt was wet from sweat and covered her shorts.

“Tuck that in,” Scott said.

“Roger,” her voice was raspy like a man mimicking a woman.

“Can we talk?”

“Not with him,” she pointed at Zimmer.

“I’ll wait outside.” The chaplain clutched Stone’s shoulder and whispered, “You’ll be all right.”

“Come get your Bible when you want, Sir,” she said to the Chaplain. He poked his head back into the tent. “I got it all clean and purified for you.”

“Keep it,” he said, his bared teeth presented in response to her smile. Stone thought he also heard, “You need it more than me.” But he figured that Jenkins didn’t hear those last words as she smiled at him, lifting her gray shirt high above the waistline of her black shorts, and then tucked the gray edges into the black.

Stone wasn’t all right. Jenkins had the body of a dancer with strong legs, a petite torso, and a slender face fully framed by red hair. It was a wonder to Stone that she joined the Army rather than take up modeling or cheerleading for professional sports. Some had said she enlisted to escape abuse, others because she wouldn’t have to strip any more, but what Stone most believed was that she knew she’d be the center of attention.

“What’s the word, Sir?” She asked. “You and the preacher come here to save my soul?”

“I’m here because of the video.”

“You watched it?” Her eyebrows touched as she wrinkled her forehead. “You did. Now you’ll burn in Hell like the rest of us.”

“I’m not here to preach at you,” Stone said. “Just want to talk for a minute.”

“Come on in.” Her arms swung toward lacy curtains decorated with a sparkling sign, “Welcome to the Jungle.” “You like my video?”

“Everybody likes it.” He sat in a chair she had decorated with unicorn stickers and said, “That’s the problem.”

“It was.” She stopped and followed his gaze. His eyes were enraptured by a nearby picture of her in a bikini holding a toddler.

“Tabitha,” she said. “I left her with my folks. They can’t afford her.” She sat on her bunk in front of him, her hands gently rubbing her thighs as she spoke.

“Don’t you send money home?”

“Yeah,” she stuttered a bit, and he wondered if she was going to cry or was only pretending to. “Dad’s business tanked, he’s gone bankrupt, Mom’s got medical issues, and we ain’t got nobody else to help.”

“What’s that have to do with.”

“I need the money,” she said, moving to the edge of her bed and placing her bare foot on the leg of the unicorn chair.

“How do you get it from this?” Stone pointed at her laptop.

“Sympathy,” she said, touching her lips with her finger. He imagined he knew what that meant having heard her name whispered under hushed voices, and her image on the screens of laptops quickly shut as he approached.

“LT Stone,” a voice came from outside the tent.

“Yeah?” Stone jumped up.

“This is Specialist Scott. We got sixty minutes till start time. You told me to remind you.”

“Huah,” Stone said and then looked at her. “I’m not sure if you should still go with us.”

“I do something illegal?”

“Well, no, but it’s not the Army we want others to see.”

“I love seeing them kids, Sir.” She shot up and stood so close to Stone he could feel the heat of her breath. “Please, don’t screw me over.”

“If you come,” Stone considered the foolishness of bargaining even as he said, “you owe me a few minutes to talk about, well, sin.”

“Ain’t you a sinner?”

“Born and bred,” he said. “But after the mission, I want to talk about grace.”

“Later, then.” Her smile would forever remind him of loss.

SPC Scott waited by the Humvee with the rest of Stone’s battle rattle. Private Jenkins reported a few minutes later, stuffing her hair up into her helmet, and dragging her vest and weapon along behind her. Staff Sergeant Lloyd had assigned four soldiers to each of the six Humvees. The last one had room for two more passengers, the translator and the child from the orphanage. Scott was the LT’s driver; Jenkins sat directly behind Stone, with Private First Class Lawrence to her left behind Scott. Jenkins looked like she didn’t belong with her helmet pressing down on her hair, the lip of it nearly eclipsing her eyes, her vest almost engulfing her, and her M16/M203 grenade launcher dwarfing her as she held it at the ready.

The convoy to the orphanage was quiet with Iraqis waving salutes in the Soldiers’ direction, children running alongside as they passed by with windows zipped down and

arms waving in return. Musaf, the interpreter, and Jaleel, the orphan ride-along, joined the convoy as they headed away from the school the soldiers were rebuilding into the city to buy enough scholastic supplies for 150 kids.

Along the way, as they skirted past uniquely ornamented mosques, Pepsi signs written in English and Aramaic, a Catholic church without a highflying cross, and cars older than many of the Humvee's passengers, the soldiers talked while Stone listened. He smelled the sweet fragrance of Jenkins' shampoo as she pressed forward in her seat listening as if she was hearing her winning lottery numbers being announced on TV. He imagined feeling her warm breath on his neck. He wanted to remember it that way, anyhow.

Specialist Scott asked Jenkins and Lawrence if they knew why he went home only three weeks ago. They said, "No," so he proceeded to tell them his story:

"My wife, Becky, was sick and pregnant, so they sent me home back in April. We'd been here only about six weeks and I didn't want to leave, but she never complains, and well, she was crying all the time. This was right before I was assigned to the school repair duty, so I didn't really know you guys yet. When I got to the States—you know that Budweiser commercial where everyone's clapping as the Soldiers walk down the airport—that's what happened. I felt proud. Someone took my picture. Somebody bought me lunch and I missed my ride.

"Becky was expecting me home by noon, only I missed the rear detachment's van. They were there at eleven hundred. I was eating and lost track of time, so they left, figuring I had missed the flight or something. It was weird being in that airport, being

home again and yet not really 'home.' I was so excited I didn't think to call anyone. I just found a cab and headed home.

“Don't show up empty handed,' I thought. So, I asked the driver to stop at a Wal-Mart and shopped for my wife and for my future newborns. I figured I had all the time in the world, only I didn't know what Becky was going through when she called Rear D and they told her I wasn't on the flight. I imagine she panicked and that was what started her hyperventilating. She'd been doing it for years whenever she got upset, only now it was worse with her being pregnant and all. She couldn't muster enough voice to call anyone and instead jumped in our car and headed for the hospital.

“It's ironic that the entire time she's speeding down the road like a maniac headed for the hospital, I was at Wal-Mart buying her roses, a card, some chocolates, and a silk nightie. She was hit head-on by a semi about the same time I finally thought to call Rear D. When I got to the hospital, it was bad. She wasn't moving, but she was breathing. Her eyes were shut and blackening, her legs broken, and her heart was beating out of control. They told me I got there just in time to make a decision. The twins wouldn't live if they didn't get them, but if they went in, she might not survive the surgery.

“I just looked at her face and I knew the right answer. Her choice became mine. The kids are with my Mom now. I had to come back, to tell you guys about what happened to me. You see it was then, when I made that decision, that I finally understood the meaning of sacrifice; the meaning of love.”

Stone had paid attention though the conversation wasn't for him. He listened to Jenkins sniff, wanting to turn to see if she would wipe her eyes, but unwilling to be so



intrusive. Instead, he stared out the window at the expressionless faces and listened to her tell Scott, “Later,” when he asked if she knew what love and sacrifice meant.

As SPC Scott finished his story, Stone ordered him to stop on the side of the road, near the shops but away from the marketplace on the south side. The other Humvees pulled in behind while the Soldiers filed out and prepared for their mission.

Stone stopped Specialist Scott before he got out and said, “Sorry about your loss.”

“You ever loose anything precious to you, Sir?” He asked.

“No,” Stone said, though he continued to carry the picture in his pocket. “Why?”

“It feels better to share pain,” Scott said. He walked around to the Lieutenant’s side of the Humvee and then said, “Sir, I still have faith in God and in what we are doing. I have hope every day knowing that one day, I will see my wife again for all eternity. That’s what keeps me going. Knowing that in the end, we will all hear the applause of angels.”

Jenkins and Scott volunteered to remain behind to guard the Humvees while the rest of them headed into the markets. Stone realized later it was a mistake to bring Jenkins and then worse, to leave her with the vehicles. It was a lesson he’d never forget; guilt he’d forever carry.

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” The minister’s monotone voice was contrasted by the soft sobs of a young girl in the arms of her grandmother. The sun was descending into the west; its glare behind the pastor

shadowing his stern chin robotically moving to the beat of an inaudible drum. His didactic sermon was received by soft sobs and shuffling shoes from less than a dozen family members, friends and soldiers. LT Stone's green uniform was stiff against his chest, his tie too tight, and his beret unable to block the glaring sun.

“Would anyone like to share a few words?” The minister asked. Stone knew he had to speak, to tell the story, to tell the truth; but he would wait if another would speak first. The family—the parents and the brother—sat in the only chairs with their chins resting on their chests, tissues simultaneously raised to their noses, while the few friends spun their heads, looking at one another with forced frowns and hands that seemed bound inside their pants' pockets. The soldiers stood straight, their rifles shouldered, while Stone, the lone officer, stared the minister in the face until he felt the soft hand of a child slide into his grasp.

“If there is no one, then I would ask you to bow your heads in prayer,” the minister said.

The little girl touched his pant leg like she was feeling a familiar fabric and smelling a scent she loved. Her red hair bounced on her shoulders as she lifted her arms up at him and shouted, “Mommy.”

Stone bent to a knee, knowing the eyes of the crowd were now upon him, and lifted the child to his chest, her face so close he could smell the peanut butter on her breath. The prayer stopped at “in Heaven;” there was silence, and all eyes focused on him. They wanted to know what happened. He could see it in their stares, in the slight

nodding of their heads, and in their applause as one by one, beginning with the grandmother, they beckoned him forward with a clapping crescendo.

“Private Jenkins was a soldier,” Stone said. “She did her duty. She died for her country.” He wanted to tell them her story, but the sequences seemed disjointed; the memories mixing with imagination. Her life seemed to intertwine with his own; this funeral with the memorial service only a few days before in a country so far away. So he remained silent with the child in his arms as the minister finished his prayer. But he knew the story.

“Come home,” Tabitha said as LT Stone attempted to return the girl to her grandmother.

“Yes, come tell us about Brianna, please,” Mrs. Jenkins said.

Stone checked his watch, tapped his hand against his coat pocket and said, “I got a plane to catch.”

“She never told us much. Just that she loved us.”

“She had pictures of you all over her personal area,” Stone said.

“Lord, she never said much,” the grandmother said.

“Come.” The girl tugged on Stone’s hand with both of hers. He followed the family to their car and then followed them in his rental to their place, almost without thinking, never once considering the time he’d lose.

They offered him the couch and he sank into its leather embrace. Tabitha went to her room for a nap following a pat on her head from LT Stone. With a cup of coffee in

hand, and the attentive ear of Jenkins' parents and a brother she never mentioned, LT Stone told them what seemed to him the truth; the story he came home to tell.

“You know the story of Abraham and Isaac? How God told Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice, to test the patriarch's faith? Well I imagine Abraham must've felt mighty confused by all this. Why would he offer up the gift that was promised him? Would God raise Isaac from the dead? All we know is that Abraham marched his son up that hill, bound him up with rope so he wouldn't get away, or so the father wouldn't see the boy as his son, then raised the knife to heaven and prepared to strike at the one he most loved. We know the strike never came: but what if it did? Would Abraham feel the guilt of murder or the pride of obedience?”

The family shrugged. Mr. Jenkins began to speak but held it. LT Stone pointed with his finger at a picture of Private Dancer in her bikini holding Tabitha in her arms and continued:

“You know the Muslims believe Abraham's story just like we do? Only the son doesn't represent Christ and God doesn't bring Him back to life. I imagine a Muslim father strapping a vest to his son comprised of broken ceramic, marbles, rocks, and shards of glass all over wires bound around three pounds of C4 explosives. The father's mouth twists into a beaming smile while his son silently prays to Allah.

“‘You have made me proud,’ the father says and kisses his son's hairless cheeks. ‘You will make God proud, as well.’

“Once bound to his mission, the son advances towards his target. She is still a hundred meters away and yet he thinks he can smell her shampoo. With each trudging

step he stares intently at his target, remembering his training, remembering her image burned into his mind. She is the enemy and represents everything that is abhorrent to God. The children gathered around the beautiful American girl move away from her while women beckon with swift hands and men back the crowd away with arms flared to their sides. Their eyes are affixed to the martyr, the sacrifice offered for the glory of God.

“The son turns to face the soldier, her eyes scanning sporadically from the crowd to the unarmed man. In one hand she holds her rifle, but in the other is the tiny hand of a child. A little girl with green eyes and a loose fitting hijab, naively smiles up at the son, unaware of the danger, unresponsive to the silent prodding of the crowd. The son turns from the girl to the soldier, thinking to look the devil in the face before he sees the face of God.

“Her bright eyes strain to see beyond the man standing in front of her. Tufts of red hair protrude out from under her helmet like blood dripping down her face. Her trembling hand holds her rifle high as her other clings tightly to the child. The son looks into her eyes and he sees the reflection of himself, sweat running down his brow, his greasy hand shaking behind his back, and on his hairless face, a smile like he was staring into the face of an angel.

“‘Show me your hands,’ she says in a language he can barely understand. He can’t stop smiling, feeling a sense of joy like he’s about to change. He harmlessly drops the detonator, holds his palms open before her eyes, and backs away one step.

“Only the father is watching from the window. He presses the call button on the cell phone and his son, your daughter, and the helpless child disappear into eternity. The crowd applauds; the father praises God for the death of a sinner and the glory belonging to his only son.”

The parents stirred, the mother cried and Mr. Jenkins said, “Enough.” LT Stone left the steaming cup on a stand by the couch and returned to his rental car, his hand lightly tapping the picture he still carried in the pocket below his name. He didn’t even look at his watch, didn’t worry about calling home, knowing that there would always be time.

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## VITA

Michael (Mike) Warren is a Soldier in the United States Army with over 15 years of active military service including three years of ROTC at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee. After completing Basic Training at Fort Benning, Georgia, Mike was assigned to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 187<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) for the majority of his enlisted tenure. After a year in Korea and a second tour with the 101<sup>st</sup>, Mike received a Green to Gold scholarship and finished ROTC in 2001. Again, he received orders to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) and deployed with them to Iraq in March 2003.

In 2006, Mike was selected to serve as an Academic Instructor in English at the United States Military Academy and was subsequently accepted into the University of Tennessee's Masters of Art's program. Upon graduation in 2008, Mike will report to West Point where he will serve three years as an instructor and hopes to one day return as a permanent professor.

Mike has a wonderful wife, Leah, three beautiful girls: Jordan (11), Rachel (8), and Abigail (4), and two dogs: Spencer (Boxer) and Izzy (Chihuahua). Beyond teaching writing, Mike is interested in the study of the Bible and helping other Christians to do the same.