

Introduction: Non-Fiction



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In Tim O'Brien's fantastical story *Going After Cacciato*, an infantry platoon in Vietnam chases down Private Cacciato, who has decided to quit the war and walk to France. How could they make sense of that? In considering Cacciato's decision, they would each have to look at their own experiences in the war. "The trick, of course, was to think it through carefully. That was Doc's advice—look for motives, search for the place where fact ended and imagination took over. Ask the important questions," writes O'Brien, himself a combat veteran. "It was an idea. It was a working out of possibilities. It wasn't dreaming and it wasn't pretending. It wasn't crazy."

Of course, it may seem strange to reference a fictional work to introduce a collection of non-fiction writing. But in these pieces I see a similar working through of possibilities as these veterans and others in their support networks grapple with the effects of military service, both subtle and profound.

These stories are built on fact and experience, using elements from fiction writing like dialogue and scene building to tell true stories. But even in non-fiction, writers make choices and interpretations. We choose elements to highlight, and downplay—and sometimes our subconscious minds do this for us, especially in stressful moments like

combat, when senses can be so heightened by circumstance, and memory so selective. Writing is often a sifting through of experiences, as we search for patterns, for explanations, even for guidance. Sometimes just the act of putting words onto paper can bring relief or perspective, helping us make sense of events or share them with others.

These are stories of combat, the home front, and all of the small spaces in between—from a harrowing glider flight into Germany, to a young veteran waiting in the fluorescent glow of a VA hospital for his first appointment. We are taken on a jeep drive down a frozen mountain road in South Korea, and a routine patrol through Baghdad that turns surreal at the site of a suicide bombing. A Marine captures his war in photographs, distilled into snapshots in the mind, each with a caption of emotion, and another Marine stands at her kitchen table, loading a pistol and looking back on the traumas of her life as she considers whether to shoot the man who has been stalking and harassing her.

Flying into the mountains of Afghanistan for a year-long deployment, Joseph Badgett thinks, “This will be the realest damn thing I ever do.” Skimming through Facebook several months into his tour, he has a stark realization: “My friends weren't changing. I was,” he writes in “Twenty-Three and Angry.” “Once you go to war, you never come back.”

The stories compiled here also remind us that the veteran community is broad and that military service impacts far more people than just those wearing the uniform. When we went to war, others came with us, in heart and spirit. Kathy Brady captures this in a

poignant and moving story about her son's combat tour, and his return home. "Life is not okay. I am not okay," she writes in "They Also Serve," echoing Joseph Badgett's sentiment. "In many ways, Bud is home from Afghanistan, but I am not. I went to war and I didn't come back. How crazy that must sound. I never left U.S. soil. At least my body didn't. But I can tell you that an integral part of me went to Afghanistan, a land I did not see, smell, or hear. My only son went to war and I couldn't let him go by himself. So I packaged up his mother and sent her in care packages."

That is a beautiful and powerful image. And there are so many more in these stories that it seems unfair to highlight just one. Consider that a prelude to everything you will read in the following pages.