

RETIRE  
*the*  
COLORS



RETIRE  
*the*  
COLORS

VETERANS & CIVILIANS  
ON IRAQ & AFGHANISTAN



*Edited by*  
DARIO DiBATTISTA



HUDSON WHITMAN

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For our fallen brothers and sisters.  
For the 22 a day.  
For the returned who are still returning.  
For those who love and care for us, even though  
we've all been changed in some ways.

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“They spent millions training me  
but they never taught me to come home.”  
—Army Sergeant Caleb Joseph  
from *Demon Camp* by Jen Percy



# Acknowledgments



EVERY AUTHOR IN THIS COLLECTION has written something truthful. Something truthful and painful about their own lives. Through their writing, we can communally seek to find intellectual clarity to emotional crisis in regards to our nation's longest wars. They are bearing the report of the consequences of war. They are connecting the 99% of America who didn't serve, with the experiences of those who did. All the credit, in that sense, I believe goes to them. Thank you, all. And well done. I am forever impacted by your powerful stories, and humbled by your confidence in allowing me to bring them together in this collection.

Thank you Susan Petrie, Excelsior College, and Hudson Whitman Press for your leadership and guidance (and patience!) in helping me in my role with the publication of this book. This anthology is better because of your dedication and oversight.

Special shoutout to Katrina Martin Meistering for her inspiration.



# Introduction



Ron Capps

IT'S NOW BEEN FIFTEEN YEARS since the September II attacks brought us war. In a couple of years, children born on the day of the attack will be able to join the military. We will probably still have troops fighting in Afghanistan and more scattered around the Middle East dealing with the aftermath of the Iraq War. That should scare the hell out of you. It scares the hell out of me and everyone else I know who served in those wars—or any other war for that matter. We're in a period of time that feels like perpetual war, of relentless violence, of continuous deployments. Every deployment changes us. Every deployment sends new men and women into the maw of unspeakable violence and then brings them home again—well, most of them.

And once they're home? Among the most challenging of the innumerable tasks returnees and their families face is reintegration. Returning veterans have to reintegrate into their families, into the community, and into a world that should seem very familiar but isn't. Their world has changed because they have

changed. We here at home have to reintegrate them with these changes into our lives once again; but we've changed, too. This return, this reintegration is what the writers whose works appear in this book are writing about.

There is no shortage of war stories out there. From the intimate violence of *The Iliad* to the comic bureaucracy of *Catch-22* and on to the several stories no doubt published on the web the same morning you picked up this book, men and women have been writing about war forever.

There is a smaller canon of writing about the return and reintegration of soldiers. *The Odyssey*, of course, is the seminal return story. In the story, it took Odysseus and his men ten years to reach home from Troy. Or, perhaps, Homer's tale is a metaphor for the men needing ten years to reintegrate after ten years at war with Troy. Erich Maria Remarque, who wrote *All Quiet on the Western Front*, also wrote a number of novels about life in post-WWI Europe including *The Road Back* and *Arch of Triumph*. Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* and James Jones's incomplete *Whistle* picked up in post-WWII America where Remarque left off. One could argue that the long-running cable TV hit *Mad Men* was a return-from-war story, since Don Draper was actually Dick Whitman, a survivor of the war in Korea just trying to move on.

It is the moving on that editor Dario DiBattista focuses on here. The stories in this fine collection are stories of aftermath and aftershock. They are stories of coming home and finding home unrecognizable, of longing to be back in the war, back in a place you understood and that made sense much more than this unnatural place you once called home. They are stories of

not understanding, of absent friends, of loss and adjustment—or not.

These are vital stories written by soldiers and civilians, by men and women, by parents and children, by health care providers and health care recipients, by warriors and pacifists. In short, they are written by people like you, like me, like us. And they should be read by as many people as we can get them in front of.

Why, you ask? These types of stories have been around since we had only the oral tradition. But these are stories about us, not about the Greeks thirty centuries ago, or about the Germans 100 years ago, or even about Americans in 1953 or 1964. These are stories about the world we live in today: a world that's hyperlinked and Uber-transported, one in which humans are digitally connected on every possible platform but sequestered and isolated in every way that counts. Our world is different. We are different. War is different.

The war that Odysseus came home from was fought at arm's length: Men fought and killed using swords the length of a man's arm. In time we created catapults and trebuchets, then cannons and rifles, then machine guns and gas, aerial bombing and submarines, cyber-war, UAVs and MIRVs. At each progression we further and further distance more and more of our warriors from the act of killing, from the blood and the viscera. Now a warfighter can sit in an air-conditioned office building in the Nevada desert and have Hellfire delivered from a drone to destroy a house and the family inside it in the middle of the long Afghan night. We have strategists in Stuttgart planning a counter-narrative and enacting a social media campaign to defeat the medieval Islamic State's brutal rampage in Homs. This is what war becomes for some in the twenty-first century, for some but not for all. No.

## INTRODUCTION

We still have fighters on the ground in the cold and the heat, in the dust and the mud, away from home, away from their families and away from the things that shaped their beliefs and gave them reason to go around the world to kill or be killed in the most intimate ways: With the gun, with the knife, with the hands.

Then they come home. They go grocery shopping and are overwhelmed by the choices in the pickle aisle. They drive the kids to school or football on Friday night and are still scanning the roadside for anything that might be hiding a simplified improvised multiple explosively formed penetrator. They stand next to you on the factory line or sit in the next cubicle at work trying to sort out just what the hell happened back there and why everything here feels so different.

And unless you're a part of this deploy and return and re-deploy cycle, you might have no idea what it's like to be in some far-away village on Monday killing Taliban and then back on the block with your spouse and kids at the Village Inn eating pizza on Friday. You might have no idea what it feels like to look across that table and only kinda sorta recognize the person you're married to because he or she has just come back from an eighteen-month pump that was only supposed to last twelve but then stoploss happened because the president came up with something called the Surge. You might have no idea what it feels like to believe you're not doing your part because you're only a two pump chump and just last week a soldier was killed on his fourteenth deployment.

So that's why these stories need to be read. In point of fact, that's why these stories must be read. We, each of us, have responsibilities. Those who survived the war have a responsibility to report what happened on the ground to the society that sent

them to war—what was done in their name. The senders have a responsibility to hear these things if only as a way of communalizing the experience and taking on some of the burden of the experience so that the survivors can move on.

Oh, and then there's the other thing. There's also just some damn good writing here. So dig in.

*Ron Capps is the founder of the Veterans Writing Project. His memoir Seriously Not All Right: Five Wars in Ten Years was published by Schaffner Press in 2014. Ron served in the Army and Army Reserve from 1983 to 2008.*



I.

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War,  
Up Close



# NUMB3RS



Brooke King

*Brooke served in the U.S. Army, deploying to Iraq in 2006 as a wheel vehicle mechanic, machine gunner, and recovery specialist.*

HOW MANY *have you killed?*

The old man asked me when I told him I was a 50 cal gunner. The other questions he asked while we sat in the doctor's waiting room no longer mattered, my answers forgotten. All the old man saw now was a killing machine that had a number, this quantifiable proof that I, unlike the weapon I used, was capable of killing. Giving him the number would confirm it. And yet, to me, saying it aloud was an admission of guilt, a point of reference that someone could put their finger on and say, "See here, there is your proof. She's not capable of compassion." To me, the number was something that could be held against me or dangled over my head; if I ever did anything questionable later in life, that number could be pointed to and used as evidence of my inability to care.

I've told people the number before—mostly people who were curious as to how a female soldier could possibly ever kill anyone in combat. Yet I had, and all they saw after I admitted it was the number, not the invisible number of times I did not pull

the trigger, the number of times I spared a life rather than took it. No one seems to care about that number, and so, it is never known. But it holds just as much weight, so much that I made sure I would never forget it.

I tattooed the proof on my back: a large cross with a skull and crossbones screaming, a bullet hole in the center of the forehead. I carry it there as if to say, “Here is your proof. Here is what you need to see. This is the measure of who I am.” It takes a lot of courage to pull the trigger, to take a life, but it takes even more courage to find a reason not to, to give life in a place where only death is offered day in and day out. But there are other numbers as well. That’s all war is—a quantity that is added to or subtracted from.

Every day I was deployed in Iraq, I counted, measured, kept tallies and tabs on all sorts of things:

The body bags in the back of the truck after my first mission—3

The seconds that pass just before an incoming mortar round hits—4.1

How many in the unit have been killed in action—5

The amount of times I tried calling home, but couldn’t—9

The months I waited until I saw my family again—10

The total number of gauze pads that fit into a grenade pouch—17

The pages I left until I finished *The Sun Also Rises*—22

The number of birthdays and holidays I missed—29

The number of bullets in an M4 magazine—30

The number of hot meals I ate at the DFAC—46

How many times I woke up from a nightmare screaming—too many

The number of tears shed over body bags filled with soldiers I didn't know—not enough

Yet none of these numbers made a difference to people at home, and the old man sitting next to me in the doctor's waiting room couldn't have cared less about any of them except the one—the number of people I'd killed.

For me, this wasn't the measure of glory or honor, but rather that of a job done too well. So, I give out the only number that gives weight or meaning to my time at war—the number of lives I chose to spare, and it is this number I gave the old man when he asked me how many people I've killed: 250. I told him 250. He replied that the number seemed a bit high; did I really kill that many? I told him the number represented not how many I killed but how many I chose to let live. He looked at me strangely. Ashamed of the lowball number, I looked down at my black Converse sneakers as I told the old man that the number was not nearly high enough. He lifted an eyebrow at me and then nodded his head. The nurse called his name. He stood up and put his hand on my shoulder, which startled me. I flinched a little. The

old man stepped back, thanked me for my service, and told me to take care. I looked at him, bewildered. No smile. No handshake. I told him that I was just doing what they told me to do. He nodded his head and thanked me anyway before disappearing with the nurse through the double doors.

Years later, I was driving my kids to school when I realized there was something in the road. It had been eight years since Iraq, but still my training, instinct, muscle memory, or maybe just my PTSD made me stop ten feet short of the object. It moved. I clenched the steering wheel. Was it worth getting out of the Jeep to investigate? I contemplated turning around until one of my boys in the backseat pointed to the object.

*Look mom, a duck.*

Duck.

Duck.

I thought the word over and over again until it registered that the duck was the quacking, flapping kind.

*Is he hurt?*

I looked closer, leaning over the steering wheel. There was blood on the pavement. The duck was certainly almost dead, left in the middle of the road to die. I couldn't leave it there, and the voices in the backseat insisted that I help. I put on my flashers, got out of the Jeep, and walked toward it. It tried to get up, making me jump. Startled by its attempt to get away, I moved back, not wanting to injure it further, but I couldn't assess its injuries from far away. I slowly inched closer. By this time, two cars were behind my Jeep, all interested as to why my vehicle was stopped in the middle of the road. A man walking his dog came up on the sidewalk.

*Is it hurt?*

I gave him my patented “you’re an idiot” face and told him, *No, it’s just sleeping.*

The man muttered “*Fuck you*” under his breath and handed me a section of his newspaper.

I looked down at the newspaper section, an advertisement from Ashley Furniture about a china cabinet and dinner set marked down to a ridiculously low price for the Presidents’ Day sale. “Sunday, Sunday, Sunday” scrolled across the top of the advert in bold, canary yellow lettering.

*To pick it up with,* the man said.

*Why me? Because I stopped to see if it was alright or because my Jeep had an Iraq Vet sticker plastered on the back window?*

*Both,* he said as he handed me an extra leaflet. *Just in case,* he said as he walked away, his dog in tow.

No chivalry these days, I guess.

The lady whose car was stopped directly behind my Jeep ran over and asked me if the duck was okay, if there was a vet nearby. I almost gave her my “you’re an idiot” face, but then it occurred to me that New Tampa Animal Hospital was on the corner right before the school. I replied that there was a vet down the street and asked her to call while I tended to the duck. She called. I stared at the duck like my father used to stare at the kitchen sink when it broke, trying to figure out the best way to fix it without fucking it up even more. I had been a combat lifesaver in Iraq, knew how to stitch a wound, stop bleeding, and check for fractures on a human. I guessed that a duck would be no different. I bent down to look at it. I felt its ribcage. Nothing but mush. I shook my head and looked back at the lady calling on the phone.

*Don’t bother.*

She hung up and asked what I was going to do.

*The only right thing to do: Kill it.*

The lady looked back at her car. Her son was in the back seat playing on some gaming device. I looked over at the Jeep. The back window was rolled down, both boys with their heads out, looking at me.

*Do me a favor, I said, nodding in the direction of the Jeep. Keep them occupied.*

She nodded at me, walked over to the Jeep on the other side and asked the boys to roll up the window and come talk to her.

With the boys occupied, I used the newspaper to pick the duck up. Walking over to the side of the road near a hedge, I set it down. Its mouth was open, panting, its tongue sticking out. I looked into its eyes. The brown surrounding its irises faded as its pupils got bigger. I sighed. Now or never. I put my hands around its neck. I hesitated. I tightened my grip around its neck. I froze.

The only other time I had frozen like that was a few months after I got to Iraq. After a recovery run, on our way back to base with a five-ton on the HET semi-truck trailer, the fire we put out in the bed of the five-ton broke out again. We pulled over on the side of Route Irish five minutes from Camp Liberty, got out, climbed on top of the trailer. Sergeant Lippert handed water bottles up to me as I stood on one of the five-ton truck tires and started dousing the flames. I was halfway into the third bottle of water when a bullet whizzed past my head and ricocheted off the quarter panel next to me. Sergeant Lippert hit the dirt and scooted underneath the HET trailer. I jumped off the five-ton and onto the trailer bed, scooting underneath the axle and behind the tire I had just been standing on. In a low prone position, I waited. With no weapon and the back-up security a half-mile down the road, Sergeant Lippert told me to get off the trailer and get to