

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

**EMBEDDED JOURNALISTS ARE UNIQUELY QUALIFIED TO CONVEY THE  
EXPERIENCE OF A COMBAT SOLDIER**

by

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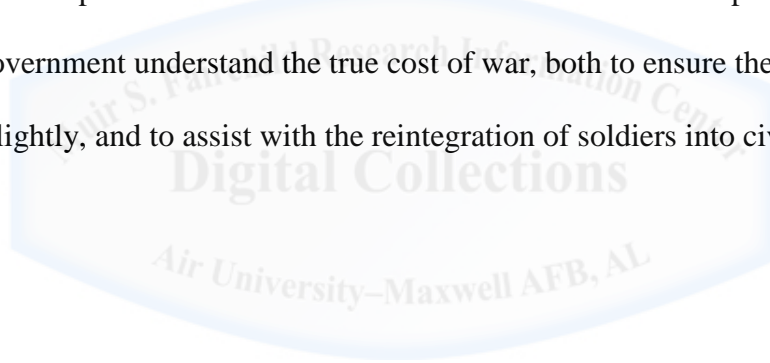
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## **Abstract**

Embedded journalists play a critical role in relaying the experience of a combat soldier to the American public. Most soldiers do not have the maturity or the writing proficiency to tell their own stories. Embedded journalists have both the maturity and the training to tell these stories. This paper reviews war narratives written by a soldier and an embedded journalist and finds that embedded journalists have similar experiences in combat to soldiers, and these experiences lead to comparable reactions to combat. Additionally, an interview with Sebastian Junger provides insight into his experience as an embedded journalist and his perspective on the need for the American public to understand the American soldier. It is important that both the public and the government understand the true cost of war, both to ensure the decision to go to war is not made lightly, and to assist with the reintegration of soldiers into civilian society post-conflict.



## **1. Introduction**

### **General Statement**

Journalists embedded with combat units provide a window into the experience of a combat soldier. Critics claim that the Department of Defense excessively censors embedded journalists. Conversely, others assert that the close relationships embedded journalists form with the soldiers they cover prevent embedded journalists from maintaining an objective perspective. However, it is important to consider the value of an embedded journalist outside of the conventional role of reporter of facts and generator of objective conclusions. Embedded journalists play another critical role for the American public; they are a means to convey the experience of the combat soldier to those who have never served in combat.

### **Statement of Problem**

The majority of combat soldiers in the United States are relatively young; many are in their late teens or early twenties. Youth plays a factor in the ability to understand the complex emotions that these soldiers encounter in combat. Conflicting emotions, varying from fear of death at one extreme to elation at surviving a firefight at the other, are not only confusing but can also be contrary to conventional expectations. A soldier may feel joy at killing an enemy because he feels that it is one less enemy who will try to kill him, but that feeling of happiness at killing is normally considered taboo in most societies. Furthermore, while many soldiers do have a high-school education and some even have college degrees, few have training as writers and are not capable of coherently explaining their wartime experience to the American public. Both youth and lack of writing expertise are barriers to the American public's understanding of the experience of a combat soldier.

Embedded journalists provide a unique opportunity to understand the experience of combat soldiers. The journalists place themselves in the same combat situations as soldiers. The journalists' do not simply observe the soldiers in action, but also put their lives at risk due to their proximity to combat. Furthermore, embedded journalists are trained to translate experiences into the written word, so are better equipped to convey those combat experiences to the American public. The shared experiences of embedded journalists and soldiers result in both having many of the same feelings and reactions to combat. In turn, these experiences allow embedded journalists to provide a window into what it means to be an American combat soldier and give the American public a better understanding of the costs of war.

### **Statement of Purpose**

This paper addresses the similar experience in combat of both soldiers and embedded journalists. It will analyze two books, one written by a former combat soldier and one written by an embedded journalist, to comprehend the authors' wartime experiences and reactions. Brian Turner, author of *Here, Bullet*, was an Army infantry soldier during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He received his Masters of Fine Arts in poetry from the University of Oregon prior to enlisting in the United States Army, and wrote most of the poems in *Here, Bullet* while deployed. Many of these poems have a narrative quality. While not alone among soldiers writing war narratives, Turner was uniquely qualified to convey his experiences based on his academic background.

Additionally, this paper analyzes a book written by an embedded journalist. *War*, by Sebastian Junger, covers his time embedded with an Army unit in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom. Over a one-year period, he and photojournalist Tim Hetherington visited the same unit five times, up to one month at a time, at a small outpost in Afghanistan. The outpost

was named Restrepo in honor of the unit's medic, who was killed during their deployment. Junger wrote *War* following the unit's deployment.

A significant portion of this paper will consist of a telephone interview between the author and Sebastian Junger discussing his experiences as an embedded reporter and the value that war narratives provide the American public.

During wartime, the Department of Defense attempts to keep the public updated on combat operations, but most citizens feel that it is necessary to have non-Department of Defense coverage as well. It is important to have journalists of all types interested in the status of wars and who will pass information and opinions on to the American public. When reporters embed with combat units, their focus is often on the state of the war, the progress of the war, and who is winning the war. However, it is also important to have journalists who focus not on the action, but on the soldiers themselves. In the last decade, less than one percent of the population served in the military, and this number is expected to continue to decline in coming years.<sup>1</sup> In the future, the lack of military experience, and the probability of even knowing a member of the military will decrease for the American population. There is a growing civil-military gap, and if left alone, this gap between military members and civilian society will increase as the two groups have little experience with the other and little understanding of the other.

Journalists who approach war on non-political terms and attempt to understand soldiers and their experiences in war play a critical role in ensuring that Americans recognize the impact of war on individuals. Moreover, embedded journalists provide a means to understand the burden that society, as a whole, is placing on a few when our country goes to war. Reintegration into civilian society can be difficult for returning veterans, and a better appreciation of the combat experience will help both military and civilian agencies assist with the transition.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

This paper assumes that the limited selection of war narratives reviewed and the two selected for use in this research paper are representative of the many war narratives that have been published. Similarly, this paper is limited by the small selection covered in this paper. Further, the limited time available to conduct research and write this paper restricted the breadth and depth of this paper. The conclusions drawn are limited by the author's interpretations of the material.

### **1. Embedded Journalists React To Combat Like Soldiers**

Journalists who embed with combat units over an extended period of time are able to achieve a unique perspective on combat and on soldiers, and convey that understanding to the American public. While journalists are non-combatants, they do experience combat in war. The enemy targets the military bases that journalists live on. Embedded journalists go on patrols that come under fire or are ambushed. Insurgents target vehicles that embedded journalists ride in with improvised explosive devices. Rather than being outside observers, embedded journalists experience the same acts of war as soldiers. Sebastian Junger, while embedded with Bravo troop, describes his reaction in a firefight: "I'm more or less frozen behind a Hesco watching little gouts of dirt erupt from the ground in front of me. It takes me a moment to understand that those are incoming rounds and that I probably don't want to go there."<sup>2</sup> At another time, while traveling in a convoy to the outpost, an improvised explosive device hits Junger's Humvee. The man who tried to kill the Americans set the bomb off too early, and it exploded under the engine block instead of the cab. That mistake damaged the vehicle and did not physically harm the occupants, but significantly affected Junger's thoughts on war and made him truly feel the



personal impact of combat.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, embedded journalists' close proximity to combat soldiers puts them at risk of also being killed in combat.

By closely reading the accounts of war written by both soldiers and embedded journalists, it is possible to see how similar their reactions are to the inimitable experience of combat. Those soldiers who do write about their experiences use the same language as journalists to describe their experience. Additionally, soldiers and embedded journalists frequently address the same two subjects: fear and trust. Both authors in this study address fear, particularly the fear born of uncertainty. Additionally, both discuss the trust relationships that develop of necessity in life or death situations.

## **Fear**

One of the major emotions discussed directly and indirectly by soldiers in their writings on war is fear. This is not simply the fear of being hurt or killed; this fear is often caused by uncertainty. Uncertainty in war originates from the understanding that violence can erupt at any moment, particularly out of an otherwise mundane moment. Situations that initially appear to be straightforward can change drastically when the enemy reacts in an unexpected way, and the inability to accurately predict dangerous situations can lead to fear. Living with fear over time impacts soldiers, and can affect their ability to reintegrate into civilian society following conflict. Understanding the fear that soldiers feel in combat may lead to better assistance for returning veterans.

Brian Turner articulates his understanding of this kind of fear that derives from the horror that can arise out of any situation. In the poem "Two Stories Down," he describes an American soldier coming to the aid of an Iraqi who has just jumped from a balcony. The soldier does not consider the man a threat. The soldier attempts to provide aid to the Iraqi, who "steal[s] the knife

from its sheath, the two of them struggl[e] for the blade until the bloodgroove sunk deep and Hasan whisper[s] to him, Shukran, sadiq, shukran; Thank you, friend, thank you.”<sup>4</sup> This poem epitomizes the fear that soldiers live with when interacting with the local population. Even trying to do the right thing and help what may appear to be in an injured person can result in a soldier’s death.

In unconventional or irregular warfare, the difficulty in determining who the enemy actually is can be another source of fear. In Iraq, questionable alliances, a non-uniformed enemy, and an unhappy civilian population made it difficult for Americans to determine whom to trust. Another Turner poem, “What Every Soldier Should Know,” describes this fear of the unknown. The poem starts out with a caution: “If you hear gunfire on a Thursday afternoon, it could be for a wedding, or it could be for you.”<sup>5</sup> It continues, “There are men who earn eighty dollars to attack you, five thousand to kill. Small children who will play with you, old men with their talk, women who offer chai—and any one of them may dance over your body tomorrow.”<sup>6</sup> Turner is describing the disturbing knowledge that in certain types of warfare, the enemy is not clearly defined. Even civilians who act kindly toward the soldiers may be capable of also killing them.

Turner further articulates this unsettling notion of fear caused by uncertainty in the poem “Hwy 1”:

Cranes roost atop power lines in enormous  
bowl-shaped nests of sticks and twigs,  
and when a sergeant shoots one from the highway  
it pauses, as if amazed that death has found it  
here, at 7 A.M. on such a beautiful morning,

before pitching over the side and falling  
in a slow unraveling of feathers and wings.<sup>7</sup>

In this poem, the crane becomes a metaphor for a combat soldier. He is addressing the wartime fact that death can occur at any time and from any direction. Often, particularly when targeted by a sniper or hit by an improvised explosive device, a soldier would have no warning of his impending death. War narratives consistently describe the comprehension that death may transpire at any moment and often during mundane activities.

Reading war narratives written by soldiers can assist the civilian population in understanding the combat experience. Understanding that experience, including the fear that soldiers feel while still performing their duties, may allow the general population and helping agencies to better prepare to assist soldiers with reintegration.

Journalists embedded with combat units face fear also because they are in the same uncertain situations as the soldiers. Junger says, “Fear has a whole taxonomy—anxiety, dread, panic, foreboding—and you could be braced for one form and completely fall apart facing another.”<sup>8</sup> This is a well-articulated description of the fear that those in combat situations may face. There may be fear prior to an operation, during an operation, or fear of what may be seen as otherwise an ordinary situation. While not considered combatants, embedded journalists can be killed just as the soldiers are. Journalists are not immune to the fear caused by uncertainty and share similar reactions to fear as soldiers.

Like Turner, Sebastian Junger discusses the knowledge that one could die at any minute. He writes, “Pretty much everyone who died in this valley died when they least expected it, usually shot in the head or throat, so it could make the men weird about the most mundane tasks. Only once did I know beforehand that we were going to get hit, otherwise I was: about to take a

sip of coffee, talking to someone, walking about a hundred meters outside the wire, and taking a nap.”<sup>9</sup> Junger’s awareness of what he was doing when previous firefights broke out highlights his understanding that at any moment they could be attacked, and at any moment he could be killed. Later, Junger discusses the actions he took to deal with his fear of the unknown. After realizing that if he were to die, it would most likely take place at Restrepo, he spent a lot of time thinking about the attack that would kill him.<sup>10</sup> He considered the various ways the enemy could attack the outpost. He thought about the most opportune time for the enemy to attack and which direction would give the enemy the most advantage. He would put his vest and helmet by his feet at night and keep his boots loosely tied so that he could put them on fast but not trip over the laces, planning to be out the door quickly in case of attack.<sup>11</sup> Junger was fully aware that, just as for soldiers, death could come for him at any moment from anywhere, and he learned to expect and attempt to manage that fear.

Junger’s experience in Iraq demonstrates the long-term effects of protracted exposure to fear. Another common reaction to combat is nightmares, something both journalists and soldiers experienced. A lot of soldiers even took sleeping pills to keep from jerking awake at night due to imaginary gunfire.<sup>12</sup> Junger describes, “I had a lot of combat nightmares at Restrepo—I think everyone did—and they were invariably about being helpless: guns were jamming, the enemy was everywhere, and no one knew what was going in.”<sup>13</sup> Being a non-combatant did not give Junger any relief from the fear that came with being in a combat zone with frequent firefights. He understood that the same things that could kill the soldiers could also kill him.

## **Trust**

In addition to fear, the trust that develops between members of a combat unit is another subject that authors of war narratives frequently discuss. The complete reliance on other people

for personal survival is a situation that most people rarely face. Understanding that trust and attempting to meet the expectations of the other members of one's unit creates a feeling of belonging and necessity for the members of that unit. This bond with others is a feeling that is not normally achieved in civilian society, but is often an aspect of war that soldiers miss when returning to non-military life. It is easy to focus on the traumas of war, and forget that there can also be positive experiences in combat. In addition to fear, another common topic in war narratives is the trust relationships that develop between soldiers, and between embedded journalists and the soldiers they embed with.

The trust developed between the men in a unit is different from liking or being friends with another person. Turner describes a love/hate relationship with his supervisor in the Army; despite an emotional feeling of hate, he still loved his boss.<sup>14</sup> "I mean, if I got shot in some room I need to know that they'd bring me back out, and vice-versa."<sup>15</sup> One of Turner's poems, "Ferris Wheel," attempts to convey this committed relationship between men whose lives depend on each other:

The history books will get it wrong.  
There will be nothing written  
about the island ferris wheel  
frozen by rust like a broken clock, or  
about the pilot floating unconscious downriver, sparks  
fading above as his friend swam toward him  
instead of the shore, how both would drown  
in this cold unstoppable river.

Turner's description of the loyalty towards one's fellow soldier above personal safety is a relationship that most civilians have never experienced. Soldiers are keenly aware of their reliance on others for survival, and in turn feel that responsibility to protect their fellow soldiers.

The soldiers that Junger embedded with attempted to describe those relationships to him. Junger asked one soldier whether he would risk his life for other men in the platoon. The soldier replied, "I'd actually throw myself on the hand grenade for them." When asked why, he said, "Because I actually love my brothers. I mean, it's a brotherhood. Being able to save their life so they can live, I think is rewarding. Any of them would do it for me."<sup>16</sup> Combat soldiers have absolute confidence that every other soldier would put his own life on the line for any other soldier. The bond that soldiers develop with each other motivates them to do anything to protect each other, to the point of putting another's life before their own.

Despite being non-combatants in war, embedded journalists often develop similar trust relationships with the members of the unit that they spend the most time with. Many journalists travel with the same unit during their embed experience, and attempt to place themselves near those most trusted during patrols and firefights, fully reliant on them. Junger describes his first combat experience, and his difficulty in making himself video the event, which was the entire reason he was in the combat zone. He finds it easier to do if he is next to another soldier, and putting his faith in that soldier's judgment, follows his lead to determine when it is safe to stand up and when to take cover.<sup>17</sup> Survival in the combat zone requires the journalists to fully trust the soldiers they are embedded with.

In addition to trust in the soldiers they embed with, journalists understand their lives rely on the men around them and often feel compelled to hold up their end of the bargain. In *War*, Junger discusses his need to be as prepared for missions as the soldiers were, to ensure he was

not the one slowing the team down. Just as the team leaders held their men accountable for minor things that could become a bigger issue in combat, such as untied shoelaces or dehydration, Junger monitored himself to ensure he was not becoming a liability to the team. Although he was only an embedded reporter and not what an outsider would consider a true member of the group, his experience with the platoon led him to not only feel accepted by the soldiers, but compelled him to do his part as a member of the team to ensure their collective safety.

Journalists who embed with combat units are no longer simply observers. It is not only the soldiers who come under fire from the enemy; journalists are taking fire alongside them. While it is true that the soldiers may be in more danger because they are the ones who must put themselves in harm's way and fire back, journalists are just as vulnerable to snipers, to mortar attacks, to improvised explosive devices. Non-combatant status does not protect a journalist from risk to life or limb in combat. The exposure to danger that journalists experience is very similar to that of soldiers, and produces similar reactions.

These shared experiences and resulting similar reactions uniquely qualify embedded journalists to communicate the story of the combat soldier. While embedded journalists do not have the exact same experience and cannot speak for the soldiers, they are in a position to attempt to convey those experiences to the public. Embedded journalists are not asking soldiers to describe their experiences and then translate for public consumption. Embedded journalists are able to see first-hand the experience of the soldiers, experience combat themselves, monitor and relate their own experiences, and then interpret those reactions for the public.

A better understanding of the combat experience will assist the military and the public in reintegrating soldiers into civilian society. While many of the events in wartime are traumatic,

most do not realize there can also be positive outcomes from stressful and traumatic events. The development of mutually dependent trust relationships is one of these positive results of a wartime experience. Awareness of the depth of the bonds between those who experience combat may shed light on the difficulties that some veterans have in readjusting to civilian life following a combat tour.

## **2. Embedded Journalists Are Uniquely Qualified To Convey A Soldier's Experience**

An advantage of embedded journalists is that of experience, both in life and in writing skills. Embedded journalists are generally older than most of the soldiers in the units they are embedded with. The majority of combat soldiers on the front lines are young and many have little life experience outside of high school. The complexity of the situation that they encounter during combat can be confusing and hard to understand for a young person. While their peers are maturing as they start their first jobs, live alone for the first time, or go off to college, soldiers are in a position of trying to mature while also making decisions that can mean the difference between life and death for themselves, their units, or the enemy. Soldiers have to deal with life-altering events, including the effects of civilian casualties and the loss of close friends. Many of these soldiers have a difficult time understanding the complex emotions that combat stress can produce. In Afghanistan, Junger describes one soldier named O'Byrne who, "seemed to have a knack for putting words to the things that no one else really wanted to talk about. I came to think of O'Byrne as a stand-in for the entire platoon, a way to understand a group of men who I don't think entirely understood themselves." Out of the thirty soldiers in the unit, only one seemed to be consistently able to articulate what he was feeling.<sup>18</sup>

Embedded journalists, who are often older, may have dealt with some of these same emotions in the past, though on a far different scale. The journalist may have experienced the



feelings of homesickness and loneliness while far away from home, dealt with death in his or her personal life, and felt a sense of responsibility to provide for oneself. While these are minor examples of the emotional experiences a civilian would have, undergoing these traumas furthers the process of maturation. Having dealt with some of these emotions prior to entering the distressing combat environment, a mature journalist may be in a better position to put those emotions felt during combat into words. A soldier who is feeling those emotions for the first time will be challenged to process those emotions, and may not be in a position to try to describe those emotions to an outside audience.

The ability to not only understand emotions, but to convey those emotions in a manner that the public can understand is a skill that most people do not have. Some published authors do not have formal training in their craft, but many more do. A professional writer will be more effective in translating experiences into a format that an audience can relate to. Additionally, the military is notorious for using strange terms and acronyms, and makes assumptions that others will understand their unique lingo. Even the different branches of the military sometimes confuse each other with their service-specific terminology. In some respects, an embedded journalist is in the position of acting not only as translator of experiences, but also of putting those experiences into terms other civilians can understand and relate to.

This is not to say that combat soldiers are unable to understand their experiences or express themselves. On the contrary, many soldiers have come home from war and written narratives that conveyed their experience to the public. However, those soldiers that have done so are a minority of the soldiers that have fought in America's wars. Embedded journalists provide another venue through which the public can better understand the soldier's experience.

### 3. Interview

In an effort to better understand the experience of embedded journalists, and also to understand why the media feels it is important to write about war, Sebastian Junger agreed to be interviewed for this research paper. The following is an excerpt from a telephone interview conducted on 21 February 2013.

*In a previous interview, you said your motivation to write War and then make the documentary was to focus on what it was like to be a soldier and to understand soldiers themselves. I was wondering if the experience was what you expected and if you were expecting to feel like a part of that group, how over time in Afghanistan you started to feel like a part of their group?*

Well, I've been in a lot of wars before I was out at Restrepo, including Afghanistan in '96 and the 2000s and West Africa and Bosnia. But I've never been with people from my own country and professional soldiers. I've been with militias basically. What I didn't understand going in and what became the point of my book coming out was the incredibly powerful and necessary effect of belonging to a group. Understanding that the group will make sacrifices for you and you will make sacrifices for the group and if everyone does that, and I say this in my book, but if everyone does that everyone's better off psychologically, emotionally, and physically. I studied anthropology in college and I realized, to understand how that group works, what we were replicating was really our human evolution. I mean, we evolved as a species in groups of 30 or 40 people; they were related of course, but still groups of 30 or 40 and in a very hostile environment where armed force was necessary for survival. Individual sacrifice for the group was absolutely a prerequisite for belonging to the group. Women, of course, endangered themselves for the group by getting pregnant and giving birth. I'm sure the mortality rate among women, among our ancestors, was horrifyingly high and probably equivalent to the mortality rate in combat. So women risked themselves in that way, that necessary way, and men risked themselves in hunting and in war. I was stunned by the power of that group bond. I just didn't realize how profound it was and how meaningful it became and how important it was. I didn't know that going in but I felt its effect while I was there and it became the point of what I wanted to write about.

*You mentioned in your book the trust in the men around you, the fear of letting anyone around you down, trying to keep up, not be the slow one. Were you surprised that you weren't just observing those effects, that you also felt that way when you were with that group?*

It didn't surprise me, but I was grateful for the fact that that happens because it felt good. I think any assembly of people faced with adversity and hardship and danger becomes a group like that, and in urban, American society it almost never happens. I think there were some effects like that after 9/11. I live in New York, and after 9/11 in New York,

citywide there was a kind of collective effort and bonding that happened. During the Blitz in London apparently something like that happened as well, so people, because it's such a human state to be in, in kind of an evolutionary sense, people remember those times of great tragedy and great hardship with incredible fondness. I know the people who lived through the Blitz, they didn't miss the war, per say, but they missed the effect that the war had on their community, which was a very positive effect. The people in London were quite nostalgic after the war about those days. And people in New York City also were quite nostalgic in some ways about the bonding that happened in the city, the goodwill and the generosity that happened in the city after 9/11. Likewise, the guys in the platoon, and me included, I can generally say that most of those guys really missed it. I know I did. And I don't think that any of them would want to be back there but they miss it. It's a funny sort of split.

*When soldiers come home from war and write their war narratives, do you see that as a form of healing for them personally or as a form of them wanting either their families or the American public to understand what they've been through, or is it a little of both maybe?*

I think that the advantage that I had out there was that I was in my forties, and you just get better at understanding yourself and understanding life and the feelings you're having as you get older. I think everybody does. So those guys are trying to understand a really profound experience at age 19, age 20, and I think they sort of struggled to. Just as I would have had I been that age. I think when they come home they actually have quite a hard time explaining it and they feel that they can't, and that no one who wasn't out there can really understand it. Likewise, I don't think I can really talk to a woman who's given birth and understand what she went through. I think there are things that just aren't understandable if you haven't experienced it. One of the benefits of journalism for society is you basically have people who are a little bit older, they're in their 30s, their 40s, and their 50s, who are more skilled at understanding things and communicating them than young people are and they can take on that task. One of the things that was really gratifying to me about Restrepo and about War was innumerable soldiers said to me- you know I travel around the country, I give talks, I meet vets, I meet soldiers-and innumerable soldiers and vets said to me: when people ask me what it was like, I didn't feel like I could explain it adequately, I told them to watch Restrepo or read War. So they sort of used that work as a way to communicate, what they would have communicated but they didn't feel quite up to it.

*In your book you said your video camera captured everything that your memory didn't and I've seen that in a lot of the other war narratives that I've been reading. The soldier talks about, after a firefight everybody had different versions of what had happened, where the enemy was. When you're back home trying to write, how are you reconciling the truth in writing as in trying to convey that emotional aspect versus the actual facts that you can verify?*

Everything that I understand emotionally has to correspond to the facts and if it doesn't, then I have to write about how emotions distort reality. There's no emotional truth that

trumps factual truth. I used the video to either confirm what I was feeling, experiencing, or to correct it, but I don't see them at odds with each other. The video's the last word on what actually happened in front of you whether you remember it differently or not. The fact that you might remember it differently is really interesting. It says something about the human brain, not about the truth.

*As far as the value of war narratives and the impacts that they have for the American public, I was wondering if you think that as an embedded journalist...I know there's a lot of talk about how it's hard to be objective as an embedded journalist because you form these relationships but also I was wondering about the actual experience that you had while you were there, because you're not just watching somebody else get shot at, you're actually getting shot at. I was wondering how that affected your writing and the story that you are trying to tell to the public.*

I've known, because I've been a war reporter for a long time, that you're never objective about the people who are trying to kill you. It's just not possible. I think journalists can write objectively about situations on a strategic level and that wasn't what I was trying to do. I wasn't trying to understand the overall war and if it was going well or not. Other journalists were trying to do that and doing a good job at that, but that wasn't what I was trying to do. I was trying to understand what it feels like to be a soldier in a platoon. So, not only was I not seeking objectivity, I didn't even want it. Soldiers aren't objective, so I didn't need to be objective. I was trying to understand their experience, and their experience is very subjective. I was perfectly willing to become subjective with them, because I was trying to understand how they were feeling.

*Right, that makes sense.*

There were things that sometimes troubled me, and the thing I didn't want to do, because I liked these guys, was to ignore anything that bothered me. War is a pretty raw, disturbing thing to do, and a lot of very unseemly emotions come out. And you know, one of them, frankly, is glee at killing the enemy. It's not pretty but it's very natural. There was one situation where they were cheering a situation where an enemy fighter was wounded, very badly, and it bothered me. I understood it, but it bothered me, and I wanted to understand it better and so I asked them about it. I didn't want to ignore unpleasant things just 'cause I was fond of them. But that's different from being objective because I really wanted to understand them. And I even wanted to understand the things that I didn't, that made me uncomfortable.

*You wrote your book and then you made the documentary and you speak to a wide variety of people. Do you think that because of your work or reporting on the war, do you think that the American public understands and appreciates what these soldiers are doing? And I'm asking 'cause I'm in the Air Force, but I'm a pilot. I'm so far removed from combat...I'm not in it like these guys are, so I feel like I'm part of that American public. Do I understand and do I really appreciate what we are asking of them? And I'm wondering if that's changed as we've seen more of these narratives get published?*

The public isn't going to understand what's being asked of the soldiers if they rely on the Pentagon to communicate the experience. The Pentagon isn't going to do a very good job of it. The Pentagon, understandably, spins everything they can in the most positive narrative that they can come up with. I don't fault them for it. You know, I would too, but that's what they're doing, and they might emphasize the sacrifices of the soldiers in kind of an abstract way but they're not going to go into detail about it. It just doesn't serve their purposes. They're designed to win wars, and doing that isn't going to help win a war. Soldiers have trouble communicating the experience because it's very painful for them or it's confusing. Some of it isn't really painful, some of it they miss, but it's all confusing to them and hard to communicate. I know there's a very complicated relationship between the press and the military and the press and the soldiers but I think it does come down to the press to create these narratives and communicate them to the public. I think these narratives get communicated between husbands and wives and families, or privately in individual households, but sometimes it doesn't. It does sometimes, but I think often it doesn't. I think the press has a tremendous potential to not only to write about the war as a political, geostrategic issue but also as an experiential issue. You know, this is what it feels like. That's what Tim Hetherington and I were trying to do with our work, explain to civilians what it feels like to go to war. I think the liberal end of the political spectrum assumes that if you communicate what it's like to go to war then you end up being an advocate against war. And it's sort of inevitable, you know, war's so awful if you communicate what it's really like, you end up advocating against it. That's completely not the case with me or with Tim. I mean, soldiers sign up, there's no draft, soldiers sign up to do this. They're not forced to and they have options and everyone I was with out there wanted to be a soldier. They all wanted that experience. So I think that the political left makes this sort of erroneous assumption about well, if you communicate what war is you end up being anti-war and really, that's really not me. We didn't want our work to be misused that way. We both, Tim and I, felt that some wars are necessary and it's not our job to determine whether this one is or isn't, but we did want the public to understand what the soldiers were going through. But not as a position against war, just as something that was important in and of itself.

*Right, to see the personal side of it versus an opinion side. Do you think the fact that you and Tim kept going back, even after the firefight, after the injuries, did that help gain some credibility with the platoon?*

Did it help our credibility with the soldiers?

*Yes.*

Yeah, I think so. I mean we went through a lot, Tim and I, and we never caused a problem and I think it was pretty clear to the guys that we were willing to do just about anything to be a good member of the group. One day we asked to be trained in battlefield medicine in case we ever needed to help the other person or anyone else. And we asked to be trained on all the weapons in case we ran into a situation like Chosen Company did where they were ambushed and almost got overrun and took 100 percent casualties and the wounded fought off the enemy. And I said to Tim that Chosen Company could have



easily been Battle Company and if that happens we don't want to just be sitting there like idiots; we need to know what to do. Thank God that never happened, but I think it made an impression on some of the soldiers that we asked to be trained if we ever needed that.

*So you were willing to put yourself out there and be part of that team as well.*

Yeah, absolutely. We were counting on them for our safety. It occurred to us that there might be a situation where they had to count on us for their safety, at least for a little bit, and had we been with Chosen Company, absolutely. Every guy had a bullet in him, and we're out here, and if you're going to be out here with these guys the deal is that you have to do everything that you can to protect the group and that means not complaining on patrols when you're tired and it means drinking enough water so you don't dehydrate. And it might mean trying to clear a jam on a 240. I mean, who knows but that's the deal. Tim walked all night on a broken leg.

*Right, I read that.*

Yeah, because he didn't want to endanger everyone in the group, but if you're not willing to do that then you shouldn't be out there.

*Well, that's the end of my questions as far as the narratives and your experience in combat. Is there anything else that you were expecting me to ask?*

No, I think it's really interesting that you're doing this. Personally, I think that war is a very politicized thing and it should be because it's a terrible thing. Because its politicized it gets argued about and it needs to be argued about because it shouldn't happen too easily. But I really think that the narratives of war, in terms of the experience of soldiers, should be set apart and have their own value completely outside of the political discussions. I think both the right wing and the left wing really fail at that. I think the right wing takes the experiences of the soldiers as a way of... they have great pride in the soldiers and they use that pride to consolidate their opinion about the rightness of the war. And the left wing, they use the suffering of the soldiers as a way to condemn the war. Really both sides misuse the soldiers' experience to their own ends, and they shouldn't. I think it's just really important to have the experience of the soldiers communicated in a way that has no political content.

*I have seen a lot of soldiers that return say that part of their frustration and problems with reintegration is that there is that political side, but then there's just the rest of the public who doesn't know and doesn't care. They can just keep going about their normal lives while these guys are fighting and dying on their behalf. Do you think that if there are more of these narratives-I know there is some resistance in the military to having soldiers tell their story, but there are some advocates saying it's a great form of therapy and if the public understands this it'll be easier to reintegrate.*

I think the public doesn't understand that it's our war. You know, liberals think that they didn't sign on for this and so it's not their war, but it is. And, just for the record,

politically I'm liberal, I'm a democrat. And I'm a liberal thinker, so when I'm talking about liberals I'm talking about my own tribe. But I think that the people that soldiers kill, they killed under our orders. We sent them. We did and I'm not saying it's wrong to send them, but it was us who sent them. It was our money, our taxes that paid for it, and it's our war. It's not their moral burden. They signed up, and as my friend Karl Marlantes said, and he's someone you might want to interview and I'm happy to connect you to him, he's a Vietnam vet, he wrote a novel called *Matterhorn*, and another book called *What It's Like To Go To War*, it's a very profound book. It's an amazing book, and he said soldiers sign up to fight, but they don't sign up to carry the moral burden of having waged war. That's the whole basis, burden. And so I think what people sort of peel off, into talking about it politically, I think that what they're doing is avoiding the moral burden and the right wing does it just as much as the left.

*Right.*

When we kill those civilians by accident over there, we all killed them. The right wing doesn't really want to acknowledge that very much and that's the only thing the left wing focuses on. I think it really does the soldiers a disservice, and the more we understand their experience, and not just their trauma, but also understand what they miss about it. I think we need to understand what was good about it; I mean personally, like how it changed them, soldiers, in good ways and in what was meaningful and important for them out there. If we don't understand that we won't be able to reintegrate them back into society, and so these narratives are very important. And it isn't just a list of traumas; it's also an accounting of what was meaningful and good out there. Because the guys miss it and we have to understand what it is they miss.

*The brotherhood, the teamwork, the reliance on each other, the responsibilities.*

Yes, it's all very human things and all things that were very important parts of our human evolution. They get those experiences out there and they don't get them in their hometowns, so they miss it and we have to understand that. Another problem is that the military is tiny. In Vietnam there were 500,000 soldiers over there at one time, and in WWII there were something like 2 million men in arms overseas, something like that, this is nothing. You know, this is what, we have 60,000 guys over there. I mean, it's nothing, it's a tiny part of the country and frankly I think it's kind of understandable that the public isn't focused on it. In some ways the Army isn't big enough to force the public to focus on it; in WWII they couldn't avoid it. Even in Vietnam they couldn't avoid it. It's going to sound a little harsh; soldiers aren't the only ones to sacrifice. I live in New York City, and people put up skyscrapers and there's a lot of construction, and there are workplace accidents all the time. Guys falling off skyscrapers and dying, guys getting buried in trenches. Urban industrial society costs us human lives. It happens all the time, and those guys who get killed in construction accidents in the city, they get 3 inches of page 12 of the New York Times. We depend on them just as much as we depend on soldiers. And no one's really thinking about it either. So soldiers aren't the only ones whose sacrifices are being ignored, it's a big sprawling society and we can't keep track of everyone and it's not just true of the soldiers.

*Right, I can see that. If it's not affecting you personally, there's a lot of other stuff to focus your attention on. It's easy to forget.*

Right, and we depend on those guys, and it is mostly men doing those jobs. Our society depends on those men just as much as on soldiers. You know, we just don't think about it because we don't need to.

#### **4. Why We Need to Understand the Combat Experience**

In any endeavor that costs so much, both in terms of loss of life and amount of national treasure, it is critical to think deeply as a nation and truly consider the full costs of going to war. To facilitate this debate, both before, during, and after a conflict, journalists play a vital role in distributing information to the American public. Rather than let our elected officials simply decide the fate of our country, the media ensures an active citizenry is informed on, ideally, all sides of the issues. Clearly, although not all citizens will be satisfied with the decision that the government makes to go to war or refrain from war, a hearty debate will ensure the decision is not made lightly to send the sons and daughters of this country into combat. Furthermore, debate ensures that there is a continued effort to resolve the conflict, return soldiers home as soon as possible, and successfully reintegrate the soldiers into civilian society following a conflict.

In addition, it is also important to understand war beyond its political definition. War cannot be evaluated simply in terms of right or wrong. The impact that it will have on those who will undertake those acts of war must also be considered. War does not end when soldiers come home from conflict. Soldiers and their families have to deal with both physical wounds and psychological wounds resulting from their combat experience. While not every experience of combat is traumatic, it will still affect soldiers' reintegration. We need to understand both the trauma and the dichotomy of missing war upon return. Many soldiers find it difficult to explain why they miss war – not for the combat action but for the relationships formed and the feelings



of being necessary and vital to other people. If the American public and the elected representatives who make critical decisions regarding war do not understand the effects that war has on soldiers, there is reason to be concerned that those decisions will not be taken as seriously as they should be. Furthermore, without understanding the combat experience, both its negative side and its positive side, there will be a growing divide between the military and civilian population.

Embedded journalists provide an additional venue to understand the experience of American soldiers in combat. It is important to encourage veterans to write about their experiences in order to increase public understanding of the impact of war. However, it is not likely that in the near future the ability of soldiers to convey their experiences will dramatically increase. For the reasons articulated previously, due to immaturity or inability to express oneself in writing, many soldiers will not be able to adequately explain their reactions to combat. For that reason, embedded journalists, because of their similarity of experience, are in a unique position to communicate those experiences to the public. Both their maturity compared to the soldiers and experience as writers will allow embedded journalists to convey those experiences. The more the American public and the United States government understands the costs of war, the greater the chance that future conflicts will be fully deliberated and that veterans of those wars will be successfully reintegrated into civilian society following our nation's conflicts.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

It is important that civil society in the United States understands the experience of those who serve in combat. This understanding is not only important when debating the choice to go to war or not to go to war, but in maintaining a cohesive society that can reintegrate those that go to war on their behalf. Historically there have been several barriers to understanding the combat

experience. Most combat soldiers are young and lack the maturity to process their own emotional reactions, much less articulate those emotions and reactions to those who have not experienced combat.

Embedded journalists in wartime situations, while maintaining non-combatant status, are in the same situations as combat soldiers. They, too, are at risk of being wounded and dying. Because of this similarity of experience, the reaction that embedded journalists have in combat mirrors those of soldiers. As seen in the books reviewed for this paper, the journalists and the soldiers reacted remarkably similar to the stressors of combat. These trained writers can then convey these experiences to the American public. While fewer citizens of the United States may have first-hand military experience in the future, war narratives can help bridge the gap between combatants and non-combatants.

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<sup>1</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, "As Fewer Americans Serve, Growing Gap Is Found Between Civilians and Military." *New York Times*, 24 November, 2011. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/us/civilian-military-gap-grows-as-fewer-americans-serve.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/25/us/civilian-military-gap-grows-as-fewer-americans-serve.html?_r=0) (accessed 11 March 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Twelve, 2010), 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Turner, *Here, Bullet* (Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 2005), 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Junger, *War*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Hicks, "Brian Turner Interviewed by Patrick Hicks," *War Literature and the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities*, Volume 24, 2012, [http://wlajournal.com/24\\_1/pdf/hicks.pdf](http://wlajournal.com/24_1/pdf/hicks.pdf), 8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> Junger, *War*, 246.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

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