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## The Military Novel

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## THE MILITARY NOVEL

*The art of successful fiction writing demands that through literary technique alone, without recourse to the visual impact possible on stage or screen, the author makes his invention more vivid, more "real" than any factual experience possible. Such is the case with the military novel. While not dealing with the specific personalities and events of the military historian, the military novelist seeks to capture what he considers the essence of war, those basic human "truths" as they are exposed in that most demanding of all circumstances—combat.*

An article prepared

by

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This essay is about military fiction, about "war novels." While many are written, little in the way of serious criticism of the war novel has been produced, and what there is of it is not usually very good. This is especially true of critiques of war novels which were written during wars or immediately thereafter. Critics are inclined to applaud almost anything that endorses their view of war, and their view of war is usually the same as the war novelist's: i.e., war is hateful if not downright bestial, and it is directed by people who do not know what they are doing.

In dealing with the subject we must first define our term, and in doing so one is immediately confronted with a paradox, for military fiction, like any good fiction, is written by men who believe they are writing the truth—a truth which transcends the fictional devices they use to express it. Ernest

A writer's job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly, but when a good writer is creating something, he has time to make of it an absolute truth.

I would not go this far as there are but few writers that ever stumble upon absolute truths. Had they not biases, prejudices, and predispositions, they would not be writers in the first place. I do believe, however, that the best war novelists frequently come closer to the reality of war in their work than military historians. They come closer to reality in much the same way as El Greco's "A View of Toledo" comes closer to the essence and ambiance of that city than a careful photograph might have done. Ideally the military

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historian and military novelist have complementary missions. The historian describes how wars were fought and for what reasons; the novelist is concerned with what the fighting meant to those who suffered, failed, or succeeded in it. Certainly their efforts overlap. Both work within the confines of observed or recorded human behavior; both accentuate what they think important about their wars and tend to ignore what is transitory or unimportant. Often the military novel is a polemic, but who would deny that such a work as Henson's *Stonewall Jackson* or Sir John Fortescue's magnificent *History of the British Army* is, in its way, polemical? Indeed, the principal difference between military history and military fiction lies in the fact that the novelist is preoccupied with what we might call the underside of war, with the deep and unbridgeable chasms that separate the recorded achievements of armies and the private hells of suffering and terror that the men who compose the rank and file of armies must endure. The novelist focuses on the reality of war for men who are not usually professional soldiers and with the farce, tragedy, and occasional ennoblement of spirit that characterize the organization, movement, and fighting of armies. Great military fiction may come close to Hemingway's "absolute truth" about war, but only rarely is it attained.

For the purposes of this essay, military fiction is that body of fictional writing about war which is mainly concerned with those who participate in war as soldiers. This definition excludes, therefore, such books as Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (whose protagonist is a military officer, but an officer who is usually shown in "off-duty" situations); or a book like Jerzy Kosinski's devastating and pathetic account of a young boy lost in the eastern front in World War II, *The Painted Bird*. Also excluded are such classics as *Les Miserables*, *The Charter-house of Parma*, and *Vanity*

*Fair*, each of which happens to contain brilliant accounts of the Battle of Waterloo and the immediate context in which the battle was fought, but none of these books are principally concerned with soldiers and war.

By and large, war fiction is written by men who hate war, who dislike the self-effacement military organizations must insist upon, and who either despise or mistrust the human qualities that war seems to exalt. Only rarely is it written by professional soldiers, nor is it often written by those whom modern American politics would call "conservative"—that is, by men who are content to contemplate the imperfectibility of mankind and the apparent persistence of war as a part of the human condition. It is usually written by men who served in either the enlisted ranks or as very junior officers.

The qualities of character that war seems to exalt have been succinctly set forth in one of the great works of classical history—Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*. Describing the war's effect on its participants, military and civilian, Thucydides observes:

What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action. Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defence. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them was suspect . . .

Of course, what Thucydides is describing is human behavior in a period

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of prolonged stress, and his description is not limited to the soldiers and generals who fought in that war. His words are remarkably descriptive of the actions and emotions of soldier and citizen alike who have been caught up in all the wars of history. These are the traits common to men in conflict, and they are the base upon which the military novel's story line is constructed.

There is a pervasive typology of character in military fiction which can be broken down as follows:

First there is the war lover. He is usually a Regular, and he is commonly depicted as a man who enjoys the opportunities war provides him to test himself and the chances war gives him for self-aggrandizement. He likes to fight. He capitalizes on his own relative immunity from fear and fatigue. With a weapon or in command of men, he feels himself equal to any crisis he may be called upon to resolve. He is an excellent hater, and he has particular scorn for soldiers with misgivings about themselves and their work. Second, there is the "good professional," the best example of which is perhaps C.S. Forester's General Curzon in *The General*. The "good professional" has no particular love for fighting; indeed, he mistrusts whatever seductions it may have to offer. Third is the inept Regular soldier—a man in the business because he can do nothing else. Fourth, there is the idealistic Reserve officer, or conscript, who is appalled by what he sees in the barracks square or on the battlefield. Fifth and finally, there is the wretched, grumbling, limited, battered private soldier. Almost always, it should be noted, military novelists have come from the ranks of the "type fours." James Gould Cozzens, William Styron, Norman Mailer, Anthony Powell, Mikhail Lermontev, Mikhail Sholokov, and others carry with them a personal view of war, a vision that at once stimulates them to write and indelibly colors their characterizations and plots.

These various fictional types are usually set in a situation the author has invented to demonstrate the hatefulness or uselessness of war. Placed against a backdrop of violent disorder, characters who lack the qualities Thucydides said war exalts may emerge and grow into people who deserve our admiration. Commonly the situation involves a military unit's attempted execution of a foolish or misbegotten order or mission. Noteworthy examples employing this story line include: Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*, Styron's novella *The Long March*—in my judgment the best military novel written in this country since World War II—and Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*.

Not only are these stories catalyzed into life by the issuance of foolish or misbegotten orders, but the orders are frequently given by senior civilian or military functionaries who have not the slightest idea of how they are to succeed. Isaiah Berlin's famous essay on *War and Peace* perhaps best describes this theme of very senior officers who do not really control the situations their orders create. They are too far away from the action, and they generally believe that they must allow only "neutral factors of calculation" to form their judgments.

What of these different types of characters? There are first the war lovers: good warriors and committed professionals who are commonly dedicated careerists. Their ranks include characters like the corps commander in Arnold Zweig's masterly *The Case of Sergeant Grischa* (1928), a coldly efficient general whose qualities of mind and character are laid out in a chapter the author calls "Portrait of an Autocrat." The general is a man without pity. He despises those who work for him and regards them as so many parts of a finely tuned machine, parts which are to be thrown on the ash heap when they fail to function in accord with the impossibly high standards of per-

formance he sets for them.

Among the war lovers are also men like General Tanz in *The Night of the Generals*, a soldier whose depravity manifests itself in the slitting of bellies of the bloated whores whom he must have every few months. He is a man who fiercely chastises his orderly if there is dust on the carburetor of his limousine or if the temperature of his bath varies from his order more than one degree centigrade. Tanz is a military fetishist, but one whose attention to detail does not diminish a remarkable ability to conceive and execute breathtakingly bold tactical operations. Despite his seemingly barbarous nature, however, General Tanz is no unmitigated brute, for he is a great admirer of impressionist paintings in the Jeu de Paume gallery.

There are also—and perhaps most famously in modern American military fiction—Norman Mailer's General Cummings and Sergeant Croft in *The Naked and the Dead*.

In many ways Cummings is the most carefully wrought of all Mailer's fictional creations, possibly because the author has a lurking admiration for him as well as a great hatred for what he represents. Cummings is conceived as a representative example of the modern American general: he is a midwesterner, a Protestant, ambitious, a West Pointer, and in his own eyes a patriot. Above all, Cummings has "an almost unique ability to extend his thoughts into immediate and effective action," as Mailer puts it, by making his men fear the consequences of failing to do his bidding. He positively revels in the opportunity to humiliate his subordinates—especially those capable of reflection and independent action, like his aide Hearn. At the same time, Cummings has a slight effeminacy of manner, which Hearn reflects is commonly found in men with the capacity for extreme ruthlessness. A nasty piece of work is General Cummings. In his marriage bed he salutes his

wife with cries of "bitch . . . bitch!" and when his aide measures up too well to the offices he has planned for him, the general sends him out to almost certain death with a reconnaissance patrol full of misfits.

In cruder form these qualities are found in Sergeant Croft, acting platoon commander of the Divisional Reconnaissance Platoon in Cummings' division. He administers the platoon in much the same way as Cummings commands his division and through the same device—fear. Croft suspects almost everyone of cowardice, hates mankind generally, loves hunting and the out-of-doors, and regards his military skills with the pride of a fine craftsman. To his credit he is no careerist, but there is nothing he likes so much as a good firefight, and indeed Mailer uses the word "itch" several times to describe Croft's feelings when not actually killing. It is thus thoroughly in character for Croft, lying one night in his damp foxhole and hearing the eerie pidgin English of the frontline Japanese challenging his terrified men, to jump up shooting, screaming "Come and get me you miserable sons of bitches!"

However effective Croft and Cummings are as fictional characters, they remain carefully drawn caricatures. It is in William Styron's *The Long March* (a novel about a battalion training in Camp Lejeune for service in Korea) that the character of the war loving professional transcends caricature. Here is Styron at his best, describing the battalion commander, Colonel Templeton, who has just received word that a short round from a mortar has killed or wounded several of his men:

The brief flicker of uneasiness in his eyes had fled, and when he put down his messkit and looked up at Hobbs it was only to wipe his hands on his handkerchief and squint casually into the sun, as if he were receiving the most routine of messages. It was absolutely

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typical of the man, Culver reflected. Too habitual to be an act yet still somehow too faintly self-conscious to be entirely natural, how many years and what strange interior struggles had gone into the perfection of such a gesture . . . the frail, little-boned almost pretty face peering upward with a look of attitudinized contemplation; the pensive bulge of tongue sliding inside the rim of one tanned cheek to gouge out some particle of food; small hands working calmly at the folds of the handkerchief—surely all this was more final, more commanding than the arrogant loud mastery of a John Wilkes Booth: more like the skill of Bernhardt, who could cow men by the mystery of her smallest twitch . . .

Generals Tanz and Cummings, Colonel Templeton, and, at a much different plateau, Sergeant Croft are characteristic of many fictional military professionals. A cynic might justifiably observe that such characters tell us as much about their authors as they do of the features distinguishing successful soldiers. The truth of the matter is that such figures commonly represent men who tend to value precisely what most writers do not. Men who write novels about war rarely write to celebrate. They write to criticize or condemn those who use their intelligence to serve their lusts for power and authority. The latter do it by making the military system work for them, and in a nation in which civilians are more at ease with a Grant, a Marshall, or an Eisenhower running our armies, it is little wonder that the successful war novelists have fastened on the military autocrats as the evil protagonists of their works. Yet the author retains that brittle thread of admiration for them, as if to recognize that such men are necessary to fight battles and command armies successfully.

The most successful example of a "good professional" (type two in our classification) in modern English fiction is C.S. Forester's General Curzon, the only major character in his World War I novel *The General*.

Here we use the word "professional" as Lewis Namier once used it: a man who thinks more about his work than he does about himself, whose ambition is satisfied by the knowledge that he has done well what he has set himself or what he has been ordered to do. No base motive of self-aggrandizement motivated Herbert Curzon. Forester is especially eager that his readers get beyond the superficial, physical characteristics of his hero. I quote from his description of Curzon shortly before the cataclysm of World War I would elevate him to knighthood and a lieutenant generalship:

The picture of Curzon in the years immediately before the war seem to verge closely on the conventional caricature of the Army major, peppery, red-faced, liable under provocation to gobble like a turkey-cock, hide-bound in his ideas and conventional way of thought, and it is no more exact than any other caricature. It ignores all the good qualities which were present at the same time. He was the soul of honor; he could be guilty of no meannesses, even bogging at those which convention permits. He would give his life for the ideals he stood for, and would be happy if the opportunity presented itself. His patriotism was a real and living force, even if its symbols were childish. His courage was unflinching. The necessity of assuming responsibility troubled him no more than the necessity of breathing . . . he shirked no duty, however tedious or inconvenient . . . he could administer the regulations of his service with an

impartiality and a practised leniency admirably suited to the needs of the class of man for whom those regulations were drawn up . . .

Curzon had his shortcomings, however. Most notably he shared along with his seniors a singular lack of mental agility and responsiveness to the changing technology of war. Moreover, not even the clever Oxonians directing the British contribution to the war had any notion of how to prosecute that cruelest and most senseless of wars to which they had committed England. Curzon's very soldierly qualities—in themselves representative of the class from which most English officers were drawn—were no longer useful to the tactical problems he was called upon to solve. It is a crushing indictment of a system and a caste that Curzon's divisional chemical officer—a “technician” educated at Oxford—is invariably placed at the foot of the staff table in the mess; that his machinegun officer has been selected because he has the worst seat (on a horse) of all Curzon's officers; and that, finally, in the holocaust of his last battle, Lt. Gen. Sir Herbert Curzon calls for his saber, mounts his horse, and charges into the teeth of a German artillery barrage. Thus is he relegated to his wicker wheelchair on the boardwalk at Bournemouth, where the shabbily genteel, alternately patronizing and flattering him, wonder at his benign and tolerant facial expressions.

Most war novels have professional soldiers like Curzon in them. *August 1914*'s principal character is a Colonel Vorotynev, who has all Curzon's qualities of character but is an imaginative thinker as well. Despite all his good qualities, however, Vorotynev is destroyed at the end of the book. He knows too much, he feels too keenly the uselessness of the slaughter, he resents the colossal stupidity of generals promoted on no grounds other than popularity and connections, and finally

he feels compelled to confront the Tsar and the High Command with his criticisms.

Generalizing then about this second type, the fictional “good professional,” we may say that if his character is sound, he is likely to be stupid, or if his character is sound and his brains are good, he is likely to be crushed by the system.

Our third type is the inept Regular soldier of bad character. In war literature he is commonly an officer in the middle field grades, a major or colonel serving on the staff or in command of some rear echelon service unit, or he may be a senior NCO. Irritable, insensitive, brutish, always physically repulsive, he incurs the novelist's anger more than any of the others—usually because he is the type of Regular officer with whom the novelist is best acquainted. Such characters have a feral, predatory cunning; they drink a great deal, indulge in outrageous *pseudologia fantastica* about their friendships with big shots back in Paris, London, or Washington, and seem to exist to make conscripted professors of English and liberal intellectuals from NYU miserable. In this they invariably succeed. They populate, for example, such books as Anthony Powell's and Evelyn Waugh's war trilogies, *Catch-22*, *The Naked and the Dead*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *Tunes of Glory*, *August 1914*, and *From Here to Eternity*, and it is rare that they are treated sympathetically as, for example, in *The Caine Mutiny*. Even here, however, the writer makes no particular attempt to blot out commander Queeg's terrible defects of character.

Considering now the fifth type—the poor, dull, drafted private—he is the one who suffers most horribly and who is most likely to be killed in war; the fictional conscript usually shares many of the same qualities of character and intellect that the writer sees in the inept careerists. The common foot soldier is the one whom war frequently “en-

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nobles," the one who rises uncomplainingly to the challenge of insane frontal attacks and certain death; but in literature he is just as often shown cowering under sustained artillery and mortar barrages, soiling his pants, and grumbling. Soldiers always grumble and are miserable.

They tend to come from Soho or West 75th Street, from Indian reservations, squalid fishing cities, and small towns in central Georgia. They have spent their previous lives in canneries, bicycle shops, operating lathes, drifting, or in jail. Occasionally the conscript will come from Groton or Eton, claiming he did not want the responsibility of a commission, and always this type will have a running feud with his platoon sergeant, keep a diary, and be decorated for bravery. For the most part, however, the wretched private is not idealized in fiction.

This tells us something useful about our fourth type, the idealistic young officer-narrator, or fictional mouth-piece. It is this: that war and the preparation for war place a premium on skills, attitudes, and convictions which most serious writers of military fiction lack. Fundamentally we are talking about the mistrust which has always existed between men of action and men of reflection, between men either prepared or resigned to endure things as they are and men eternally dissatisfied with the human condition. Thus, while the idealistic or cynical narrator (author) resents the professional success of a general whom he feels has subverted real talent to the service of a gory business and while he despises the general's willingness to abide by a system which strikes him as brutish and depersonalizing, he is equally quick to dislike the inarticulate, always grumbling soldier. He may hate General Tanz or Colonel Templeton, but he does not often admire the rank and file of the armies they command. More commonly he criticizes them as the case of a

writer like Anthony Powell (*The Soldier's Art, The Valley of Bones, The Military Philosophers*), he almost completely ignores them. He builds his story around the vagaries of military politics.

Do not dismiss the modern military novelist out-of-hand, for he, together with the mass media, forms the public's notions of war and soldiers. While the novelist's characters tend to be caricature, they also contain kernels of the truth, a truth that too often can be unsettling. Perhaps, too, we can learn from the novelist—whether it is the novelist's intention or not—that war is too important to be entrusted to the kinds of men impelled to write fiction about it, and, of course, it rarely is.

So much for this survey of military fiction and the typology of its characters. If, incidentally, I have dwelt unduly on character at the expense of plot, I do not think I have done any injustice to the military novel, for military novelists as a whole are much more concerned with character than they are with plot. Indeed, most criticism of war writing agrees that plot development is not particularly important to the military novelists' art.

It remains to say a few words about the conditions in which great war literature appears to be grounded. Historically, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, and World Wars One and Two have accounted for almost all important military novels. This is so because these were large wars which swept up virtually all society, including the literary elements that so-called wars of policy like the Boer War or Korea left at home. In World War One, for example, the socially privileged classes and educated elites probably paid a far higher price in killed and wounded, relatively, than the working classes from which most conscripts were drawn. Although these four wars—with the exception of World War I in its last 2 years—were prosecuted by statesmen who enjoyed fairly widespread popular



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support for their policies, the reality of war—its grisly and miserable underside—was no different from the reality of wars like Korea and Vietnam. There was more than ample grist for the military novelist.

I do not think Vietnam will produce any significant military fiction. Possibly there was a Stephen Crane or a Hemingway or a Norman Mailer serving in the American Army whose outrage at what he saw may mature in time to a great war novel, but it is doubtful. The writers who might have sung of the modern American soldier—the smart professional, the good officer, the inept commissioned cipher, the idealistic young man, and the poor bloody infantryman—were passed over by an inequitable draft system which left most prospective writers of creative fiction in Kenyon College, Chapel Hill, or Cambridge. It will remain largely for journalists who covered the war to write about it in fiction, and so far they have chosen to do it in what is called “the new journalism,” in descriptive sociology, or in white-hot polemics against the military and civilian leadership. More sadly, the very people who might most profit from fictional chronicles of this war will be among those least likely to read them or, in any case, to be moved by them. It

is 2,400 years from Thucydides to David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, but the messages of both books are unmistakable and similar: the qualities of mind and character that democracies at war seem to promote and exalt are those which encourage, rather than inoculate, man against the one great constant in his political behavior—vanity.

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor Josiah Bunting III earned bachelor's degrees from both the Virginia Military Institute and Oxford University and a master's degree in modern history from Oxford (Rhodes Scholar). As an Army officer, he served with the Mobile Riverine Force in Vietnam and as Assistant Professor of History, U.S. Military Academy. He published a best selling novel of the Army in Vietnam, *The Lionheads* (1972). Following his departure from active Army service, Professor Bunting joined the faculty of the Naval War College as professor in the Department of Strategy; he recently left the college to assume the presidency of Briar Cliff College in New York.

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... Fiction is not a dream. Nor is it guesswork. It is imagining based on facts, and the facts must be accurate or the work of imagining will not stand up.

Margaret Culkin Banning, *The Writer*, March 1960