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Fragmentary Survival

by Bart Kubiak

(English 2820)

Writing has been a tool used to great effect throughout millennia. Those looking to best communicate their observations, experiences, and introspections have chosen this medium. Today, storytelling in the form of short stories, novellas, and novels remains among the most powerful of instruments in expressing people's illations catalyzed by conflict. War literature has redefined the meaning of "truth" while speaking volumes on the realities of war. Fiction has given authors the ability to effectively traverse the essence of combat within the safety of poetic license, freeing them from the burdens of bureaucracy and restrictions of historic reality. They explore themes that are not only prevalent in wartime but also ones which reveal inherent characteristics of humanity. Phil Klay recounts insights from his own military service in the Iraq War, from January of 2007 to February of 2008, through the short story collection *Redeployment*. In the short story "FRAGO," Klay immerses the reader in the rush of combat whilst alluding to themes of routine, leadership, the military-civilian disconnect, and exhibiting how service members cope with the horrors of war.

"FRAGO" stands for "Fragmentary Order" which is an order which recognizes changes from the basic operations order relating to timing, enemy situation, or new assignment. In Phil Klay's "FRAGO" the narrator, a Sergeant in charge of several Marine Fire Teams, receives just such an order – "LT says drop the fucking house." The narrator then organizes three Fire Teams for a raid on a house that presumably contains armed militants. Second Fire Team is set to lead the raid on the house. One member of Second Fire Team, PFC Dyer, is a nineteen-year-old Private who has never killed anyone. Sergeant Sweet leads Second Fire Team into the building with Dyer right behind him. Sergeant Sweet is badly wounded and Dyer is forced to return fire at the aggressor and severely wound him. Klay describes the rest of the raid within the two pages, utilizing numerous military acronyms, vague to common civilian minds, and an expeditious syntax to depict the rush of a situation which lasted no more than two minutes. In the raid's aftermath there are several dead enemy militants, a wounded Sergeant Sweet, and two rescued prisoners who have been tortured and were about to be executed on camera. Dyer was ordered to apply first aid to the militant he shot and in the process got blood all over his clothes. The narrator notices Dyer is already feeling the shock of his first possible kill, avoids telling him about the condition of the militant, and gives Dyer his own uniform to change into. After the raid the Marines are on their way to Forward Operating Base (FOB) TQ to resupply, get food, and see how Sergeant Sweet is doing. On the way the narrator works to keep the men in his vehicle from discussing the horrific nature of the raid with crude humor, as the Marines use throughout the story. When they arrive at the hospital in the FOB a doctor tells them Sweet will be alright and luckily does not know anything about the condition of the man that Dyer shot. Nonetheless, Dyer shows the signs of shock and guilt. After this visit the Marines find the dining facility and all reward themselves with some cobbler for dessert. Dyer does not pick up his spoon so the narrator, his Sergeant, puts the spoon in his hand for him. The story ends with the line "You've got to do the basic things" (Klay 27). Throughout the story the narrator tries to keep his Marines' minds off the horrors they just witnessed. However, in his mind, and probably everyone else's, there is a constant stream of thoughts about what really just happened.

The principal focus of "FRAGO" seems to be on the coping mechanisms of military service members and the results of those mechanisms—specifically in the culture of the Marines, in this case.

Any bad thoughts or negative epiphanies are often “swept under the rug” by the narrator and other Marines. The characters deal with each horrific situation through the use of comedy or by actively ignoring a situation’s grisly truth. When the narrator and a Lance Corporal come upon the two tortured prisoners awaiting execution in front of a camera, Lance Corporal McKeown “looks at the camera and says, Al-Qaeda makes the worst pornos ever” (Klay 19). What McKeown seems to be doing is using humor to make light of an otherwise horrific situation. It is also important to note the vulgarity of this joke being indicative of the bond these troops share; such language or comedy would not be used in the majority of civilian work environments. Critic Lawrence J. Trudeau recognizes how the humor in “FRAGO” is a demonstration of the “profane camaraderie” that “often masks the fear and horror of the active-duty Marine” (Trudeau 63). The critical observation to be made about the Marines’ interactions in this story is that all these jokes really do is merely mask the horror and never truly reconcile the emotions of these men. Comedy helps relieve emotions from the sight of horrors and also helps manage Marines’ fear for their own lives. For example, Sergeant Sweet, who has a possibly fatal injury to his upper thigh, asks Doc to give him a “BJ” while he is working on his wound (Klay 20). In addition to cracking jokes, the Marines actively avoid thinking about what they have seen. At one point the narrator tells a Lieutenant to not “think about it until [they are] back in the States” (Klay 22). So what these Marines end up doing is storing up all their emotions, confusions, and fears to then bring them back home to a public that lacks the experience or knowledge needed to empathize with them and begin a healing process. A key moment is when the Marines are on their way to a military FOB and McKeown stated “that was really fucked up.” But the narrator immediately decides “now’s not the time to have that conversation” – it never seems to be the time – and proceeds to tell another profane joke to change the topic (Klay 24). The narrator himself continues to think about what happened and surely the other Marines do too. They never really confront what happened or how they feel about it. One of the narrator’s last efforts to make Private Dyer feel better about his first kill is reassuring him that he “took out the guy that shot Sweet” and focusing on the “bad guy” part as opposed to letting Dyer think about what he just did to another human being (Klay 25). Crude comedy or the avoidance of discussion is far from the most effective way for people to deal with the profusion of emotions that come with witnessing or committing horrors in war.

In war, however, Marines do not have the luxury of pondering their emotions and taking time to pause or self-reflect on right and wrong. In a short moment the narrator and Corporal Moore get alone, they begin discussing what should have been done and how one of the “hajjis” in the building deserved to be killed. The narrator reminds Moore that his decision regarding the life of the enemy combatant was “not the point” and what really matters is that if his “Marines see [him] fucked up over this, then they start thinking about how fucked up it all is. And [the Marines] don’t have time to deal with that. [They have] got another patrol” the next day (Klay 23). So, even though comedy may not seem the most effective tool, the Marines do not have a choice. If they begin to think too much about the horror of what they are doing or what they have seen they could lose focus - second guessing and hesitation in a warzone can lead to death. In order to remain effective Marines they must maintain their equanimity, and subsequently contain any moral unease and suppress any fear. The problem with this sort of culture is that it produces Marines with ravaging amalgams of emotions that are left unaddressed until their arrival at home to a public that is too disconnected to even begin helping them.

Phil Klay masterfully exhibits the military-civilian disconnect through his vocabulary choices. “FRAGO” is dense with military jargon and mannerisms that appear foreign to the civilian reader. A vast majority of the population, and likely a majority of Klay’s audience, has little to no military service experience or knowledge. A reader of this naivety will find it often near impossible to decipher the meaning of an acronym-heavy sentence without an internet search engine at the ready. When the narrator says he will “get on the IISR to the LT to call for CASEVAC” the reader

without prior knowledge of such jargon cannot help but feel perplexed. Critics may argue this is a weakness as it may interrupt a reader's stream of consciousness in what should be a fast-paced scene in the story. Eventually, Klay's language could make a reader feel disengaged from the story or even dissuade people from reading at all. However, this struggle and feeling of exclusion is precisely what Klay is aiming for in an effort to mirror the disconnection suffered between civilians and the military. Esteemed war correspondent for *The New York Times*, Dexter Filkins, asserts that "[o]ne of the great truths of the war in Iraq (and Afghanistan still) was that nearly all its burdens were endured by a tiny percentage of the population" (Filkins 18). "FRAGO" is a brief snapshot into the life of active-duty US Marines that mainly serves to show how little civilians understand about the burden of war, or let alone bear it. This "tiny percentage of the population" faces great challenges at home when met with a public which they can hardly begin to communicate their experiences to. Klay subtly affirms his intention is not merely about the technical language barrier between the military and civilians by using terms from the phonetic alphabet to replace a common phrase meant to express confusion, "what the fuck" or "WTF," with "Whiskey Tango Foxtrot" (Klay 19). This is hardly official military terminology but it makes the reader pause, think for a second, and realize how even the seemingly simple notions lack immediacy in understanding between civilian and Marine. Klay's expression of this concept of disconnect provokes the thought that if civilians have trouble understanding the simple jargon of this story then how are they to ever understand the complexities and ambiguities of the experiences service members return home with.

In "FRAGO," Klay also includes many subtle details that manifest the nuances of military life. One evident aspect that emerges through Klay's writing is the routine and order-oriented mindset Marines adopt overseas. Dexter Filkins affirms that "Klay has a nearly perfect ear for the language of the grunts — the cursing, the cadence, the mixing of humor and hopelessness" (Filkins 11). The sentences are often short, condensed, and to-the-point; they reflect the efficiency and pace of the Marines. The transition from humor to darkness is often blunt, abrupt, and brutal. Another major theme is that of leadership. The narrator is a Sergeant in charge of several Fire Teams and naturally a good leader. His actions after the raid define a leader as someone who not only gives orders and is in charge but someone who feels an immense responsibility for his fellow Marines and cares for each one of them. The narrator consistently decides to bear the burdens by himself and does his best to keep his Marine's minds elsewhere. When Dyer has blood all over his sleeves from the man he just killed it is the narrator who gives him his own uniform and even disposes of the old one.

In closing, Phil Klay's "FRAGO" serves as a dense courier of the challenging realities troops face overseas in regards to not only combat but also morality; it reveals how service members cope with the horrors of war and drives forth the truth of the military-civilian disconnect. This short story exemplifies what a powerful tool fiction can be in the traversal of themes found in war. Phil Klay captures the substance of true leadership and provides insight into a culture unexperienced by the vast majority of this country's citizens. Ultimately, "FRAGO" is a thoughtful illustration of the brotherhood formed in the crucible of war and its inevitable incompatibility with civilian life.

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