Have I Ever Been to War?

by Ryan Hill

Generations have voiced through pen and art, the glorious horrors of war
Stories are told, some without words, of men changed down to their core

I've been and seen and felt and feared, but my story is not the same
With a different view of the battlefield, I'm wary of what I claim

I have dented the earth and bent the air inside the enemy's door
But I cannot help but ask myself, Have I ever been to war?

I've topped the heights and flung my craft into valleys in the black of night
But the intimate pain and guilt in death remained outside my sights

I've squeezed the trigger that ended men's lives but did not witness the gore
So again I have to ask myself, Have I ever been to war?

I've seen the ghost of my imminent end
but never the face of a dying friend

I've seen the hopeless green smoke rise
but never the suffering it disguised

I've heard the whistling rounds drop in,
without a clue of where they'd land

But I've never felt their sting before,
And so I ask, Have I been to war?

I don't carry a load, nor am I lost between the darkness and the light
I'm the same as the man who left to go, but I question if that's right

To all those who there remain, and to those who've gone before
I joined you in that hellish place, but I'm still not sure I've been to war.

Lt. Col. Ryan "Rhino" Hill, U.S. Air Force, is a military professor at the Naval War College. He is a command pilot with over 2,600 hours in the A-10 and A-29. He has seen combat on the ground in Afghanistan in 2003 with the 82nd Airborne Division as a battalion air liaison officer and in the air in 2007 with the 354th Fighter Squadron flying an A-10. (A 354th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron patch is displayed on the headset of an A-10 Thunderbolt II attack aircraft crew chief 13 July 2015 during a theater security package deployment to Lask Air Base, Poland. Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Ruano, U.S. Air Force)