

Foreword

Between what is written and what is read are feelings—
they form an intimate connection between writer and reader.

—W. Piatt

Since the dawn of human history, soldiers have turned to poetry to express their experience of war. Poetry is an outlet to extract meaning from the exhilaration, suffering, injustice, and destruction of war, allowing the soldier to record personal experiences wrought by intense emotions, passions, visceral fear, anxiety, loss, pain, even despair. Poetry fuses sensual perceptions and moral reflections into a disciplined mode of verbal and written expression, trying to give the war experience a sense of coherence that can be intensely personal and often communal.

For me, writing is therapeutic. Having experienced battlefields from Bosnia to Afghanistan to Iraq, I quickly learned that war—the intentional killing of other human beings—is the worst human invention. It is a terrible condition of humanity that sends soldiers to foreign lands to kill other soldiers. The strategic purpose of conflict should never mask the toll it takes on the people who wage it. The brave men and women upon whom this responsibility is placed do so with honor and valor, yet their innocence is lost by witnessing the pain and suffering at such a monumental scale. The only joy is to survive, and that feeling quickly fades, overwhelmed by the loss of so many and the destruction of so much. Any joy for surviving is quickly replaced by guilt for being alive, despair over all that has been lost, lives ruined. Through it all, the soldier endures knowing that if we do not stand for liberty and justice, the alternative would be far worse. And so, I write my thoughts as I feel them, creating a poetic flow that has allowed me to understand, purge, occasionally savor moments—in the moment. Often, as I have written the words expressing my feelings, these emotions seem to leave my mind, allowing me to keep moving forward, as soldiers need to do. Later, I realized that these feelings remained, deep inside, in my soul, often eating away at my emotional state.

The writings that follow capture the experience and feelings of war. No history book or Hollywood production can render the raw range of emotions felt by warriors. Only the military members themselves can put into words their own experiences. And thus, these beautiful writings are eyewitness statements to what the writer was seeing and experiencing at the time and they are an invitation to you, the reader, to see, feel, and experience the war through their eyes.

—Lt. Gen. Walter Piatt
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