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Fine Print

Last rights

Colorado author treads sensitive territory

Louisville, Colo., author Michael Sledge has spent the past several years obsessing over dead bodies.



The author, Michael Sledge, in Normandy, France.

Specifically, Sledge has meticulously explored how our government treats the remains of fallen soldiers, now and in past conflicts, and the implications of such a problematic issue. The result is his book, *Soldier Dead*, recently published by Columbia University Press.

Inspired by the account of a girlfriend's father back in his old stomping ground of Shreveport, La., Sledge woke up nine years later knowing he had to pursue the story.

"I was in a mobile home in Louisiana, out in the woods, waiting for my girlfriend to get ready, and her dad and I were jawboning," says Sledge. "He told me about how, after the Korean War, the military used him on these search and recovery missions because he could read the land -- he'd see a sunken green spot and know that a body was probably buried there.

"They were looking for one guy out in this one-kilometer area behind a skirmish line. They walked the ground looking for clues and found hundreds of spent shells, the remains of one American soldier, and just in front of that, the remains of 300 Chinese soldiers. I heard that story and about nine years later I woke up in the middle of the night with a vision, with this thing right before my eyes. It was like, holy shit, what happened to these guys? What were their last moments like?"

The importance of bringing back bodies and carefully reconstructing those last moments, says Sledge, is enormous for many reasons.

First, it is important forensically: The military can glean important information about enemy weapons, armor, tactics and other key battle data by examining the remains. Second, it is important culturally: Families need closure, communities need closure, and respectful treatment of the remains of "soldier dead" -- a phrase used before the more commonly used and less personal "war dead" -- signifies a caring and compassionate military.

Finally, recovering and identifying our military dead to keep the faces of humanity, including the faces of the enemy, in the forefront of battle are important. That, says Sledge, is something the military brass doesn't want to talk about, though they are rapidly moving toward a battle approach that is more automated and less personal. The ramifications, he believes, are chilling.

"If we use machines that walk the face of the Earth to do our killing for us, what's that going to do to countries who can't see their enemies?" Sledge questions. "If we don't have people coming back who have faced death, saying, 'Wow, it's pretty ugly over there,' if it's just a video game and you just punch a button, then we will have lost something essential."

The military is currently spending billions of dollars on unmanned "predator tanks," says Sledge, and is talking about "leaving fighter pilots out of their own planes," developments leading to a future where, theoretically, "we won't have to have any boots on the ground."

The problems with that are both practical and philosophical, and should be discussed openly, adds Sledge.

"If we take people out of the link, I have a real problem with how good the data will be, how discriminating the actions taken will be, and how it will affect the people under attack," he says.

"When we refuse to acknowledge the humanity of the enemy, we're taking a step backward rather than forward."

-- **Kathryn Eastburn**

capsule

Michael Sledge will sign *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*.

Saturday, April 30, 2 p.m.

Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 1565 Briargate Blvd.

Call 266-9960 for info.

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