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War Wounds

Combat and its aftermath, from the battlefield to the graveyard.

By John Prados

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For the men and women who fight and the families who send their brave youths off to battle, wars end in one of two ways: The fighters either die or return. Some of those who come back move on to further adventures; others are broken, either physically or from the trauma of conflict. We may now lack a chronicler of the human tragedy of war in the style of Hemingway or Ernie Pyle, but we have instead an outpouring of personal reminiscences from every perspective, on wars from Korea to Iraq.

He Will Go to Korea

In a Korean War memoir written more than a decade ago, James Brady vowed never to go back to Korea. He didn't want to disturb the dead. *The Scariest Place in the World: A Marine Returns to North Korea* (St. Martin's/Thomas Dunne, \$24.95) is the story of Brady's return to Korea at the age of 75, after he had a stroke and decided that he had to return soon or never confront his past. Brady flips back and forth from Hill 749, the meaningless knob on the front line that his battalion defended 50 years earlier, to South Korea today. (The mention of North Korea in the subtitle refers to the location of that hill, slightly above the demarcation line of the 38th parallel.)

As his Boeing 747 makes its final descent into Inchon, Brady wonders just what had been accomplished by the war. On the ground, he talks to U.S. and South Korean generals, discovers that barely 250 American soldiers actually patrol the Demilitarized Zone and revisits his personal heartbreak ridge, where the Marines suffered a full



(From "Soldier Dead")

battalion's worth of casualties. But "the DMZ of memory had changed," with people now playing golf in the minefields and buses of tourists outnumbering the trucks full of soldiers. Panmunjom has become a showplace. The Americans on the front line want to know what it was like to fight the Chinese and how Christmas was lived in Korea during the war; Brady wants to learn why life along the DMZ today remains as wacky as it sometimes seemed to have been back then. During the war, he puzzled over seemingly capricious orders from superiors; now he puzzles over people happily hitting golf balls in a minefield. Brady's narrative is reflective and sometimes moving. "It's war that turns men into doves," he concludes.

Taking Aim

War's cruel way of sundering relationships comes through more

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clearly in *Shooter: The Autobiography of the Top-Ranked Marine Sniper* (St. Martin's, \$24.95), by Marine Corps Gunnery Sgt. Jack Coughlin and Capt. Casey Kuhlman, his company commander, as well as Donald A. Davis. The combat narratives here recount battlefield action with considerable energy. Moreover, Coughlin was present at such key moments as the battle of Mogadishu and the toppling of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad. He makes an exceptional attempt to present the centrifugal forces that ultimately destroyed his marriage and drove Kuhlman to give up a promising career in the Marine Corps. A renowned sniper, Coughlin is less concerned with his tally than with the human values of comradeship and love. He retired after the 2003 Iraq invasion to take custody of his two little girls. "But for me, it is over," Coughlin writes. "I have passed my rifle and scope to others."

Remembering Doug

Understanding loss is John Sacret Young's central preoccupation in *Remains: Non-Viewable* (Farrar Straus Giroux, \$24). Raised in a big, close-knit Yankee family, Young had 22 first cousins. His favorite, his longtime sidekick Doug, was killed in action in Vietnam in 1969 near Danang. *Remains: Non-Viewable* describes the attempts by Young, who is best known for his work on the Vietnam-themed television series "China Beach," to deal with Doug's death. His quest leads him not only to ideas for his scripts but also to numerous encounters with Vietnam veterans -- and ultimately to Vietnam itself.

Much like James Brady returning to Korea, Young feels driven to confront the past, to find the place where his cousin was killed and put himself back in that dreadful time. He visits Hanoi, Saigon, Danang, Khe Sanh and other sites; he encounters expat vets, Vietnamese children of the revolution and North Vietnamese leaders. The narrative jumps back and forth in time, from the hospital-bed death of his cousin's father to his own father's passing to Young's life and loves. Unlike Brady, who fought abroad, Young's experience centers on America in the '60s, and he makes little effort to reconstruct Doug's war or battles. Some of this narrative is gripping, but much of it lacks continuity; in this case, self-preoccupation does not yield broader insight.

Tending to the Fallen

Dead soldiers such as Young's cousin Doug have to be tended to as well as the living. That other road home remains among the least understood aspects of warfare. Michael Sledge, a freelance writer,

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Honor Our Military Fallen (Columbia Univ., \$29.95).

This is terra incognita. Government-employed historians have written a handful of monographs and articles about "graves registration," as the military terms the activity, but these remain overwhelmingly focused on World War II. There is little on the subject in the popular literature. Yet the topic is not only intrinsically important but deeply relevant to such high-profile issues as the fate of Americans missing in action in Korea and Vietnam.

From the Seminole wars in Florida in the early 1800s to Iraq today, the U.S. military has steadily expanded its commitment to recovering and honoring its dead. It has also greatly refined the technical and organizational mechanisms it uses. In Florida in 1818, only officers' remains were returned, and even then the families bore the expense. The mission enlarged with the Civil War, when the national cemetery system helped accommodate many more dead soldiers. In the two world wars, it was common to bury fallen Americans in military cemeteries abroad. Efforts to identify the dead

systematically had begun in the early 1900s. In Korea and Vietnam, U.S. efforts shifted to full-scale repatriation, which remains standard procedure today.

Soldier Dead covers such issues as the practical, moral and morale-related implications of how the dead are treated. It also examines U.S. treatment of enemy fatalities; the intrawar and postwar recoveries of soldiers' remains, including extensive coverage of the effort to find and identify those missing in Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Korea; how troops' remains are identified, stored, moved and buried; and the controversies that have developed around these practices. Throughout, Sledge is keenly aware of the hopes that preoccupy the families of lost soldiers and the role of physical remains in the grieving process.

During the Iraq invasion, Sledge was an embedded journalist with an Army mortuary company. He objects to the Bush administration's policy of attempting to avoid media coverage of returning remains, which are now flown to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, out of the cameras' view, supposedly out of concern for loved ones' sensibilities. "There is also the danger that if the government takes the 'family privacy' position to its logical conclusion," Sledge writes, "it will no longer announce the names of those killed, only the numbers. And if the logic is followed further, the government could, theoretically, refuse to announce even the number of dead." In fact, the nation as a whole needs to grieve for and honor its dead -- creating a public interest in knowing the truth about war, however bitter.

John Prados is a senior fellow at the National Security Archive. His most recent book (edited with Margaret Pratt-Porter) is "Inside the Pentagon Papers."

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