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The Art of War

A Review of *My Detachment* by Tracy Kidder (Random House, 2005), *Gods of Tin: The Flying Years* by James Salter (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), and *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer* by Nathaniel Fick (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

If journalism is the first rough draft of history, the hastily written memoir may be the second. Judging by the number of such memoirs that have already emerged from the current war in Iraq, that conflict will be well chronicled indeed. These works are different from memoirs written after the fog of war has cleared, and the comparison is not to their advantage. Some seem just a book contract away from the blogs they once were; others are heavy on the talk-show elements and light on reflection; and still others are so intent on self-pity and self-aggrandizement that they read like beerily told barroom tales. For all that, to read some of these accounts is to taste the grit of battle and to smell the stench of fear, and is perhaps worth sifting through the flotsam of a tale told too soon.

To see what raw war stories can become with the benefit of time and distance, consider Tracy Kidder's *My Detachment*, a title he chose deliberately for its double meaning. Kidder waited 35 years to write the book, which recounts a tour of duty spent in command of an eight-man detachment during the Vietnam War. Kidder had first worked through his wartime experience in a bad novel written at the Iowa Writers' Workshop (Anthony Swofford did the same thing before penning *Jarhead*, his fine memoir of the first Gulf War that wasn't published until 2003). *Ivory Fields*, as Kidder titled his novel, was rejected by 33 publishers before he ceremonially burned it in his back yard. When a friend found an old copy decades later and returned it, Kidder was by turns embarrassed and amused by the purple prose of his youth ("Alone, Lieutenant Dempsey moves, a dry rangy weed with ghostlike eyes"). In place of his stillborn novel Kidder eventually fashioned a shrewdly observed memoir that is anything but another guts-and-glory, war-is-hell account.

A green ROTC intelligence officer fresh from Harvard, in 1968 Kidder ends up with an assignment to Vietnam rather than the cushy stateside post he was expecting. As he walks around Cambridge in a crewcut shortly before he receives his orders, he regrets ever having enlisted, an impulsive decision that was meant, among other things, to impress his coy sometimes-girlfriend. “I had separated myself from my social class, from my student generation. Now I found myself looking in from the outside at my old life, and everyone there, on the other side, seemed to be having a great time, while opposing the war—*by opposing the war.*”

In Vietnam, Lieutenant Kidder commands a detachment charged with reporting on enemy radio locations. The men spend their days in a camp, cordoned off from the war by barbed wire. *Ivory Fields* was full of events Kidder never witnessed: combat, rape, killing of innocent water buffalo. The figures for “VC KIA” reported in daily briefings are all he ever knows of casualties. The drama played out in *My Detachment* is between Kidder and the men he nominally commands, a disaffected group whose stint in Vietnam is, unlike his, dictated by necessity rather than choice. Kidder portrays himself, above all, as a young man caught between his desire to be a romantic hero and his inclination to disparage the war and the Army.

Looking back, Kidder is able to observe the impact a now distant conflict had on a self-conscious young man who, deep down, is less concerned with grand arguments about the war’s morality than with its effect on his budding sense of self. If there’s a danger here, it’s that the years that stretch between the awkward young lieutenant and the wiser older writer dispose Kidder to be a bit too hard on himself. As a young man, Kidder was afflicted with acute self-awareness, the bane of many writers. Now, every bit as self-consciously, he attempts to explain and, perhaps, to atone. But if every writer had to do penance for his youthful prose and attending pretensions, the literary world would resemble nothing so much as a flagellants’ convention.

Gods of Tin, James Salter’s 2004 memoir of his flying days from the end of World War II until 1957, is a very different book, but it too demonstrates how remove can bring grace. A pastiche of journal entries, excerpts from his previous memoir, *Burning the Days*, and earlier fiction, *Gods of Tin* is an odd little book, and sometimes

downright confusing if you're looking for a narrative thread. But it's full of stunning moments strung together to create an impression of height, chill, exhilaration, and man's desire to notch a kill on his belt. After Salter graduates from West Point and completes his at times harrowing training in the States, once landing nose-first in a Massachusetts house, he is sent overseas after World War II. He spends six years stationed in the Pacific and in the States before volunteering for Korea: "You were not anything unless you had fought."

The anxiety that eats away at him in Korea, day after day, is that he will forever have only a view to the kill. In a 1952 journal entry, he describes hearing, on the way to a debriefing, the news that two fellow pilots have shot down MIGs: "Sudden, fierce heartbreak. Juvenile, perhaps, but unquenchable . . . They were still in the air. I didn't want to be at the debriefing and have to congratulate them, I didn't have the courage." You come away from this book not with a memory of whether Salter finally got his MIG (he did, but his mention of this is nearly an aside) but with an overwhelming sense of the author's unfulfilled yearning. "I had not done what I set out to do and might have done," he writes, though the thing that he was reaching for seems something only he could see.

He eventually tendered his resignation from the Air Force, "the most difficult act of my life": "Never another city, over it for the first time, in the lead, the field that you have never landed on far below, dropping down towards it, banking steeply one way, then the other, calling the tower, telling them who you are. Never another sun-burned face in Tripoli looking up at you as you taxi to a stop. . . . And the dying whine, like a great sigh, of the engine shutting down, the needles on the gauges collapsing. It is over." For Salter, the gulf that opened between his old life and his new, as that engine stopped, was so immense that everything receded into poetic fluidity, like the twisting Yalu River miles below his plane in the Korean skies.

Few if any of the Iraq war memoirs that have been published so far are likely to endure. But the best of them, their narratives as yet immune to the wisdom of time, offer vivid, immediate glimpses of the dust and smoke of war. Such is *One Bullet Away*, a tale told by an intelligent, dedicated warrior seduced by the ethos of the Marines. Nathaniel Fick, a Dartmouth classics major ("People like you are

supposed to be in the other corps,” an embedded journalist tells him), trained to be an elite Marine sniper and served in Afghanistan before spending the first two months of the war on the ground in Iraq. As lieutenant of a platoon attached to the First Reconnaissance Battalion, he commanded twenty-two men.

Fick’s book invites comparisons with Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead*—both men were Marine snipers—if only because it’s easy to imagine that Fick was determined to write a book as different from Swofford’s turbulent memoir as possible. No suicide attempt, pornography fetishes, or stomach-churning shitter detail in Fick’s pages, and the drill instructors at his boot camp say “freakin’.” His descriptions of officer training make it easy to understand why he wanted to be a Marine officer. Hell, he made *me* want to be one. He leads a brotherhood, and that knowledge animates everything that he does: “We had to retain our ability to think when the world was crumbling around us. Not for ourselves, but for our Marines.”

Fick isn’t an elegant writer, but he is, not surprisingly, a thorough one. His book is so meticulous and specific in its descriptions of battles, training, and weaponry that we come to understand, through sheer force of detail, the life of the modern American soldier. Mentions of family, girlfriends, etc.—usually, the memoirist’s bread and butter—are vague and few. But the ins and outs of missions are not, as when Fick’s platoon is assigned to secure a bridge over the Euphrates River in a small Iraqi town called Chibayish, and they commence their laborious planning. “We studied the map, passed around photos, and pushed toy cars across the tent’s wooden floor, rehearsing formations and what we would do when the enemy attacked. Two hours turned into three and then four.” Days and pages of waiting ensue, as Fick and his men examine photographs of the area taken by a U-2 spy plane and, finally, pack and repack their vehicles to drive through Kuwait to the Iraq border.

The surfeit of detail is overwhelming, but in the interstices between missions and battles are Fick’s interactions with his men. From boot camp onward, the Marine Corps encourages, and exploits, these soldiers’ fidelity to one another. At times, Fick’s fellows in *One Bullet Away* are difficult to distinguish. They’re all “bros.” The backslapping camaraderie they share is the stuff of all the war stories we’ve ever read. But that’s because it’s the stuff of war.

Memoirists often attempt to ferret out the contradictions in their experiences. They interrogate emotions, theirs and others'. They question and doubt. Underrepresented—or, at least, underacknowledged by the literati—are the accounts of the true believers. Fick, who wrote his book shortly after he returned from Iraq, gives us the motives of the patriotic warrior, not the reluctant one. Throughout *One Bullet Away*, his conscientiousness gives the lie to the stereotype of the reckless, ill-educated American soldier.

And for that reason, his decision to leave the Marines, which he merely glosses at the end of the book, in the manner of a man who does not wish to dwell on a still-painful thing, is all the more wrenching. To continue in the military life to which he seems so suited, he must knowingly risk the lives of the men with whom he has forged the bonds that the military both invokes and requires. And that, in the end, he cannot do. To read Fick's fresh account, thin on the emotion that drives him and heavy on the military ephemera that fill his days, is to hear the recollections of a man who, in his mind, is a warrior still.

The American way of waging war is undergoing what those who study such things call a revolution in military affairs. Sensors make bombs smarter and weapons more precise. Via satellite, soldiers in individual Humvees track one another's vehicles as little blue icons on computer screens. Soldiers call in air strikes and then come upon the charred remains of their enemies in bombed-out vehicles. Killing has become more distant, less intimate. But death still holds us close. The sand will need to settle for a few years before we know what grip it has held, this time, on the human animal.