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HOME FIRES

On War and Redemption

By Timothy Kudo

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Home Fires features the writing of men and women who have returned from wartime service in the United States military.

When I returned from Afghanistan this past spring, a civilian friend asked, “Is it good to be back?” It was the first time someone had asked, and I answered honestly. But I won’t do that again. We weren’t ready for that conversation. Instead, when people ask, I make it easy for everyone by responding, “It’s fine.” That’s a lie, though. It’s not fine.

It’s not the sights, sounds, adrenaline and carnage of war that linger. It’s the morality. We did evil things, maybe necessary evil, but evil nonetheless. It’s not the Taliban we killed that bother me. They knew as well as I did what can happen when you pick up a gun and try to kill your enemies. But the enemy isn’t the only one who dies in war.

I joined the military when we were already long into this conflict. Aside from driving to San Francisco to protest the Iraq invasion, I quickly embraced the inevitability of these wars and relinquished their execution to the government. That was a terrible mistake. In 2006, as both wars raged and the Iraq conflict seemed doomed, I felt obligated to do something. I had no idea what I was committing to when I raised my right hand and took the oath. I realize that my decision was extreme, but it’s one I felt bound to. Only now do I understand the responsibility that military members bear, not only for the lives of others, but also for the consequences of their actions.

It was on a patrol early in our deployment in September of 2010 when the Afghan farmer dropped his shovel and ran for his life. Our squad of 10 dove for

the ground. We looked toward the staccato crack of machine gun fire but saw nothing. A few anxious Marines fired anyway. We moved. Someone observed Taliban in a small building just ahead. We fired. It was the first time in an hour anyone had a clue where the enemy was. I saw two Afghans calmly building a wall despite the war erupting around them. Nothing made sense.

We cleared the building. As one team assaulted it, a Marine holding security spotted two armed men driving toward us on a motorcycle. Gunfire rang out from multiple directions. "Are you sure they have guns?" I asked. Nobody knew. We shot a smoke grenade as warning in case they were civilians. They paused, then resumed course. We yelled and waved for them to stop. They persisted. I thought: they might kill my Marines but if we kill them, we might be wrong. Cracks and flashes erupted from the motorcycle. The only hard fact about the rules of engagement is that you have the right to defend yourself. You decide for yourself to pull the trigger. The Marines returned fire for 10 long seconds. The motorcycle sparked where the rounds slapped the metal and drove into the bodies. The bike stopped. The men fell.

The building was empty. No bodies, no blood, no bullet casings. The fog of war lifted. I had been certain what was happening and I was wrong. The combination of confusion, chaos and adrenaline can't be explained unless you've also experienced it. We ran to the motorcycle. One Marine made a quiet plea, "Please let them have weapons. Something. Anything." They were dead. Their weapons were sticks and bindles. The muzzle flash was light glaring off the motorcycle's chrome. One man was no older than 16. It was late afternoon then and, in the Muslim tradition, their family quickly arrived to bury them in the last hour of sunlight.

Even now, I don't know what led them to drive toward a group of Marines firing machine guns, despite warnings, yells and waving. I know that our decision was right and, given the outcome, that it was also wrong. We trained to kill for years and given the opportunity, part of us jumped at the chance to finally be Marines. Despite the school construction and shuras, that's what it

meant to make a difference in uniform; it meant killing our enemies. But these men weren't enemies. They were just trying to get to a home so close that their family was able to watch them die. After the shooting, the families encircled us in hysterics as they collected the bodies. It was the first and only time I saw an Afghan adult woman's face. The wailing continued in the distance as we continued on our mission.

The insanity of war means that incidents like this are accepted. By the standards of those who fight wars we actually did the right thing. The catastrophe is that these incidents occur on an industrial scale. Throughout Afghanistan, there are accidental civilian killings; it is war's nature. When we choose war, we are unleashing a force, much like a natural disaster, that can literally destroy everything and from which there's no going back. As 10 years of conflict have shown us, nobody knows how wars end.

With six months left on our deployment I had no choice but to move on. I told myself we did what we were trained to do and that it just ended badly. I stuck with that reasoning despite feeling terrible and soon, my emotions caught up to my logic. People say they can remember a traumatic incident like it was yesterday. I can't. Since my return, Afghanistan has melted into a feeling more than a memory. But I do remember the widows and orphans and wailing families and the faces of two men on a motorcycle. They understood they were being killed as it happened, yet they couldn't accept their fate. They died painfully. Their teeth clenched and grimacing. Their eyes open. Those eyes gave them a final pleading expression. *Why did you kill us?*

Back in the United States, I look at people and think: "You have no idea what right and wrong are." Much that I once held as matters of conscience is now just custom or culture. The challenging thing about ethics is you have to figure them out for yourself. What the war taught me is first: you should always strive to do the right thing even though you can't control the outcome. Second, wrong decisions have tragic, irreversible consequences. There is no return. Nothing changes it and no lesson justifies it.

I never pulled the trigger on my rifle but I ordered other men to kill. For an officer, there is little difference. In all militaries, individuals don't kill, groups do. We are each assigned small tasks in the orchestrated murder of our enemies and oftentimes, this decentralization creates its own momentum. We became excellent at engineering the enemy's death. After one incident, my commanding officer told me that he was ultimately responsible. Yes, by the letter of the law, that is true. But everything we did over there we did together. We're all responsible. I feel it, and I know that the other officers and N.C.O.'s share the same moments of pride and shame. I also know that that this sense of responsibility is shared all the way to the presidents I've served under who saw the consequences of our actions at the hospitals at Bethesda, Walter Reed and Dover Air Force Base.

Only the dead have seen the end of war. This is a maxim that has been used to illuminate humanity's propensity for war, but it is also an accurate reflection of many veterans' experiences. The war not only came back with us, it was here the entire time, experienced by orphans and widows. It was experienced by the widows from my unit who were unable to cook a single meal for their kids since their husband's death. During a memorial a few weeks after our return, families of the dead collapsed grief-stricken in front of their loved ones' pictures as a thousand Marines solemnly bore witness. When an officer went to the house to check on one family, the littlest one told him matter-of-factly, "My daddy is dead."

Civilians can't shoulder the responsibility for killing, but the social contract demands they care for those who do. And this is the great disconnect in our society right now, because that feeling of responsibility is still locked behind the fences of our military bases. My friends killed and died over there for America. And while many of my peers view that as sentimental, jingoistic, naive, or (behind closed doors) stupid, those men believed so deeply in something they were willing to give everything for it. When we wage war to defend the American way of life, there's an obligation to uphold that ideal. Can

we honestly say we've done that?

The Marine Hymn states that we are “first to fight for right and freedom and to keep our honor clean.” Since the shooting, I've thought about what that means and decided that it was beyond good and evil. It was an accident. War doesn't distinguish between innocence or guilt, skill or incompetence, intelligence or idiocy. But we do. We see injustice in the deaths and can't accept their inevitability. But it was fated when we decided to go to war. In that sense, we're all responsible.

After coming home, our commanders told us we earned glory for our unit, but I know it's more complicated than that. War has little to do with glory and everything to do with hard work and survival. It's about keeping your goodness amid the evil. But no matter what happens, you never work hard enough, people die and evil touches everyone. Our lives will go on but the war will never go away. That's why it's not simply good to be back. I thought my war was over, but it followed me. It followed all of us. We returned only to find that it was waiting here the entire time and will always be with us.

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