

Coming home

Pulitzer Prize winning author examines the spin and the politics used to describe the horror young soldiers endure on our modern battlefields

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“Every war has its after-war,” writes David Finkel, “depression, anxiety, nightmares, memory problems, personality changes, suicidal thoughts.” In the recent “Thank You for Your Service” and 2009’s “The Good Soldiers,” Finkel shows us what he means by providing extraordinarily vivid and wrenching accounts of the people among us who are living “after war.”

Perhaps half a million U.S. servicemen and women have come home from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan with either PTSD or traumatic brain injury (TBI) — or both. (TBI occurs when a brain is jolted so violently that

it collides with the inside of the skull and causes psychological damage. Because of chronic exposure to explosions, soldiers in Iraq have experienced TBI at levels never seen before in U.S. soldiers.)

Finkel illuminates the tragedies behind the statistics and generic clinical descriptions in stunning fashion. “The Good Soldiers” chronicles his observations in Iraq while he was embedded with the 800 men of

“Thank You for Your Service” and “The Good Soldiers” By David Finkel

Infantry Battalion 2-16 (Task Force Ranger) during Operation Iraqi Freedom, often called “the surge.” Several years later, in “Thank You for Your Service,” he follows a number of men from the 2-16 and their wives or widows as they try to return to normal life at home. Many of them can’t.

Read together, the force of these two books is staggering. Finkel describes life in every detail at Forward Operating Base Rustamayah in eastern Baghdad. To supplement his keen powers of observation, he has reviewed countless journals, letters, medical records and reports, text messages, emails and phone messages. Rather than generalize or editorialize, he lets the many details speak for themselves.

He describes the month of June 2007 as “a month in which four soldiers died, another lost a hand, one lost an arm, one lost an eye, one was shot in the head, one was shot in the throat, eight were injured by shrapnel, 80 IEDs [improvised explosive devices] or EFPs [explosively formed projectiles] detonated on passing convoys, soldiers were targeted by gunfire or rocket-propelled grenades 52 times, and Rustamayah and the COPs [command outposts] were hit with rockets or mortars thirty-six times.”

Twelve men in the 2-16 died in Iraq, 75 were wounded and approximately 200 came home with PTSD or TBI. As one sergeant says, “How can anybody kill and function normally afterward? Or see someone get killed and function normally afterward? It’s not the human response.”

Finkel examines the toll of these two wars by focusing on individuals.

Adam Schumman is a soldier’s soldier, well respected by people in his platoon. He was sent home early during his third tour because of the severity of his PTSD symptoms. Two years later he feels “completely broken,” is



American soldiers in transport

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usually suicidal and is ashamed of injuries that people cannot see. He wonders why he still tastes the blood that ran into his mouth from the man, wounded by a bullet in his head, who he carried down three flights of stairs on his back.

Schumman’s wife, Saskia, seems to have PTSD symptoms of her own. She calls him “a good broken man” and says, “I can’t do it anymore. I’m an absolute mess. ... I’ll tell you what. If one more person tells me to be patient, I’m going to need a fucking institution.” She goes on to say, “He’s not a soldier anymore. He’s fucking screwed up.” The two fight all the time.

Amanda Doster is the widow of Jim Doster, who substituted for Schumman on patrol so that Schumman could use Jim’s scheduled time to call home. Doster was blown into pieces when his Humvee was hit by an EFP. Amanda’s friends describe her as “relentlessly heartbroken” and are annoyed that she can’t get over her grief. She stores her husband’s ashes in a gun safe and thinks she sees him driving a pest control truck. She is erratic with her kids and increasingly dependent on her friends.

Tausolo Aieti spent seven weeks in PTSD inpatient treatment and now participates in the “Warrior Transition Battalion,” one of 32 facilities for severely psychologically wounded soldiers. Despite serious wounds, he extracted two bleeding soldiers from their Humvee after an IED blew it up and set it on fire. A third soldier, burned alive in the Humvee, now asks Tausolo in dreams, “Why didn’t you save me?”

Nic DeNinno is in an inpatient PTSD program for seven weeks. Suicidal, he is not permitted to have shoelaces and is supervised while shaving. He dreams of a bloody girl and Iraqi bodies in a bathtub and asks his wife if she thinks he’s “a monster.” In Cognitive Processing Therapy he says, “At the time, I mean we were rockin’ and rollin’, we were mean, mean killing machines. Now I look back and I’m like, God, what were we doing? What were we thinking?”

“The Good Soldiers” helps the reader

understand how these soldiers became so damaged. The New Way Forward sent an additional 30,000 U.S. soldiers to Baghdad in a last-ditch effort to reverse a failing military strategy. The stated mission was “to create a balanced, secure, and self-sufficient environment for the Iraqi people.”

Initially gung ho, members of the 2-16 grow

to believe there is no point in being there. They are constantly in danger and become increasingly stressed, scared and traumatized. They go out in daily Humvee convoys that are blown up by IEDs hidden in ubiquitous piles of trash. (“The convoy approached another pile of trash. Maybe one was hidden in there.”) By the end of their deployment, some have been in 40 explosions. On foot patrol, they face snipers and other fighters with small arms and rocket-propelled grenade

launchers.

Nor are they safe when on base. They are attacked without warning by rockets and, later in the surge, by dozens of “lob bombs” filled with shrapnel and ball bearings. During these attacks, the troops can only hunker down against blast walls with their fingers crossed, hoping to survive.

When President Bush boasts that the U.S. is “kicking ass,” the soldiers know that news of the war in the U.S. is “all macro rather than micro.” “The dust, the fear, the high threat level, the isolation: that was the surge the soldiers knew . . . ‘Those people have no idea how bad it is here.’” They have their own belief about their situation: “This place is a complete shithole.”

Finkel, who writes for the Washington Post, has won both the Pulitzer Prize and a MacArthur Genius Grant. In these two books he cuts through the spin and the politics to describe the horror that soldiers (average age 19) faced in Iraq and the lasting physical and psychological effects of their service. The effect on Iraqis is the subject for a different book.

Before people advocate getting into another war, they should be made to read both these books. “Thank you for your

service” cannot compensate for the damage to souls and psyches.

An extended quote from “Thank You for Your Service:”

During the war, every day would begin the same way. The soldiers would tuck lucky charms into their pockets and joke about their final words. They would gather in quick circles to pray and smoke the last cigarette of their lives. They would tighten their body armor, push in their earplugs, lower their shatter-resistant sunglasses, and tug on their burn-resistant gloves, and when someone called out, “Let’s go,” they would climb into their Humvees and go, knowing full well what was waiting for them down the road. They had seen Harrelson’s Humvee rise into the air and burst into fire. They had seen Emory get shot in the head and collapse in his own spreading blood. They had seen soldiers lose legs, lose arms, lose feet, lose hands, lose fingers, lose toes, and lose eyes, and they had heard them, too, in the aid station, in whatever pain is enough pain to make a nineteen-year-old scream. They had heard a soldier ask, “Is anything sticking out of my head?” after a mortar attack. They had heard a doctor say, “I’m hoping, I’m hoping,” about a soldier who in a few minutes would be dead. They had heard a soldier telling a dying soldier as he stuffed what was left of him into a Humvee, “You’re gonna have to move your feet so I can close the door.” They had heard a soldier who had lost his right leg and left leg and right arm and most of his left arm saying, “Ow, it hurts. It hurts.” They had heard a sergeant who was watching something skid across the floor of the aid station, which had fallen from a shredded soldier who was about to die, say with sadness, “That’s a toe.” Most of all, they had heard explosion after explosion and seen dozens of Humvees disappear into breathtaking clouds of fire and debris, and by the end most of them had been inside such a cloud themselves, blindly feeling around in those initial moments to determine if they were alive, or dead, or intact, or in pieces, as their ears rang and their hearts galloped and their souls darkened and their eyes occasionally filled with tears. So they knew. They knew. And yet day after day they would go out anyway, which eventually came to be what the war was about. Not winning. Not losing. Nothing so grand. Just trying until it was time to go home and discovering that life after the war turned on trying again.

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