

Intro for *Warrior Writers: Re-making Sense Reading*

I'm David Huddle from the UVM English Department, and I've been teaching here since 1971. When I returned from Vietnam and got out of the army in 1967, I started writing stories right away, with the aim of trying to become a writer. The first two short stories I published, in the Fall 1969 issue of *The Georgia Review* and the January 1971 issue of *Esquire*, were about Vietnam. Thus, I was able to acquire some credentials, get a teaching job, and become a writer, albeit one with an academic stripe down my back. But here's the hitch--by using Vietnam as my subject matter, I colluded with the Vietnam War in a more insidious way than I had as an Army enlisted man. I'm not alone in this colluding--I stand in a rank with my betters, the distinguished Tim O'Brien, Philip Caputo, Michael Herr, David Rabe, and Larry Heineman--and we stand in the platoon of such writers such as Norman Mailer, Joseph Heller, and Ernest Hemingway, who've exploited the subject matter of war on their way to making writing lives for themselves. It's a problematic tradition, because in trying to convert war into art, we've made war attractive. We've tarted up the old hag. It's not what we had in mind--I'm certain of that--it's just that when we read *The Things They Carried*, we find it exciting and funny and perversely appealing. O'Brien probably intended exactly the opposite, but instead of making a case against war, his writing makes a case for it.

The book we're here to celebrate this evening--*Warrior Writers: Re-making Sense*--breaks the mold of "tainted" writing about war in a couple of ways. The first is that these writers are more concerned with testimony than with art and career. The second way is that this writing tells a truth about war with such raw urgency that there's no way even the most gun-happy recruiter-vulnerable teenager could possibly find it appealing. Take for example, this data from Cloy Richards's poem "A Word is Worth a Thousand Pictures" about a picture of six marines:

Private Perez was killed by a car bomber at a vehicle
checkpoint.

There's only 5 marines in the picture now.

Sergeant Silva lost the use of his left leg after a rocket
attack and is now addicted to painkillers and booze.

There's only 4 marines in the picture now.

Lance Corporal Dubois joined the marines to help conquer his heroin addiction. After three years clean and sober, he came back from Iraq a broken man, and turned back to heroin. He overdosed two months after we got back.

There's only 3 marines in the picture now.

Corporal Allen's stress and emotional problems got the better of him and he started beating his wife and children. Two years after Iraq he's in prison, without a family.

There's only 2 Marines in the picture now.

Private First Class Anderson got dishonorably discharged for drug use 5 months after we came home. Rather than turn to his family for help, he wanders the streets of southern California, begging for money, food, work.

There's 1 Marine left in the picture now, and it's me.

Am I still alive?

I might be physically breathing, but I'm dying inside.

So there really aren't any Marines in that picture and without those Marines it's just a picture of a shattered city in a devastated country.

I ask you to consider what's not in this poem/picture--it offers no irony, no humor, no grand spectacle, no beautifully shaped descriptive sentences. No band of brothers. No grace under pressure. No courage under fire. No surrealism. Just plain old Whisky Tango Foxtrot unvarnished, ugly-as-shit truth. And I say that there is greater integrity in this writing than in all the war novels and poetry that we will ever study in classrooms. I say that this writing is truth that's called for by this war, this nation, this godawful president and his corrupt and blundering and conscienceless administration. I say these writers are being as polite about it as they can be without breaking the law, but they're rubbing our noses in it. As they should be. Because as Frank Rich put it last week in *The New York Times*, "Most Americans don't want to hear, see or feel anything about Iraq, whether [we] support the war or oppose it. [We] want to look away, period, and have been doing so for some time."

The United States is more endangered than it ever has been, but it's not because of terrorists. It's because we're morally asleep, and the White House criminals perfectly

understand that we just don't want to wake up. Our desire to go on with our comfortable lives gives the Bush administration license to go on killing and torturing, making themselves and their friends rich, betraying honorable men and women, making lying the official language of the US government, and disgracing our country in the eyes of the world.

On the other hand, the work of these warrior writers demonstrates that a moral course of action is possible. Against the stream of lies spewing out of the White House, a few precious words of the truth can be set forth. I'm grateful to these men and women for the courageous example they've set in both their words and their actions. In their struggle to put this book in our hands, they have indeed "re-made sense." If American integrity can be restored, it will be in some part because these warrior writers have had the courage to tell us, urgently and directly, the awful things they know--and that we need to know. I hope we have the courage to hear them.