

Introduction

—Wanda Fries

*On Peleliu we fought and died. We're restless lying side by side,
Who gave our all. And now we wait,
too worn to rest, too tired to hate.
We are the earth's repatriate...*

—William Lincoln Simon

Written by a veteran present at the fall of nearly 10,000 of his fellow Marines and infantrymen in 1944, in a battle predicted to last four days, but one that went on instead for two months, these lines from the last poem in *Blue Streak* reveal that the war experiences of the writers in this journal of military poetry cover almost seventy years, a human life span in terms of the battles—some interior—the writers in this volume have fought.

As seems to be continuously and depressingly the case, William's battle itself is controversial. The strategists who made the decisions had yet to learn the lessons of recent prior battles, and the small island and its tiny airstrip proved to be nearly useless in the eventual defeat of the Japanese and the final resolution of the war. A captain who wants to know the reason for the clash of troops he witnesses says to Hamlet:

Truly to speak, and with no addition,
We go to gain a little patch of ground
That hath in it no profit but the name. (*Hamlet* 4.4.16-18)

I am not a pacifist. I am certain that there are rights—particularly the rights of those who cannot defend themselves—that sometimes must be protected, even at the cost of war. I am, however, a believer that my job as a civilian is to hold politicians accountable so that war is the *last*, not the *first*, resort. We must also avoid glorifying the dead and the wounded in a way that allows the politicians to hide behind these warriors’ honor, and we must *always* care for those who, as William points out, “gave their all,” a phrase that, to me, covers not only dying, but the death of innocence. Too often we send children to war. We should take care of the men and women who return.

One way to do that is to listen to them, because they do not speak in one voice, any more than the rest of us speak in one voice. I always cringe when I hear someone claiming to speak “for veterans,” because I know so many of them, and while it’s true that veterans share many common experiences, I can no more predict the opinion of a veteran on a particular political issue, a religious bent, or a musical preference than I can predict anyone else’s. That does not mean, of course, that we cannot speak in unison for veterans’ rights. As for veterans, this volume suggests that they can speak for themselves, in all their variety and diversity.

This volume will be my last term as poetry editor for what was, at its inception, a section of *The Journal of Military Experience*. I have wept with Sergeant Jack Kirt—as did every participant—during a Military Experience and the Arts poetry workshop as his wife read his poem about the night nurse who is the last witness as Private Johnson dies. His poem is included in this volume. Some poems here are raw; others hedge their bets behind an ironic surface that is barbed and cutting. Not all are bleak, and some of

the poems recount the excitement of jumping out of an airplane or the beauty of a Baghdad sunset.

Every poet was a pleasure to work with, and what I got most from them was gratitude; they were grateful that their voices will be heard, grateful for a few editing suggestions, as if I were not the one who should be grateful for the opportunity to read so many lovely lines of beauty and honesty. I hope they would all say that I honored their style, their metaphors, their cadences—their *voices*. I know I tried to. It has been an honor to be a part of this journal, one of the experiences that I will remember all my life.

As I leave, Suzanne Rancourt, herself a veteran, and perhaps for that reason above all other good ones, is more suited to edit *Blue Streak*, will step in as editor. Her own poems have been included in the last two volumes, including this one, the first free-standing journal. They are beautiful.

Read the poems and savor them. Listen. Though some believe our penchant for war is hard-wired, I cannot bring myself to apologize for continuing to hope that the voices of warriors from Homer on will finally be heard until, at last, we beat our swords into ploughshares and need study war no more.