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A Talk with Matt Gallagher and Roy Scranton Editors of *Fire and Forget*

Where did the idea for this anthology come from?

Roy: The idea for *Fire and Forget* came when Jake Siegel, Phil Klay, Perry O'Brien, Matt Gallagher, and I got together and decided to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps. There is a small community of veteran writers in New York, a few of us had been sharing our work with each other, and we knew right away we had something—a moment, a voice, some material—and we wanted to get our stuff out there. Most of the venues open to veterans' writing, like the NEA's Operation Homecoming and the Warrior Writers workshop, tended to focus on the trauma of war, sometimes the politics, and used writing as a form of therapy. Our idea was to assemble a collection on the first principle of good writing: to pull together some of the best writers coming out of these wars, and do it in a way that would represent a real diversity of voices, experiences, and artistic approaches.

Matt, you wrote *Kaboom*, a memoir about your experiences in Iraq, and Roy, you've published poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Why did you choose fiction for this collection?

Matt: Fiction has this paradoxical ability to be closer to the truth while also distanced from it—a very freeing thing for a writer, even in realism. *Kaboom* covered my fifteen months in Iraq, which is a long time, but my experiences were such a small piece of these wars, because they were just one person's limited by that one person's worldview.

I found myself still wanting to write about stories I'd heard overseas, or experienced as a vet coming back to American society, or put together in my mind while daydreaming in the library. Fiction allows the freedom to dig deeper into what these wars were and what they meant. Turned out, I was just one of many young vet writers who discovered this old truth while putting pen to pad.

Roy: Since I work in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, I think a lot about the different things that different modes of writing can do, and on the question of fiction I always come back to Aristotle and Mark Twain. After 9/11, there was a lot of talk about truth being stranger than fiction, about fiction not being able to keep up with the improbability of world events. This is not a new problem. As Twain put it, "Truth *is* stranger than Fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't." Now, if all you want is to gape and jaw at the absurdities, monstrosities, and sheer novelty the human primate can finagle, there's no better place to look than out your window.

But the stories we tell ourselves offer something else. For Aristotle, the difference between historical truth and poetry—or poesis, by which he meant making, or fiction—is the same as it is for Twain. But it is just in *possibilities* that fiction's power lies: it allows

us to reflect on more universal truths, the kinds of things a certain kind of person would say or do, the kinds of situations that happen. Fiction allows us to abstract from the incessant particularity of one event, one moment, and one day something bigger—some larger connection between all of us, something human.

Moreover, in being obliged to stick to possibilities, fiction takes to itself the power to create *new* possibilities. Stories like *Oliver Twist*, *Ulysses*, *1984*, and *Neuromancer* actually change the way we see and think about the world: they change the world itself, as much as an invention like the iPhone or a discovery like the Higgs boson. Fiction is a mode of exploring the possibilities of the condition of being human. Nothing else does that.

The contributors represent a wide range of military jobs and affiliations. How did you select who would contribute?

Roy: We invited submissions from all over the country, reaching out to all the vets and veterans groups we could find, and we took what came in and we read it. Then we argued with each other, sometimes to the point of real ire, about whether certain stories should stay or go. One truly exciting story we had kept us in heated debate right up to the last minute—in the end, we decided we couldn't take it without revisions and the writer stuck to his guns, so we had to let it go. But the primary question was always quality. We wanted good stories.

Matt: It was a much more difficult process than I think anyone anticipated, there are many talented writers associated with the military and vet community, and short stories seem to be a form that writers of all styles and backgrounds enjoy utilizing. We wanted the book to be as representative as possible of these wars in their different forms from 2001 to the present, sure. But ultimately, it came down to which stories were the strongest, as Roy said. Which voices or scenes or images kept us up at night? If a story did that, it's in *Fire and Forget*.

How did your personal military connections shape your editorial perspectives?

Matt: Part of my job at the nonprofit Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America is helping shape our members' stories and experiences into essays and op-eds, which has proven incredibly fulfilling for me, and I hope and believe for our members as well. So I'm more exposed to what Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are writing about than most, and how they do it. For *Fire and Forget*, I wanted to see stories that were both distinct and universal, something that transcended a personal slice of life to capture something overarching, while also feeling fresh and different. No easy criteria to meet, certainly. But that's where the talent and dedication to craft comes in, and where the writers in this book succeeded so brilliantly.

Roy: My military experience shaped my editorial perspective in a couple of ways. First, I could directly relate to the stories our authors were telling, so that when it came to helping them revise and polish their work, I could offer both the editorial-outsider

perspective and a sympathetic-insider perspective. Having an intuitive, experiential sense of what our authors were trying to convey helped me help them refine their work.

Second, time in the service and in Iraq gave me a pretty good bullshit detector. There are constant dangers in telling war stories. Every moment, we risk telling people what they want to hear, what should have happened, or what we only wish was true. On the other side, mere reportage doesn't work: you can't raise banality to the level of truth by strictly recounting events. Reality must be fashioned, fiction made. So somewhere in there, somewhere between pleasing lies and meaningless data, we follow the faint lights of the mighty dead. It's easy to misstep. My own experience has hopefully helped me help my collaborators' work as much as their experience has helped them help mine.

Many of the stories focus not on deployments, but on the difficulties of returning and adjusting to life back home. Why is it important to cover that part of the soldiers' lives?

Roy: It seems to me that the most important cultural fact about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is how little most Americans had to do with them, how disconnected we were and are. One of our writers, Jake Siegel, just came back from Afghanistan last fall. His war—his second deployment—is completely different from the war I saw ten years ago, and has almost nothing to do with our day-to-day lives here in the States.

The radical fissure between *over here* and *over there* opens two ways: first, our disconnection from the suffering, destruction, and death we inflicted on the peoples of Iraq and Afghanistan; second, our disconnection from the American military-industrial complex and the lives of the men and women who do what George Orwell called “the dirty work of empire.” Our anthology focused on the latter, on the sense of strangeness and homelessness coming home, on the alienation soldiers often feel in their own country and their own culture, because *that's the story these veterans needed to tell*.

In a story like “Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere,” “Poughkeepsie,” or “Redeployment,” what you get is the sense of someone living in two worlds. There's one world *over there* they've adapted to, where violence is regular, death is a constant, and the very landscape is hostile—a world where human fate is subject to chance, brute force, necessity, and military hierarchy, and *America* represents naked geopolitical power. Then there's this other world, *over here*, where you're constantly bombarded with advertisements, merchandise, and titillation, and *America* is a fuzzy feeling used to sell cars and political candidates. Over there, you choose whether or not to shoot a speeding van that might contain a bomb... or a frightened family, as in Gavin Kovite's story, “When Engaging Targets, Remember.” Over here, you choose between five hundred TV shows and forty kinds of energy drink.

But it's the same person in both worlds. It's the same soldier or Marine that has to make sense of their life, their decisions, their job. Dramatizing that conflict between *over there* and *over here*, which is at heart a dilemma about American identity and American power, about responsibility and freedom, may be the key message we can offer as veteran writers.

Matt: Because the war doesn't end when the bullets stop flying, especially in this era of an all-volunteer force returning home to hollow slogans rather than opportunities. And—

I'm speaking for myself here, though I'd guess it's a sentiment shared by other writers who penned homefront pieces—I think writing about the war in a world civilians are familiar with, like a front yard in Hawaii, can be accessed by readers otherwise unfamiliar with the nuances of military life and culture. That mattered to me. Writing is a two-way relationship, if readers aren't participating in the experience, it's nothing more than an exercise in self-indulgence.

Why did you choose to include a story from a military spouse?

Matt: Because Siobhan Fallon is a kickass writer with a unique and powerful voice. That was honestly it from my end. The battles military families confront during a deployment are completely different than those of their service members, but no less trying. And those battles are arguably more terrifying, because of the effects of the unknown on the human psyche.

Roy: Asking Siobhan to contribute was an easy decision. When I read the title story in *You Know When The Men Have Gone*, I realized that here was something we'd been missing: the perspective of those people who might not deploy overseas, but who are as deeply entrenched in the modern American military as any veteran—the spouses, lovers, and partners at the other end of the satellite phone call from the FOB (Forward Operating Base).

Siobhan's contribution fit perfectly: stories like Andrew Slater's "New Me" and Mariette Kalinowski's "The Train" give us a soldier's view of home, but Siobhan's "Tips for a Smooth Transition" presents the mirror image: what the person at home is thinking of and worried about, how dangerous, unreachable, and unpredictable the returning soldier can seem, how difficult the struggle for fidelity and compassion can be when the future sometimes looks like an unending series of precarious separations.

You each have stories in the anthology. What was the inspiration behind your own pieces?

Roy: My story, "Red Steel India," is something of an anti-story. I see it operating on two main levels. On one level, there's Wilson and Reading, who are doing a sort of Beavis and Butthead, Didi and Gogo routine—both Wilson and Reading, in different ways, think they're above the situation they're trapped in, but they themselves perpetuate and even help create that situation. They're basically tools, in every sense, but tools who are nevertheless compelled to express their humanity by whatever trifling, idiotic means available. On this level, I see "Red Steel India" as an absurdist comic sketch.

On another level, at the level of the reader's expectations, there's the whole question of narrative progress, climactic violence, trauma, and epiphany that most people seem to expect from war stories, the kind of thing that Nikolai Rostov gins up about "the Schön Graben affair" in *War and Peace*: not the chaos, mess, fear, and stupid happenstance of war, but a clear, intelligible, meaningful plot that just happens to fit Nikolai's audience's preconceptions as well as Don Quixote's windmills fit his. "Red Steel India" works to frustrate the implacable pull toward climactic epiphany—the Aristotelian anagnorisis—in the hopes of opening another mode of perceiving the flow

and repetition of events, and perhaps making the reader themselves reflect on their own narrative expectations.

In this way, “Red Steel India” is of a piece with my novel *War Porn*, from which it’s taken, which tells a story about our desire for war stories, and what that desire might cost.

Matt: There’s a subset of the military—in the Army and Marines, particularly—that have borne the brunt of the multiple deployments of the past decade with what can best be described as resigned stoicism. War for a year, home for a year, war for a year, rinse and repeat. What happens when those starkly contrasting worlds begin to blur, when the normal becomes abnormal and vice versa? That was the genesis of “And Bugs Don’t Bleed”: trying to capture the burden of the tip of the spear in the micro tale of one relationship falling apart, even when the girlfriend back home is doing everything in her power to hold things together.

Further, having been stationed in Hawaii myself, the juxtaposition between environments was too rich not to utilize. It was beyond surreal training for a desert war on a piece of volcanic rock in the middle of the South Pacific. The tropical indolence of Hawaii seemed the ideal setting for the raw, violent undercurrents of the story.

Which story in this collection touched you the most?

Matt: It’s very difficult to just name one, but I will: Perry O’Brien does something in “Poughkeepsie” that keeps on adding layers with every rereading of it. It’s funny without being campy, it’s sorrowful without being sentimental, it’s profound without trying too hard. Plus, I myself have dreamed of training an animal army to take over a college campus, albeit with bears instead of rabbits.

Roy: Every story in this collection matters to me, and each one does something different and particular. At this point, it’s like trying to pick your favorite kid. But I have to say, of all the great work we’ve been lucky enough to include in *Fire and Forget*, I think Jake Siegel’s “Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere” reaches a level all its own.

I hesitate to say too much about it, for fear of gilding the lily, but the way Jake manages to work his story right into the hazy ache between memory and desire, between the frenzy to come home and the weird longing to go back, and the way he imbues the narrator’s conflict about how and whether he can even tell his story with a kind of explosive subliminal power, make “Smile, There Are IEDs Everywhere” ring with an emotional truth devastating in its honesty and clarity.

Can you explain the significance of the title, *Fire and Forget*?

Roy: When we were coming up with a title, we went through a lot of ideas. One of our favorites was *Did You Kill Anybody?*, which is just about the most ignorant question you could ever ask a veteran—and one that we’ve all been asked at least once, often by total strangers. Another favorite was *I Waged a War on Terror and All I Got Was This Lousy T-Shirt*, but that seemed too long.

Fire and Forget is a term applied to certain weapons, usually missiles, that once released seek their own target. The weapon needs no additional guidance. *Fire and Forget* stuck with us because it's such a paradox, because it touches so aptly on the double-edged problem we face in figuring out what to do with our experience. On the one hand, we need to tell the stories of these wars, if for no other reason than to remind people what happened. On the other hand, there's nothing most of us would rather do than leave these wars behind. But for a soldier, to fire—and *forget*—is the one thing you can't ever do.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

Roy: I believe narrative is a collaborative art; I believe the reader shapes as much of their reading experience as does the writer. So while I certainly hope that readers come away from these stories as moved, chastened, and stricken, as impressed by the effort to make sense out of violence and death, and as pleased by the craft and aesthetic accomplishment of these stories as I have been, what's more important to me is what readers *bring* to this book: curiosity, independent thought, and a desire not just to be entertained, but to be changed.

Matt: I want readers to understand that our stories are their stories, that our history is their history. There is no clean narrative to emerge from these wars, and that's okay, that's the way of 99.9% of human events. But just because a narrative isn't clean doesn't mean it's not meaningful and that important lessons can't be gleaned from it. We're not heroes because we served and wrote about it, nor are we pawns. We're American sons and daughters channeling experience into art. That's it—though “it” is still a pretty awesome thing.