

# Three Perspectives of the Iraq War: Generation Kill (the novel and the HBO Series) and One Bullet Away

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**Three Perspectives on the Iraq War: *Generation Kill* (the Novel and the HBO Series) and *One Bullet Away***

Završni rad

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## Contents

Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
1. An Overview of War Journalism.....	5
2. An Officer's Position and Perspective.....	8
3. Enlisted Men's Position and Perspective.....	9
4. Battle of Nasiriyah.....	10
4.1. A Journalist's Perspective.....	10
4.2. An Officer's Perspective.....	11
4.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective.....	12
5. Battle of Al Muwaffaqiyah.....	14
5.1. A Journalist's Perspective.....	14
5.2. An Officer's Perspective.....	15
5.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective.....	17
6. Battle of Al Gharraf.....	19
6.1. A Journalist's Perspective.....	19
6.2. An Officer's Perspective.....	20
6.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective.....	22
Conclusion.....	23
Works Cited.....	25

## Abstract

Receiving accurate information is very important, especially when dealing with topics such as war. The 2003 Iraq War is a relatively recent conflict between The United States of America and other Coalition forces against Iraqi Army led by Saddam Hussein. The literature about this particular conflict is still in the making, so it is important to know how to disambiguate between accurate information and sensationalism. This paper tackles the problem of accurately conveying facts about the Iraq War by analyzing three battles through three different perspectives, namely those of journalists, officers, and enlisted personnel. Each of them perceive the war through the prism of their own beliefs and prior experiences, and due to that, it is necessary to filter their own subjective perceptions from the objective truth. That is done by looking into one event from various points of view. By comparing how the three battles were narrated from each of the perspectives, this paper aims to extract the information that overlaps in all of the perspectives. Those pieces of information can be regarded as objective, whilst the rest of the individual narratives are personally influenced and vary slightly, depending on the narrator. Sources from which these three perspectives will be drawn are Evan Wright's war reports compiled into a book titled *Generation Kill*, which was later turned into a TV miniseries, and Nathaniel Fick's war memoir *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*.

Keywords: Iraq War, three perspectives, *Generation Kill*, *One Bullet Away*, battles

## Introduction

To even begin discussing various perspectives on the 2003 Iraq War, it is vital to explain some basic terminology, namely the setting, the hierarchical relationship of the battalion in question, and some of the more frequently used terms in this analysis.

First, the invasion on Iraq began on 20 March 2003, and the open hostilities formally ended on 1 May 2003, when President Bush declared the end of open hostilities due to the defeat of Iraqi army. This paper will analyze the invasion of Iraq from the perspective of the Second Platoon of Bravo Company of the First Reconnaissance Battalion. Most of the time during the initial invasion, First Reconnaissance was spearheading the assault and, due to that, they were often the first and the only unit in a hostile territory. Three battles deemed most significant in this initial stage of the invasion are the battles of Nasiriyah, Al Muwaffaqiyah, and Al Gharraf. Nasiriyah was the first major battle in the invasion, and the city of Nasiriyah is one of the biggest in Iraq. It is also of great strategic value since it controls several bridge crossings across the Euphrates. The next battle is that of Al Muwaffaqiyah. In itself, Al Muwaffaqiyah is an insignificant little town serving as a milestone for the Marines on their way to Baghdad. It was, however, a place of a very tense battle where Reconnaissance Platoon was ambushed from all sides, and they suffered some casualties. Finally, there is the battle of Al Gharraf. Al Gharraf is a town north of Nasiriyah where U.S. Marines encountered heavy resistance. Since it would be strategically a bad idea to leave an entrenched enemy town behind your own lines, Marines had to pacify the resistance in order to progress forward. They suffered minor casualties there. With regards to hierarchy, general Mattis was in charge of the entire Iraq Invasion whilst the battalion commander Ferrando was the Reconnaissance commander. Fick's immediate superior was captain Craig Schwetje, and Fick himself was the Platoon commander.

These battles are analyzed through the eyes of Evan Wright, an embedded journalist in the Second Platoon, the enlisted personnel of the Platoon, the Platoon commander, Nathaniel Fick. Wright's and enlisted men's perspective are drawn from Evan Wright's war reports compiled into a book *Generation Kill*, first published in 2004, and from a subsequent television series of the same name premiered in 2008. Fick's perspective is drawn from his memoir *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*, published in 2005. *Generation Kill* is organized into "Prologue," thirty-five chapters and "Epilogue." It provides insight into the minds of the ordinary soldiers and non-commissioned officers with hints of the writer's own views. The HBO series *Generation Kill* is spanned across seven episodes and covers

most of the events from the books but in a much more condensed manner. Fick's memoir is divided into three major parts – “Peace,” “War,” and “Aftermath.” For this paper, the only relevant part is “War,” which is divided again into two parts; the first part deals with Fick's training and deployment into Afghanistan, and the second part deals with the war in Iraq.

It is mention-worthy that the Iraq War literature is still in the making and dominantly non-fictional since the Iraq War can still be considered a present event. However, there are some noteworthy examples of literature regarding this war which includes mostly memoirs by the participants such as Colby Buzzell's *My War: Killing Time in Iraq*, Kayla Williams' *Love My Rifle More than You*, or Chris Kyle's *American Sniper*. New material is being published daily, both in form of war memoirs and war-fiction.

According to the article “A Golden Age of War Writing? A Critical Companion to Contemporary War Lit,” one of the problems with contemporary war literature is a lack of its professional assessment: “The critical evaluations so far have been complimentary, by-and-large, which is cool, but sharper-edged critique by sterner critics is sure to come. . . . [W]e also await the academic community's assessment of contemporary war literature using the current methodologies of literary analysis” (“A Golden Age of War Writing?”). The lack of a professional evaluation of war literature is evident in the fact that Iraqi professor Ikram Masmoudi published a survey of war literature in June 2015 titled *War and Occupation in Iraq War Fiction* before any American scholar did (“A Golden Age of War Writing?”).

Another noteworthy article about war literature was published in *New York Times* by Brian Van Reet, a war veteran, who fought in Baghdad in 2004-2005. The article was published in 2013, and is titled “A Problematic Genre: The Kill Memoir.” In it Van Reet compares war fiction with war memoirs and criticizes the sensationalism produced by the “service members a little too proud of the lives they took in Iraq and Afghanistan” (“A Golden Age of War Writing?”). Van Reet compares war memoirs *Carnivore*, *American Sniper* and *No Easy Day* with war fiction, namely Abrams' *Fobbit* and Powers' *Yellow Birds*, which, in his opinion, described in a better and more accurate fashion what it was like in Iraq. He criticizes these memoirs due to their sensationalistic approach to war which can be observed from their subtitles, namely, “A Memoir by One of the Deadliest American Soldiers of All Time,” “The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History,” “The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden” (Van Reet). He concludes his article by saying: “Good fiction eradicates the barrier between self and other, while the kill memoir reinforces the military-civilian divide. . . . [T]he author of the kill memoir . . . offers

the spectacle of high body counts and terrorists twitching on the floor as proof that we are winning” (Van Reet).

Those and numerous other sources about the war in Iraq can be found online but, as it was already mentioned, besides Masmoudi’s newly published survey, a comprehensive account of contemporary American war literature is non-existent.

## 1. An Overview of War Journalism

Journalists have become a necessary part of any war. In order to receive accurate and up-to-date information about the ongoing conflict, many editors and media houses seek to embed their reporters in combat units. To embed a reporter means to assign him to a specific platoon which he will follow around and report about the war from the primary source. The reporter is granted security by his entourage and the military is granted publicity.

The beginnings of war correspondence date back to World War II in which, according to Steward, U.S. Army and Marines Corps accomplished this task with teams of combat correspondents: “The combat correspondent concept began with the spring of 1942 by the U.S. Marine Corps” (1). According to the same author, in World War II and the Korean War, while the United States still had a drafted Army, they had many professional journalists in its ranks and therefore a great deal of them were assigned to the correspondent teams (2). Since they no longer have drafts, the Army’s source of trained and experienced journalists has significantly dwindled, so they have to employ civilian ones. That has opened up the opportunities for people like Michael Herr and Evan Wright. Michele Norris offers a short overview of Herr’s book, *Dispatches*, that was published in 1977 and reflected on the Vietnam War, in her article “Through A Correspondent’s Eyes: Revisiting Vietnam.” Michelle says: “Herr was 27 when he went to Vietnam as a reporter, only slightly older than the men about whom he wrote. That fact was crucial. He shared their world. The war he depicts is less a military event than a cultural and psychological one, an experience that marks these boy soldiers like a tattoo that penetrates to the bone.” Herr’s book is regarded as one of the best and most accurate books ever written on the Vietnam War. What sets it apart from other books of that period is that its author wrote about the people there and their emotions; in one paragraph, according to Norris, he describes a conversation with a major returning for a second tour: “After the first tour, I’d have the goddamndest nightmares, the officer tells him. You know, the works: bloody stuff, bad fights, guys dying, me dying. I thought they were the worst, he says. But I sort of miss them now.” It is exactly that kind of writing that the audience seemed to respond to. They wanted it personal and up close instead of sterilized versions which they were usually served.

A more recent example is Evan Wright, a reporter on the Iraq War. He wrote a series of articles for which he won the National Magazine Award for Excellence in Reporting in 2004. He later compiled those articles into a book and subsequently worked on its television adaptation. Near the beginning of the book, before his deployment to Camp Matilda, Wright



makes a mention of the journalists' division into those who are pro-war and those who are opposed to it. He even mentions a fistfight between his American and Canadian colleagues:

War fever, at least among reporters, has been running pretty high. Before coming to Kuwait, while staying at the main media hangout hotel by the Navy's port in Bahrain, I'd witnessed two colleagues get into a smack down in the lobby over the issue of war and peace. A Canadian wire-service reporter, bitterly opposed to the war, knocked down a loudly patriotic American photographer in favor of it. (28)

American journalists seem far more unified in being pro-war than their international colleagues:

When I watched the broadcast of Colin Powell making the case for war to the UN, I was aboard a Navy ship in the Gulf with a group of American reporters who cheered whenever Powell enumerated another point building the case for the invasion. They booed when European diplomats presented their rebuttals. Being among reporters here has sometimes felt like the build up to a big game, Team USA versus The World. (28)

When he first arrived at Camp Matilda, Marines base in Kuwait, Wright was greeted by commander Ferrando and introduced to Fick, who was the commander of the platoon that Fick was to join. Upon his arrival, Wright was sceptical about the war in the first place and did not have too high an opinion on the Marines about whom he says the following:

Culturally, these Marines would be virtually unrecognizable to their forebears in the "Greatest Generation." They are kids raised on hip-hop, Marilyn Manson and Jerry Springer. For them, "motherfucker" is a term of endearment. . . . These young men represent what is more or less America's first generation of disposable children. More than half of the guys in the platoon come from broken homes and were raised by absentee, single, working parents. Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and Internet porn than they are with their own parents. Before the "War on Terrorism" began, not a whole lot was expected of this generation other than the hope that those in it would squeak through high school without pulling too many more mass shootings in the manner of Columbine. (18)

This shows his initial opinion on the Marines he was with. He barely regarded them as persons; they were broken things sent to do what they do best and that is to kill. Yet, his opinion drastically changed toward the end of the book, and that will be shown through a few

key events, namely, in the opinions he expressed during the battles of Al Gharraf, Al Muwaffaqiyah, and Nasiriyah.

The Marines did not welcome him with open arms either. When Wright first arrived, they regarded him as a civilian, an outcast, and corporal Josh Person accused him of being a liberal on his first day. They later embraced him as one of their own when he refused to quit even after several near-death situations, and also when they found out that he had written articles for Hustler magazine.

## 2. An Officer's Position and Perspective

Fick's account is drawn from his memoir, *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*. Not anyone can become an officer of the United States Marine Corps. They are a cut above the rest of the grunts and should inspire trust and enthusiasm into their men. According to the information gathered from the official USMC web page, to enlist in the Marines you have to be between seventeen and twenty-nine years of age, have your high school diploma, and pass a physical examination. To become an officer, however, you have to have at least a bachelor's degree and you must be a citizen of the United States ("Marine Requirements"). Nathaniel Fick is a first lieutenant, and he has met or exceeded all of the criteria. When describing the landscape and battles, he does it like a Marine officer, without dwelling on colours and sundown, but instead focusing on the tactical appraisal. Unlike Evan Wright, whose aim in the war was to recount the events as objectively as possible, Fick's job was to keep his men from getting killed. Also, he is a lot less likely to talk badly about his commanding officers and quote his Marines on subjects that would get them in trouble with the chain of command. Wright has no problems in quoting marines joking about 'accidentally' shooting captain McGraw or complaining how incompetent their company commander is. Fick completely omits these parts, and that in a way takes away from the realism of his experience. Although his intentions are honourable, trying to preserve the marines in question from getting in trouble, he is instead denying the reader a true atmosphere in the Platoon. Through his eyes everything seems by the book and according to a plan, whereas from Wright's perspective, it is clear that the morale in the platoon is deteriorating due to the series of bad decisions from the chain of command. In Wright's account, the Marines are very vocal when talking badly about their stupid commanding officer who they have nicknamed Encino Man, while Fick fails to even mention the nickname, let alone criticize his series of dumbness and incompetence. Fick's perspective of the war is analysed by examining his insights from his memoir in regards with the three battles that are described in this paper.

### 3. Enlisted Men's Position and Perspective

This war is also examined from the perspective of those who fought it the most, the enlisted men. Their attitude on the war in general and on individual missions is expressed in a much more vulgar way, mostly in their own marine jargon. After all, they are the ones who will suffer the greatest price of their officers' incompetence. That is why they are much less forgiving when it comes to stupidity than lieutenant Fick. They give their commanding officers derogatory nicknames and so captain Craig Schwetje is nicknamed "Encino Man," probably on a reference to a 1992 movie of the same name about a cave man. The first time Fick says something about Schwetje is when he mentions that he is a super star football player, and refuses to refer to him even by his name. The enlisted men, on the other hand, refer to him exclusively as Encino Man, usually preceded by an adjective "fucking," or "stupid." The same goes for his executive officer, nicknamed Casey Kasem. When two of them are trying to call in an artillery strike dangerously near their own positions, Doc Bryan summarizes the opinion of the entire company about the two of them: "Doc Bryan is growing alarmed. 'Sir, I don't like this,' he says to Fick. Nodding toward Encino Man and Casey Kasem, he adds, 'When those two put their heads together it's fucking dangerous'" (Wright 169). The second incompetent commander is captain Dave McGraw, nicknamed Captain America, most likely to parody his courage and leadership abilities, which are non-existent. He is prone to panicking and hysterical yelling on the radio. His behaviour is best described by lieutenant colonel Ferrando in Wright's *Generation Kill*: "An officer's job is to throw water on a fire, not gasoline" (81).

The enlisted men and their views will be analysed in regards to the three already mentioned battles. Their experiences are primarily drawn from *Generation Kill*, both the HBO series and Evan Wright's book.

## 4. The Battle of Nasiriyah

### 4.1. A Journalist's Perspective

The first battle that will be analysed is the battle of Nasiriyah. During the initial artillery bombardment, Wright describes it in great detail; he mentions types of shells and artillery range controversy about collateral damage which is mostly attributed to imprecise artillery strikes. He seems to be fascinated by the gear and describes it in great detail, here and in many other places in the book. He tells about the first time the Americans “screwed” the citizens of Nasiriyah. It was in 1991, during the George H. W. Bush’s administration, that U.S. Air Force dropped thousands of leaflets, urging the citizens to rise against Saddam, but then allowed Saddam to quell the rebellion by force. He ironizes the tactics by saying: “Despite America’s dazzling high-tech capabilities—the Marines move through Nasiriyah by blasting it to hell” (126). On the other hand, he is relieved because he believes that every round he sees fired towards the city ups their odds of surviving (126). The differences in perspectives are obvious when viewing this battle from Fick’s and from Wright’s points of view. When moving into Nasiriyah, Wright is more concentrated on the environment; he notices the weather, the colour of the river, the stray dogs, civilians, even a building’s colour. Wright offers a vivid description of the environment: “We are surrounded by shattered gray buildings, set back about fifty meters on either side of the road. The things you look at are the thousands of gaps everywhere—windows, alleys, doorways, parapets on the roofs—to see if there are any muzzle flashes” (129). Wright also interrupts the narrative to give brief biographies of the characters, like when he stops describing the battle of Nasiriyah and jumps to major Eckloff’s biography. Wright reports the drive through Nasiriyah in a true journalist fashion. He acts as a middleman between us and the Marines. While going into great detail about the feelings and personal life of the marines surrounding him, he does not talk at all about his own feelings. As a civilian, he must have been petrified by the drive through an ambush in which many soldiers lost their lives, but he does not write about any of that. He strives to be objective and to present the objective of his work, the war and the Marines, as objectively as possible.

#### 4.2. An Officer's Perspective

Unlike Evan Wright, Fick does not try to be objective; this is a book about his experience of the war after all. While driving into Nasiriyah, Fick and his men are welcomed by the bloody and bullet-rattled Humvees of the 507<sup>th</sup> Maintenance Company which took a wrong turn into Nasiriyah. After that, Fick writes: "Every tree, every wall, and every building looked hostile. I was afraid for the first time in Iraq" (204). He says that everything was blurry and slow and was worried that he would not react on time when the shooting began. When they get into a firefight, Fick's first reaction is to laugh (205). He observes the positions of other units and the furious shooting from both sides and says that it reminds him of a set of a Vietnam War movie. He goes on to describe the battle like an after action report; he describes unit positions, who is shooting where, who is guarding the flank, enemy positions. He does not digress from the action to describe one person, like Wright does. Fick says that "combat slides emotions so far up the scale that amusing events become hilarious" (206). That is why he sees some soldiers maniacally laughing during the engagement. They retreated from the first attempt to drive through the city. On their second push, they rolled into the city and Fick observes the aftermath of a day's combat: "an amtrac sat in the road with its roof peeled back like a sardine can. Packs and sleeping bags littered the ground, and I saw lumps covered with ponchos. Dead Marines" (209). That is basically it when it comes to the battle itself. Fick did not go into great detail nor was he prone to Wright's fits of sensationalism. This drive through a hostile town was every day's work for Fick. When you watch this battle in the *Generation Kill* HBO series, the greater part of the drive is calm; the platoon is surrounded by friendly troops and casualties from all sides, but they receive no direct enemy fire. Captain McGraw is panicking when they stop and is yelling: "they could be coming from all sides! This is the last place we should be" (episode 2, "The Cradle of Civilization"). A little while after that, he is also seen shooting an unarmed Iraqi. None of this is mentioned in Fick's account. Be it because captain McGraw is his superior officer, or because he did not see the incident, Fick's description of the battle of Nasiriyah begins promisingly. Two Marine regiments were stopped by the Fedayeen, but after a whole night of bombing, they did not encounter almost any resistance in the city. That could be the main reason why Fick did not waste too many words on this battle.

### 4.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective

The preparations for the battle begin at about three in the morning and Colbert and his team are expected to move out at dawn. Since the cover of darkness and their night vision optics are their primary advantage over their enemies, Colbert says that the order is “fucking asinine” (Wright 127). Nevertheless the order stands and they get ready to move. Corporal Josh Person and Trombley talk about which music would best fit when they roll into Nasiriyah in order to demoralise the Iraqis. They probably talk about that in order not to demoralise themselves; all of them are aware that a tough fight is ahead and that some of them might not pull through. That is why they appear so cheerful before the attack. When they finally move into Nasiriyah, they encounter other Marines who are signalling them to don their gas masks because they think that they are under a gas attack. Colbert is incredulous and tells his men not to put on their gas masks: “There’s birds flying. Fuck it. We’re not putting on our masks” (Wright 128). Throughout the invasion, they have been required to wear so called MOPP<sup>1</sup> suits, which should save them in case of a chemical attack. No such attack ever took place either in the book or in the HBO series. MOPP suits are there as a justification. The whole war started over Saddam Hussein’s alleged possession of chemical weapons. If they had deployed without adequate protection, then it would have been obvious even to the lowest marine that that was just an excuse to invade Iraq which would have affected the morale to an unknown extent. Colbert’s team had an uneventful trip through Nasiriyah and, although there was much shooting Kocher, the team leader in Bravo’s Third Platoon says that “a lot of this was just some officers and POGs<sup>2</sup> who think it’s cool to be out there shooting up buildings” (Wright 130). In the HBO series they are also driving through the town hearing gunshots in the distance and watching Cobra attack helicopters blowing up buildings. Whenever the helicopters blow something up, the Marines cheer “Get some!” and pump fists in the air. When they are ordered to halt, so that other company can extract a wounded marine, Captain America is “spazzing out on their comms” (“The Cradle of Civilization”) and his soldiers again talk about killing him accidentally. When they leave the town, Trombley is dissatisfied because he did not get to shot. Nasiriyah was a quiet mission for them, and everyone except Trombley are happy that they managed to avoid any serious resistance.

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<sup>1</sup> *Mission Orientated Protective Posture* – is a protective gear used by military personnel in a toxic environment, e.g., during a chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear strike (“What Does MOPP Mean in Military?”)

<sup>2</sup> *Person Other Than Grunt* – a derisive nickname that frontline troops have for the support units. (“What Does POG Stand for?”)

To conclude, these three perspectives differ in some aspects, primarily in their narrative focus. Wright seeks to be objective; he describes the environment to the best of his abilities and tries to provide historical context to the reader. Fick does not care about that. His perspective is drawn from his memoir and in it he writes about how it was for him and only for him. He is focused on his actions and feelings during combat and admits to his sensory and memory deficiency when hearing the same event retold by his fellow marines. Backgrounds of other marines do not have a place in Fick's memoirs and his descriptions of the environment are school-like definitions of a trained platoon commander. The enlisted men are the ones who are down to earth the most. They do not care about feelings or the environment; they are worried about survival. They are worried about forgoing their technological advantage and going head on into a fortified position in open top Humvees. They are more afraid of the stupidity of their commanders than they are of the enemy.



## 5. The Battle of Al Muwaffaqiyah

### 5.1. A Journalist's Perspective

Once again, after examining this battle, the same elements mentioned in the battle of Nasiriyah can be found. Wright is in sergeant Colbert's lead Humvee, which will logically be the last one to get out of the kill zone set by the Fedayeen, the fanatic Iraqi combatants. Nevertheless, throughout his narration of this combat situation, not a single line of his emotions regarding his life-threatening situation can be found. He concentrates on other people, like corporal Person and his thick Missouri accent (255) or the tune that sergeant Colbert is singing. He reports the events as if he were oblivious or impervious to danger, like a sports commentator, objectively and accurately, feeding us information without any personal insight. According to Kuhlmann et al., "psychosocial stress impairs memory retrieval in humans and suggests that emotionally arousing material is especially sensitive to this effect" (2977). The plausibility of his version of events is questionable since he must have been under heavy emotional duress and might have falsely reconstructed some of the events that transpired. Wright's perspective has quite a few overlaps with Fick's version in *One Bullet Away*, but it seems much more as if Wright wanted to make it more interesting. He conveys every swear word or disparagement of the Marines toward their superiors, for which some of them might have got in trouble. Due to that, his credibility as an impartial and objective narrator of this war is in question because it is highly unlikely that he, an ordinary civilian untrained in the ways of warfare, was able to accurately remember every detail and every word that has been said during the time that he was being fired upon. Even Fick, who is a trained Marine, admits to some holes in his memory, so Wright is probably trying to fill in the gaps in an interesting way.

## 5.2. An Officer's Perspective

This is the battle in which, according to Fick, Marines are finally taking the fight to the enemy. Their objective is to move into Al Muwaffaqiyah as a battalion during the night and split up into platoons and then set up ambush points for the Fedayeen retreating out of town. NCOs were sceptical about the mission, and they voiced their discontent on its imprudence. The most vocal of them was sergeant Patrick, who was against setting ambush points in the dark in the unfamiliar territory primarily because there was no way for them to identify who is Fedayeen and who is not without, as he puts it, walking up to them and asking them. Fick agrees with Patrick, but has no choice in the matter; the order came from the Battalion command and it was his job to make sure that they execute the mission in a way so that all of his men come out of it alive. After they agreed on a plan of action, Fick describes the town of Al Muwaffaqiyah, again as if it were an intelligence report meant to be passed down to troops.

When they began the actual mission, they moved in a single column and they needed to cross a bridge before entering the town. When looking into this mission in retrospect, Fick says that they should have sent foot patrols to recon the bridge before the rest of the battalion arrived in Humvees, but the command said that there was not any time for that. When they neared the bridge and found an obstacle on the road, Fick immediately braced himself, even before the fire fight started. He knew that they had driven into an ambush (267). Upon the realisation, he says: "The fear was palpable. You could hear it and feel it and even taste it, like a penny under your tongue" (267).

Seconds after he had given the order to turn around, sergeant Colbert spotted men in the trees and opened fire. What ensued was an intense fire fight with enemies shooting from all sides. Yet, once the shooting started, fear gave in to duty: "Fear passes quickly. Once the shooting started, I was busy directing the platoon, talking on the radio, and shooting back. It wasn't courage so much as task saturation" (268). They were getting suppressed from the flanks and from straight ahead. Fick knew that if they did not get out of there fast, that they were all going to get killed. He got out of his vehicle and went on foot to Colbert's lead Humvee to direct their retreat because, due to an obstacle in the road placed by the Iraqis and poor visibility in the dark, they were unable to go back because the vehicle behind them was blocking their way. Fick says that he was more concerned with getting shot from his own men because peripheral vision on night vision goggles was very bad. While he was directing the convoy, he got radio reports of casualties, but no fatalities due to Doc Bryan's rigorous

medical training of his Platoon. They managed to fall back from the ambush point with sergeant Patrick and corporal Stafford being shot in the leg. This battle was a serious blow on their morale and he knew it. Even the lowest of the Marines was asking himself why the command was sending them into ambush in open Humvees when they had had tanks and light armoured vehicles stationed a few miles up the road (270). Regarding that, Fick says: "From an armchair in Iowa, it would have seemed foolish. From a dark roadside in Iraq, its lunacy ate away at our confidence" (270). After that, tanks were sent in and under the cover of their fire, First Reconnaissance moved once more into Al Muwaffaqiyah.

When they secured the town and searched for the dead bodies, Fick was shocked to realise that they had fought against the Syrians and not the Iraqis. In his book, he rationalizes this by saying: "They shot at us and missed. We shot at them and didn't miss. The fight was fair" (273). In the series, however, Fick's reaction is somewhat different. After the mission, in the episode "A Burning Dog," he says: "Those jihadists who attacked us? Isn't this the exact opposite of what we want to happen here? . . . He wasn't a jihadi until we came to Iraq." It is obvious from his demeanour that Fick has his doubts about the war, but he is doing a very good job in hiding that from his men. He is mostly keeping his doubts to himself and tries to dispel any doubts from his own platoon in order to keep the morale on a satisfactory level. The battle of Al Muwaffaqiyah has been a tough one, even from Fick's perspective, and also in his opinion a tactical error that should have been avoided because it could have led to unnecessary deaths.

### 5.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective

The enlisted men's perspective is aptly put by Pappy in a single sentence: "The people running this can fuck things up all they want. But as long as we keep getting lucky and making it through alive, they'll just keep repeating the same mistakes" (251). This mission is yet another in a series of botched strategies in the eyes of the ordinary marines. They are waiting just a few kilometres from the bridge into Al Muwaffaqiyah and, as Doc Bryan says, ". . . it seems like a no-brainer to send a foot patrol out and observe the bridge before driving onto it. 'Reconnaissance,' Doc Bryan points out, 'is what Recon Marines do'" (251). None of the logical steps are, of course, taken and they are ordered to go across under the cover of the night. At least that would sound like a good move, if they had had enough batteries for their thermal-imaging scopes, which they did not. Due to that, they drive right into a Fedayeen ambush and a fierce fire-fight ensues.

During the fight, Q-tip Stafford is wounded in his leg by a piece of shrapnel and Pappy is shot in the foot. Both of them tourniquet their wounds and resume fire. Espera is firing his weapon and saying Hail Marys. They managed to extricate themselves from the kill zone and escape with only two men wounded. Marines are unusually quiet and subdued. They try to patch up their Humvees as best as they can and they send Pappy to the rear for medical aid. They move into the town once more, and this time they manage to take it. After the battle, Wright conveys their post-combat reactions, which differ from soldier to soldier. Person says that he felt no fear; Trombley barely managed to stay awake and said that he had an erection. Colbert is excessively cheerful and does not appear phased by the near-death experience in the least. He does get annoyed, however, when he opens his MRE<sup>3</sup> and finds peanut butter instead of jalapeno cheese (265-266).

Wright is curious about how they feel about last night and asks Doc Bryan how he feels about killing two people last night. He answers: "It's a funny paradox. . . . I would have done anything to save that shepherd kid. But I couldn't give a fuck about those guys I just killed. It's like you're supposed to feel fucked-up after killing people. I don't" (266). Espera's experience is quite different: "That dude I saw crawling last night, I shot him in the grape. Saw the top of his head bust off. That didn't feel good. It makes me sick" (266).

To conclude, the Battle of Al Muwaffaqiyah was a tactical error which resulted in having two men wounded and all of them nearly killed. Wright tries once more to give an objective

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<sup>3</sup> Meal Ready to Eat – a standard Marine field ration.

perspective on the Battle, but his version is to be analysed with scrutiny because he could not have possibly remembered what every soldier had said in such a detail, primarily because he is an untrained civilian who experienced a night time ambush. His and Fick's version have some overlaps, but it looks like Wright is trying to fill in the gaps in his memory with interesting sayings from the Marines from his vehicle. Fick admits to being afraid for a brief period and not remembering all the details of the fight, and he is a trained Marine. The enlisted men's view is primarily drawn from Wright's account, and it is apparent that they are emotionally affected with what they have just been through, some to a greater and some to a lesser extent. All three perspectives have a noticeable amount of overlaps, but they put emphasis on different aspects of the event, Wright strives towards objectivity, soldiers are glad to have made it alive, and Fick is glad that he and his men are all alive.

## 6. The Battle of Al Gharraf

### 6.1. A Journalist's Perspective

The third battle that Wright observed was the one in the town of Al Gharraf. It was a small town, but the Iraqis put up heavy resistance and inflicted casualties on the Marines. Kocher's driver, Darnold, is shot in the left arm, but no other casualties were inflicted on the First Reconnaissance. This is the battle in which Wright actually writes about his own perspective of the gunfight. He says: "In my case, hearing and sight become almost disconnected. I see more muzzle flashes next to the vehicle but don't hear them. In the seat beside me, Trombley fires 300 rounds from his machine gun. Ordinarily, if someone were firing a machine gun that close to you, it would be deafening. His gun seems to whisper" (151). He himself admits to his sensory deficiency during the combat, but nevertheless continues to narrate through the drive. When he compares Marines in his Humvee with himself, they are almost romanticised; Colbert is serene, Person shows no panic or fear, and Trombley is smiling, probably thinking that he is in a video game (151). It is not implied that Wright is lying in his account of the battle; it is more likely that he is filling in the gaps in his memory. As a civilian who is not used to being shot at from all sides, he must have been terrified and it is simply not possible that he has remembered the event in such detail. While the base line of events is most likely true, since it is accounted both in Fick's and Wright's book, their personal experiences are mostly that – personal, and as such should be carefully scrutinized by the reader if he/she aims to gain the insight into the event itself.

To conclude, Evan Wright tries to present the war as objectively as possible, but in rare instances fails to do so by inserting his stances, like this one, later in the book: "I picture an enemy fighter bleeding in a cold, dark ditch and feel no remorse—at this time" (327). He tries to visualise the setting for the reader by vividly describing the environment, equipment, and personalities of the marines in First Reconnaissance. Wright seems to be prone to unnecessary sensationalism by which he might be causing troubles for the Marines that he quotes. Due to everything mentioned and the fact that he was under a lot of stress during these battles, his account of events tends to be too elaborate; namely, in order to attract the readers, he fills the gaps in his memory with biographies of the accompanying Marines, or by simply inserting their derogatory comments towards their commanding officers in the middle of a fire fight.

## 6.2. An Officer's Perspective

The battle of Al Gharraf was the most difficult battle of the three battles mentioned in this paper. Even Fick describes it in great detail because they have encountered heavy resistance in Al Gharraf and could have gotten killed there. Fick and Wright share the same experience of this battle. Fick himself admits that his perception was distorted and his senses felt reduced: "Sensory overload paralyzed me. . . . Flashes of incoming fire surrounded us, but I didn't hear it, and I couldn't tell whether my platoon was shooting back. . . . I felt nothing. I was a passive observer watching this ambush unfold on a movie screen" (214). That feeling could have lasted a few seconds or even up to a minute, which is a lot of time in a fire fight. He eventually snapped back to reality and his senses were clear again so he was able to monitor the situation and remember things more clearly. He accredits that to Marine Corps training: "Survival and command tugged me in different directions. A normal human survival reaction would be to curl up on the Humvee floor-boards and close my eyes. This is precisely the reaction Marine Corps training is designed to overcome" (215). While Wright romanticizes the Marines in his Humvee and describes them in surprisingly great detail, taking account the life or death situation he is in, Fick does not have the time to observe his fellow marines. He is busy shooting and staying alive. His description is about him firing grenades into buildings and enjoying himself (216). He says that hyperclarity, about which he had heard much about from Vietnam veterans, has finally kicked in here (216). Fick describes a young Iraqi he killed with his grenade launcher and remembers everything, from the colour of clothes he wore, his belt buckle, to where he placed the shot. He goes on to describe the route, the turns they have made, and constant fire that rained upon them. They have managed to get out of town but then Colbert's lead Humvee got stuck in a tar pit called *sobka*. Fick was worried that a mob of angry Fedayeen would see them stuck and attack them, but that did not happen. After they have extracted Colbert's vehicle and made away from the town, they encountered the Regimental Combat Team in their heavy armoured vehicles, and Fick wondered why they were not the ones going through the town. After the combat, the Marines tell and retell their views on what has happened, which makes Fick think, mainly because his version of the story differs from that of the other Marines. He says: "I found out that my memory of a firefight was just that-mine. . . . I saw fire coming from buildings to the right and remembered a drag race of four or five kilometres out to the highway. . . . But the map showed the distance was only about fifteen hundred meters, less than half of what I'd

estimated” (219). He did not remember a great deal of things, or he remembered them differently, and that is why one can only get Fick’s version of the event and not what has actually transpired.

One thing is certain, both from Wright’s and Fick’s point of view Al Gharraf was a death trap. They almost died there, and it was wrong to send them in open top Humvees through that town. It was not their skill that got them through, but luck. Fick knows that; Wright knows that; and the enlisted men know that. Wright is eager to pass on the comments from the enlisted men about the stupidity of the missions, but Fick is more tempered in his expression of discontent. More than once does he disagree with the plan of action and rebuts himself by saying that his situational awareness as a platoon commander is very limited and that maybe it would make sense if they were let in on all the details. They were not, though, and Fick did his best to cope with seemingly senseless orders while completely leaving out the names of his commanding officers in question. The enlisted men and Evan Wright were not so good on them.



### 6.3. Enlisted Men's Perspective

Al Gharraf is a town where a lot of Marines, mainly the ones from Task Force Tarawa, had lost their lives, so Reconnaissance is aware of the real danger in this town. The opposition in the town has managed to halt the advance of an entire Regimental Combat Team, complete with tanks and other heavy vehicles, so when commander Ferrando orders the First Reconnaissance to drive through the town, the Marines are incredulous (146). During their drive through Al Gharraf, Kocher's driver Darnold is shot in the arm. After the mission, he is given an option of going home or rejoining the team in Baghdad. He chooses the latter. This goes to show the commitment of a Marine to his team regardless of the incompetence of his superiors and a dubious cause of war. When Colbert's team is entering the town, he tries to relax everyone by saying: "You're now going to have to earn your stories" (150). His intention proves successful. During their drive, they are fired upon from all directions, and nearly all of them are quiet, shooting, and doing their jobs. Except Trombley; he is shooting but feels the need to share with Colbert every kill he makes, as if he were keeping score in a video game. As soon as they are out of town, Colbert's vehicle is stuck in a *sabka* field, a form of quicksand. The Battalion operations chief is ordering Colbert to destroy and abandon his Humvee, but Colbert refuses, and one Marine who is observing all of that says: "We're going to die because Colbert's in love with his Humvee" (155). They eventually manage to pull it out of the sand and drive away from the town. When they stop at a resting point, all of the Marines seem ecstatic. They jump out and embrace each other; even Colbert becomes emotional (155). None of them can believe that they have made it with the only casualty being Darnold's arm. Colbert is disturbed by not feeling anything during the combat; he says: "I just loaded and fired my weapon from muscle memory. I wasn't even aware what my hands were doing" (156).

It was one of the first serious engagements that the Marines were in and they were elated to have made it alive. They brag and retell their version of events, but all in all, the morale is high due to a successful mission. Later, as this very same pattern repeated itself and they drove through town after town in open Humvees, the Marines dubbed their unit "First Suicide Battalion" (23). Considering that most of the Marines lost their faith in their leadership after the first few engagements, they used sarcasm to battle with the irrationality of war.

## Conclusion

War is one of the most stressful events that can happen to a person, and one of the ways of coping with the emotional difficulties of it is to convey that experience in writing. That is why every war has its literature, from fiction, to war reports, and soldiers' memoirs. A portrayal of war depends on the person who experienced it. In this paper three perspectives of the same war were presented – a journalist's perspective, an officer's perspective, and the perspective of the enlisted men in the Reconnaissance Battalion. All of them talk of the same events but in a different manner. Wright's perspective is coloured by his journalistic experience, and as a journalist he strives to be as objective as possible. His goal is to convey the events in a way they happened, without investing himself too much in them. However, the credibility of his perspective is put in question because he had a first-hand experience of being shot at and, admitting to sensory deficiency during those moments, he could not have been able to remember the exact details of the battle. Due to that, he is prone to filling the gaps with interesting events or biographies of the people involved in the conflict.

Fick is a Marine officer, and his views are thus skewed by his Marine training. He either fails to see, or simply finds irrelevant, common things that Wright describes in great detail, like the landscape or the colour and shape of the buildings. His account of events reminds of an officer's training manual in which every town and situation is conveyed in a military sense. He notices tactical advantages and possible dangers whilst ignoring the details a civilian would notice. He stands on the borderline between the enlisted men and civilians due to the fact that he is more aware of the underlying concepts of war and the problems that arise from it simply because he is more educated than the regular soldiers.

Last, the enlisted men, consisting of non-commissioned officers and ordinary Marines have their own specific views on war. Most of them are rather enthusiastic about the chance to prove their masculinity and to have a chance to kill someone. They do not really care about the reasons for the war or the possibility of a diplomatic solution. The enlisted men's main concern are their incompetent commanding officers. They have utmost confidence in themselves and their team leaders, but higher ranking officers, like captains and the above ranks, are held in very low esteem due to their profound and utter incompetence. The enlisted men offer the reader the truest perspective of the war because they are the backbone of any operation and they are the ones who pay the ultimate price for the incompetence of their superiors.

Through the three perspectives of the Iraq War, one can notice the overlapping events and pieces of information on the basis of which one can conclude that war is a heavy burden for everyone involved. It is not a large scale fraternity party with weapons, as one could deduce from Wright's book, nor is it a well-planned and executed military operation, as Fick tends to present it. War is a very confusing situation for everyone involved, and each person has his/her own unique experience of it. When all of those experiences are put together and observed, events recorded in all of the participants' narratives can be considered truthful to a much greater extent than individual accounts of events that do not co-occur in other stories.

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