

## BOOK REVIEW

### **Blood Brothers: Among the Soldiers of Ward 57<sup>1</sup>**

Alice A. Booher<sup>2</sup>

Walter Reed General Hospital, now Army Medical Center (WRAMC), opened its doors at its present 113-acre location in the northwest sector of the District of Columbia in 1909, and has since undergone vast expansions.<sup>3</sup> It has a well-deserved international reputation as a military surgical hospital, now with 5,500 rooms covering 28 acres of floor space.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the 150,000 active and retired service personnel it routinely serves, the President, Vice President, Senators and Congressmen are eligible for, and many routinely avail themselves of, care there.<sup>5</sup> Implementation of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission report set closure for fall 2011, at which time a new joint military medical facility will be completed 7 miles away on an expanded Bethesda, Maryland, campus of the National Navy Medical Center (to be known as the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center). In the interim, in addition to the ongoing, usual, and emergency health needs of the huge military constituency, wounded service personnel worldwide are evacuated to WRAMC.

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<sup>1</sup> MICHAEL WEISSKOPF, *BLOOD BROTHERS: AMONG THE SOLDIERS OF WARD 57* (2006) (hereinafter *BLOOD BROTHERS*).

<sup>2</sup> Alice A. Booher is Counsel with the Board of Veterans' Appeals. She received her undergraduate degree from Butler University (1963), and her LLB and JD degrees from Indiana University (1966, 1967). A former foreign service officer, she has been an independent book reviewer and journalist for national print media for many years. She has been published in the *STARS & STRIPES*, *MILITARY ADVOCATE*, *ALLIANCE ADVOCATE*, *THE PENTAGRAM*, *OSS SOCIETY NEWSLETTER*, *THE EXPOW BULLETIN*, and *ON POINT: THE JOURNAL OF ARMY HISTORY*.

<sup>3</sup> Welcome to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, <http://www.wramc.amedd.army.mil/Visitors/visitcenter/history> (last visited Oct. 16, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> *BLOOD BROTHERS*, *supra* note 1, at 24 (famous patients of WRAMC include President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Generals Douglas MacArthur and George C. Marshall).

In February 2007, an investigative series on WRAMC in *The Washington Post*<sup>6</sup> led to focus on some significant problems involving building deterioration and bureaucratic nightmares.<sup>7</sup> The *Post* series acknowledged that the immediate crisis was, in part, precipitated by the number of recovering troops who had been released from hospital beds but still needed treatment, to be either returned to duty or discharged, a group outnumbering hospital patients 17 to 1.<sup>8</sup> With an average stay of 10 months, these troops are housed in every conceivable location on and off post.<sup>9</sup>

Rare criticism and myriad praise has been directed to the actual WRAMC medical/trauma health care. While Weisskopf's account annotates some care-ancillary problems, his primary focus is on clinical (post-trauma) care and specific soldiers, and he portrays Ward 57, the ward which treats amputees specifically, as the premiere treatment facility for amputees.<sup>10</sup>

Weisskopf, now 60, is himself a seasoned investigative reporter for *Time* magazine. In 2003, he was imbedded in Iraq covering "*Time's Person of the Year: The American Soldier*" with the 1st Armored Division when his own WRAMC story was formed. Weisskopf was riding in a HUMVEE when a grenade (looking like a black rock) was hurled to his feet and exploded as he threw it back. A few hours after the *Time* cover photo shoot, female Army medic, SPC "Billie" Grimes, one of the soldiers on that cover, saved his life.

Like a few other civilians,<sup>11</sup> Weisskopf was waived into WRAMC

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<sup>6</sup> Investigative Series, *Walter Reed and Beyond*, WASH. POST, 2007-08, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/walter-reed/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Dana Priest & Anne Hull, *Soldiers Face Neglect, Frustration at Army's Top Medical Facility*, WASH. POST, Feb. 18, 2007, at A01, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/17/AR2007021701172.html> (indicating, for example, Building 18, a pre-WWII off-campus recuperation area, had mold, mice, rot, and cockroaches).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Walter Reed Army Medical Center Home – Lodging & Housing, <http://sfac.wramc.amedd.army.mil/SOLDIERS/Facilities/LodgingandHousing/default.aspx> (last visited Oct. 16, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> BLOOD BROTHERS, *supra* note 1, at 286.

<sup>11</sup> Woodruff, *Cameraman Seriously Injured in Iraq: Convoy Carrying "World News Tonight" Co-Anchor and Cameraman Hit by Roadside Bomb*, ABC NEWS, Jan. 26, 2006, available at <http://abcnews.go.com/WNT/Story?id=1553996&page=1> (indicating fellow journalist Bob Woodruff was treated at WRAMC in 2006).

for treatment of his missing hand and other injuries.<sup>12</sup> This book is the reporter's personal struggle, and also the story of soldiers he met on Ward 57. He focuses on both the combat and post-combat battles of CPL Bobby Isaccs, hit by a roadside bomb in Mosul; medic/leader SFC Luis Rodriguez who lost limbs and, temporarily, life's purpose; and Peter Damon, who lost his arms and a friend in a freak accident with a tire blowout on a Black Hawk.

The healing process is a fragile and complex one, and Weisskopf deals with his own and those of others in an exceptionally articulate, insightful manner. Abundant bonding and inspiration does not become intrusive or cloying. He also brings a candid and lucid discussion of space-age medicine, prototype prostheses, and cutting edge technology. There are also vignettes of Ward 57 as a "PC" place for politicians, professional athletes, and media stars to spread their special brand of solicitude and presence. Readers should be most positively impacted by those who heal, and were or were not healed, therein.

The book contains a certain amount of gallows humor which can be a great coping mechanism when dealing with difficult subject matter. *Blood Brothers* might be read in coordination with *The Long Road Home: One Step at a Time* and *The War Within: One More Step at a Time*, compilations of cartoons by Garry Trudeau that chronicle his character, BD's, similar experiences, including Ward 57.<sup>13</sup> This trio of books compliment one another and address the same constituency with exceeding clarity.

Military medicine today can be pretty sophisticated stuff, and while an olive drabness may wash over the ubiquitous WRAMC/Army setting, Weisskopf taps into the core of each soldier, which boosts a powerful viability in both individual and aggregate stories.

A "blood brother" has traditionally meant a male who swears loyalty to another, which conjures up images of six year old boys pricking their thumbs and exchanging drops of blood on an oath. "Blood Brothers" as an identifying phrase has been used a lot. Sometimes the overuse of

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<sup>12</sup> BLOOD BROTHERS, *supra* note 1, at 18.

<sup>13</sup> G.B. TRUDEAU, *THE LONG ROAD HOME: ONE STEP AT A TIME* (2005); G.B. TRUDEAU, *THE WAR WITHIN: ONE MORE STEP AT A TIME* (2006).

such a phrase can contaminate the purity of the imagery, but in this case *Blood Brothers* is exactly the right title. Via a bond of these brothers, blood or otherwise, the telling remains Weisskopf's own meandering trip back into journalistic objectivity and personal "normalcy," albeit perhaps relative. It is a classy, edifying, intense, disturbing, thoughtful, and introspective book which requires neither particular political persuasions nor personal viewpoints.