

Veterans' Journeys Home: Life after Afghanistan and Iraq¹

Caleb S. Cage²

Oral history collections are increasingly available through federal, state, and community programs aiming to capture first person combat and wartime narratives, especially from the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These collections consist of many hours of unedited, in-depth interviews with various people, sometimes famous, sometimes common, often relying on a scripted set of questions and sometimes resulting in verbatim transcriptions of personal accounts. Probably the most prominent of these databases, and there are many, is the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project, a program of the American Folklife Center that "collects, preserves, and makes accessible the personal accounts of American war veterans so that future generations may hear directly from veterans and better understand the realities of war."³

With respect to wartime oral histories, these collections prove to be fertile ground for historians, sociologists, psychologists, and practitioners of other academic disciplines. Authors and scholars alike have started making use of oral history collections to publish books that attempt to analyze and synthesize the veteran experience from the current wars. For example, *What Was Asked of Us: An Oral History of the Iraq War by the Soldiers Who Fought It*,⁴ written and edited by Trish Wood, was published in 2006 and offers an unvarnished view of the war through a traditional oral history approach, that is, presenting the words of

¹ LORI HOLYFIELD, VETERANS' JOURNEYS HOME: LIFE AFTER AFGHANISTAN AND IRAQ (2011).

² Caleb S. Cage is a 2002 graduate of the United States Military Academy and a Veteran of two tours in Iraq. He has been working with veterans in Nevada since separating from the Army in 2007.

³ *About the Project*, VETERANS HIST. PROJECT (Aug. 3, 2012), <http://www.loc.gov/vets/about.html>.

⁴ TRISH WOOD, WHAT WAS ASKED OF US: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE IRAQ WAR BY THE SOLDIERS WHO FOUGHT IT (2006).

dozens of service members by editing lightly and offering little to no editorializing between the topically-arranged interviews. Other works, such as Larry Minear's *Through Veterans' Eyes: The Iraq and Afghanistan Experience*⁵ and Lori Holyfield's *Veterans' Journeys Home: Life after Afghanistan and Iraq*⁶ tend to present the material in a more synthesized form, editorializing broadly on the interviews and providing excerpts from the material they are quoting to support their assertions.

Of the two books in this latter style, Holyfield's book offers by far the more compelling read, largely due to where she is coming from and what methods she used to approach the material. She is the daughter of a veteran⁷ and a sociology professor at the University of Arkansas,⁸ making her particularly well suited for the research and examination she provides in her work. In writing her book, she partnered with the Library of Congress to preserve the interviews she captured, interviewing students in the sociology graduate program first, and then building a broader network through their friends and contacts.⁹ Many of these interviews make up the first part of her book, and can now be found online in the Library of Congress archive.¹⁰ It was perhaps this combination of her academic training and her background that allowed her to approach the process dispassionately, but still approach her subjects with compassion.

“As sociologists,” she writes, “we are in the business of examining how social processes work in order to understand who benefits and who loses from structural arrangements.”¹¹ In the

⁵ LARRY MINEAR, *THROUGH VETERANS' EYES: THE IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN EXPERIENCE* (2010).

⁶ HOLYFIELD, *supra* note 1.

⁷ *Id.* at 2-3.

⁸ *Faculty and Staff—Lori Holyfield*, DEP'T OF SOC. AND CRIM. JUST., UNIV. OF ARK., <http://sociology.uark.edu/4240.php> (last visited Nov. 1, 2012).

⁹ HOLYFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 4-5.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 4; Archive of Contributions from Lori Holyfield, VETERANS HIST. PROJECT, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/search?query=holyfield&field=interviewerdonor> (last visited Nov. 1, 2012).

¹¹ HOLYFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 128.

first five chapters, or roughly the first half of *Veterans' Journeys Home*, Holyfield does an excellent job of pursuing these ends. The sample of her interviewees is adequately broad and representative, she relies on the literature of her field, and she largely avoids editorializing. Even if a reader is inclined to disagree with aspects of her arguments or conclusions, she does an admirable job of being provocative and balanced throughout the first five chapters.

In these chapters, the book is divided into relevant sections that break the wartime experience into usable, sociologically relevant pieces. In her first chapter, "War, Those Who Fight It, and Shifting Images of the Warrior," she explores who make up "today's soldiers," and what their motivations are for joining the military.¹² She ultimately proposes that today's soldiers are part of a "changing military culture . . . apparent in the attitudes expressed by many returning soldiers who share their stories of life after combat."¹³ In her next chapter, "Socialization of the Contemporary Soldier," Holyfield focuses in on the "hazing rituals and degradation rituals" imposed on her interviewees during their transitions from civilians to soldiers during basic training.¹⁴ When discussing this chapter in her Introduction, she suggests that these rituals and rites of passage "mark the creation of soldiers," where "individual identities are erased and reshaped for military service."¹⁵

Holyfield's most compelling chapters follow, though, as she develops her theoretical contributions to her field, perhaps attempting to provide a new level of understanding for the caregivers, families, and veterans of these wars. In her third chapter "Reluctant Edgework and 'Nonstandard' War," Holyfield uses more technical language in an effort to illustrate how the uncertainty and intensity of asymmetrical warfare may be leading

¹² See *id.* at 14-16.

¹³ *Id.* at 20.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 23.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 8.

to the mass diagnoses of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).¹⁶ Holyfield characterizes both PTSD and TBI as these wars' "signature injuries."¹⁷

In her subsequent two chapters, "Sister Soldiers: Women and Military Service" and "Military Masculinity and Combat: The Perfect Storm for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," Holyfield reaches what appears to be the central thrust of the first half of her book, that all of what she has discussed to this point combined—*i.e.*, the nature of today's soldiers, the socialization process her interviewees experienced upon entering the military, the asymmetrical combat, and new roles for men and women in combat—create a "perfect storm"¹⁸ for traumatic injury, a warning and an explanation for those serving this current generation of veterans.

Though some of her conclusions may be objectionable to various readers, the coherence of her argument makes for an interesting and important contribution to the ongoing discussions and debates regarding the experience and treatment of this generation of veterans. In this connection, Holyfield briefly examines the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its position on PTSD claims, often in a critical tone. She notes that

¹⁶ See, e.g., *id.* at 46 (discussing "reluctant military occupational edgework," a product of "prolonged uncertainty" and "episodes of real terror" during combat conditions); see also *id.* at 83 ("Reluctant military edgework is not a psychological state of mind, but rather a condition of war. Moreover, with technological advances, more people now survive war than in any other historic period. Physical wounds can be handled by medical teams on the ground. Soldiers can be airlifted to surgeons at nearby hospitals before being brought back to military hospitals in the United States. Medicine is readily dispensed for anxiety, depression, and loss of sleep during service and is available upon return. Soldiers who have a diagnosis of PTSD are welcomed back for more tours. But we have to ask on behalf of today's soldiers: Just how many times can a soldier be exposed to reluctant edgework before he or she succumbs to war trauma? How many times should one's brain be exposed to Traumatic Brain Injury before a soldier begins to lose his or her ability to function in everyday life? The military does not know the answers to these questions, yet many are allowed to return again and again for multiple tours.").

¹⁷ *Id.* at 14.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 110.

“the number of compensations for PTSD grew by 79.5 percent between 1999 and 2004 (from \$1.72 billion to \$4.28 billion),”¹⁹ and suggests that it may have been this growth that led VA officials to unofficially shape diagnoses in ways that would rule out PTSD.²⁰

This conclusion comes up short, though, and offers a first glimpse at a significant weakness in Holyfield’s work. Her book, published in 2011, ought to have referenced the VA’s change to regulations regarding compensation claims for PTSD, made effective July 13, 2010. Indeed, this change to Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations went to great lengths to liberalize one of the evidentiary standards for substantiating a compensation claim for PTSD, adding that, in certain circumstances where a veteran’s claimed in-service stressor is related to fear of hostile military or terrorist activity, and provided some additional conditions are met, a veteran’s lay testimony alone may establish the occurrence of that stressor, in the absence of clear and convincing evidence to the contrary.²¹ This change to the rules governing claims for service connection for PTSD is significant, to say the least, and clearly shows a good faith effort towards the philosophical shift that Holyfield advocates, and it should have been recognized as such in her work.

Perhaps this oversight was necessary for her argument, but it reveals a bias or motivation that simply becomes more concentrated starting in her sixth chapter, and carrying throughout the entire second half of the book. Holyfield switches from the objective, credible, and scholarly tone she used for the first half, to a subjective and personal narrative for the second

¹⁹ *Id.* at 127 (citing *PTSD Compensation and Military Service*, INST. OF MED. & NAT’L RES. COUNCIL OF THE NAT’L ACAD. (2007), at 2, available at http://www.pdhealth.mil/downloads/PTSD_Compensation_and_Military_Service2.pdf).

²⁰ *See id.*

²¹ *See* 38 C.F.R. § 3.304 (2011); *see also* Stressor Determinations for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 75 Fed. Reg. 39,843 (July 13, 2010) (corrected by Stressor Determinations for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, 75 Fed. Reg. 41,092 (July 15, 2010)).

half. This shift in tone, together with her omission regarding actual and significant changes to VA policy, combine for the unfortunate effect of undermining her work. Her sixth and seventh chapters detail her experience at various “Vets Journey Home” psychological retreats, starting with a history of the recovery program²² to actual descriptions of the rituals and techniques utilized in that program, meant to manage PTSD with veterans and their families.²³ While one could see Holyfield dealing with controversial assumptions and assertions relatively fairly in the first five chapters, she clearly shows her conclusion that veterans are inherently victims, and appears to actively argue on behalf of this premise throughout these passages.

The last pages of her eighth chapter and the Epilogue consist of page after page of block quotations. The quotations in chapter eight reflect answers from the veterans she interviewed to the question, “Why is it important for veterans to share their stories?”²⁴ The Epilogue consists of transcribed letters written to the presumably unborn grandchildren of her sociology students in Arkansas within hours after the attacks on September 11, 2001.²⁵ While these transcriptions probably have a value somewhere, they are puzzling additions to the work and leave one to conclude that they may have only been added to ensure that *Veterans’ Journeys Home* could become a book-length manuscript.

While *Veterans’ Journeys Home* may have limited appeal outside of some sociological circles, it could be considered an important text in terms of what oral histories might mean and how they might help broaden the understanding of the current conflicts. At a time when the nation has been at war for a decade and only an extraordinarily small portion of the country has served in uniform, oral histories tell a valuable story, no matter

²² HOLYFIELD, *supra* note 1, at 139-48.

²³ *Id.* at 149-83.

²⁴ *Id.* at 187-93.

²⁵ *Id.* at 194-222.

the author's or editor's perspective. As Larry Minear points out in his similar work, *Through Veterans' Eyes*, "the experiences of veterans in Afghanistan and Iraq sound a cautionary note as the nation looks to the future,"²⁶ and further, that the veterans' perspectives "deserve respectful attention and thoughtful pondering in all of their commonalities and diversity."²⁷

The debates over how to treat returning service members have no doubt just begun. Barring military conflicts in the near future, the nation is poised to begin considering what impact these wars have had on a portion of a generation of young men and women. This book is among the first attempts to answer this question and it should be lauded for that. The weaknesses of the first half of the book, especially as they are played out in the second half, mean that even some of Holyfield's better arguments may have limited appeal. It also means that there is still plenty of room left to debate the social and cultural issues surrounding the real nature of the veteran's journey home.

²⁶ MINEAR, *supra* note 5, at 193.

²⁷ *Id.* at 196.

