

OPERATION POETRY

US Marines turn poison into gold dust by writing about the horrors of the Iraq war in a military exercise that encourages fears and feelings

By Damian Fowler

Corporal Paul Leitch is not your typical jarhead. That's military slang for a US Marine. For a start, he writes poetry. Marines are not meant to write verse. After all, they are "the guys you send into combat to kick down the door", says Gunnery Sergeant Mark Oliva, another jarhead. They did it in Guadalcanal, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq. The Marine Corps serves as a hardcore infantry force, specialising in emergency intervention via ground, sea or air. "The few, the proud" is the recruitment motto. So for an enlisted marine to bare his soul by writing poetry – well, it's either an act of folly or surprising bravery.

But perhaps things are changing. The National Endowment for the Arts – whose past endeavours include funding controversial art projects such as Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ", a photograph of a crucifix immersed in luminous urine that enraged conservatives in the US – is running a new literary programme. The government agency is turning fighters into writers as part of "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience". The idea is to encourage servicemen and women to write down their stories. Dana Gioia, the chairman of the NEA, says this is an attempt to "give a voice to people who often think of themselves as silent" and to preserve "the testimony of men and women who saw the events directly".

I talked to a former marine, David J. Morris, author of *Storm on the Horizon* about the first Gulf war, on the seeming paradox of turning warriors into writers. He says: "Soldiers frequently don't make good writers because they're callous. As a writer you run in the other direction. You consider the universe." Can a marine, who is trained for specialised amphibious assault, helicopter insertion and guerrilla operations, capture the "real deal" of war?

I signed up to attend a writer's workshop at Camp Pendleton, the busiest military base in the US, to see what kind of alchemy was at work. The base, 38 miles north of San Diego, California, covers some 200 square miles of southern

California's coastal terrain and serves as a training ground for more than 60,000 military and civilian personnel. It has more troops deployed in Iraq than any other; it also has a higher casualty rate.

Two workshops are scheduled, led respectively by military historian Victor Davis Hanson, and the writer Tobias Wolff, most famous for his two memoirs, *This Boy's Life* and *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War*, an account of his military service in Vietnam.

About 30 marines gather, dressed in their "cammies", along with a few civilians, some former marines and a couple of family members. Pens, mightier than swords, are poised. Hanson talks about classical wars and the importance of what he calls "ground-up" reporting to capture the soldier's-eye-view of combat. "When you talk about what you saw in Falluja from a helicopter," he asks them, "are you

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going to bring in human themes?" He concludes with a writing assignment, asking the marines to describe a moment of fear.

It yields the following from Marine Corporal Paul Leitch: "The 23rd night sky over Ramadi in December was cold and blue. Christmas was in two days. The only lights were the stars above and the strange fluorescent light from the village. The marines in front of me cautiously crept along the muddy, fog-enshrouded road, past stucco concrete brick houses and silent cows. For a long time I had heard the gentle sound of my camera clicking against my rifle and my boots scraping across the wet pavement. Unseen dogs began to bark and growl as if rabid and starved. A few pops went off in the distance. My head turned and followed a few tracer rounds that cut the air like red lasers between me and the

marine in front of me, who I had just met on the back of a seven-ton."

Leitch is a combat correspondent, deployed to write and photograph US Marine units on the ground for the Marine Corps newspaper, which may explain his predilection for poetry and prose but did not exempt him from being a "trigger puller". Leitch describes his experiences with an eye for detail. His first assignment plunged him straight into the ugly side of war alongside the army's 507th Medevac Unit. He saw the wounded and "fallen angels" – body bags of dead marines.

When his journalistic assignments were over for the day, Leitch would light up his tent with his laptop and write for himself. "It went from shallow observations about daily activities to more raw and deep emotional reflections on what I was feeling."

With a degree and experience in the corporate world, Leitch is unusual. He came late to the Marine Corps, enlisting in July 2002. He has a young family, but felt a strong desire to serve his country and follow in the footsteps of both of his grandfathers. There were dark moments, he says. "I thought that all hell was going to break loose and the thought of me, my friends or other marines dying was like awaiting a sucker punch to the gut." In January, Leitch lost three of his close friends, all marines, in a helicopter crash.

He is not alone. "I write a lot about death," says Barbara Cogburn. She retired from the marines last year after 20 years. Just over a year ago, she was working for Mortuary Affairs, counting the dead; the names of those killed in action were processed in her office. Her eyes brim as she talks about her time working for the general in charge of the Force Service Support Group, which keeps "beans, bullets and band-aids" flowing to the front lines.

She kept a daily journal of events from November 2002 until June 2003. In an entry dated March 19 2003, Cogburn describes an "entry control point" in Kuwait, which the marines used as a staging area before the invasion of Iraq the next day. "There are many emotions now. I know that as long as I live I will not ever forget this day. I will never forget



how empty the desert was. I will never forget what a ghost town it was. How the full moon started to rise in the sky. A huge apricot orange colour. Only to illuminate us with bright light once it was fully in the sky. The airfield had more helos than I have ever seen parked on the runway. There have been non-stop flights tonight. People left in droves here today and are still pouring in as I write."

Cogburn says her introspective diaries are antithetical to marine culture. Phrases I heard, such as, "It's hard to describe what it's like to get mortared" or "You're constantly dealing with the thought that you could get blown away" hardly capture a warrior's inner life. Common sense, leadership and discipline are the Marine Corps virtues, says General Timothy Donovan, Camp Pendleton's base commander. He doesn't mention soul-searching.

In the afternoon workshop, Wolff sets the marines another writing assignment. He asks the students to take their cue from Tim O'Brien's book on Vietnam, *The Things They Carried*. Cogburn reveals that she carried, "a small piece of parachute

folded into a ziplock baggie, kept in my left breast pocket; the chute that saved my Great Uncle Bud as he jumped out of a plane over Okinawa". Many of the marines carried such tokens of humanity into combat. Leitch listed his M-16A2 with six magazines, Wiley X ballistic goggles and his twin sons' "beanie" from the hospital where they were born.

Wolff wants the marines to pay attention to the texture of their experience, and he advocates a very immediate kind of writing. "For any of them to write a literary artefact of their experience, if I can put it so crassly, is going to take years. You just can't see the shape of your experience immediately. Things have to sift. That said, it's important for them to capture the moments that would otherwise be lost to memory in some kind of journal form, to create a treasury to draw on." Yet Wolff was impressed by the amount of writing these marines had done, especially in the form of e-mails from the front lines. He also sees an impediment to truthful writing: "Right now, there is a lot of contest on the surface for the moral high ground.

That will be something that they will work out in their souls in years to come."

This is a problem Corporal Matthew Richards is grappling with. He signed up, against his father's wishes, to join the Marine Corps on his 18th birthday, 2001. He wanted to serve his country after the September 11 attacks. He describes talking with an old friend about their shared experiences in Iraq. "We talked about morality and the war, and he's a bit more religious than I am and feels the need to find some place he can go to make up for things out there, missionary work or something. I won't be doing that myself, but I do agree that I also need cleansing."

Richards is 20,000 words into a novel – the main character is initially indifferent to events around him but slowly grows in moral understanding. But something is troubling Richards and he can't write about it. Last August, his unit fought a battle against Moqtada al-Sadr's militia in Najaf, the spiritual heart of the Shia world. It was intense urban combat, "something like D-Day, with tracer bullets flying and mortars exploding". In a room next to him, he heard the shouts of "Shoot him! Shoot him!" The marines had flushed out a "militia guy" with a rocket-propelled grenade, who began running up the stairs. Richards saw his sergeant follow and draw his knife. What happened next still haunts him. All he remembers are the shrill screams as the enemy soldier was stabbed.

It was a dark moment. He wants to convey its essence in writing, but feels unable to. He wants to turn these events into fiction. If imagination and metaphor is the novelist's domain, this kind of reality is either gold dust or poison. The last American generation to cover a big war produced some of the most disturbing books about combat and guerrilla warfare, such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*.

Is there any evidence that seeing a war first-hand will forge a better writer? Is there a correlation between what a marine experiences and what he or she writes, between seeing and doing, M-16 and pencil? Most of the writers I spoke to admitted that war had provided them with swathes of material, since, to paraphrase Polish writer Ryszard Kapuscinski, it is life lived at maximum tension. But this reality doesn't necessarily translate into literature. "The only authority a writer finally has is the quality of his work," Wolff says. "A lot of bad writers have been to war."