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The Cost of War American-Style

Posted By Tom Engelhardt

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Back in the distant year 2003, my novel about a world I had inhabited for decades, *The Last Days of Publishing*, came out. In its last pages, three superannuated book editors huddled in a coffee shop in Manhattan, dreaming about DIY publishing. A decade later – for me – fiction has become reality. Today, with the publication of Ann Jones's magnificent *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return From America's Wars – The Untold Story*, and with a major helping hand from Haymarket Books, Nick Turse and I are indeed DIY publishers, embarking on a venture that is less a potential business model than an urge to change the world and have an adventure in the process.

From time to time over the years, he and I had slipped into a booth at my local diner and, like those fictional editors of mine, batted around vague plans for creating our own press. Finally, in 2012, we gathered up our collected essays about drones and tried a do-it-yourself one-off at Amazon that we called *Terminator Planet*. It was a book made by a machine or perhaps an algorithm without, as far as I could tell, human intervention, and like the president's drones, it turned out to come with "collateral damage." (It was the ugliest-looking volume imaginable!) Next, we turned to Anthony Arnove, my publisher at Haymarket Books, and produced a little collection of Nick's recent work, *The Changing Face of Empire*, which proved to be a jewel of a book and a modest success. Emboldened, we started looking for a manuscript with which we could really launch an imprint, one that caught some unforgettable aspect of our dark world and, above all, needed a press like ours to be born.

When, in 1976 at age 32, I first became an editor at a mainstream publishing house, I had just one urge: I wanted to bring new voices, as young as I was, into the world; I wanted, as I used to say at the time, to publish "voices from elsewhere," even when that elsewhere was right here in the U.S.A. (Back then, I also proudly and only half-jokingly used to brag of being publishing's "editor of last resort," a claim that would now undoubtedly get an editor fired.) Generally speaking, I think I reached that goal both in the books I helped to birth and, in more recent years, at TomDispatch, which is, I hope, regularly a voice from "elsewhere," even though firmly located here. Nearly four decades after my publishing career began, however, I find it strangely appropriate that the first voice Nick and I bring you isn't youthful at all, but that of the vibrant Ann Jones, who, when she dons her combat boots and body armor, may actually be the oldest war correspondent on the planet.

It turns out that it takes an old lady with guts, someone who has long known the suffering that the Afghan War brought down on Afghans, to follow the trail and the lives of young American soldiers horribly wounded in that war. Hers, like theirs, has been a harrowing journey, reported in her remarkable new book with striking bluntness by a woman who is herself something of a veteran of the catastrophes of our world and who, in the wake of her Afghan experiences, has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder herself. As it happens, she also writes like an angel, even as she brings us, up close and personal, the true costs to the young Americans she calls "kids" of our post-9/11 war-making.

You don't have to believe me. Consider what psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, author of the award-winning book *Achilles in Vietnam*, has to say about the way *They Were Soldiers* portrays the American wounded:

"This is a painful odyssey. Ann Jones's superb writing makes it possible to take it in without sugar coating. Her scene painting takes you there with compassion and without flinching – no sentimental bullshit here, no lofty pity. We fly with her in the belly of a C-17 medical evacuation from Bagram [Air Base in Afghanistan], into operating rooms of the Landstuhl European way station, more surgeries at Walter Reed, into the gymnasium for the long, determined work with prosthetics, with the physical and occupational therapists. We go with her to the homes of the families receiving the brain-injured and the psychologically and morally injured. We hear firsthand accounts by families of service members who died of their war wounds in the mind and spirit, after making it back in one piece… physically. Her breadth of vision includes even contractors, whom most dismiss from their minds and forget. Read this book. You will be a wiser and better citizen."

And when you're done, you won't for a second doubt the high price some Americans have paid for Washington's folly.

It's with great pride, then, that I announce the official publication today of this first original offering from Dispatch Books. To introduce it at the site, TomDispatch regular Jones offers an overview of what might be called her American experience in Afghanistan. Read it and then buy her book. I guarantee you one thing: when you're done with it, as with the best of books, you'll see our world differently. ~ *Tom*

Silent Soldiers, The Losers From Our Lost Wars

By Ann Jones

The last time I saw American soldiers in Afghanistan, they were silent. Knocked out by gunfire and explosions that left them grievously injured, as well as drugs administered by medics in the field, they were carried from medevac helicopters into a base hospital to be plugged into machines that would measure how much life they had left to save. They were bloody. They were missing pieces of themselves. They were quiet.

It's that silence I remember from the time I spent in trauma hospitals among the wounded and the dying and the dead. It was almost as if they had fled their own bodies, abandoning that bloodied flesh upon the gurneys to surgeons ready to have a go at salvation. Later, sometimes much later, they might return to inhabit whatever the doctors had managed to salvage. They might take up those bodies or what was left of them and make them walk again, or run, or even ski. They might dress themselves, get a job, or conceive a child. But what I remember is the first days when they were swept up and dropped into the hospital so deathly still.

They were so unlike themselves. Or rather, unlike the American soldiers I had first seen in that country. Then, fired up by 9/11, they moved with the aggressive confidence of men high on their macho training and their own advance publicity.

I remember the very first American soldiers I saw in Afghanistan. It must have been in 2002. In those days, very few American troops were on the ground in that country – most were being readied for Iraq to fulfill the vainglorious dreams of George W. Bush and Co. – and they were not stationed in Kabul, the Afghan capital, but in the countryside, still supposedly searching for Osama bin Laden.

I was in the north, at the historic Dasht-i Shadian stadium near the city of Mazar-i-Sharif, watching an afternoon of *buzkashi*, the traditional Afghan sport in which mounted men, mostly farmers, vie for possession of a dead calf. The stadium was famous not only for the most fiercely contested *buzkashi* games in the country, but also for a day during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan when local people invited 50 Soviet soldiers to enjoy the spectacle at Dasht-i Shadian and slaughtered them on the spot.

I was seated with Afghan friends in the bleachers when a squad of Americans in full battle gear barged into the dignitaries' box and interrupted play. Some of them insisted on riding the horses. At a sign from the local warlord presiding over the games, Afghan riders helped the Americans mount. They may also have cued their horses to bolt, race away, and dump them in the dirt.

A little stiffly, the soldiers hiked back to the grandstand, took up their rifles, and made a great show of laughing off the incident – of being loud and boisterous "good sports." But a large audience of poker-faced Afghan men had taken their measure. A friend said something to me that I never forgot in years after as I watched the "progress" of the war unfold: "They didn't know what they were getting into."

The next day, I spotted another squad of American soldiers in the city's central bazaar. In the midst of busy shops, they had fanned out in full battle gear in front of a well-known carpet store, dropped to one knee, and assumed the firing position. They aimed their assault rifles at women shoppers clad in the white burqas of Mazar and frozen in place like frightened ghosts. The Americans were protecting their lieutenant who was inside the store, shopping for a souvenir of his sojourn in this foreign land.

I can't say exactly when the U.S. military brought that swagger to Kabul. But by 2004 the Americans were there behind the walls of fortified urban bases, behind concrete barriers and gigantic sandbags at armed checkpoints, blocking traffic, and closing thoroughfares. Their convoys were racing at top speed through city streets with machine-gunners on alert in the turrets of their armored vehicles. Women half-blind under their burqas brought their children to guide them across suddenly dangerous streets.

Enter the Warriors

I had come to Afghanistan to work for those women and children. In 2002, I started spending winters there, traveling the country but settling in Kabul. Schools long closed by the Taliban were reopening, and I volunteered to help English teachers revive memories of the language they had studied and taught in those schools before the wars swept so much away. I also worked with Afghan women and other internationals – few in number then – to start up organizations and services for women and girls brutalized by war and stunned by long confinement to their homes. They were emerging silently, like sleepwalkers, to find life as they had once known it long gone. Most of Kabul was gone too, a landscape of rubble left from years of civil war followed by Taliban neglect and then American bombs.

After the Taliban fled those bombs, the first soldiers to patrol the ruined streets of Kabul were members of ISAF, the International Security Assistance Force established by the U.N. to safeguard the capital. Turks, Spaniards, Brits, and others strolled around downtown, wearing berets or caps – no helmets or armor – and walked into shops like casual tourists. They parked their military vehicles and let kids climb all over them. Afghans seemed to welcome the ISAF soldiers as an inconspicuous but friendly and reassuring presence.

Then they were supplanted by the aggressive Americans. The teachers in my English classes began to ask for help in writing letters to the U.S. military to claim compensation for friends or neighbors whose children had been run over by speeding soldiers. A teacher asked, "Why do Americans act in this way?" I had, at the time, no answer for her.

In my work, I found myself embroiled ever more often with those soldiers as I tried to get compensation, if not justice, for Afghans. As a reporter, I also occasionally felt duty-bound to attend press briefings concocted by Washington's militarized theorists of a future American-dominated world of global free markets, spreading democracy, and perfect security in the oddly rebranded "homeland."

The Pentagon prepared PowerPoint presentations cluttered with charts and arrows indicating how everything was ultimately connected to everything else in an insulated circularity of hokum.

Subordinates based in Kabul delivered those talks to American journalists who dutifully took notes and submitted soon-familiar stories about new strategies and tactics, each guaranteed to bring success to Washington's Afghan War, even as commanding generals came and went year after year.

To American officials back in that homeland, war was clearly a theoretical construct, and victory a matter of dreaming up those winning new strategies, or choosing some from past wars – Iraq, for example, or Vietnam – and then sending in the brash kids I would see in that stadium near Mazar-i-Sharif to carry them out. War was, in short, a business plan encoded in visual graphics. To Afghans, whose land had already served as the playing field for more than 20 years of Washington's devastating modern wars, it wasn't like that at all.

Frankly, I didn't like the U.S. soldiers I met in those years. Unlike the ISAF troops, who appeared to be real people in uniforms, the Americans acted like PowerPoint Soldiers (with a capital S), or, as they preferred to be called, Warriors (with a capital W). What they seldom acted like was real people. For one thing, they seemed to have been trained to invade the space of any hapless civilian. They snapped to attention in your face and spat out sentences that splashed your flesh, something they hadn't learned from their mothers.

In time, though, their canned – and fearful – aggressiveness stirred my sympathy and my curiosity to know something about who they really were, or had been. So much so that in the summer of 2010, I borrowed body armor from a friend and applied to embed with U.S. soldiers. At the time, General Stanley McChrystal was massing troops (and journalists) in the Taliban heartland of Helmand Province in southwestern Afghanistan for a well-advertised "decisive" showdown with the insurgency. I, on the other hand, was permitted to go to a forward operating base in northeast Afghanistan on the Pakistani border where, it was said, nothing was going on. In fact, American soldiers were "falling" there at a rate that took their commanders by surprise and troubled them.

By the time I arrived, those commanders had become secretive, cloistering themselves behind closed doors – no more PowerPoint presentations offering the press (me) straight-faced assessments of "progress."

For TomDispatch, I wrote a piece about that base and included one fact that brought me a deluge of outraged email from wives and girlfriends of the Warriors. It wasn't my description of the deaths of soldiers that upset them, but my noting that the most common disabling injury on that base was a sprained ankle – the result of jogging in the rocky high-desert terrain. How dare I say such a thing, the women demanded. It demeaned our nation's great Warriors. It was an insult to all patriotic Americans.

I learned a lesson from that. America's soldiers, when deployed, may no longer be "real people" even to their loved ones. To girlfriends and wives, left alone at home with bills to pay and kids to raise, they evidently had to be mythic Warriors of historic importance saving the nation even at the sacrifice of their own lives. Otherwise, what was the point?

Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?

And that may be the point: that there wasn't one, not to this war of choice and revenge, or the one in Iraq either. There were only kids in uniform, most of whom by that time knew that they hadn't known what they were getting into, and now were struggling to keep their illusions and themselves alive. They walked the streets of the base, two by two, battle buddies heading for the DFAC (mess hall), the laundry, the latrine, the gym. They hung out on the Internet and the international phones, in the war and out of it at the same time, until orders came down from somewhere: Washington, Kabul, Bagram, or the map-lined room behind the closed door of the base commander's office. As a result, every day while I was on that base, patrols were ordered to drive or walk out into the surrounding mountains where Taliban flags flew. Very often they returned with men missing.

What had happened to those boys who had been there at breakfast in the DFAC? Dead or torn up by a sniper or a roadside bomb, they had been whisked off by helicopters and then… what?

They lodged in my memory. Unable to forget them, almost a year later, when I was officially not a nosy journalist but a research fellow at a leading university, I again applied for permission to embed in the military. This time, I asked to follow casualties from that high desert "battle space" to the trauma hospital at Bagram Air Base, onto a C-17 with the medical teams that accompanied the wounded soldiers to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany – the biggest American hospital outside the United States – then back onto a C-17 to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, and in some cases, all the way home.

Over the years, more and more of America's kids made that medevac journey back to the States. Costsofwar.com has tallied 106,000 Americans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan or evacuated from those war zones because of accident or disease. Because so many so-called "invisible wounds" are not diagnosed until after soldiers return home, the true number of wounded must be much higher. Witness the fact that, as of June 2012, 247,000 veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq had been diagnosed by the VA with post-traumatic stress disorder, and as of May 31, 2012, more than 745,000 veterans of those wars had filed disability claims with the Veterans Administration (VA). Taxpayers have already spent $135 billion on medical and disability payments for the veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the long-term medical and disability costs are expected to peak at about midcentury, at an estimated $754 billion.

Then there were the "fallen," the dead, shipped to Dover Air Base in metal "transfer cases" aboard standard cargo planes. They were transferred to the official military mortuary in ceremonies from which the media, and thus the public, were until 2009 excluded – at least 6,656 of them from Iraq and Afghanistan by February of this year. At least 3,000 private contractors have also been killed in both wars. Add to this list the toll of post-deployment suicides, and soldiers or veterans hooked on addictive opioids pushed by Big Pharma and prescribed by military doctors or VA psychiatrists either to keep them on the job or, after they break down, to "cure" them of their war experiences.

The first veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq returned to the United States 10 years ago in 2003, yet I've never spoken to a damaged soldier or a soldier's family members who thought

the care he or she received from the Veterans Administration was anything like appropriate or enough. By the VA's own admission, the time it takes to reach a decision on a veteran's benefits, or simply to offer an appointment, is so long that some vets die while waiting.

So it is that, since their return, untold numbers of soldiers have been looked after by their parents. I visited a home on the Great Plains where a veteran has lain in his childhood bed, in his mother's care, for most of the last decade, and another home in New England where a veteran spent the last evening before he took his own life sitting on his father's lap.

As I followed the sad trail of damaged veterans to write my new book, *They Were Soldiers: How the Wounded Return From America's Wars – the Untold Story*, I came to see how much they and their families have suffered, like Afghans, from the delusions of this nation's leaders – many running counter to international law – and of other influential Americans, in and out of the military, more powerful and less accountable than themselves.

Like the soldiers, the country has changed. Muted now is the braggadocio of the bring-'em-on decider who started the preemptive process that ate the children of the poor and patriotic. Now, in Afghanistan as in Iraq, Washington scrambles to make the exit look less like a defeat – or worse, pointless waste. Most Americans no longer ask what the wars were for.

"Follow the money," a furious Army officer, near the end of his career, instructed me. I had spent my time with poor kids in search of an honorable future who do the grunt work of America's military. They are part of the nation's lowliest 1%. But as that angry career officer told me, "They only follow orders." It's the other 1% at the top who are served by war, the great American engine that powers the transfer of wealth from the public treasury upward and into their pockets. Following that money trail reveals the real point of the chosen conflicts. As that disillusioned officer put it to me, the wars have made those profiteers "monu-fuckin'-mentally rich." It's the soldiers and their families who lost out.