Writing a Memoir: The Involvement of Art with Craft

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MANY OLD VETERANS hope to write a memoir someday. I am one of the relatively few that has. Civil War vets could hardly wait to get their hands on pen and paper to record their memoirs. But World War I produced remarkably little personal literature, nor has the Second World War produced its proportionate share. Nevertheless, there is a widespread belief that the market is flooded with memoirs from our last great shooting war. A relatively recent issue of the *New Yorker* assumes as much in one of its superb cartoons. We see an exasperated editor staring across his desk at a hopeful old veteran:

> You've described your experiences well enough, Mr. Frimley. The thing is that quite a few other people were also in World War II, and some of them have already written about it!

Some have, of course, but in reality very few World War II memoirs have come from the lower ranks, where the young privates and seamen lived and died.

I am surprised that my memoir, *GI Jive, An Army Bandsman in World War II*, may be the first enlisted man's memoir to come out of the South Pacific theatre. It is the story of a smalltown teenager swept into the army and, eventually, half way around the world to the jungles of the South Pacific. Musical ability won me temporary positions in several stateside army post bands, then it was overseas where I joined the 37th Infantry Division band in the Solomon Islands. But musicians in the Buckeye Division played for parade,

concert or jazz ensemble only during the intermissions from the war; during combat we were a heavy weapons platoon and I was teamed behind a light machine gun. Being in this division greatly broadened my literary horizons, for this division's story probably reflects the Pacific war better than any other division, whether Marine or army. During its 592 days of combat it fought in every type of terrain the Pacific had to offer, hurled the only blitzkrieg of the Pacific war down Luzon's Cagayan Valley, and played the major part in the capture of Manila, the only metropolis involved in the Pacific conflict and the site of its deadliest single battle in combined military and civilian casualties. Its men mingled so well with the civilians of New Zealand, Fiji, the Solomons and Luzon, that a monument to this effect was erected on Luzon, the only instance of this, I think, in the Pacific war. My story, then, is in some ways the story of this division, but the story of this division is in many ways the story of World War II in the Pacific. I amounted to nothing personally, but attached to division headquarters I was busily writing my letters and building my memoirs in the right places at the right time. Some forty years later, in 1982, my memoir of all this was published. The lack of similar memoirs from South Pacific enlisted men demands some study—why this dearth of memoirs?

In partial answer, let us paraphrase some words of wisdom from Pogo, the oppossum, and say that many memoirists are stopped by "insurmountable opportunities." This paradox is seldom apparent to the would-be memoirist. Everything seems to favor him at first. I remember the feeling well. I thought with great elation that my research was all done before I even started! My two and one-half years in the army were snugly stored in my memory, my letters, and various documents. God, what a relief! No musty archives, expensive trips, and years of research for me. All I needed to do was sit down, let the golden words flow, and—a book; a book the easy way, a book without the sweat and exasperating verification of thousands of facts. I had published two books previously. I felt my writing style was adequate. It was, for the writing of history, but I now encountered the need for art—the use of some of the novelist's tools as well as the craft of the historian. This blend of art with craft—the theme of this paper—soon impaled me on the horns of Pogo's "insurmountable opportunity."

I was puzzled, yet I knew that history was more of an art than a science; I had yet to see that for the competent memoirist the rules may expand, that he may use art and imagination in ways denied the narrative historian. Indeed, I believe that the only historian who may justly add to his story by use of imagination to fill in a bit of the past is

the memoirist, for only the memoirist is writing primarily of himself, and not of other people and institutions. He must construct his own personality and those of men and women in his past in a way more akin to the novelist than to the historian, for he must involve himself in love affairs and marriage, divorce, birth and death, perhaps even in criminal activity. In writing of such a personal nature, he may devise dialogue (as I illustrate later in this paper), for this enhances the truth and impact of the story—after all, the memoirist was actually there, and can remember the theme if not the exact words used. In short, good, readable narrative history may well be art, but it still lacks the imaginative, artistic brushwork expected and attainable in a top-flight memoir. Finally, the memoirist, like the historian, writes to be read by other people. If a more artistic handling of material brings additional readers, what is wrong with that? Is it not deplorable that Rhett Butler, a figment of Margaret Mitchell's imagination, is much better known worldwide than any Civil War general?

The overlapping of the novelist's art with the historian's craft has long concerned historians. As I got into the writing of my memoir, I began to reassess a debate I had heard in New Orleans in 1968. The Southern Historical Association met there that year, and its opening session was entitled, "The Uses of History in Fiction." A better title might have been, "How Far Can the Historian Go in Using the Tools of the Novelist?" I sat quietly in the midst of the huge crowd; I had published nothing. I was greatly impressed by the talented panel. Robert Penn Warren deftly countered thrusts from the audience that he had modeled Willie Stark after Huey Long in *All the King's Men*. Ralph Ellison urged that the artist must remain free to use history as he wishes without becoming its captive. Willian Stryon labored under the hottest assault. Several arose to berate him for what they took to be his willfully damaging distortion of the life and character of Nat Turner. Stryon ably defended himself, aided by C. Vann Woodward, who chaired the session. Eleven years later, in 1979, as I began writing my memoir, the greatest lesson of this heated meeting echoed in my mind: There will never be complete agreement on this issue of art and craft. The historian-turned-memoirist must accept this truth. He then can decide how far he wants to go in using the tools of the novelist; with this decided he is able to sit down and get on with his memoir. He will find no rule books. He must trust his honesty as an historian in telling his story so that truth will be enhanced rather than hindered. This uncertainty—this lack of rules—is too much for certain personalities. Some of these stick rigidly to historical style. They usually produce an artless and therefore unpublishable memoir. Others simply sigh and give up, turning to other tasks. In both cases, I think,

they have fallen victim to Pogo's "insurmountable opportunity."

The professional historian who sits down to write a memoir is in for some surprises. A lifetime of training is hard to bypass. Unlike Teddy Roosevelt, he is shocked to find he must use the personal pronoun continuously: "I did this, I went there, I loved her." An even greater assault on previous training comes in finding himself involved in the action. He must expose himself, warts and all. Criticism of others, once rather easy to come by, is now directed against himself. He squirms. He has doubts—what will my colleagues think of such an ego trip? There is no retreat. He plunges on, gradually understanding that the writing of a memoir is truly a blend of art with craft.

Any memoirist who is not a good raconteur may face an "insurmountable opportunity." This is the writer who lacks the art of involving himself emotionally in the give and take of a good yarn. He is the fellow who believes that his involvement in something as important as a war is enough. The usual result is a collection of unrelated tales, an episodic account of one skirmish or narrow escape after another. While this sometimes aids in historical interpretation of a battle or campaign, it has little to offer the reader and, through him, the publisher. The reader wants to know what it was *really* like; he wants to share in the terror, the boredom, the happy moments, the love affairs, and the wild elation of a man at war. If he fails his readers in this, there will be no theme uniting common humanity, for although the craft of writing may be accurate and even superb, the art of telling a story is missing.

I suppose my entrance into the field of memoir writing was about average. My mother saved my letters home, and I shipped the letters I received to her in bundles. I forgot all about those letters as the years turned into decades. When she died, I moved many boxes, including the letters, into my basement. One summer day in 1979 I had so little to do that I opened one of the boxes. I was nostalgically elated to find some 300 letters, photos, and other mementos of my years in the big war. "Good Lord," I thought, "look at these!" I eagerly went through the bundle of pastel blue and green love letters. "Ah yes, sweet Libby Grierson, quite a gal; and here's another from Patricia Purdon—Oh my, I'll never forget that night!" Each letter promised undying love. Suddenly my two teen-aged daughters appeared, read a few, then giggled as they scurried up the steps to tell their mother.

I was deeply interested by now. I read other letters. "Did I really believe that?," I thought, laying down one letter and picking up another. As I read, my life as an eighteen- to twenty-year-old began taking shape in my memory: there were all the snap judgments of youth, but with occasional insights into the war, and into life itself,

which startled me. I was now just as startled to realize that my memory had grossly distorted much of the life passing before me in the letters. Suddenly I realized I was reading the mail of a boy I no longer knew, a boy I had mostly lost and forgotten during the wear and tear of nearly forty years. What I had here was the man I used to be. But I had the letters, a priceless aid to memory, chronology, and the truth of my experiences. I gradually understood later that, without these letters, my faulty and hazy memory would have produced a rather typical, befuddled memoir.

I had my letters and the urge to get started. All I needed was a little spare time to carry the thing through. I went to see the department chairman. There is, of course, a genuine art in worming reduced course loads and the like from recalcitrant chairmen and deans, an art form I need not belabor. I walked in and laid out my plan:

> "You," he said, "you want to write a memoir?" I shuffled my feet. "Yes," I said. He looked me steadily in the eye, his stare at once curious and suspicious. "Were you with MacArthur, Nimitz, Eisenhower—were you on any of their staffs? What was your importance? What did you do?" "I was a private." "Oh. Oh, I see. Well, I'll give this to the executive committee and see what comes up."

Nothing came up. I wrote my memoir on my own time. Although I had been granted time rather freely for two previous books, there is something about a military memoir that chills the heart of most historians. I was no exception to this rule. Experience had taught me that pitfalls of ego, bias, and other distortions all too often prevailed over the truth. This experience had come in editing the papers and partial memoir of Thomas W. Parsons, a soldier of the Mexican and Civil wars. It had been published in 1975. I determined to tell the story of "the man I used to be," just as he was. I knew I must fight all temptations to "gild the lily." I must strive for truth in everything, just as any historian. There is no alternative. As an historian I at least had a recognizable goal; I would fit the art into my narrative in keeping with my goal. Also, as an historian, I knew how to undertake the standard historical research so essential to the production of a book.

No enlisted man had access to the tactics, strategies, statistics and chronology of events I wanted to include in my book. I turned to other sources regarding these things. I made extensive use of Stanley A. Frankel's *The 37th Infantry Division in World War II*, one of the best unit histories to emerge from that conflict. Almost of equal value was the multivolume *United States Army in World War II*, often referred to as "The Green Series." Several of these volumes, with their

superb maps, exact chronology of events, pertinent statistics, and clear explanations of relevant tactics and strategies, became my constant companions as I put my story on paper. My memory of Fort Benning and its environs was greatly enhanced by a return to its library in 1979 where I read pertinent issues of *Pine Bur* and *The Bayonet*. Again, I made great use of The 37th Division Veteran's Association in nearby Columbus, Ohio, regularly going through its voluminous files, studying the personal papers of the division commander, and later selecting many photographs from its huge signal corps collections for inclusion in my book. Finally, I located the addresses of men who had served with me, writing them and receiving much help in straightening out half-remembered episodes we had shared together in the South Pacific. In short, craftsmanlike historical research not only precedes any art involved in writing a memoir, but aids it and supports it throughout the story.

I made several false starts into my story before I understood that there could be no neat separation of art and craft. I had been writing my story from the rather damp and wrinkled viewpoint of an aging and nostalgic college professor. I pontificated a bit here, offered a scholarly viewpoint there, and composed correct and craftsmanlike sentences and paragraphs. I was trapped into what many writers call the "professional curse"—the attempt to explain and enlighten all things instead of letting the story speak for itself. I knew something was wrong; my first chapter was lifeless. My teen-aged son and daughters read it. They shrugged in tacit agreement. Seeing their disappointment shook me into admitting that I was not really writing of the teen-aged soldier I used to be—a very different person in a very different era. This caused me wisely to change my entire approach to the memoir.

From this time on, I tried consciously to get my story across as lived by a too-hot-to-trot tenor saxophone player and a damned frightened machine gunner. A young fellow who had never heard of jet planes, television, Korean police action, academic deans, John Kennedy, or, thank God, rock n' roll. A young fellow, however, who thought he knew much more than he did of life, women, army officers, and playing ad-lib solos on "Star Dust" and "Body and Soul." This decision brought art into my memoir to stay. I now had to build up this forgotten fellow's life and personality in much the same way as a novelist builds the character and foibles of any major subject in his novel. I would use my memory, my letters, and some imagination to present a true picture. And it must be done in a few revealing sentences. For example, my buddy Jimmy Mayfield and I decided to visit a whorehouse—we had never heard the word "bordello"—in post-

battle Manila. I quote from my book:

> A half-dozen women lounged in a dusky, sanguine room. A candle burned before a small religious shrine in a corner. A well-built girl the color of creamy coffee approached. She smiled broadly, unveiling gold teeth. She wiggled a lacquered fingertip inside an ear.
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> "Only place is virgin, Joe. You like?"
>
> I stepped back.
>
> Someone shrieked, "Mathias is backing out."
>
> I ran out into the sunlight. Laughter sounded. I looked over my shoulder. Mayfield was right behind me.

This one short scene borrows from the tools of the novelist. It reveals more of my teen-aged character and fears, I think, than a five-page, closely reasoned explanation. The facts in this scene are true, but I believe the truth was enhanced in using a bit of art. In short, I doubt that any writer is called upon to use imagination in a more *personal* way than a memoirist. But imagination must enhance truth.

The whorehouse scene involves the use of dialogue. I started my memoir with no thought of this, but after a very few pages it began intruding upon my thinking. Its use would not only clarify many situations and shorten others, but would allow for deft character sketches. I decided very early to employ dialogue, after initial misgivings (I now wish I had used it more often). I questioned myself: How can I write in dialogue forty years after the fact? My letters contained very little of this, nor would it be possible for me to remember long-ago phrases and sentences. How much and how often should I use dialogue? Not much, I decided; just enough to push along an otherwise lagging narrative, to give some zip, and to reveal character. And it had to be in the language of the time—in the language of the lower ranks. Would it destroy historical accuracy or blunt the truth? Doubts nagged at me; I worried about it at length. But I decided to use it, and I also decided to explain its use in my preface:

> Conversations are sometimes included, even though not written as such in my letters. I cannot, for example, remember old "Pump's" lecture to me on venereal disease verbatim, but I am sure I have written a close approximation. The same can be said

for several conversations with girl friends or with fellow soldiers, such as the one glorifying in the news of the Battle of the Bulge while we swam in the tepid waters of a tropical lagoon.

I will illustrate my use of dialogue by quoting directly from my book concerning the tropical lagoon. This scene is painted against the background of the mighty one-thousand ship Luzon invasion force. My division, the 37th, had shipped out of Bougainville and anchored in Seeadler Harbor, an atoll in the Admiralty Islands just north of New Guinea. We were to idle away ten days while the great force assembled. We got shore leave, and my buddies and I began swimming in a tiny lagoon thrust into one of the small islands of the atoll:

> While Chick and I were paddling around, our buddy Rudy Panol joined us. He shouted as we waved a copy of the division newssheet. "Boy oh Boy," he said, "the guys in Europe are taking a helluva beating from the Germans. Says here that a big attack called the bulge is running them out. The snow is so deep they are freezing all over the place."
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> This fell under the heading of good news to Chick and me. "Freezing, are they," I chortled, "they're the ones who laughed like hell when I got ramrodded out here to the Pacific. To hell with 'em, let 'em freeze awhile. They got all the wine, women and song—ain't going to hurt 'em to freeze awhile, is it Chick?"
>
> "Hell no," Chick replied. "They'd give up a lot of that good old stuff to be where we are right now." He was floating on his back spitting a stream of water between his teeth.
>
> "Yeah," Rudy agreed, stripping for a swim; "we may have a lot of damned bugs over here, but ain't nobody froze to death in the South Pacific yet—I hope they freeze down to their bungholes!" We swam with much increased happiness, taking a proprietary interest in the clear warm waters of our lovely coral pool and the sunny skies above it.

In these few sentences of dialogue I created an atmosphere of tropical lanquor—this in contrast to frigid Europe. The reader is reminded that the South Pacific had at least one major advantage as a battlefield. Again, I revealed the small but nagging frictions and jealousies between GIs sent to Europe as opposed to those sent to the great unknown—the South Pacific. And finally, there is shown the typical surface callousness of teen-aged soldiers snared in the web of World War II.

But is it true? Yes it is. I well remember that lagoon and our feelings when we heard of the Battle of the Bulge. The conversation is as close as my memory will allow, but I readily admit error insofar as the exact

wording. So what? This is about three kids swimming in a lagoon, not of MacArthur and Nimitz whose exact words might well be very important, nor should they be supplied by any historian. In short, a straight narrative revealing the same information about GI attitudes would run for at least a page, and it would still lack emotional impact. It would not convey nearly so well the thoughts and feelings of three typical Yankee soldiers in late December, 1944. With studied care, I think, the memoirist can profit from the novelist's tool of dialogue, and so can historical truth.

If dialogue is to be used, then what about profanity? There are several reasons for a judicious use of profanity in a military memoir. I think the major reason is that it heightens the truth of war itself. After all, war is the ultimate profanity, not the incidental use of certain poorly wrought words and phrases. War is enough to make a man cuss! Secondly, it preserves the language uses of an era for the future. For example, I used the word "whore" when called for. I could have used "prostitute," but that was not used much by World War II servicemen. We GIs would have said it was a "show-offy" word. In short, I tried to be true to the language usage of my time, including profanity when I judged it in keeping with this motive. Finally, I was with the youngest group in the army. Like most kids we reveled in being "pissed off" instead of merely "angry," or saying "tough shit" instead of "bad luck." It seemed that the mere saying of these and other new expressions moved us out of our adolescence and into an all-knowing adult world. Is this not a streak of humanity common to all young soldiers and sailors? Letters to me from my buddies were full of it. One uninhibited example in pure form came from an air force trainee, and I quote from my book:

> When we went into that first spin I coulda shit a brass rod. See you've got yourself a stripe. I'm a Pfc too (poor frigging cadet.) We get slapped in the face with a fist full of chicken shit everytime we turn around. It's a great life though!

Any memoirist is faced with many hard choices concerning the material to use and to discard. Although I could record only a fraction of my involvement in nearly three years of army life, this fraction had to tell my story with balance, truth, and narrative flow. Unlike the novelist, I could not invent material to fill in or bridge gaps. Any memoirist committed to the truth is soon faced with limitations of choice—perhaps it is the one greatest discipline of memoir writing. And it is the one which, done with a heavy, artless hand, destroys most memoirs.

There is no guide to the choice of material. It is an art, I think. One has to know where to stop—where the colors begin to fade. Examples abound. I played hundreds of card games and rolled the dice frequently. Most enlisted men did the same. I remembered several colorful events and fistfights connected with these games. Should I use them? I decided against it, and used only one card game in the entire memoir. It represents the time spent on hundreds of such games. More than this would have been trite and redundant, for card games and dice are accepted by knowledgeable readers as understood background, the same as barracks, tents, company streets, and mess halls. The game I used served as an introduction to a greater event, giving me two for one:

> After a good lunch, several of us decided to play cards, sharing the ominous rumor that Tokyo Rose was predicting our landing at Lingayen. I leaned back against the spare anchor strapped solidly to a bulkhead. It was a pleasant game of Hearts, the queen of spades holding our attention until we idly commented on three planes approaching us at water level from Negros. They were perhaps two miles away. We slowly laid our cards down in apprehension as they approached. By this time they were 1000 yards away and closing on us at some 400 miles per hour. "Japs!" we shouted. I kicked myself behind the anchor, my face to the sky. A plane flashed by at mast level. My eyes were full of the big red circles under its wings.

You need not buy the book to find out what happened. It was the first Kamikaze attack on the invasion convoy. Navy corsairs did him in. The card game was used to establish a peaceful and unsuspecting scene. This peaceful game of Hearts, interrupted by sudden death, reveals combat as it really is. It is the best example I can offer of the blend of art with craft.

One of the unexpected fruits of publishing my memoir came in a storm of letters from old veterans formerly in or attached to the Buckeye Division. I call them my "how come" letters and developed some little art in answering them. Most of them start like one from Jasper Smith of Anderson, Indiana: "How come you didn't mention Company C, 672nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion in your book?" Another letter writer asked, "How come you didn't tell of the Philippine woman who commited suicide before giving birth to a Japanese baby?" It wouldn't do to tell Jasper that I had never heard of the 672nd, or the other fellow that the suicide was news to me. Instead, I developed an artful dodge—the final skill for the adult or student who would try his hand at a memoir—to "how come" questions: "Jasper,"

I wrote, "I will certainly include the 672nd in my next book!"