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FILM REVIEW; The Hemingway Effect, From Recent Battlefields

By **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

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As you absorb the most graphic images of combat and how it changes people in these works written by soldiers but read by nine actors, "sanitize" is not a word that comes to mind. The best pieces portray combat as such a heightened sensory experience that it demands to be written about, and they suggest that war can turn ordinary men who wouldn't think of keeping diaries into latter-day Hemingways.

The visual images illustrating these recollections are pertinent wartime montages (one story is accompanied by animation), but they can't compete with the power of the words. Listening is like reading variations of "Snowden's Secret," the climactic chapter of "Catch-22," in which Yossarian, tending a dying man, realizes that "man is matter." Several pieces describe the animal terror of death during combat in visceral language that involves every organ of the body.

Here is a sample, from e-mail that John McCary, an Army sergeant, sent to his friends and family after attending a funeral for soldiers from his unit in 2004:

"What do you say to your men after you've scraped up the scalps of an entire Iraqi family off the road right next to the shattered bodies of your soldiers held together only by their shoelaces, body armor or helmets: we're fighting the good fight? I don't think so. We're just fighting. And now we're dying."

In "Medevac Missions," Ed Hrivnak, an Air Force veteran who served for 20 years, discusses the guilt

of those who have been through combat and asserts that everyone who has engaged in a lot of ground combat knows he has killed innocent people. Several writers describe the impossible, split-second choice of whether to shoot.

The most heartbreaking story is Jack Lewis's "Road Work," which describes an old Iraqi man who has just witnessed the shooting by American soldiers of his beloved son, who is later revealed to have been an engineer and the pride of his family. The father, having lost his will to live, pleads to be killed.

Interviews with older, established writers like Tim O'Brien and Tobias Wolff, who reflect on their experiences in Vietnam, provide a historical perspective. Mr. O'Brien talks about memory and of returning soldiers who carry around in their minds "a book of pictures of ugly corpses" and specific body parts: "that cheek or that ear."

Mr. Wolff bitterly asserts that public indifference to the experiences of soldiers who have fought in Iraq is "a sign of a really decadent civilization." And "Operation Homecoming" helps you realize how successfully the Pentagon's campaign to keep images of combat and of the dead and dying out of the news media has insulated the American public from the Iraq war's tragic reality.

Some pieces are stronger than others. Brian Turner's sarcastic "What Every Soldier Should Know" and Parker Gyokeres's "Camp Muckamungus," which describe the daily grind of military life, are the most pointed efforts at humor. But they pale beside the stories of combat.

Late in the film Mike Strobl's touching description of escorting the body of a 19-year-old Marine home injects "Operation Homecoming" with a note of nobility. But it is a tiny ripple in a sea of disgust and despair.

Operation Homecoming
Writing the Wartime Experience
Opens today in Manhattan.

Produced and directed by Richard E. Robbins; written by Mr. Robbins, Brian Turner, Denis Prior, Colby Buzzell, Jack Lewis, Parker Gyokeres, Sangjoon Han, Ed Hrivnak, John McCary and Mike Strobl; read by Beau Bridges, Robert Duvall, Chris Gorham, Aaron Eckhart, Justin Kirk, John Krasinski, Josh Lucas, Mr. Turner and Blair Underwood; director of photography, Jason Ellson; edited by Gillian McCarthy; music by Ben Decter; released by the Documentary Group. At the Film Forum, 209 West Houston Street, west of Sixth Avenue, South Village. Running time: 81 minutes. This film is not rated.