

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD



IMAGE : JEFFREY DECOSTER

Bret McCabe / Summer 2014

The dead started coming for Ron Capps in Afghanistan in 2002. People he didn't or couldn't save as a Foreign Service officer for the State Department. Refugees fleeing ethnic massacres during a Central African coup. Forty-five people near Račak in Kosovo who asked him for help one day, then were found shot in the back of the head the next.

"I would go to sleep and wake up in the midst of these horrific dreams of the dead," Capps says, sitting in his office in his Chevy Chase home. "They were there in the room with me as far as I knew. I would be awake and just absolutely convinced that the dead were there.

"Simultaneously, I knew that the dead were *not* there," he continues after a long pause, sitting up in his chair and pointing at the ghosts he knows are not in the room. He would reassure himself: "I'm here and this is Afghanistan and they're from Kosovo or they're from Zaire and that's not real. And I'm OK because they're *not* real. But, wow, they look real. And I don't want to go back to sleep."

The dead started haunting Capps, A&S '95 (MLA), '11 (MA), shortly after his deployment to the U.S. military command headquarters at Bagram Airfield. As an Army reservist he was called into active duty following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Human intelligence—information acquired face to face in the field—was crucial in Afghanistan, as the region was relatively primitive technology wise and opportunities for electronic surveillance and intercepts were few.

Capps, who was then director of human and counterintelligence operations, sometimes feared he was losing his mind. "When that started happening during the day, that's when I realized I needed help," Capps says. "I had about 100 people working for me all over the country and spread out over airbases outside of the country. I didn't feel like I could in good conscience continue to not get treatment."

He saw a doctor at the Combat Stress Center, who put him on Prozac, and he began the tightrope walk of admitting he wasn't feeling well without sounding so far off his rocker that a military psychiatrist might have his security clearance pulled. So Capps developed his own scale for measuring his mental state: all right, vaguely not all right, and seriously not all right.

How bad could it get? "I am pretty darn sure that I am only a couple blinks away from rolling onto the floor and curling up in a ball, but I remember that there are some new guys in the office and they would most likely totally freak out if on their first day the boss started rolling on the floor and baying at the moon. So, I think now would be a bad time to roll on the floor, you know, because I'm supposed to be in charge of this circus, and if the Chirpy Bastards have to drag me out of here wrapped in a fucking straitjacket, foaming at the mouth and babbling about streetlights emitting death rays, that would be bad."

That's how Capps describes his initial experiences with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in *Seriously Not All Right: Five Wars in Ten Years*, his debut book that Schaffner Press published in May. It's a memoir of not only the experiences that contributed to Capps' PTSD but also how writing has aided his ongoing recovery. Since retiring from the military and State Department in 2008 and being classified a combat disabled veteran, Capps has advocated for writing therapy as a complement to PTSD treatment in commentary pieces for *Time*, *Foreign Policy*, and *The American Interest*.

Now he's sharing writing's clarifying power with other active duty and veteran military personnel. In 2011, he started the Veterans Writing Project and developed a curriculum for



IMAGE : MARSHALL CLARKE

teaching the craft to veterans and military personnel, *Writing War: A Guide to Telling Your Story*. He partnered with the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center to develop a program for wounded service members. And he started the literary journal *O-Dark-Thirty* to showcase writing by veterans and active-duty personnel.

That's his mission now: to help veterans become the writers they want to be. "This isn't therapy," Capps says of the VWP. "We remind people that if they need help, seek help. We talk about writing. That's what we encourage. *Get your damn story down.*"

Ron Capps' office is located in the third-floor attic of his home. It's a comfortably intimate space, able to fit a few bookcases, a table, and some chairs, with enough room left over for his two dogs to curl up on the floor when he sits at his desk. He points to a few clear plastic tubs where he keeps all the notes from his overseas missions, their covers identified by a place and year written in marker.

Capps is a trim, fit 56-year-old who keeps his light brown hair cut short, his beard shorter, and his office well kempt. Books about early-20th-century Darfur and Ali Dinar, the last sultan of the region, are stacked on a table, research for the historical novel he's working on. He opens a box that recently arrived from his publisher. It contains his military and State Department photo IDs, which are used on *Seriously's* cover.

Capps holds one up and smiles. It reads ANDY. "That's the name I went by in Iraq because we didn't use real names," he says, poking through the box. He rattles off what each ID was for as he roots through them: Embassy Khartoum, theater access for the Kosovo forest, United Nations mission in Kosovo. "Cameroon, the first embassy I worked in," he says, holding the badge up quickly and tossing it back into the box. "Bagram collection point, that's where the prisoners were kept. My old military ID. U.S. embassy Khartoum again, my second one. My Iraq ID. Ethiopian driver's license. DIA blue badge for the entire intelligence community. Embassy Ottawa. American annex Kabul, Afghanistan—that's to get into the CIA compound."

His eyes light up a bit and he holds up a laminated blue card on which is printed something in Cyrillic. "This is your 'get out of jail free' card for Serbia," he says. "It basically says, 'He doesn't speak Serbian. Shut up and let him go.'" He puts it back and flips through a few more. "This is fun stuff."

He can say that now. In 1994, after a decade in the Army specializing in military intelligence, Capps transferred into the Reserve and became a foreign service officer. Over the next decade, his State Department and military deployments would send him to war-torn places where he witnessed people doing horrible things to each other. And he wasn't in a position to do much about it.

In Africa, he says, he failed to convince his superiors to prevent thousands of refugees from getting massacred by Banyamulenge rebels and Rwandan troops. He would spend time in the

field, report back to Washington about what was going on, and then talk to the survivors after incidents. One woman told him about the soldiers who shot her son, then raped her in front of her husband before killing him with an acetylene torch. In Kosovo, he had a Serbian thug put a pistol to his head, threatening to kill him and rape his interpreter. A woman begged him to take her child in hopes of saving him from mortar rounds, a sniper's bullet, or being locked inside their own home and incinerated alive. He attended the burial of six people killed during a bombing.

Those bodies were his first encounter with war casualties, and the sight of them was seared into his brain. Memories of their dead skin charged the first words he ever put to paper about his war experiences, when in 1999 he borrowed a typewriter and sat in a small room in Pristina and typed: "Yellow. Their skin was yellow. They had dirt under their fingernails and their feet were dirty."

His attendance at their funeral was strategic. The diplomatic corps assumed that if their representatives were present at the burial, Serbian snipers would be less likely to shoot the Kosovars doing the burying. That was often the extent of Capps' intervention capabilities.

That was his job: observe and report what he saw to the State Department. Just the facts, not the smell of blood that lingers in villagers' homes after an attack, not that when an 18-month-old's body goes missing, the dogs probably got to it first.

Capps would often be part of diplomatic teams on peacekeeping missions, but nothing they did kept anyone at peace. The experiences became hard to reconcile with his sense of right and wrong. "I feel like what pushed me as far as I went was this sense that I failed to save lives," Capps says. In 2004, Capps was sent to Darfur, and the dead followed him there. His personal life was falling apart—his mother died, his marriage was winding toward divorce—and he began to wonder why the hell he bothered to do anything at all. One day, he borrowed a sidearm from a colleague, grabbed two beers, and drove out into the desert to shoot himself.

That afternoon, his ringing cellphone saved him from a bullet, and he knew then he needed help. He was medically evacuated from Darfur in May 2006, returning to Washington, D.C., where he took a State Department desk job. Though his body was removed from the war, his mind wasn't. Images of the dead still enveloped him in sometimes debilitating waves of grief. His breath would come in staccato gasps. His chest would tighten; his hands would shake. If he couldn't ride it out, he would ball himself up on the floor. By this point, he had been diagnosed with PTSD for about five years, his only treatment regimen a Prozac prescription and self-monitoring on the scale of all right to seriously not all right.

PTSD was officially recognized as a condition that afflicts veterans in 1980, but the impact of war on the people who survive it has been recorded since man started fighting. While putting together his Writing War curriculum he came across the different names for the symptoms now commonly associated with PTSD: combat fatigue, battle fatigue, shell shock, soldier's heart.

After the Civil War, doctors started calling it *nostalgia*. "That is a really fascinating term because it's that idea of wanting to live in the past and people remaining focused on something

that happened long ago," Capps says. "That inability to move forward is very descriptive of what PTSD is like. Part of you is still there."

This research allowed him to put together writing by veterans about their combat experiences—to use as examples in the curriculum. Kurt Vonnegut, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, etc.—to use as examples in the curriculum. He supplemented this literary history by talking to medical researchers. From psychologist James Pennebaker at the University of Texas, he learned about the role language plays in understanding trauma and mental health. With neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky at Stanford University, Capps talked about the wording he should use to write about how the brain responds to stress. And from psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, whose work with Vietnam veterans informed his 1995 book, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Capps learned about the concept of moral injury and the role narrative can play in a soldier's processing of the war experience.

"When Shay talks about moral injury, about taking part in something that is so antithetical to your belief structure, that completely resonated with me," Capps says. "That is a moral injury. I believe that this is what happens to people, and this is one of the reasons we have so many people struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder right now."

This research also granted him better insight into how writing was helping him understand what was going on in his mind. He says he first started writing about his war experiences because "I knew I wanted to remember it *and* I was trying to make sense of it," he says. "But at the time I'm not sure I realized fully what I was doing other than documenting it. I don't really think I understood that it was going to help me."

The more he wrote about his experiences, the more he realized that he was gaining a sense of control over the memories just by having put them into words. "I found that as I dug back into [my memories], I realized how far I had already come, how much better I was feeling," Capps says. "By going back into it, it drags you back a little bit but when you come through it, you're a little further along. A slingshot effect. You pull it back, and then it pushes you forward. So over time, I started to understand how [writing] was helping me, and about that point I started thinking about the writing project."

Jay Snyder experienced that slingshot effect himself. Now a retired tennis official and former director of the U.S. Open, Snyder entered the Army in 1964 after graduating from college, arriving in Vietnam as a lieutenant platoon leader in September 1965. Wounded late in his tour, he was medevaced back to Valley Forge Hospital, serving out his duty stateside before starting his career, first with the state government of Pennsylvania and later with the U.S. Tennis Association.

He enrolled in two of the Veterans Writing Project's earliest classes, first a weekend seminar and then, with Capps' encouragement, a weeklong writing workshop. He had a project in mind.

While overseas in Vietnam, he started corresponding with his sister's college roommate, who today is his wife of more than 40 years.

Snyder still has all their letters. "I had always thought I could take those and turn them into a book related to my experience in Vietnam," Snyder says. He envisioned an autobiographical project, but after going through the workshops, he realized he had the raw materials for a novel. Snyder says he hadn't tried writing fiction since he was an English major in college. "Once I started, it just opened the whole floodgates," he says. "Guys are pretty good at putting things in a box and kind of leaving them there. And I didn't really open some of those boxes until after a couple of the workshops and [writing] exercises, and I just came up with pages of [story] ideas."

Snyder's story "Dog Tags to Death" was published in the special fall 2013 issue of *O-Dark-Thirty*. It's a three-page plunge into a soldier surviving a firefight, in which the narrator observes that .50-caliber tracer rounds look "something like a glowing beer can" when they race by overhead.

"With the writing that we get, it's still something that feels like the emotion is just torn open," says Jerri Bell, a VWP instructor and managing editor of *O-Dark-Thirty*. The program is open to writers of all levels, and Bell says that what they produce "is sincere and raw and still kind of bloody." For VWP writers, emotions are "still very much on the surface, especially with the writers from the Vietnam generation, who, I think, came home to disparagement and blame and shaming. You can almost feel how hesitant and tentative they are."

The VWP provides the space and peer encouragement to build veterans' confidence as writers. Like Capps, Bell is a veteran, having served as a Navy intelligence officer for 20 years. That's the VWP model: veterans mentoring veterans. Serendipitously, all the VWP instructors are Johns Hopkins alumni as well: Bell, A&S '09 (MA); Dario DiBattista, A&S '11 (MA); and Jim Mathews, A&S '95 (MA). Capps recognizes that veterans know how to talk to each other. "You feel like nobody's going to ask you a really stupid question like, *How many people did you kill?* You can relax a little bit."

This comfort level is crucial for any emerging writer because it's the first step in building confidence—self-confidence to put thoughts and feelings into words, confidence in the social setting to share them with somebody else, and confidence that slowly accrues upon discovering your thoughts and feelings resonate with somebody else.

"The writers I love the most are the ones who aren't so sure" about their writing, says Bell, who encourages the veterans to read their work aloud. "When they get that feedback from other people in the class—'Hey, that's really cool'—just watching the light bulb come on, *People would actually want to read something I've written?* Having that veteran-to-veteran connection gives them a little bit of confidence."

The instructors also remind their students that they don't have to write about war. Capps points out that *Seriously Not All Right* isn't a conventional war narrative. At no point does he level his rifle at a presumed enemy, or recount the harrowing chaos of defending a position from attack.

"I always use the great example of James Dickey," says VWP instructor Jim Mathews. "He was a Korean War veteran, and he said that his experience in the military really drove a lot of what he wrote about. Yet, what he wrote about didn't have anything to do with the military. It had to do with the human condition, which is something you get in bite-sized portions in your experience in the military. And you get it in a very short time, in a place where you're forced to witness that tension. So if you're observant at all, you're going to pick up a lot of great material from that experience."

Dickey isn't the only American writer who fits that bill. Edward Abbey, Raymond Chandler, E.E. Cummings, E.L. Doctorow, Dashiell Hammett, Gay Talese, Calvin Trillin, Norman Mailer, Horace McCoy, James Salter, Robert Stone, Donald Westlake—all spent some time in the military or saw combat.

Mathews says he likes to paraphrase one of his favorite Ben Franklin quotes with the students in his classes. "'Before you can write something worth reading, you have to live something worth writing.' They've done that," he says.

"We're coming off a bunch of wars stuck together," he continues. "Where a huge population of veterans has experienced overseas deployment and combat. Out of that, we are going to get a huge influx of writers and literary fiction in the next 10 or 20 years, kind of similar to what we saw after World War II. I think it's coming, and an important element of that is going to be the female voices that we didn't have coming out of Vietnam or World War II."

Air Force Maj. Melody Mitchell might be one of those voices. She works in the Office of Special Investigations (a combination of military criminal investigation command and military intelligence), earned her officer's commission through ROTC at UCLA, trained to be a Middle East specialist, and spent the past decade deployed at various times in Iraq and Kuwait. "My mission was to go off base and look for terrorists," she says. "There was that danger element and yet, admittedly, none of that bothered me per se. But there were other things that did."

Mitchell declines to go into detail, adding only that "I was in a pretty rough place, especially in 2010, right after my return from Iraq." By fall 2012, after two more deployments, she and her husband were living in the Washington, D.C., area and she decided she wanted to "try to find [her] voice and stop lolling in [her] misery." She started attending events sponsored by Women in Defense, a career-building, networking, and educational organization for women in national security careers. There, she encountered other women in law enforcement and the military who shared some of her struggles. She read Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*. And she decided that not only did she not want to leave the military, she wanted to form support networks for military women. She started one in Washington that met once a month, and when she was deployed to Jordan in the summer of 2013, she started one there, too.

"There were more females [in my Jordan unit] than I was used to in deployments, but we were still outnumbered eight to one," Mitchell says. "I wanted to build a community where I

encouraged women to look after each other, for us to watch each other's back. It was purely optional, and I had the backing of the group commander, and he had me do all calls to promote his safety and security messages and to talk about challenges that tend to be unique to females, especially in the Middle East."

In both groups, Mitchell took notes on the discussions, added her own thoughts, and wrote them into lengthy emails that she sent to the group. Those emails got shared, and soon Mitchell was hearing from other women in the military who had similar experiences.

"It's great to see that I'm not the only one struggling with X, Y, or Z," she says. "I think the military gets so PC that they try to say, 'OK, we're all the same and we're all equal.' And yes, we're all equal, but we're also different, and we should learn about gender differences and acknowledge them. We don't have to bludgeon people with them. If we just admit, 'OK, our minds think different sometimes,' I think it would help us be more effective in our missions."

But she couldn't figure out why this discussion was taking place in email. Looking for other military women who were writing about their experiences, she visited a website that aggregates blogs by military personnel and their spouses. There, she found more than 1,600 blogs by women—an overwhelming number of them written by spouses, not active-duty personnel. She realized that if she wanted to see a blog about military women, she'd have to write it herself.

She debuted her blog, melodyhmitchell.com, in January, but she says she's still finding her voice. She heard about VWP from Kayla Williams, a former Army specialist and author of the book *Love My Rifle More Than You*, whom Mitchell saw at an author appearance at Politics and Prose bookstore in February. "I really didn't know what to expect," she says. "I just hoped to learn something. I feel like war has been a huge part of my life and career, but I wasn't writing about war. Yes, Ron was able to teach us the basics of writing, and that has improved my writing and thinking and structure. But I love how he uses literature from different [veteran writers] to teach us. He would read a passage and just simmer on it, discussing what made it great writing."

Capps realizes it's a cliché to say that teachers learn as much from their students as vice versa, but he brings it up when talking about the VWP. He is teaching veterans how to write, and they're teaching him how to be more empathetic. "Everybody's having a hard time, everybody's struggling to be kind," Capps says. "Maybe it's just that I'm getting older. Maybe it's just that I've come to a better understanding of my life. I understand more about letting the past go, living in the moment, and trying to just be a better person. I don't know how I get that from students. I don't know how I get that from teaching. But in the past couple of years, the only thing that's really changed in my life is that I've been running this program, and I feel considerably different."

Capps is spending the summer promoting his memoir, working on a novel about Darfur on the cusp of the First World War, and doing his best to grow the VWP. The project conducts regular workshops and seminars in the Washington area and around the country. He'd like to branch out to places where there are significant populations of veterans: San Diego, Seattle, Colorado, Texas, Florida, Chicago.

He'd also like to see a university develop a writing therapy program. "You can get a degree right now in art, music, dance, drama therapy— and be certified to work in a hospital—but writing therapy just does not exist," he says. "So many psychiatrists and psychologists, social workers, therapists use writing as a tool. Why don't we let people who are writers get involved?"

He's passionate about the subject because he knows it works. His writing career is a testament to that. "Since the end of 2013, I've made my first attempt to go off medication in eight or 10 years," Capps says. "So I'm still working on it. But I'm certainly better than I was 10 years ago, and I'm certainly better than I was five years ago.

"I feel all right. On that continuum, most days I'm over here on that 'all right' side. I still have the occasional 'vaguely not all right' day. But I'm a *long* way from seriously not all right."

Correction: An earlier version of this story misspelled the name of Schaffner Press, the publisher of Capps' book.

Bret McCabe, A&S '94, is the magazine's senior writer.

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