

The Art of Documenting War

Remembering Evan Wright

by Maj Benjamin Van Horrick

These are the lead sentences in Evan Wright's series, "The Killer Elite," documenting the Marine Corps' 1st Reconnaissance Battalion as it barreled north toward Baghdad during the 2003 U.S. invasion. The three-part series did not appear in *Time* or *Newsweek* but rather in *Rolling Stone*. The tone and tenor of the series brought the war from Baghdad to the home front with a combination of grit and honesty. Sean Woods, Wright's editor at *Rolling Stone*, recently remarked that working on these pieces "was like writing the first draft of history." That first draft of history still hits home just as strongly as *Generation Kill*, the book he subsequently wrote based on his embedded experience. With the news of Wright's death by suicide this month, readers should take a few moments to reflect on his embedded reporting and how he combined his sparse prose and his unfettered access to create an enduring, frantic, manic, and humane account of young men at war.

Wright's early life and career trajectory did not foretell his success as a war correspondent. However, in retrospect, his turbulent youth and immersion in American subcultures proved invaluable. During a 2013 episode of the *Longform* podcast, Wright recounted his experience at a reform school, which he termed "Abu Ghraib for kids." The experience left Wright with a deep distrust of social groups and a suspicion of the cultural establishment. When he began writing professionally, he did so on society's cultural periphery, working first at *Hustler* magazine reviewing pornographic films. Later, he wrote several

"The invaders drive north through the Iraqi desert in a Humvee, eating candy, dipping tobacco, and singing songs. Oil fires burn on the horizon, set during skirmishes between American forces and pockets of die-hard Iraqi soldiers."

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long-form pieces profiling American subcultures—neo-Nazis, war profiteers, skateboarders, sex workers—work that would form the basis of his essay anthology: *Hella Nation*.

Wright's years spent penetrating and documenting the overlooked tribes of American society proved ideal when embedding with the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion during the first months of the Iraq War. Recon Marines are a tribe within the larger Marine Corps, with their own distinct customs, norms, and culture. In 2003, the Marine Corps Special Operations Command did not exist. Those volunteering for recon's selection pipeline and unique mission set cleaved themselves away from the Marine Corps' often stifling constraints for operational autonomy and its accompanying high exceptions. Recon Marines chose their own tribe. Wright did not just embed with them—he became an envoy to this separate, distinct tribe.

On the heels of a dissatisfying profile of Shakira and a contract negotiation with *Rolling Stone*, Wright volunteered for a war reporting in Afghanistan in 2002 in a bid to jump-start his creative fire and extract more money from the magazine. Wright found inspiration for his war in two unlikely sources—Christopher Isherwood and A.J. Liebling. Isherwood was a writer who, along with the poet W.H. Auden, documented their observations of the Sino-Japanese War in the late 1930s in *Journey to a War*. Liebling, like Wright, profiled people at the margins of American society beginning in the 1930s. When the United States joined World War II and began its first campaign in North Africa, he embedded with American forces. Liebling's and Isherwood's clear, direct prose, and their incorporation of quotes from their subjects, served as a template for Wright's war reporting.

Out of a pool of five hundred reporters, Wright gained a prized assignment when the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq in 2003—embedding with the Marine Corps' 1st Reconnaissance Battalion—due to his minimal logistical needs. Most of the journalists required electricity to file their daily stories and produce live reports that could com-

promise the position of the units. Freed from the daily deadline, Wright travels with his notebooks and cameras. Sitting in the Humvee with the Marines, Wright filled fifteen notebooks with scenes while marinating in the banter between the recon Marines. As Wright left Iraq, the daunting task of turning the tales into a cohesive narrative struck the writer with fear. A Marine remarked to Wright, “Dog, the stuff we’ve been through, the people we are, everything we’ve seen—an idiot could write this and it would turn out OK.”

The Marines Wright profiles face uncertainty, fear, excitement, and boredom on the road to Baghdad. Against the brown backdrop of Iraq’s desert terrain, Wright paints non-commissioned officers and junior Marines in technicolor. Crammed in the Humvee for days on end, he introduces readers to a dysfunctional band and with his pen reveals them to be a loving family. Sgt Colbert, a combat-proven team leader, takes the role of the loving father. Behind the wheel, Cpl Person serves as the loud older brother, bickering with the Humvee occupants, singing pop songs, and cursing the war’s seeming futility. Cpl Trombley is the boastful little brother who is in need of guidance, confidence, and reassurance at times. Wright presents the Marines’ virtues or vices, making each a dynamic character in the unfolding drama. Weeks in the Humvee allowed Wright to capture the cadence, diction, and tempo of dialogue among the group, giving the reader a front-row seat to the crude, crass, and comical banter. Nathaniel Fick, who commanded the platoon Wright was

embedded with, noted, “I knew Evan as a good and gentle guy in a place that was neither good nor gentle.” Portraying young Marines with dynamism, Wright treats his characters with a deft gentleness that is at once devoid of exaggerated sentiment and yet complete with humanity.

Wright concludes the first dispatch in the series describing an event that epitomized the chaos and uncertainty of the early days of the invasion. Hastily ordered to secure an airfield, a gunner is told to fire on individuals believed to be hostile threats. The Marines later learn that the individuals were Bedouin teenagers in pursuit of their camels, which had run in fright from the Marines’ vehicles, and one of them would die from his wounds. Wright recounts the event and the fallout, capturing the emotions of the moment almost tangibly: the frustration of the Navy corpsman who tries to treat the wounded boy; the remorse of a grief-stricken gunner who weapon fired the shot that took the boy’s life; a leader’s protective insistence that it was his order to fire that is responsible for the tragedy, not the gunner’s actions.

The scene also powerfully foreshadows what is to come in the war. As the action of combat places Marines in contact with Iraqis who see the would-be liberators as invaders, and tragedy ensues, an image begins to take shape of the formidable insurgency that would drag on well after 1st Recon rotated home. Wright’s recounting of the story only conveys the consequences of issuing—and following—orders amid the fog of war, but also proved prescient

in the summer of 2003 as the future complexities of the Iraq War were barely beginning to come into focus.

Wright’s seminal war reporting and crisp writing documenting the opening months of the Iraq War set the standard for conflict reporting that followed. The raw account of recon Marines left an indelible impression on all readers—myself included. When published in the summer of 2003, Wright’s long-form pieces began framing the initial months of the Iraq War and provided a lens through which the ensuing insurgency could be understood. The resonance of Wright’s writing harkens back to the writers, Isherwood and Liebling, that inspired him and beyond, to the oral tradition and the chronicling of the wars of antiquity. Aided with only a pen, paper, and audio tapes, Wright records the seemingly ephemeral musings of men in combat, using them to give depth and color to the story of war. As long as there has been war, there has been a place for people to tell war’s story. Wright did that. His life came to a tragic end, but his words still light the minds of readers just as brightly as the oil fires he witnessed as he rolled into Iraq, authoring history’s first draft.

>Author’s Note: The views presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the Marine Corps and the DOD. This article first appeared in the July 2024 edition of Modern Warfare Institute at West Point. <https://mwi.westpoint.edu/the-art-of-documenting-war>.

