



Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan
Edited by Donald Anderson

Summary from [Google Books](#):

In *Quagmire* you'll find a range of voices—men and women, military and civilian—and a range of perspectives from the homeland, the combat zone, and war's aftermath. These personal responses to war in Iraq and Afghanistan have been selected from *War, Literature & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities* to mark the thirtieth anniversary of its inaugural publication. The responses cover approximately fifteen years of the United States' conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and demonstrate the aftermath of war and the degreed ripples that extend beyond soldiers to families and friends, lovers, hometowns, even pets.

As citizens, Pablo Neruda advised, we have an obligation to “come and see the blood in the streets.” To ignore what we do in war and what war does to us is to move willfully toward ignorance. To ignore such reminders imperils ourselves, our communities, and our nation.

Book's Applicability to Junior Army Officers:

The Soldiers that Junior Officers are leading today may have been to Iraq or Afghanistan, or they may not have gone. Either way, these wars have been going on for most of these Soldiers lives. It is important to hear diverse perspectives on these conflicts and the impact they have had on service members, families, and the public. Discussing these narratives will help further critical lenses of Soldiers and provide enhanced empathy.



Read2Lead

Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

What is Read2Lead?

Read2Lead is a series of book studies published by the Center for Junior Officers, a small Army research center dedicated to empowering junior officers to develop themselves and their teams. Read2Lead modules give junior officers a ready-to-use product that they can integrate into leader professional development programs

What's in this Read2Lead?

Every Read2Lead module contains:

- A short summary of the book that you can circulate to prime people for reading
- Advice for running your Read2Lead session
- A series of questions that can be used in multiple sessions, with options for using the questions over different lengths of time
- Additional resources that may be helpful for the facilitator

What do I need to provide to run a Read2Lead program?

First, the time. Read2Lead sessions work best when they're done over multiple sessions, so participants can digest books in small "chunks" instead of trying to cram them in all at once. Make sure you give your participants enough time to read the book and not fake the funk.

Second, the books. Books can be purchased with a government purchase card if they remain in the hands of the unit. Buying books for a Read2Lead session can be a great kick-starter for a battalion or even brigade library. You can also provide the books to Soldiers with the expectation that they pass them along to another Soldier when they are done with them. If you choose this approach, you should ensure you mark the books appropriately per the purchasing regulations and legal guidance of your organization.

Third, the space. Read2Lead sessions should be conducted in spaces where everyone can hear and see one another. Be creative: maybe you do them as hip-pocket training on a range, or at the end of motor stables. Or as a brownbag lunch in a barracks dayroom.

When you run the actual session, think of it as a time for your Soldiers to think outside the box, discuss something beyond the day-to-day concerns of the unit, and improve their communication skills. The questions provided on the subsequent pages are a starting point, but feel free to add or substitute your own to make the session more meaningful for your Soldiers.



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This Read2Lead is designed to occur over five separate, 60-minute sessions. These sessions will facilitate discussion centered on the individual and unique voices presented in each chapter of Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan. Quagmire critically considers the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from personal perspectives of diverse participants. This guide incorporates supplemental materials from different sources to help with the support and processing of the individuals reading this material, as it can be emotional and triggering, especially for participants who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“...the most concentrated composite effect of [these] essays: that there were nearly as many wars going on as there were different participants in different situations over a nearly interminable period of years.” (Philip Beidler, Foreword)



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Session 1: Foreword, Prologue, Things to Pack...

Recommended Time: 60 minutes

Reading 1. *Foreword* by Philip Beidler, pages ix-xi.

“A reader of this collection of personal narratives from the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan...will gain a new knowledge of what happened there; or, to be more precise, what horrific enterprises the Iraq and Afghanistan wars turned out to be over the years for a myriad of participants” (pp. ix).

Discussion Questions:

- If you have not served in them, what are your perceptions of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?
- If you have served in them, what are your reflections on the perspective by Philip Beidler? Agreements? Disagreements?

Reading 2. *When War Becomes Personal: A Prologue* by Donald Anderson, pages xiii-xvi.

“The responses, written over the period of the last fifteen years, mirror, approximately, the lengths of these two Middle Eastern conflicts, and demonstrate, I believe, the fixed aftermath of war, the degreed ripples that extend beyond soldiers to families and friends, lovers, hometowns, even pets...To ignore what we do in war and what war does to us is to move willfully toward ignorance and pretense. To scorn such reminders carelessly imperils ourselves, our communities, our nations” (pp. xvi).

Discussion Questions:

- Anderson questions the validity we, as readers, have on stories and who they are told by. What do you think of the examples he gives and their validity or impact on you?
- What perspective are you taking when reading the stories in Quagmire? Critical, reflective, or something else?

Reading 3. *Things to Pack When You're Bound for Baghdad* by Jason Armagost, pages 1-27.

Discussion Questions:



Read2Lead

Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

- On pages 3-5, Armagost details the extra items he has in his flight suit and helmet bag. He says these things bring him comfort. What emotions and memories does reading this list illicit for you?
- “Tonight I will shoot Apollo’s silver bow that never misses...I tell myself that my actions will help save the lives of soldiers who are racing north out of Kuwait. This is honorable. It is not honor” (pp. 9). As members of U.S. Military, we affirm our ability to pull the trigger when necessary. What moral dilemmas does this leave us with? How do we live with this and continue pursuing the mission?
- Armagost describes a ritual he has Knob Noster State Park on pages 17 and 18. What do you think of this ritual? Why do you think he does this? Do you have a similarly meaningful ritual? If so, what value does it have for you?
- Detailing the dropping of the bombs (pp. 22-24), the author explains all of the technical features and concludes by saying, “sometimes you must do a bad thing to stop something even worse? Make it so.” What are your takeaways from this passage and sentiment?
- Armagost concludes by sharing his mixed emotions and thoughts he still has regarding his actions and service. How do these feelings align with your view of your own service?
- Throughout this chapter, Armagost draws parallels and insights with great literary works and authors. What effect does this have on you as the reader?

Supplemental Scholarly Article: [Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy by Litz et al. \(2009\).](#)



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Week 2: Safety, Allawi, Scars, War College, The Colonel's Bicycle

Recommended Time: 60 minutes

Reading 1. *Safety* by Rebecca Kanner, pages 28-40.

"You're damaged and brave and bleeding from the wounds we gave you which you've made beautiful, and everyone is cheering because they are large, and in perfect proportion to each other, and flexed so that they are shining through your skin like something godly" (pp. 39).

Discussion Questions:

- What unhealthy coping skills did you notice that the author's brother used? What are some healthier options you would want to suggest to the family?
- How would you want to be supported in that situation? How would you try to support others?
- What elements of military culture allow for "tough" and "strong" mentalities when all people feel pain, sadness, and grief? How can we allow space in our organization to promote this part of health?

Supplemental Resources: [National Center for PTSD](#)

Reading 2. *Allawi* by Patrick Mondaca, pages 41-45.

"When people talk about the war, when I hear veterans talking about their wars, and I think about my war, I think about the market. I think about Allawi. It is the place I dream of. The place of nightmares" (pp. 41).

Discussion Questions:

- Mondaca uses vivid imagery to describe his experience where he served at a market. What piece of imagery stood out to you? Why? What emotion did it surface in you?
- What does Allawi mean to the author?
- Do you have an "Allawi"? Reflect and share if you are comfortable.

Reading 3. *Scars* by Nolan Peterson, pages 46-48.

"The mountains may not solve any problems, but the ones they create are simple and free from the complicated tragedies of the lives we leave behind" (pp. 47).



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Discussion Questions:

- Peterson and Law immediately bond over their shared experience with service. Have you experienced this connection before? What effect did it have on you?
- Both men experienced changes in relationships back home when they got back, some were devastating. What kind of resources does your unit have to support soldiers and their families when they come home? What barriers exist to using these services? How can leaders help break these barriers?
- What elements of this story resonated with you most?

Reading 4. *War College* by Teri Carter, pages 49-64.

“It was that first afternoon, in a roomful of strangers, when I remembered that arguing controversial topics could be civil. We listened. We made our points. We considered opposing ideals” (pp. 57).

Discussion Questions:

- On her experience at the War College, Carter writes, “my core beliefs remained, but the edges had softened and blurred” (pp. 62). How can we, as public servants, make a conscious effort soften our own political edges?
- Service members are expected to remain apolitical in uniform, yet we all still have our own personal belief sets. What does “being apolitical in uniform” mean to you? How difficult is it? What is your take on this expectation?
- What value do you see in having conversations with disagreeing viewpoints like the ones depicted by Carter? In what spaces should they happen?

Supplemental Article: [An apolitical military is essential... by General \(r\) Joseph Votel](#)

Supplemental Article: [The Importance of Diverse Perspectives and How to Foster Them by Heather Singmaster](#)

Reading 5. *The Colonel’s Bicycle* by Jordan Hayes, pages 65-74.

“He would only let his gardeners do the work when he could not do it himself, and even then it was jealousy so. Lieutenant Colonel Gol was proud of his gardens” (pp. 74).

Discussion Questions:

- What is the meaning of this story to you?



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

- In what ways do characters in this story take pride (or not) in their work?
- **Reflect:** Are there jobs in our Army that you talk down on? Why is that so? How are those jobs actually necessary and important to the sustainment of our force?



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Week 3: Phalanx, A Promise to Keep, Service with Smile, The Man I Killed, Free-Falling Soldier, A Sliver of Blue

Recommended Time: 60 minutes

Reading 1. *Phalanx* by Gerardo Mena, pages 75-76.

“He had a first name once. It is now buried with his honor” (pp. 75).

Discussion Questions:

- What emotionality do you pull from this story? Do you understand the author’s perspective? Take space to share stories if appropriate.
- What do you think is the purpose of this story? Does it accomplish its purpose? Why or why not?

Reading 2. *A Promise to Keep* by J. Malcom Garcia, pages 77-85.

“In my four trips to Afghanistan, I realized, I had never given anything back to the people who had told me their stories, offered their hospitality, shared their lives and often tears. I took what they had given to me and left for the next story. I thought about that. Then I pushed the shovel into the mud” (pp. 81).

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think about the author helping and caring for the five homeless boys on her previous stint in Afghanistan? Did she do them more or harm or good? Do you think the boys would have a different perspective?
- Khalid thinks the author to be reckless at times for wanting to go to dangerous places outside of Kabul – what is your take on this?
- What did you take away from this story? What does it make you think of war correspondents and reporters?

Supplemental Podcast (2 min): [U.S.-Funded Journalists In Afghanistan Fear For Their Lives](#)

Reading 3. *Service with a Smile* by Bobby Briggs, pages 86-103.

“I’d never told this particular story before, and, looking back, Sunday brunch with strangers might not have been the most opportune time” (pp. 86).

Discussion Questions:



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

- What do you make of the interactions between the commanders that resulted in the mission being originally cancelled? Do you think Briggs's guilt is misplaced? Why or why not?
- "If our lives are a collection of the stories we carry, what does it mean to exist in a world where you cannot share them?" (pp. 102-103)
- "Do these experiences need to be shared?" (pp. 103)
- Do you have times when you feel like you cannot connect with those around you because of your experiences as a soldier? How do you cope with this? How can our organization better support you and your family in this?

Reading 4. *The Man I Killed* by Brian Duchaney, pages 104-114.

"I couldn't remember him. The more I tried to picture him, the more the faces blurred together. He was just another person that blended into the other faceless soldiers that I ended up sending into harm's way" (pp. 112).

Discussion Questions:

- The author expressed that he was feeling guilt about CPT Alvarez's death for the role he played in his deployment. Where do you think this feeling of guilt comes from? What else might the author be feeling?
- The author expresses at times that his job is not overly difficult or dangerous. How do you think this impacts his identity as a soldier?
- Have you heard of any fragging incidents in the past? What do you make of them? How can we identify warning signs to prevent such incidents in the future?

Reading 5. *Free-Falling Soldier* by Alyssa Martino, pages 115-116.

"We all have" (pp. 116).

Discussion Questions:

- Put yourself in this soldier's head. What is going through it right now? How does he feel? What is he really looking for when he asks the author that question?
- What about her? Did she respond correctly? How does she connect with him to make him feel seen, understood, normal?
- How can you support someone in this situation? How can you normalize conversations about suicide, self-harm, and mental illness?

Supplemental Resource: [Suicide Awareness & Resources](#)

Supplemental Resource: [Veterans Crisis Line](#) at 1-800-273-8255 press 1



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Week 4: A Sliver of Blue, Lucky, 31 North 64 East, The Long Goodbye, What Happened Yesterday in Baghdad, Zeh Mutaasif Yum

Recommended Time: 60 minutes

Reading 1. *A Sliver of Blue* by Paul Van Dyke, pages 117-125.

“And the morning the Irish music played, Dan Kingsley saved my life” (pp. 117).

Discussion Questions:

- This story is filled with emotionality. What emotions do you pull from it? Discuss the elements of fear, guilt, relief.
- Wouldn't we have all been scared in this situation? Why do we associate fear with shame?
- The author ends this chapter with a sentiment about “meaning.” Is there meaning from this experience? Why or why not?

Reading 2. *Lucky* by Nicholas Mercurio, pages 126-130.

“The blood was too red, impossibly red, not the comfortable deep crimson hue I had come to know through the years of television and movie violence” (pp. 130).

Discussion Questions:

- Why is the title of this story contradictory?
- How does one live with themselves if they are the only one to walk away from an event like this uninjured? How does one overcome the guilt they feel?

Reading 3. *31 North 64 East* by Matthew Komatsu, pages 131-154.

“Each mission counts toward the twenty total required for one Air Medal; some of my men sport twenty Air Medals. Then there are the special missions, the ones that went a little sideways, worth a bit more” (pp. 132).

Discussion Questions:

- What do you make of the contrast between the story being told in the present tense about the deployment and the entries from pre- and post-deployment? What effect does that have on the overall story? What insights do you draw from both of these perspectives?
- At one point, the author expresses the sentiment, “If there was any solace in the moment, this thought: we're never gonna do this shit anyway” (pp. 140). The



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

thought was inaccurate in the end. What is the danger in this training mentality? How should we be checking ourselves in order to prevent complacency in training?

- This story highlights some of the darkest, angriest thoughts someone may have while in war. How does one process these emotions in the moment? Once they are home?
- What insights do you pull from the story about Bonnie? (pp. 147-148)
- The author has mixed emotions about the award he is being honored with. Why is that?
- What else do you pull from this story?

Reading 4. *The Long Goodbye* by Thomas Simko, pages 155-156.

“He was so brave to be so scared and still pretend for us” (pp. 156).

Discussion Questions:

- What does this story bring up in you? Memories? Emotions?
- The author was in a great deal of pain watching his buddy suffer. How does one cope with this? Are these really the sacrifices this soldier signed up for? How do we reconcile that anger with one’s duty?

Reading 5. *What Happened Yesterday in Baghdad* by Raul Benjamin Moreno, pages 157-169.

“I fall to wondering too, now, about what has become of the voices I left behind” (pp. 169).

Discussion Questions:

- The author describes a group session where the session leader suggests that the participants “follow the example of Martin Luther King, Jr., that they promote an ethic of nonviolence among their countryman” (pp. 162). What do you make of this suggestion?
- How has the perspective of this story added to or shifted your perspective of the Iraq wars or Iraqi people?
- Has your perspective on media and reporting on wars changed or developed? In what ways?

Reading 6. *Zeh Mutaasif Yum* by Michah Fields, pages 170-172.

“We had not, however, under any circumstances, been taught to apologize” (pp. 172).



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Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Discussion Questions:

- How does one apologize in such an instance? Why is that not something we are trained on or practice?
- How do we reconcile the mistakes made in war at the organizational level? At the personal level?



Read2Lead

Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Week 5: Chai Party, A Bridge to Nowhere, Wilderness, Warplay, Epilogue

Recommended Time: 60 minutes

Reading 1. *Chai Party* by Jonathan Burgess, pages 173-188.

“As the expression goes: when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail (pp. 174).

Discussion Questions:

- This story account a full timeline of events from pre-mission to the establishment of Patrol Base Outlaw. How did the author’s perspective about his job and duty change throughout the story?
- What do you pull from the story about the mouse? What impact did witnessing those events have on the author?
- In this story, the author is a team leader. What do you glean about his leadership style from his accounts?

Reading 2. *A Bridge to Nowhere* by Jason Arment, pages 189-205.

“Ignoring the rules of engagement in order to avoid engaging civilians was a weird paradox. I considered that maybe things were just broken over here. Maybe Iraq really was never-never-land, as some people joked” (pp. 204).

Discussion Questions:

- “I kept thinking about how I might go home without killing anyone, how I might not be a *real* Marine unless I took a life...I felt like a fraud” (pp. 189, 190). As a leader, is this the mentality you have or would want for your soldiers? What does it mean to be a soldier in the U.S. Army to you? How does the culture of your unit impact this part of your identity?
- Does the author care about the opinion of Rose? How, if at all, does that impact his decision making?
- The author premeditated and idolized a kill in the first half of this story, what made him not follow through with it? How did his perspective change when faced with the situation of the man in a suit who wasn’t stopping at the checkpoint?
- What kind of realization did the author have at the end of the story? How did that change his outlook on his job and mission?
- What kind of mentality and culture does your unit have? Reflect on how this could impact individual soldiers.



Read2Lead

Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

Reading 3. *Wilderness* by Benjamin Busch, pages 206-212.

“My CO found this one last place, heard the call of the wild, listened to the water, went all the way” (pp. 212).

Discussion Questions:

- Other stories in this book are brimming with complex emotions; however, this story reads void of a lot of emotion. What emotions, if any, do you pick up? What effect does this have on the story?
- Do you think the author is scared of water? What importance does this have to him?
- What elements of the imagery in this chapter do you appreciate the most? Why?

Reading 4. *Warplay* by Brian Lance, pages 213-215.

“War is the encapsulating event of the entire human experience” (pp. 213).

Discussion Questions:

- What do you think war is? What does the author think war is?
- What was the most complex thing about this passage? What about the simplest?
- Were there any specific anecdotes that stood out to you? Why?

Reading 5. *The Gift of Our Attention: An Epilogue*, pages 216-231.

“We have in this volume stories from those who have been far away from home. Let our tributes be the gift of our attention” (pp. 231).

Discussion Questions:

- What are your thoughts on this epilogue? How do you think it closes out the stories that came before it in this book?
- What are your overall takeaways from this book? How has your perspective grown and changed?
- Has reading this book made you a better? In what ways?



Read2Lead

Quagmire: Personal Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan

This Read2Lead was developed by First Lieutenant Hope Hack Petersen. Hope is an Army Officer attending graduate school in pursuit of a Master of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA. She is a 2021 CJO Leadership Fellow. The views expressed above are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of the Defense or US Military Academy.