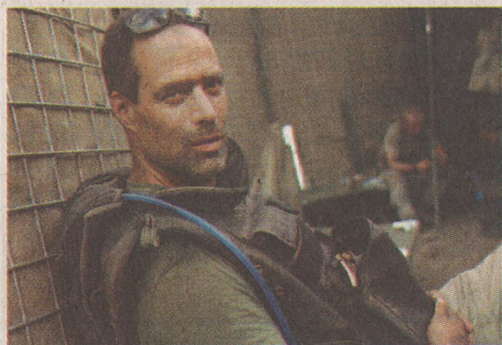


Get inside the skin of the combat soldier with these two authors in Madison

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

Karl Marlantes vividly remembers the day he decided to write about his experience as a marine lieutenant in the Vietnam War.

Following his tour of duty, the Yale graduate, posted to Marine Corps headquarters in Washington, D.C., was walking some papers to the White House. He was in full military dress. On Pennsylvania Avenue, he was confronted by



Sebastian Junger, photo Tim Hetherington

“a bunch of college students waving North Vietnamese flags, shouting obscenities at me, flipping me the bird,” he said in a recent interview. He was shocked. “I wanted to cross the street and tell them, ‘you don’t know who I am. You have no idea what I just went through. I’m just like you.’”

He spent the next 35 years composing a response. It was originally 1,600 pages long; it’s now 600. “Matterhorn,” which takes its title from a remote hilltop outpost lost and retaken by a company of Marines, is also a bestselling novel that’s being hailed as the definitive novel of the Vietnam War. Marlantes will appear with Sebastian Junger, the acclaimed journalist and author of the highly regarded

“War,” in Madison on May 23 at an event sponsored by R.J. Julia Booksellers.

Reading “Matterhorn,” Junger wrote in a glowing New York Times review, “you get the feeling [the author] was not desperate or impatient to be published.” Rather, he adds, “he seems like a man whose life was radically altered by war, and who now wants to pass along the favor.”

Though the objective of Junger’s “War” is no different - to portray what it’s like to be a young man at war in a remote, treacherous area crawling with enemies - the two books appear on their face to have little in common, and not just insofar as “War” is a bare-bones slim volume compared to the sprawling fictional saga that is “Matterhorn.” Junger’s account is based on five trips he made to the vicious region of Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley in 2007 and 2008. He was deployed not by the U.S. military but by Vanity Fair

magazine. He was embedded with a platoon of the storied 173rd Airborne Brigade. The soldiers the 45-year-old covered were, for the most part, half his age.

Marlantes, in contrast, was at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship when he decided, at 22, to fight in Vietnam. Unlike Junger’s work, which is confined to an exploration of the members of a single platoon, “Matterhorn,” set in 1969, is a multi-character, multi-rank narrative, alternating scenes of a company of Marines plagued by leeches, jungle rot, and short rations with tableaux of higher-ups enjoying brandy and cigars while drawing up battle plans miles from the front. Second Lt. Waino Mellas, the beating heart of the story and Marlantes’ alter ego, is a platoon leader teeming with ambitions of running his company and winning medals in order to justify his decision to enlist, both to himself and his anti-war ex-girlfriend back home.

The gradual shift of Mellas’ focus to the less lofty pursuit of survival and, more profoundly, to the survival of the men hunkered beside him, is the point at which the two books intersect: the bonds of brotherhood forged in combat. Marlantes writes of “the overwhelming joy” Mellas feels when racing to rejoin his men in a nasty firefight after being released from his command post, “his heart, his whole body, overflowing with an emotion that he could only describe as love.” Likewise, Junger, almost forty years later, in accounting for what drove a wounded man to get back to his unit before being medically cleared, explains that it wasn’t courage. To the soldier, “it was just an act of brotherhood, and there probably wasn’t much to say about it except ‘Welcome back.’”

It’s a phenomenon that can’t exist except on the field of battle, Junger said, and that’s at once among its greatest costs - and its most seductive appeal. The co-director, with the late photojournalist Tim

Hetherington, of the 2010 Oscar-nominated documentary “Restrepo” likens the addictive draw of combat to “the effects of cocaine on the brain” and describes the sense of “euphoric expectancy” that soldiers experience under threat of attack. The reason: loyalty to the group. “It’s as if there was an intoxicating effect to group inclusion that more than compensated for the dangers the group had to face.”

Of course, there’s a terrible price for the intense highs stirred by this interdependence. “When everything a 19-year-old does is very, very important,” said Marlantes, “when he knows if he doesn’t show up when he says he will, someone dies, how do we send him home and expect him to flip burgers at McDonalds?”

It goes deeper than that. Combat, the good-natured Oregon native said, literally changes the brain.

“Living under threat of sudden chaos and violence interrupts the normal flow of chemicals and responses in the brain. It speeds up reaction time.” That’s why soldiers are at their greatest risk of death in their first few months of duty. “Their brains are sharpening, devolving back to primal impulses.” What a soldier once heard as the tweet of a bird or the footsteps of a friend now represents a very real threat. “And it rarely, if ever, gets changed back.”

That Marlantes, who was awarded the Navy Cross, the Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts, and ten air medals, struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder, once finding himself pinned on the windshield of a car that had beeped at him, is thus no wonder.

“The core psychological experiences of war are so primal and unadulterated ... that they eclipse subtler feelings, like sorrow or remorse, that can gut you quietly for years,” Junger writes.

“We have to recognize that



Author Karl Marlantes

once we get these kids back - because most of them are kids - we’re not done with them,” said Marlantes, who credits a VA program and the years he spent working on “Matterhorn” as instrumental in healing the emotional wounds he took home from Vietnam. “They need a lot of help relearning how to act and react.”

That said, there’s no underestimating the value of books borne out of warfare, whether from an intrepid reporter or a soldier who can step back and objectively reveal the complexities of battle. Whatever one’s stance on war, they’re among the only ways to “get inside the skin,” as Junger put it, of men embroiled in brutal combat.

No better evidence of which was a college professor who approached Marlantes after a reading. Upon identifying herself as an anti-war protester in the late 1960s, she made a confession. “I had no idea you guys slept outside in the rain,” she said.

Karl Marlantes and Sebastian Junger will appear at The First Congregational Church on 26 Meeting House Lane in Madison at 7 p.m. on Monday, May 23. Tickets \$5. Purchase of either book comes with a free ticket to the event. For more information, 203-245-3959.