

"War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them," Junger writes in his charged new book "War." Junger embedded himself with a 30-man platoon in five trips to Afghanistan's Korengal Valley during a span of 14 months. Photos by Tim Hetherington.

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Back from the WAR ZONES

Sebastian Junger brings
it home to Madison, June 24

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

"War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them," Junger writes in his charged new book "War."

"It's insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know."

It's also complicated, the best-selling author of "The Perfect Storm" and "A Death in Belmont" said in a recent telephone interview.

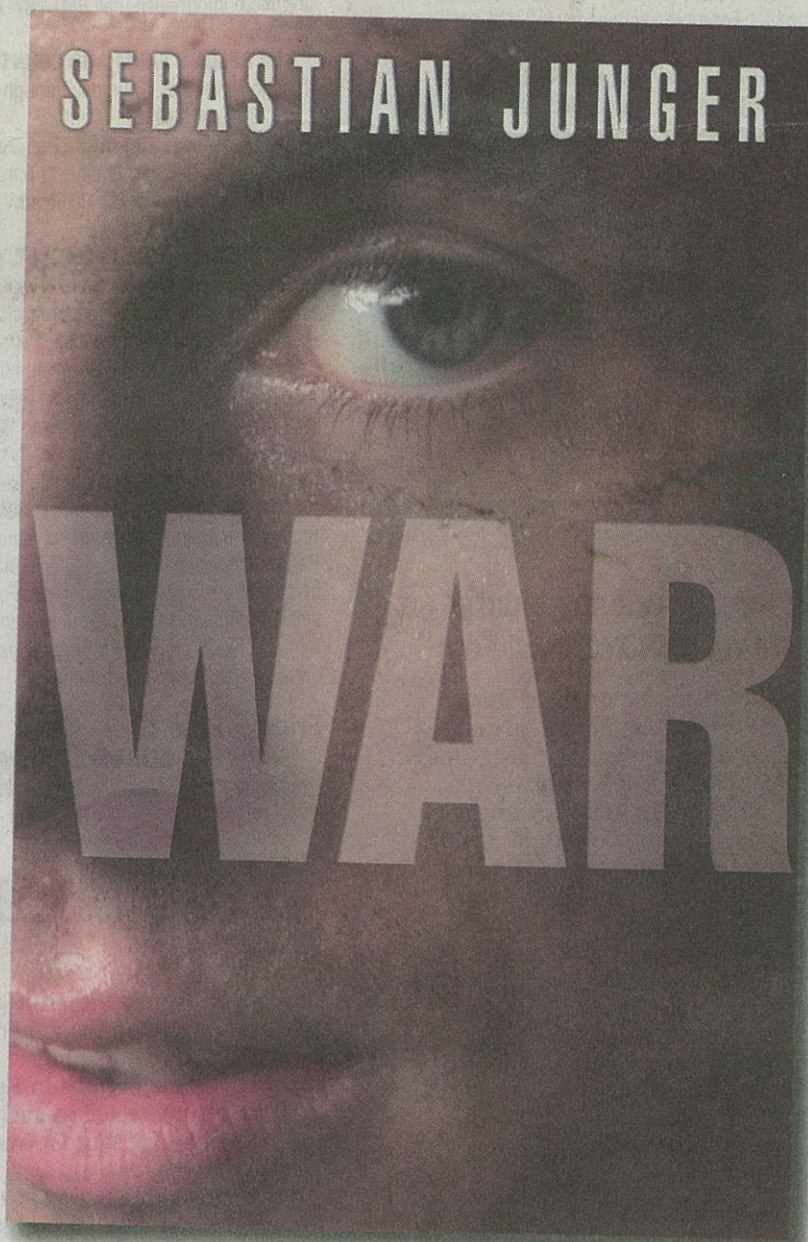
"I think it's important for us to escape the easy truths about war, to talk about not just its brutalizing aspects but also whatever it is about war that young men respond to in a positive way," he

said. "And I think that conversation has to be a very unpolitical one."

That's where the 2009 Pulitzer-Prize-winning correspondent for "Vanity Fair" magazine renowned for his so-called macho journalism in the war zones of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Pakistan, and Nigeria, came in.

For Junger, who embedded himself with a 30-man platoon in five trips to Afghanistan's Korengal Valley during a span of 14 months in 2007 and 2008, an appearance at R.J. Booksellers in Madison on Thursday, June 24 at 7 p.m. will be a far cry from the isolated and vicious mountain region that he describes as "too remote to conquer, too poor to intimidate, too autonomous to buy off."

As a result of placing himself in such hostile territory — he writes



of the "terrible snap and buzz of bullets" and his head "swiveling around like some kind of berserk robot" in an intense firefight with the Taliban — as well as the addictive draw of combat that "mimics the effects of cocaine on the brain," a rush that the author admitted to at times missing

stateside — Junger's experience becomes a lens through which to view the world of young men fighting deadly battles and the emotional onslaught of prolonged combat.

"Most of what we read and

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hear about the conflict in Afghanistan focuses on strategy, on cost, on whether or not we should be there at all," said Junger, 48, in a voice as laid-back as his months in Korengal were not.

"I wasn't interested in such abstractions but in the men we've sent far away to do our dirty work."

There is Pemble-Belkin, nicknamed Peanut Butter, the son of a labor organizer who protested every American war of the past 40 years but who is nonetheless wildly proud of his son for his service. There is Jones, a former drug dealer from Reno who joined the Army to avoid being killed on the streets or doing time. The only black guy in the platoon, his best friend is Bobby, a slow-speaking, foul-mouthed, and outrageous "unreconstructed Georgia redneck" generally acknowledged as the smartest and most capable soldier in the entire company. There are big, tough guys who are cowards and small, "feral-looking dudes" who will calmly reload their weapons while "rounds are slapping the rocks around them."

THE 30 MEN IN THE PLATOON might have nothing in common. They might dislike each other intensely. None of that can neutralize the powerful sense of brotherhood that, Junger argues, is at the heart of combat. However chaotic the military action might appear, it possesses an underlying choreography that requires each man to make "decisions based not on what's best for him, but on what's best for the group." If everyone does that, Junger writes, "most of the group survives. If no one does, most of the group dies."

As one soldier puts it to Junger while mortars

shriek over their heads: "There are guys in the platoon who straight up hate each other ... but they would also die for each other. So you kind of have to ask, 'how much could I really hate that guy?'"

THE BOND FORGED among men in the crucible of battle, to Junger's mind, sets up the paradox of combat: each soldier will sacrifice his life for his comrades which, it seems, would redeem his actions, however savage they might be. And yet, the same fierce protectiveness that the heat of combat arouses can make men savage. Which is on full display when, following a firefight, Junger observes the platoon watching a Taliban guerrilla, his leg blown off, crawl across a mountain slope. At the moment he stops moving, the men wildly cheer, a show of emotion that disturbs the journalist. "I got the necessity for it but I didn't get the joy," he writes. "I either had to radically reunderstand the men ... or I had to acknowledge the power of a place like this to change them."

It's through the author's willingness to question the platoon's behavior that "War" affords rare insight into the way men on the front line think and act. More than that, it's his refusal to issue a quick-trigger condemnation before seeking out someone in the platoon to interpret the troops' seemingly barbaric exultation at another human being's death — specifically, a soldier named Steiner who tells Junger that it wasn't senseless sadism that unleashed their war whoops. It was knowing that "this guy could have murdered your friend... we just stopped someone from killing us."

"Everyone talks about PTSD," said Junger.

"There's also something called post-traumatic growth." The term, which has been gaining acceptance among trauma experts, refers to positive psychological change that results from a struggle with highly challenging life circumstances.

IN JUNGER'S VIEW, young men don't ordinarily experience anything approximating the sense of brotherhood they find among their fellow soldiers in the theater of battle.

"To put a 19-year-old who's adrift back home in a clearly defined role with a clear sense of purpose and life-and-death responsibility can actually be a pretty constructive way for him to develop into a fuller human being," Junger said. "I know I did and I'm 49."

In any event, there's little chance he'll return to the Korengal. In April, after five years of almost ceaseless fighting and ambushes, American troops pulled out of the battle-ravaged valley. Still, though the mission ultimately proved futile, the trenchant impressions left by "War" are anything but.

"I've had Vietnam War veterans coming up to me and saying thank you for telling our story," said Junger with a certain measure of awe. "Just think about that. This is a war from about more than 40 years ago and my book somehow got into that emotional experience of combat well enough for them to recognize their own experience in it. How cool is that?"

Sebastian Junger will appear at R.J. Julia Booksellers in Madison at 7 p.m. on Thursday, June 24 to discuss "War."

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