

The Home Front

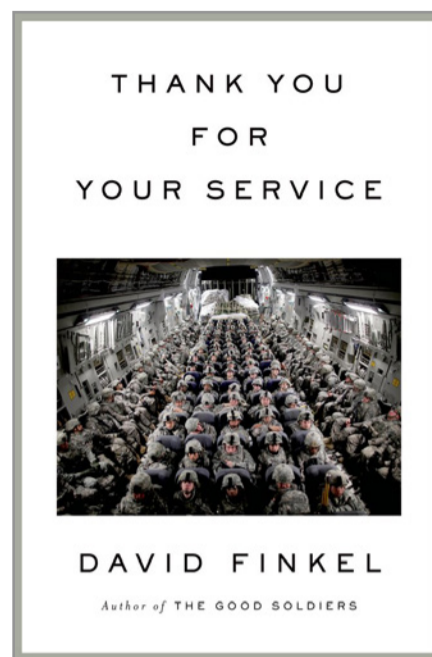
THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICE

REVIEWED BY **ALEX HORTON**

THE SOLDIER IN TAUSOLO AIETI'S DREAMS is on fire.

On a hot July day in 2007 at the height of the Iraq surge, five infantrymen, including Aieti, climbed into a Humvee to patrol one of Baghdad's most volatile neighborhoods. Later that afternoon, a buried bomb exploded under the vehicle, eviscerating it. Four of the men were able to escape, two of them thanks to Aieti, who pulled them from the truck. But the blaze became so intense that it was impossible for him to save the fifth, who was trapped inside. Yet the valiant rescue of two soldiers isn't what visits Tausolo Aieti in bed, years after his tour. Instead, it's James Harrelson, forever 19 years old, engulfed in flames. He asks Aieti only one thing: "Why didn't you save me?"

Conventional wisdom suggests that traumatic experiences in war derive from what soldiers do—the enemy troops they kill or the civilians they



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brutalize. But just as significant is what soldiers *don't do*—fail to realize a car is loaded with explosives, or, in Aieti's case, reach a trapped soldier before he burns to death. Mental health clinicians call this kind of trauma "moral injury": an act (or failure to act) that violates a person's internal code and results in an existential moral tear. Many distinguish moral injury from posttraumatic stress disorder, whose definition includes the physiological effects on the brain that can result from traumatic events. Moral injury is not a psychiatric diagnosis, but rather a violation of how the world should work. Children shouldn't die. Aieti will be quick enough to save Harrelson.



REDUX

Army Spcs. Frank Casillas waits for a ride home outside Fort Drum, New York's Magrath Gymnasium in March 2011 after a yearlong deployment in Afghanistan.

Wars are violent, loud, and gruesome. But combat is fleeting, and for young troops, what remains is a lifetime of untangling the dense consequences of decisions and actions made (or not made) in uncompromising conditions. A single moment in combat can bring a soldier home with honor or send him back broken and ashamed, unprepared for what *Washington Post* staff writer David Finkel calls the “after-war.”

In *Thank You for Your Service*, Finkel exhaustively documents the course of the after-war for the members of

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an Army infantry battalion known as the 2-16 Rangers, stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas. In his first book, *The Good Soldiers* (2009), Finkel chronicled the battalion's bloody 15-month tour in Iraq. He spent eight months embedded with the unit and was present

for many of the pivotal moments described in the book; 2-16 was responsible for patrolling the area where two Reuters journalists and several Iraqis were killed by U.S. helicopter fire in an attack that was recorded in a video and released by WikiLeaks under the title *Collateral Murder*.

Thank You for Your Service is billed as a follow-up, but it's more of a continuation of a story not yet finished. The book's title itself is an ironic reference to the phrase muttered by passengers in airport terminals when they see a soldier in uniform—a hollow gesture that avoids the gravity of war and its effects, and is often mocked by troops and veterans.

At the center of the story is Adam Schumann, a gifted IED spotter whom Finkel described in *The Good Soldiers* as “one of the best soldiers in the battalion.” In *Thank You for Your Service*, Finkel takes up the story as Schumann returns from his third tour, ahead of the rest of his men. His wife, Saskia, had pleaded with him to come home because she was worried about his mental condition. The catalyst for his sudden exit, as it tends to be for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, was a bomb blast. A soldier who had taken Schumann's place on a mission was killed while Schumann remained behind at the base in Baghdad

to video-chat with Saskia. “None of this shit would have happened if you were there,” another soldier told him following the mission. It was meant as a compliment to Schumann's ability to sniff out bombs. But Schumann heard a piercing judgment.

Banners and signs and throngs of ecstatic families don't greet Schumann when he comes home. They never do for those who leave the war early. Gunshots and amputations are tangible reasons for a departure from a war zone, a buffer from the guilt of leaving a unit behind. Schumann's mental injuries carry no outward mark, only ceaseless agony over James Doster, the soldier killed on the mission. When Schumann arrives at the airport, Saskia is there to greet him. So is Doster's wife, Amanda. “Can you tell me what happened to my husband?” she pleads. And so the war reaches a tarmac on a cool Kansas night.

Adam and Saskia share their home with their two young children, but suicide is a houseguest. Saskia frets about the many guns in the house and the extensive list of the prescription drugs her husband gulps each day. In one of the ghastliest scenes in the book, Schumann holds a shotgun to his head and dares his wife to pull the trigger. He says it's about being a bad father and a disappointment,

but it's really about Doster and the war ravenously searching for another casualty. In a way, Saskia wants to oblige her husband. Their crying baby interrupts their breakdown. The after-war will have to wait.

Finkel sets Schumann's story and others against the backdrop of the Army's increasingly well-funded (and increasingly befuddled) suicide prevention efforts. General Peter Chiarelli was once tasked with leading soldiers, but with his appointment as Army vice chief of staff in 2008, he was ordered to help save them from suicide. Chiarelli is the book's tragic hero, a crusader for best practices and lessons learned in an institution that still can't answer the fundamental question: Why do most troops come back from war just fine while others kill themselves to escape its lasting effects? Some point to the macho military culture's ethos of avoiding asking for help, accentuated in tough frontline infantry units. Others suggest that lax recruiting standards after the invasion of Iraq produced troops who buckled under the stress of the surge, and blame some suicides on soldiers' preexisting mental-health issues.

But sustained and costly efforts to address those issues have left the military clutching for answers and solutions. Last year, suicides eclipsed combat- and

transportation accident-related deaths in number. Even more vexing, a study published in August in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* cast doubt on the common notion that suicide is related to combat trauma—it found that suicide rates weren't associated with number or length of deployments, but on such factors as substance abuse, depression, and being male. In any case, Chiarelli, who retired last year, could not halt the procession of suicides. During his tenure at the Pentagon, Chiarelli reviewed each Army suicide case with his team in the Gardner Room—a purgatorial last stop for wayward souls who couldn't endure war's last battle.

As Aieti and Schumann seek and enter treatment, Finkel never quite puts into perspective for the reader the fact that their stories are not typical. At the beginning of the book, he does mention the commonly cited statistic that 20 to 30 percent of soldiers who serve in war zones return with psychological issues, while most successfully reintegrate into society. But his relentless narrative may encourage the conclusion that the military is a collection of suicidal basket cases, and that veterans are unstable psychopaths—already a prevailing notion in the media and popular culture. Active-duty personnel are sequestered from

the public on large, often geographically isolated bases, and many communities never encounter their stories of constant war—leaving movies, TV shows, and journalists to fill the gaps.

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Films that have focused on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are replete with murderous goons (*Redacted* and *In the Valley of Elah*) and reckless cowboys (*The Hurt Locker*), or centered on the Special Forces (*Zero Dark Thirty*). Few publicly consumable narratives have shined a comprehensive, realistic light on the troop or veteran experience as of yet. Finkel captures grimness as well as redemption, and he tells this essential story as delicately as possible. Convincing in the role of omniscient narrator, he probes the psyches of his subjects and—in an impressive display of newsgathering skills—reveals thrilling moments in which he acts as both a witness and an interviewer of soldiers and the people who care about them in their most fragile moments.

Thank You for Your Service has already morphed into a possible Hollywood project, with Steven Spielberg and Daniel Day-Lewis rumored to be attached. *The Good Soldiers* and its kinetic war scenes might seem more cinematic, but we have seen that movie before. If this new book is adapted to the screen, it will tell a truer war story than most have seen or heard, not of gun battles and heroic feats, but of the concussive blasts of moments and decisions that ripple through living rooms and in pickup trucks barreling through the Kansas countryside.

“Thank you for your service” has become a mantra of arm’s length, fleeting admiration. Finkel’s book shows the after-war in all of its post-September 11 tenderness and agony—something ordinary citizens will have to grapple with as the after-war lingers, decades after the last American soldier has left Afghanistan, falsely believing that once it ended, the war is confined to history. ■

ALEX HORTON served as an Army infantryman in Iraq with the Third Stryker Brigade, Second Infantry Division, during the 2006–07 troop surge. Until recently, he was a public affairs specialist with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. His work has been published on *TheAtlantic.com*, *Time.com*, and *The New York Times’ At War* blog.