



Baghdad Express: A Gulf War Memoir

By Joel Turnipseed

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In early summer of 1990, Joel Turnipseed was homeless—kicked out of his college's philosophy program, dumped by his girlfriend. He had been AWOL from his Marine Corps Reserve unit for more than three months, spending his days hanging out in coffee shops reading Plato and Thoreau.

Then Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

Turnipseed's unit was activated for service in Operation Desert Shield. By January of '91, he was in Saudi Arabia driving tractor-trailers for the Sixth Motor Transport Battalion—the legendary "Baghdad Express." The greatest logistical operation in Marine Corps history, the Baghdad Express hauled truckloads of explosives and ammunition across hundreds of miles of desert. But on the brink of war, Turnipseed's greatest struggles are still within. Armed with an M-16 and a seabag full of philosophy books, he is a wise-ass misfit, an ironic observer with a keen eye for vivid detail, a rebellious Marine alive to the moral ambiguity of his life and his situation.

Developed from Turnipseed's 1997 feature article for GQ Magazine, this innovative memoir—simultaneously terrifying and hilarious, equal parts Catch-22 and Catcher in the Rye—explores both the absurdities of war and the necessity of accepting our flawed world of shadows. With expansive humanity and profane grace, Turnipseed finds the real-world answers to his philosophical questions and reaches the hardest peace for any young man to achieve—with himself.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Turnipseed has expanded a 1997 GQ article on his experiences as a reluctant Marine during the first war with Iraq into a compelling memoir that has more than a little in common with Anthony Swofford's *Jarhead*, which was also an account of the camaraderie, "soul rending boredom" and horror of life on the battlefield by a bookish soldier more comfortable hefting a pen than a gun. In 1990, Turnipseed is a college dropout in Minnesota, spending his days sipping coffee and reading Nietzsche, when his unit is called up for active duty. The first thing he does is decide to start smoking. Armed with a pack of Camels (later a pipe), a journal and a duffel full of philosophy texts, Turnipseed soon finds himself hauling munitions through the Saudi desert. His bunkmates, with their Game Boys and beer parties, at first regard him with suspicion. And no wonder: when his nose isn't buried in a Kierkegaard tome, he's prone to pedantic lectures and generally comes across as sneering and pretentious. For a while, Turnipseed relishes his role as egghead among the meatheads. Offered a warm Old Milwaukee one night by one of his brothers-in-arms, Turnipseed waves him off and turns back to his book. "Get real," the soldier retorts. "We're all in this together now, philosopher. Better make the best of what ya got." And soon, of course, his pompous veneer melts away in the desert sun and he realizes he has more in common with his Marine brothers than he would ever have thought. This is a coming-of-age story with all the right ingredients: self-deprecation, wit, insight, irony and a lucid, enthusiastic writing style. The Marine who emerges at war's end is older and wiser-and liked and accepted by his unit-and a pretty good writer to boot.

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Review

"An edgy, street-talking trip into the often inane realities of 'high-tech' contemporary warfare. Turnipseed gives us an invaluable tale of war as it is, reckless and semi-insane. Americans, in our perilous times, should be paying attention--reading this book, this vivid story about getting to the far side of triumph."

"A deeply felt account of an exile's passage across the back office landscape of modern war. Turnipseed is a lucid, passionate, and oddball observer with an extraordinary ear for vernacular speech and a deft and understated prose style. His book is the best dispatch so far from the Middle East desert battleground."

"This is a wonderfully timely book. Baghdad Express is well-written, very up to date, and in many ways an amazing tour de force."

From the Inside Flap

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"This is a wonderfully timely book. Baghdad Express is well-written, very up to date, and in many ways an amazing tour de force." -- Robert Bly

"BAGHDAD EXPRESS manages--remarkably--to keep us there in the moment (1990-91) with the author's scared, smartass and likably philosophic self, even as it exercises the controlling perspective of the older-and-wiser (if still young) man now telling the story. Despite its profane good humor, the book has less in common with most modern American war memoirs than with prose works produced by the sensitive British soldier-poets of the First World War. And yet, for all that, the author has created something entirely unto itself. Joel Turnipseed was never a natural Marine; but he's a writer, for sure." -- Thomas Mallon, author of "Henry and Clara" and "Two Moons"

"This is the rarest of war memoirs--an account of the unglamorous, written with laugh-out-loud dialogue, that also reminds us why philosophy matters. Turnipseed has rubbed the jewelry of our philosophic heritage across the touchstone of war and shown which proves true gold and which a shining fraud. He and his Marine comrades in Desert Storm, black and white, deserve our honor and thanks." -- Jonathan Shay, author of "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character" and "Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jerald Elliott:

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Alyssa Lewis:

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