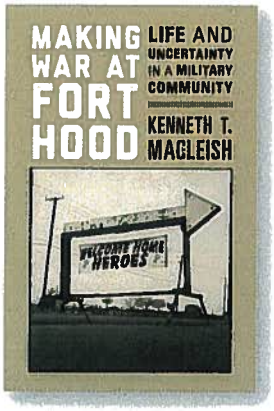
THE BOOK REPORT

The Body as Battleground by Rod Davis



MAKING WAR AT FORT HOOD: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community
By Kenneth T. MacLeish
Princeton University Press
280 PAGES, $29.95

MacLeish does not shy from calling out the more than 90 percent of the country that has never served, and the 99 percent that is not serving right now.

Making War at Fort Hood, Kenneth MacLeish's powerful and discomforting study of the military and the society in which it is simultaneously central and marginalized, is essential reading in a country that is both shaped by war and too often ignorant of its true costs. Those true costs, MacLeish argues, are internalized in the physical bodies of the men, women and children who experience firsthand what society-at-large perceives only through abstraction and denial.

This would be a good time to cue up Steve Earle's song "Copperhead Road" because, like "Run Through Jungle," "Sam Stone," and other classics of wartime anger and alienation, it will put you in the right frame of mind to consider what MacLeish discovered about American warriors during his year's residency in Killeen and close interactions with soldiers and families at Fort Hood. On that sprawling Army base, deployment and death are so common that they are ritualized through continual ceremonies that welcome troops home or send them away. At one such ritual, known on base as a "manifest," MacLeish heard "Copperhead Road" blaring from a sound system as he watched awkward efforts to collectively help send soldiers off to war. But what MacLeish mainly observed was disconnection. No amount of transition, therapy, or even civilian success and family happiness can counter the core sense that soldiers, and their families, are exiled from their country even as they embody it. Academics like to call this dynamic "otherness." Earle puts it in sharper context, with a warning attached: *I came back with a brand new plan ... You better stay away from Copperhead Road.*

An anthropologist who trained at the University of Texas at Austin, MacLeish is now an assistant professor of "medicine, health and society" at Vanderbilt University, and his book is deeply informed by the language and orientation of critical theory. This will no doubt put off some of the very people who would most benefit by reading it, but it shouldn't. By no means is this a gung-ho or great-military-man book, but it speaks far more convincingly than those genres of the courage, loyalty and honor of the American soldier.

MacLeish focuses unflinchingly on the ways the military transforms the basic physicality of soldiers (or members of any military branch) and prepares them for unimaginable violence, and he clearly holds military men and women in high esteem. They are the minority of citizens who must, as directed by their democratic society, go blow the shit out of other people and risk having the same done to them. That duty requires a mental and physical transformation that puts soldiers (and their families) in a perpetual state of contingency, contradiction, and ultimately self-denial on behalf of an amorphous ideal. Try it sometime.

MacLeish lays out his theories and proofs in a methodical manner that draws power from accumulation of detail and close analysis of fundamental military ordeals and tropes, including the thorny contradiction of "love," which you might not expect in a book of this sort. Yet the example reveals a core dilemma by probing the ways that ideologically iconic phrases such as "love of country" and "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" can be complex or irrational. MacLeish says "love" can provide the rationale that enables a soldier to kill his enemies while also subjugating his being into an "Army of One." It is no accident that one of the primary goals of the basic-training experience is to obliterate self-identity in service of a transcendent mission.

Kris Kristofferson, who served as a captain and helicopter pilot in the Army in the early 1960s, might have been thinking of soldiers when he wrote these lines in "The Pilgrim, Chapter 33": *He's a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction / Taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home.*

MacLeish also probes, at length, his theory that no trait defines a soldier more than vulnerability. "The soldier is at once the agent, instrument, and object of state violence," MacLeish writes. "Vulnerability does not demand a before and after, or the exception of a disrupted psyche. It signals a condition that is ongoing or even permanent; the always precarious and susceptible nature of the human organism itself." This condition means that every soldier is in harm's way at all times. Not just during active duty, but—and here is the submerged iceberg of war's cost—beyond.

Of course the condition of vulnerability has been experienced by soldiers forever. MacLeish's observations call to mind other, more graphic examinations. Although different in their approaches, all have

common ground in reminding us that the human body bears the ultimate consequence of war. Harold Shapiro's *What Every Young Man Should Know About War* was published in 1937 to warn potential soldiers about what, clinically, happens when a bullet hits bone, shrapnel hits gut, or trench fungus eats flesh. In 2003, journalist Chris Hedges (formerly of *The Dallas Morning News)* updated Shapiro's work with *What Every Person Should Know About War.*

The great merit of *Making War at Fort Hood* is that even as it examines the psychological and social pressures of military life and the crushing effects of combat, MacLeish does not shy from calling out the more than 90 percent of the country that has never served, and the 99 percent that is not serving right now.

"This entire book is an argument for recognition—for collective social responsibility for violence done in the name of preserving the sociality that we inhabit. ... The stories we tell about war ... tend to confirm what we think we already know. They do this in large part by affirming that the violence of war is an exception rather than a condition produced only with massive organized effort, and to which soldiers and those close to them are subject as a matter of course, on purpose.

"Being subject to war's facts of life makes them normal, but it doesn't make them easier. ... We can, however, take up our own responsibility for these facts of life rather than safely insisting that they are too foreign for us to understand or assuming that we know them already. We may not be able to feel them for ourselves. But we can hold our gaze on them a little longer, and look with care."

We should look very hard. For despite war's alienating ravages, something binds soldiers to one another. There is much in the military life that is deeply satisfying, despite the frequency with which it breaks what it builds. This book is an empathetic inquiry into both how and why. ◘

Rod Davis served as a first lieutenant in South Korea during the Vietnam era. His latest novel, South, America, *is forthcoming.*