

SYNAESTHESIA

COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

ISSN 1883-5953

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Published online

Recommended citation:

Sunagawa, S. (2019, March 18). "Surviving war and making peace" [Interview with Will Griffin]. *Synaesthesia: Communication Across Cultures*, Spring, 23-25.

Contact journal editors: editors.synaesthesia@gmail.com

Journal website: www.synaesthesiajournal.com

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Surviving War and Making Peace: An Interview with Will Griffin

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This interview is the first in a series on *Surviving War and Surviving Peace*. It comes from an interest in the effects of war on survivors called upon to carry out orders to fight. The suicide statistics for veterans who are called to war and survive to return are sad, alarming, and appalling. Who should be responsible for these effects? Why are so many people affected by the poor decisions that leaders make, and how can we remake the world where people on both sides of war can live in peace? These and other similar questions motivate my studies and this interview with a survivor. To help address these concerns, the interviewer engaged with Will Griffin, veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan War and the main developer of The Peace Report.

war | Iraq | Afghanistan | battlefield horror
WMD | militarization | PTSD | recovery

Sakura Sunagawa: As you know, Okinawa remains as a place that lives with the past traumas of war. Older people still remember the horrors of the battle and the years that followed with the occupation of the main island and surrounding smaller islands. They remember the local struggle for land rights in the face of military men with bulldozers making way for new bases. As a young woman researching these ongoing effects, I see how the past has affected me. When you were a youngster, maybe high a school or college, did you ever imagine that you would be going off to war? Did you imagine you would be fighting in the Middle East?

Will Griffin: The Afghanistan War broke out when I was a sophomore in high school. I was born into a military family, I was the only child and both parents were in the U.S. Army. It was only natural for me to believe that everyone should “serve” their country. I knew this was going to be my generation’s war. So I joined in 2004, knowing I would either go to Afghanistan or Iraq war.

SS: How did you feel when you were ordered to go off and fight? I am interested in the reaction you had in your gut.

WG: When we finally received orders to deploy to Iraq in 2006 (my first deployment was in Oct 2006 to Iraq), we were feeling mixed feelings: excited, scared, curious, prepared and not prepared. Some believed we would die over there and some wanted to make a career out of it by getting promoted faster and receiving more medals, things like that. I felt that I would be more respected in American society after returning, which is true to some degree but,

overall, not so much. Americans love veterans, mouth the values of service to country, but won’t give us a job.

SS: This sounds like hypocrisy to me. So that younger people like me, and my friends, can understand better what war today is about, can you open up a little bit and tell me about the most memorable experiences you had?

WG: First, all capitalist wars are structured like this: the rich and powerful sending the poor working class from one country to fight and kill other poor working class people somewhere else. War is the nightmare you have every night, except its real. I was a mechanic and a paratrooper. Paratroopers received \$75 more per month compared to a regular soldier. We got to jump out of airplanes in Alaska (not in combat zones, that requires a special task which we never received).

As a mechanic, I wasn’t doing operations that the infantry and other combat jobs were doing: invading Iraq/Afghan communities, breaking down doors, getting into firefights, or anything like that. My job was to keep the vehicles up and running, which is pretty important in these types of wars nowadays: Urban Warfare. It’s not like Vietnam where you would just get dropped off in the middle of the jungle by helicopter. Nearly every mission requires troops to drive their vehicles to places around the country. No vehicle = no mission.

Although I did fly a few helicopter missions with private contractors during my second deployment to Afghanistan, I mainly worked on vehicles for two years of my life while in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

I lived on the F.O.B. (Forward Operating Base). This is very close to the action. In Iraq, we were mortared and rocketed each day, usually around noon and midnight. We were mainly attacked on that schedule because it interrupted our work and sleep schedules. The United States military clearly had more and better weapons and resources, so the groups we were fighting had to resort to these sorts of tactics. Every night before going to sleep, we wondered if we would make it through the night. People would be hit by a mortar/rocket every night. My neighbor was hit dead on one night. He burned alive in front of us all. The fire was too big to stop. The fire was also heating up his bullets, and when bullets are set ablaze, they explode. Bullets were flying everywhere. This was just one night. You can imagine 15 months of this, maybe?

I emphasize the point about being a mechanic because many Americans might think they can join the military getting a non-combat job, such as a mechanic, and be in a safer position. But my story shows different. The first person I knew who died in the war was a legal assistant.

He was literally a paper pusher, as we'd say, one of the "safest" jobs you can get working in an office. But he was the first we knew that was blown up by a roadside IED (Improvised Explosive Device), which is basically a home-made bomb placed on or near a road to blow up a vehicle(s) driving by. And what did we do? Just go back to work the next day. We'd rarely had days off from work. Having an important job like a mechanic meant working 12-18 hours every day. Remember, no vehicle = no mission. And missions were top priority.

SS: What were the people like where you found yourself in this fight?

WG: They were regular people: students, farmers, teachers, workers. They had families like we do. They want secure lives like we do. They want their children to live better lives like we do. They care about their country like we care about ours. They are just people, like any other. Except we, as in me being a veteran and others being Americans who pay taxes, destroyed their lives, their communities, their infrastructure, and their entire country.

SS: After you returned from battle, how did you cope? How did war affect you and your reintegration into civil society?

WG: Anger issues. I had a lot of anger issues. For several years, my relationships with friends and family broke apart. I was constantly arguing, becoming upset, outraged, etc You can imagine, I think, that after being in situations where people's lives were on the line and then going into situations where people were upset about what was playing on the radio or what a celebrity said or did, those things don't matter much to you.

I immediately went to college in San Diego, CA, using my G.I. Bill. Being surrounded by college students who had no clue the wars were still raging really made me upset, and I couldn't connect with people. Students were preoccupied by the latest celebrity Twitter battle when I knew veterans were committing suicides and wars were still raging. How does a war veteran speak to a college student who cares only about the Kardashians? Or Football? Or musical artists? That's all a part of the fake world to me. The real world was the wars that continued, and expanded, under Obama. I separated from the military in 2010, and went to college until 2014, all under Obama. I studied U.S. Foreign Policy. Why?

I admitted to myself that I had no clue what I participated in during my military experience. It's easy to assume that veterans understand the wars they fight in, but I'd argue we don't really know anything. We never took foreign

policy courses in the military. We only learn to take and obey orders. And even to this day, I meet veterans who fought in these wars yet have no clue why the wars began. It's a sad fact of reality. But the best thing I've done is admit to myself of my own ignorance. Despite growing up in a military family, being born on military base, and going to two wars, I had no idea what they were about until I joined the anti-war movement in 2014.

Since then, I've traveled farther left on the political spectrum. I continue to ask questions about foreign policy, wars, militarism, inequality, and more. I use new media platforms, like *The Peace Report* to draw attention to these ongoing issues.



After meeting people from all walks of life, I feel that the communists and anarchists have the best answers.

I will end with words of author and professor, Michael Parenti at the University of California, Berkeley, who I think gives the best reasons of why the U.S. had invaded Iraq, from his book, "The Face of Imperialism", written in 2011:

- First, WMD's was a lie. And Saddam Hussein had no connections to 9/11.
- The US ruling class do not want any country in the Middle East, or anywhere, to be "independent, self-developing nations that control their own economies and natural resources." The Iraq economy under Saddam was entirely state-owned. Wall Street and transnational institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO continue to target nations who try to develop a self-developed, state-owned economy.

"The empire tries to prevent the emergence of any competing superpower or even any potentially competing regional power charting a course of its own."¹

¹ Parenti, Michael, *The Face of Imperialism*. New York: Paradigm Publishers, 2011: 170.

- In Nov 2000, Saddam stopped accepting US dollars as payment for Iraq's oil exports and started using Euros as a reserve currency. A threat to US bankers.
- Oil. The US still haven't used much of the oil that is in Iraq, but by destroying the country Iraq can't sell its oil to other countries. This leaves the worldwide oil market, led by countries like Saudi Arabia, at the forefront of the global oil economy. US leaders were interested in keeping Iraqi oil off the market as the US exports oil too.
- Invasion of Iraq created a bonanza for US corporate contractors. Billions of dollars in war contracts were paid. Everything from toilet paper, air conditioners, socks, weapons, and everything was contracted out. That's a lot of money to be made.
- Concern for Israel. The Israeli lobby in the US pushed for war in Iraq. This is probably the most powerful lobby in the US. Taking out Saddam benefits Israel very much.
- "In sum, the invasion and destruction of Iraq was not a foolish mistake. It certainly was not a quick and easy victory as expected, but overall it served the plutocracy quite well, at the horrific price to the people of Iraq (and a heavy price for the US taxpayer)."

Biographical Summaries:

Will Griffin is a US Army veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He served in combat tours and is presently working toward raising public awareness of the policies that send young people in harm's way. He is the founder of The Peace Report (<http://thepeacereport.com/>), and he travels the world lecturing about the benefits of peace.

Sakura Sunagawa is a third-year undergraduate student at Okinawa Christian University studying cross-cultural interactions in Okinawa regarding the ongoing US base presence. She is interested in the history and maintenance of the present social and economic structures.