Hemingway in Kuwait and Hairdo in Djibouti

Stephen Richards
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I'd like to submit two memoirs by two colleagues, Robert Burda and Deborah Griggs, who have passed away. The following were written in the spring of 2009 and submitting them to the Memoirs Project is also a way of paying tribute to both colleagues as, in my opinion, very fine writers. Let me explain how I got hold of their work:

When I was assistant dean, in Heidelberg (2005-11), I used to send a newsletter out to faculty every few months. This publication started out as an "information for faculty" thing but developed into a many-paged affair in which faculty shared their experiences on a spectrum of topics—teaching assignments, attendance at conferences, UMUC workshops, and so forth.

In 2009, I suggested that those who had taught, or were still teaching, downrange submit pieces on "the downrange experience"—to as it were let their colleagues know what it was like "down there" before applying for such assignments themselves—or deciding against it. These are a couple of the ten or twelve responses.

Some details of Robert's and Deborah's lives may be found on the "In Memoriam" page of this website. Both were published writers. Deborah's "downrange experience" is part of her blog on her time in Djibouti. The link at the top of her contribution still works—and is worth clicking on.

Stephen Richards

Robert Burda: Hemingway in Kuwait

Asked what I do, I answer "I'm a teacher," and am asked what I teach. If I say "English" I get a flat-sounding *Oh*. If I say "Shakespeare" I get a softly-spoken *Ahh* . . . !

I immediately have status.

That status took a tumble thirty years ago when I had an opportunity at a Midwestern university to offer a course of my choosing and decided on Hemingway. Colleagues immediately, and students gradually, were glad to assist in my fall. After five or six weeks, class discussions grew acrimonious. Students became impatient with Hemingway's world view; finally, dismissive.

Clearly, if I asked what I taught, it was better not to say "Hemingway."

Then, after thirty-five years, I joined the Overseas Division of the University of Maryland which has a number of on-site, Field Study courses, such as Van Gogh in Amsterdam, Expatriate Writers in Paris, Italian Art in Florence, and . . . . "Hemingway in Madrid." A bit tattered by age perhaps, the "status" Shakespeare gave me was still in place, so I was asked if I would return the course to its original focus—Hemingway's Spanish writings: *Death in the Afternoon, The Sun Also Rises, For Whom the Bell Tolls*, his newspaper dispatches on the Spanish Civil War and stories like "*The Denunciation.*"

Since Spain is a country where we can find a statue erected to Hemingway's memory—the only one in Europe to honor the memory of an American writer; and eight days in Madrid every spring and fall sounded agreeable, I accepted.

But it quickly became clear that I would not be able to teach Hemingway. Once again, I would have to defend him, not only to incredulous painters and university colleagues who patronizingly dismiss him, but to the students who came to Madrid.

For they don’t believe men and women are crippled, as they are in *The Sun Also Rises*. None are among the "wounded." They’ve had relationships in which they’ve found satisfaction, if not fulfillment. Emotional failures an accident; failure isn’t in the nature of things. They turn away from a world where men and women seem to have little or no chance to find what they are seeking in another.

A man who kills for the size of an animal’s horns or the thickness of its mane isn’t someone to be looked to for any answers as to "how to live" in the world. They resent being called "animalarians" and react strongly to Hemingway’s suggestion that there can be "pleasure" in the giving of death, even when they get satisfaction from swatting a mosquito, quashing a roach or poisoning a rat.

A life-filled city is no place for a death-oriented writer.

Some refuse to go to the *Plaza de Toros*; others leave after the sword goes into the first bull. That there are demonic forces loose in the world which are exorcised by ritual doesn’t fit in with their irreligious approach to life. They are secularists. Hemingway is foolish, even silly, for considering wine a "sacrament" when it’s a liquid found in *tapas* bars meant for nothing more than to bring on a pleasant "high." Alcohol isn’t a "giant killer."

For at the sidewalk cafes of Madrid, there are no giants.

But there is a place where a giant lives—in fact, a "colossus."

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Thirty or so miles south of the Iraq border, the U. S. military maintains one of several camps in Kuwait. A place where the sun shines like a brown stone, it "sands" instead of snows—at times, straight down. No trees, no shrubs, not even cacti, grow. There are no birds. And desert silence is unknown for noise from generators, air conditioners, artillery fire and helicopters, fills the air.

Camp Buehring doesn’t sleep.

The mess opens from midnight to one A.M. for breakfast or dinner, depending on whether a soldier is coming off or going on duty. An outdoor basketball court is never empty. Exercise machines turn all night in the fitness center.

Buildings are low-slung except for the water tower. The hospital is in a tent. To get from one room to the next, you have to duck your head. Bunk beds for two soldiers occupy a space about the size of a 9 by 12 rug.

Among these buildings there is, a bit improbably, an Education Center.

At the time of "the surge" in the spring of ’07, the University of Maryland Overseas Division offered a seminar in Hemingway. A soldier who’d attended it stopped by my classroom-office to talk a few days before he was "*going North*"—the euphemism used for deployment to Iraq. He had a volume of Hemingway’s short stories that he’d read, and when he’d finished telling me what he’d come to say, he held the book up and said:

"I think I’ll take this North with me instead of my Bible."

At another camp designated a "war zone," six men and one woman from all branches of the military—Army, Air Force, Navy— met to discuss résumé writing. We began by trying to second-guess what a civilian employer might consider "suspect" about someone with a military background. So we decided to define "the military mentality." In less than a heartbeat, a marine said: "The mission comes first."

Every head nodded.

They share Robert Jordan’s frame of mind when he begins his three days with a band of guerillas during the Spanish Civil War in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Personal matters cannot interfere with the mission of blowing up the bridge. Hemingway takes up a lot of pages attempting to educate Robert Jordan to another point of view, one like Anselmo’s or Pilar’s, who says it best: "What are we born for

if not to help one another?" But Robert Jordan turns aside from this, even as he sleeps with Maria. He touches the revolver at his side, always making sure it's there.

There are several narrow buildings at Camp Buehring sectioned into a dozen cubicles. The door opens on the backs of men and women seated on white plastic chairs, leaning forward, their heads hidden. One hears low murmurings. They are on the phone, trying to get and give help; trying to maintain contact with someone—a wife, a husband, a lover, a girlfriend. Two out of three of them will fail. For the months, sometimes years, of separation brought about by deployment, have caused the military divorce rate to soar to the highest in the nation.

It may soon reach seventy percent.

Relationships fall apart. It's no accident that they do. In war zones like Kuwait, it's in the nature of things.

Not only do they fall apart between men and women. A female soldier I knew in the Sinai Peninsula was ordered to join the Multi-national Force Observers twelve weeks after she'd given birth to a girl. Pleas to have her orders reversed fell on deaf ears. A single parent, she was forced to hand her newborn to her grandmother. When I met her, she was a shattered person.

The mission came first, the child and its mother last.

Two paramedics attending classes in Kuwait explained their three-night absence by saying that they'd had to inoculate 3,000 men and women against anthrax who'd just arrived for the "surge." The majority of them were reservists taken National Guard units, and large numbers arrived disabled. One man was scheduled to have surgery on his shoulder the day before he was sent over. Another arrived with torn ligaments in his knee, limping. Another had had four incisions for hernia six days earlier and arrived bending over as he walked.

A quarter of all those called up were declared unfit for warfare.

Cardiologist and physician to George W. Bush, Captain Michael Curran, told me that doctors are constantly declaring men and women unfit for deployment, recommending that they be sent back. But the commander of any unit has the authority to set this medical judgment aside, even if the physician outranks him. If the commander says he needs a soldier, he stays.

The reservist called up six days after his hernia operation was sent *North.*

The mission comes first.

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So where in themselves can they turn?

During WW I in Italy, Hemingway saw what he called "grace under pressure." In Madrid, he found that grace and pressure in the bullring where a matador faced the possibility of death with the grace of a *veronica.* But once to the Plaza de Toros is enough for those who come to Madrid each spring. And there's no pressure that waits for their response when they stroll in Retiro park. Unlike Jack Barnes, they know "how to live in it." They're doing well and they don't have to sleep with a light on at night.

But in Kuwait mercury-white lights burn all night.

What's visible is something Hemingway's often criticized for: bonding, especially male bonding. What has been added in Kuwait are women—male and female bonding. Men and women alike carry assault weapons slung across their backs, regardless of frame or weight, barrel to the ground. They carry them to the mess and set them on the floor at mealtime. After the sun's gone down and it's cooled, men and women sit together, not in a *cervezeria* but at picnic-like tables, talking, laughing, drinking the beverage of necessity, not choice—*collective* necessity: water.

The pressures of the desert, physical ailments, twenty-four hour duty assignments and separation from home and family, do not equal together the pressure of the colossus that's waiting for them.

Because Goya shared a vision of violent death with Hemingway, Hemingway refers to him more than any other painter. Goya's "Colossus" moves fist-clenched across a landscape, towering over masses of fleeing men and women below. Who this Colossus is, whether it represents the French under Napoleon who were seeking to destroy Spain, or some spirit-figure among the Spanish who has come to resist, can't be known.

But the Colossus that looms over Kuwait is clear, unambiguous: it's the war in *the North.* There was no running from the pressure that the men and women, sent for training in desert warfare, face.

Sometimes they respond with less than "grace."

An unexpected moment of bonding occurred one evening in the classroom. The class erupted with bitterness, condemning the four men and one woman who were the principal architects of the Iraq war. Their power held no authority for them. That the man who'd fled the Colossus himself during a war had sent them there, set them to cursing.

Had they not had the protection a university classroom affords, they may have been court martialed for what the names they gave their civilian Commander-in-Chief. Most of all, they cursed the time, the accidental year of their births. They had a Hamlet-like sense of fate. The time was out of joint and they had been sent to make it right.

And they had nowhere to turn for help except to those who stood on the right and left of them. They didn't need mothers, fathers, husbands or wives; nor did they need philosophy, religion or patriotism. What they needed to acquire the "grace" when faced with the pressure that came from the Colossus was each other.

Those who could not bond, who stayed apart, who succumbed to the pressure, killed themselves. The suicide rate in the military world is higher than the civilian world, and rising. There are now posters on U. S. bases showing the strained face of a soldier with a list of symptoms to help the viewer spot a soldier for whom the pressure is too great.

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In his book on Existentialism, William Barrett gives Hemingway a place among the existentialists. The Head of the Institute for North American Studies at the University of Alcalá, Dr. José Gurpegui, is currently writing a book titled "Hemingway and Existentialism." Both Hemingway's struggle for "authenticity" and his preoccupation with death warrants inclusion among these thinkers.

In Madrid, there is nothing that students reject more about Hemingway than his obsession with death. Let him mention it once or twice, but that's enough. "There are other things out there," they say. And they're undoubtedly right. But where they are wrong is in seeing death only as an eventuality, one that will arrive *someday*.

But for Hemingway, as for all existentialists, death is a possibility. It is there not only every day but every hour, every minute. The pressure of living with this and the human anguish of it are often pointed to in existential writing. And in Madrid, the students don't want to live life clouded by this anguish.

Hemingway chooses to live in the blinding light of it, and the light that blinds in Madrid opens eyes in Kuwait.

For the possible death as opposed to eventual death is violent death.

Faulkner quipped that one didn't need a dictionary to read Hemingway. Hemingway replied, correctly, that the big emotions don't have big words. When he writes about violent death he doesn't use big words either, but they are words most are reluctant to follow or accept.

He often reads as if he has an almost a fondness for violent death. Not the kind that comes with head-on collisions on curving roads. He calls these "industrial accidents." It was the deliberate giving and receiving of violent death that he saw in Goya's "black paintings" and *Los Disastros*. We know he was drawn to the violence of suicide, possibly even before his father's self-execution. He suggested in a letter in his early thirties that maybe that's "all that was left." But in "Indian Camp," when Nick Adams asked his father why the Indian had slit his throat, he was answered: "Because he couldn't stand things."

And in Hemingway's world one has to stand things.

Some biographers suggest that he deliberately put himself in places where someone else would do his killing for him: in four wars. When this shooting stopped, he went to Africa and provoked wild animals to run at him.

His attraction to violent death is that is, he writes, the "simplest" kind. There are no years-long complications and suffering that accompanies death by cancer or by Parkinson's or Alzheimer's disease. And he writes about how this simplest of all deaths can come "cleanly," like a sportsman who kills with a single shot by putting the bullet in the right place. He descried the day when Belmonte turned the heart of the *corrida* to the artistry of the cape from the artistry of the kill.

On the way to my quarters every day in Kuwait, I had to pass a graffiti-covered slabs of concrete, placed there to thwart any attack on the camp. It had been put there by a helicopter unit that showed a helicopter in flight, with a large death's head and three words: *Seek Destroy KILL.* When Hemingway writes that a great killer "must have a sense of honor and sense of glory," those going North want that for themselves, too. When he writes about killing cleanly in a way that "gives an aesthetic pleasure and pride" they also want that now that they've been called upon—against their wills—to kill.

Their reasons are clear.

They don't want to receive the bullet that lets them live, blinded; or the blast that only paralyzes them from the waist down. They don't want 90% of their bodies burned to the 3rd degree, as was reported of a soldier in the *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper. So they don't want to go North and deliver a half-death to someone else, either.

Since they entered Boot Camp to the time they arrived in Kuwait, they had had to keep themselves physically fit, and taught skills in weaponry and tactics—all for the purpose and intention to kill. They offered no resistance to the fact they were in the "business of killing." So they could follow Hemingway to his most extreme position—

Which is that the rebellion against death comes from its administering.

In joining the military they had already rejected the commandment "Thou shalt not kill." All pilots who released a bomb, all soldiers who pulled a trigger, all sailors who fired a missile or torpedo knew that they were doing it to kill. They had, in Hemingway's terms, not accepted the "rule of death."

They hadn't because they rebelled against their own.

And when a man is in "rebellion against death, he has the pleasure in taking to himself one of the Godlike attributes: that of giving it." The God who commanded humans not to kill, did so—not because killing is wrong—but because he reserved the right to himself. And we read throughout Hebrew scripture how frequently he exercised that right, often ruthlessly. Soldiers had no difficulty in accepting the truth that if God is the creator of life—the one who "gives," but also "takes away" whenever he wishes—then he is the destroyer of life as well as its creator.

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Wilson quotes Prince Hal that "Every man owes God a death." Because Falstaff looked upon death as an eventuality, he replied that his debt isn't due yet. But for men and women about to go North, death was a possibility for them, and they may be called upon to give what they owe to God.

They wanted to know, most of all, how to do it.

And Francis Macomber showed them.

For Hemingway's God-factor is fearlessness in the face of violent death.

Once they had accepted the fact that they owed God a death, and they were about to give violent death and possibly receive it; and accepted the idea that violent death was the simplest of all deaths, their fear began to slip from them. Their fear had been in wounding, maiming, suffering. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" was their favorite Hemingway story. After we'd read the opening paragraphs of the 19th chapter in *Death in the Afternoon* and Macomber's journey toward fearlessness, strained faces relaxed.

One marine said: "I feel a lot better."

Hemingway had given him something to hang onto.

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Toynbee said the 20th century would be known as "the military century." All indications are that the 21st century isn't ready to bring about any changes. The narrowness of Hemingway's version of reality can't be argued against. We want there to be more; and there are other things, if not more, surely. However we may protest looking at life along the barrel of a rifle with him, we can hardly protest the assertion that he had his eye on what has been the Main Event of the last 100 years.

He is America's most relevant writer.

In a few months I will be in Madrid again where I'll have to defend him. But in war zones, not only can Hemingway be taught, he can be preached. Wherever death is a possibility, he needs no defense.

Deborah Griggs: Hair

The following is just one entry from Deborah's blog of her days in Djibouti, which can be accessed at *http://www.wabbitt-in-africa.blogspot.com/*

THURSDAY, MARCH 12, 2009

Gimme head with hair
Long beautiful hair
Shining, gleaming,
Streaming, flaxen, waxen

- *Hair*, the musical.

I may wear thirty-dollar pants, rebelliously sporty shoes, and t-shirts when I teach class. I may refuse the power skirt, crippling three-inch heels or the European Kostüm. I may find as many black pants, shorts and skirts as I can so I can wear just about anything I want with them on any given day, without having to worry about things clashing. I'll wear the same necklace for a month and a pair of earrings even longer. Watches and rings get in the way and if my hair's in the way, it goes in a ponytail. I wear tennis shoes with skirts and combine them with expensively slinky stockings and just about any top. I care more about comfort and range of motion than male desires or professional expectations, and always rely on my mother's injunction toward cleanliness as a bottom-line requirement for any kind of clothing.

But since the days I stopped cutting my own hair and using henna to make it orange, I've come to

hate bad haircuts and hamburger palace color jobs. When women let their dye-jobs go and those root horizons start moving across their heads, I put on my sunglasses.

Thus, when I was deployed down here to the land of gravel roads, dusty furniture, plastic flatware, and over-chlorinated water, I was not troubled because I had to wear rough and ready clothes or reasonable walking shoes or because I had to eat the same things every day. I was relieved.

Only one thought plagued me as I arrived at Camp Lemonier—the base barber shop: the place where men get shaved haircuts and women dare not. I knew that I could not go four months without highlights or cut. Normally, I would not have hesitated to go out into the real world and get a Djiboutian cut, except that most of the places deal in Djiboutian hair, which is nothing like my fine, brittle, blonde, European locks. To make matters more difficult, I found I had a hard time with Djiboutian French on the phone; I was not allowed to leave base alone, but had to be with a "buddy"; and I had no idea what kind of frightening agents they would use to bleach hair.

Thus, on their rare trips into town, my friends began looking for beauty salons, finally spotting one that had European women on their posters and an owner with fine little red highlights. I decided to make an appointment, but placing a call from base was difficult. The phone lines here are military, which means that a call a mile away in downtown Djibouti costs the international rate of 35 cents per minute. Add my difficulty with communication and I knew any phone card would be empty before I got any of the information I needed. So I asked the help of one of the Djiboutian women who works on base. We made a date to call and I found someone with a local cell phone.

The first three times, at three different times during the day, borrowing the phone each time, we got no answer. Same thing happened next day. Then, we finally reached the salon. I heard my Djiboutian acquaintance say "color" and "four p.m. tomorrow." I heard nothing about highlights. Was this an ambush? Would it end in an act of hair terror? I didn't want to pay who knew what for a blonde helmet-head. Letting fear get the better of me, I went down to check out the base beauty shop, determined to stop thinking like such a snob. I did not find the barber, but only two very friendly but non-English speaking Filipinas. When I asked, "Do you do highlights," they just looked at each other. I scanned the salon for evidence of highlights, finally coming up their price list, upon which I discovered the entry *Highlights-Long, with massage, 30$*. Blinking a little at the idea of myself with metal foil all over my head and someone massaging my neck, I pointed to this item. They nodded vigorously and pointed to a bottle of what was unashamedly called *bleaching powder*, nonverbally assuring me that we could do business. When I asked about an appointment, we had another language struggle; however, I finally understood that I had to choose a color, then wait a day because someone had to go into town to buy the product. I went away, skeptical about the black-market colors that the base salon might end up putting together that night and also feeling cowardly about not wanting to try the salon in town. I had two appointments for the next day and wanted neither.

The next morning, I got up and went to the beauty parlor. The barber, who had been absent the day before, said he didn't do highlights with foil but just a comb. I imagined globs of blonde in my hair. Luckily, he had not bought the colors yet, so I thanked him but said I would go somewhere else. He seemed relieved.

Trapped into taking the other appointment, I prepared to grab my friend and voluntary liberty-buddy Daniel—who had offered for god knows what reason to wait two plus hours in the salon while I had my hair done—and go off into town. We walked out the dusty road to the gate, found a taxi driver who thought he knew where the salon was and drove off. We arrived without incident but were a little early, so we passed the time till the salon to re-opened by walking down the street, telling little kids we wouldn't give them money, me thinking what an ass I was for spending a yet undetermined amount on my damn hair. Returning to the salon, we saw two perfectly coiffed and nicely dressed Djiboutian women, sitting on the doorstep. We joined them.

Then the moment came. A French woman pulled up in a car and greeted us as she unlocked the door. She was dressed in a black and white, ankle length dress and low-heeled sandals. She was that kind of small-boned elegant French woman who makes us sturdier and casual types look like Clydesdales. I surveyed my dusty, witch-haired reflection in the door and sighed. I would have followed her anywhere. Putting me in a chair, she offered me and Daniel both coffee, looked over my hair, told me what colors I needed, and proceeded to mix up a suspicious-looking blue powder and some other

stuff. I didn't make a peep, but put myself in her hands. She gave me water, chocolates and, funnily enough, spoke fluent German, which she was longing to practice, having grown up in the Alsace on the border near Germany. Daniel read and watched the salon activity, while I chatted with the woman combing neat strands of glop into my hair. She was the owner and had lived in Djibouti for 12 years. Her husband dealt in precious stones and her daughter went to a local private school. It was interesting to see some of the social stratification and talk about how fearful Americans were of germs and Djibouti's city streets, which, she assured me, were much safer than any U.S. urban environment.

In the end, I paid 150% of what I'd pay in Europe but was happy to be robbed. My hair looked just like hair does. I took her card and told her I'd be back in six weeks. What the hell, I thought, my pants only cost 30 bucks.

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