



# VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES

Award-winning writer and Truro resident, Sebastian Junger, recounts his harrowing and enlightening time in Afghanistan

Deep in the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan, weighed down with 90-pounds of gear and hiking up steep high altitude terrain, Sebastian Junger took a step on a forested alpine path and felt a searing pain in his right calf. He thought he had been hit by a round. When he didn't see blood, he then assumed he had been kicked.

"But there was no one behind me. It was a real mystery, it was very painful. I just couldn't use my foot," says Junger, who was on his first trip of 2007 to Afghanistan.

There was an hour left of walking before reaching the outpost. When he arrived at Restrepo, the medic took a look at Junger's leg, but didn't know what was wrong. He hobbled on it for the entire month,

not knowing until he flew back to New York that he had torn the upper part of his Achilles tendon. "I could put weight on it, but I couldn't push off with my toes, so I'd walk and just flop my foot down. It was like a piece of wood," says Junger, describing his injury from the library at his Truro home.

At the time of his injury the journalist was embedded with the U.S. Military in the front lines and on assignment reporting for *Vanity Fair*. He was hiking with photographer Tim Hetherington and 20 men from the Army's Battle Company on the way to the most dangerous outpost in Afghanistan.

From their harrowing experiences, Junger and Hetherington created *Restrepo*, a documentary filmed while at the eponymous outpost, named after the first fallen soldier of the unit posted there.

BY LAURIE BALLIETT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY ELLIOTT



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*Restrepo* won the Grand Jury Prize for a domestic documentary at the Sundance Film Festival in 2010 and was nominated for an Academy Award. Junger subsequently wrote the New York Times best selling book, *War*, chronicling 15 unfathomable months for the platoon stationed in this hellish outpost.

“My job is to make you feel like you’re at *Restrepo*,” says Junger. “We wanted everything in the movie to be experiential. We didn’t want an outside narrator. We used soldiers in a voice over so it was like you were stuck there for 94 minutes.”

Junger is familiar with dangerous jobs. His best selling book, *The Perfect Storm*, was partially written when he was recovering in the hospital from an injury he incurred while cutting down trees near his Truro home when the Gloucester storm blew in.

“I happened to be down here for Hurricane Bob, (in 1991) and I was doing tree work. It just cut the Achilles, it tore it up,” says Junger lifting his left pant leg, displaying the scar on his calf from the accident. “I was injured, so I was already thinking about risk.”



The author chronicled 15 hellish months stationed in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan in *War*.

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*The Perfect Storm* began as a chapter in a book that was going to be about dangerous jobs. “I was following things that interested me. Commercial fishing, logging, forest fire fighting, offshore oil rigs were some of the subjects. I was interested in doing all those things. You can’t do all those things in one life, but I can write about it. The third chapter was going to be about a war correspondent, so I went to Bosnia. I figured, if this book doesn’t work, I can at least learn how to be a war correspondent,” remembers Junger.

He has been taking trips to Afghanistan since 1996, “when it was a little shop of horrors.” The first year he was on assignment for *Men’s Journal*. On this next trip, in 2005, he became attached to Battle Company, the unit he profiles in *War*, while on assignment for *Vanity Fair*. He returned five times for nearly a month each trip over the course of 2007 and 2008.

“I was lucky that I ended up in the most intrusive risk. The best units are in the worst places,” he explains that the military places its best soldiers in the hardest hit war zones. “Battle Company is one of the best companies and the 173<sup>rd</sup> is one of the most renowned brigades in the U.S. Military,” says Junger. “I wanted to know what combat was like.” His main goal was to find out what it was like to be a soldier.

When he first headed to Afghanistan, he says “No one expected it to be crazy fighting, because in theory it was a peace keeping mission, and Bush had focused the heavy fighting on Iraq. Even the soldiers thought they’d be sitting on a hill waiting for something to happen.” Junger adds that he too “first went there with the



Junger and his wife head back to Truro to relax and write. The author’s family has been coming to the Outer Cape since the 1950s.

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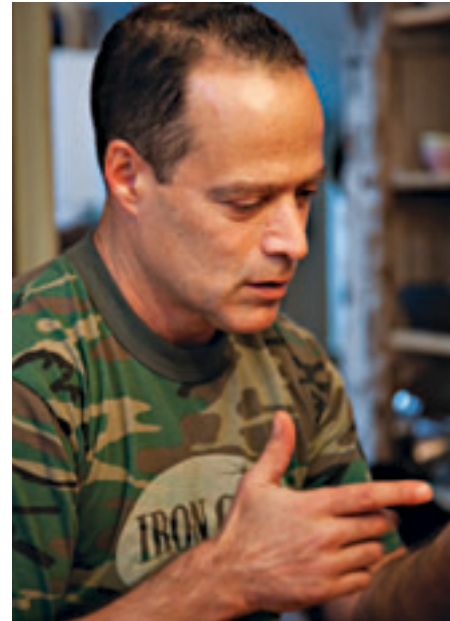
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Junger has been entrenched in Afghanistan's ongoing war since he first started traveling there as a correspondent in 1996.

journalistic equivalent of that idea.

Junger visited Restrepo shortly after it was built and the outpost was steadily under heavy fire, a surprise for both the soldiers and journalist. "I was having to get into my own fear and learn that process," he says. "To me, it was important that the reader feel the fear." He divided *War* into three books, *Fear*, *Killing*, and *Love*, the latter section explaining the anthropological and social aspects of the bond between soldiers. He details the biological response to adrenaline, how the body reacts, what the heart does and how rational thought is affected.

In spite of the danger, Junger appreciated his experiences in Afghanistan. "Life at the outpost was very simple. There was no email, no phone, no computer, no social problems, no bills. All you had to do was not get killed and not get someone else killed. You went on patrol, you went to sleep at night. It was intense, exciting, and felt very important. I miss all of that," says Junger. He felt safer at the world's most dangerous outpost in Afghanistan than he did traveling alone in Africa, his foreigner status sticking out like a sore thumb where at any moment he could be pulled away at a checkpoint. In the Korengal Valley, he was surrounded by

"To me, it was important that the reader feel the fear."

a platoon of highly trained soldiers.

Junger misses the risk and the danger of the whole thing, but is careful to point out that the soldiers miss the brotherly love created in war more than they miss the adrenaline. He wrote most of *War* in the solitude of his Truro house. With no television and the beauty of the Cape, one would think that this would be the place that made life feel most simple. His wife works upstairs on a novel in their rambling antique house; his dog makes him smile as she follows him around with her toy; and his cat jumps through the open window from the screen porch to his desk.

Back home on the Cape, he resumes his life of a highly acclaimed author, while the soldiers choose to remain fighting. "There's a counter balance to my identity. They didn't have one, so they didn't come back," says Junger. He has visited the Cape regularly his whole life, because his parents own a home in Truro, near where he lives now. His mother came to the Outer Cape in the 1950s to study under the renowned Provincetown painters Hans Hoffman, Henry Hensche and Salvatore Del Deo. Junger would come and go to his parent's house as he pleased through his early adulthood. It never occurred to him to buy a house nearby, until a realtor contacted him with an antique Cape that was about to come on the market. Junger fell in love with the home, perched on conservation land with a view of the marsh, and had it renovated.

His connection to the Cape his deep and locals often spy him around town, playing his harmonica or plying his boat, "Little Star." Junger's authenticity and down to earth nature makes him easy to like and is an integral part of the reason for his enormous success. ●



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