

ANTHONY LOYD is an award-winning foreign correspondent who has reported from numerous conflict zones including the Balkans, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, Iraq and Chechnya. A former infantry officer, he left the British army after the First Gulf War and went to live in Bosnia, where he started reporting for *The Times*. *My War Gone By, I Miss It So* is his memoir of that conflict.

Praise for *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*

‘An extraordinary memoir of the Bosnian War ... savage and mercilessly readable ... deserves a place alongside George Orwell, James Cameron and Nicholas Tomalin. It is as good as war reporting gets. I have nowhere read a more vivid account of frontline fear and survival. Forget the strategic overview. All war is local. It is about the ditch in which the soldier crouches and the ground on which he fights and maybe dies. The same applies to the war reporter. Anthony Loyd has been there and knows it’

Martin Bell, *The Times*

‘A truly exceptional book, one of those rare moments in journalistic writing when you can sit back and realise that you are in the presence of somebody willing to take the supreme risk for a writer, of extending their inner self. I finished reading Anthony Loyd’s account of his time in the Balkans and Chechnya only a few days ago and am still feeling the after-effects ... I read his story of war and addiction (to conflict and heroin) with a sense of gratitude for the honesty and courage on every page’

Fergal Keane, *Independent*

‘Not since Michael Herr wrote *Dispatches* has any journalist written so persuasively about violence and its seductions in all of war’s minutiae of awful detail ... an account that demystifies war and the war reporter and strips them bare before the reader’

Peter Beaumont, *Observer*

‘Undoubtedly the most powerful and immediate book to emerge from the Balkan horror of ethnic civil war ... far more revealing and convincing than anything recounted to camera by visiting journalists and politicians’

Antony Beevor, *Daily Telegraph*

‘An astonishing book ... a raw, vivid and brutally honest account of his transition from thrill seeker to concerned reporter’

Philip Jacobson, *Daily Mail*

‘Chilling ... a true picture into the brutality of war and should be required reading for all those politicians who use phrases such as “collateral damage” and “surgical strikes”’

John Nichol, *Daily Express*

‘Both beautiful and disturbing’

*Wall Street Journal*

‘Part war memoir, part coming-of-age tale and part junkie diary, it’s a raw account of the hypnotic lures of violence, heroin and danger’

Carla Power, *Newsweek*

‘This is more than just despatches from the front. There’s blood-red-vivid descriptions of the fighting, sure, but there’s also the dark poetic insight of a man who’s seen humanity at its worst. Loyd spares us nothing – not brains spilling out on the street, not his own bleak despair, not even the jokes – and he deserves a medal for it’

*Maxim*

‘Magnificent ... a stench of blood, excrement, mortar-fire, slivovitz and human bestiality emanates from these pages’

Ben Shephard, *Literary Review*

‘Battlefield reportage does not get more up close, gruesome, and personal ... The fear and confusion of battle are so vivid that in places, they rise like acrid smoke from the page’ *New York Times*

‘Loyd’s strongest writing is in his descriptions of carnage – of the sound and smell of shellfire; of the sexual release of blasting away with an automatic machine gun ... This is pure war reporting, free from the usual journalistic constraints that often give a false significance to suffering. And Loyd waxes eloquent on the backblast of his war time, a heroin addiction that begins before his arrival and becomes the only way he can survive his breaks from the fighting’ *Salon*

‘First-rate war correspondence ... [in] the great tradition of Hemingway, Caputo, and Michael Herr’ *Boston Globe*

‘*My War Gone By, I Miss It So* moves at the pace of a thriller. Why bother reading war fiction when you can read such intense reporting?’ *LA Weekly*

‘[Loyd] has written an account of its horrors that will wipe out any thoughts you might have had that we have reached the limit of the worst human nature has to offer. The monstrosities he describes are beyond belief. But the book is also compelling for what it tells us about fear’ *National Geographic Adventure*

‘A testament to his honor and courage. And while it would be impossible for one man to tell the whole story, his book shines with small truths and larger, philosophical ones about life and war’

*New York Post*

MY  
WAR  
GONE  
BY,  
I MISS IT SO

*Anthony Loyd*

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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## Foreword

THESE ARE THE words of a young man that I once knew well. On a winter day, nearly a quarter of a century ago, he left his country in the manner that curious young men do: restless, vainglorious and yearning for adventure beyond a distant horizon. He wanted to see a real war. This is the story of what he found in Bosnia, where he stopped and lived for a while during the years of fighting.

I still recognize him, though much has changed.

*My War Gone By, I Miss It So* was written in the summer of 1997, two years after the end of the war, in little over three months, and one draft during an on-the-run interlude from heroin at a house by a river in France. The sudden firework burst of drug-free clarity, together with the brooding awareness of short reprieve, gave the writing its particular mood. When the autumn came I dutifully returned to London and the waiting arms of oblivion.

Looking back now, I recognize with some amusement the self-involved sense of wisdom that I had at the time of writing. Forgive me, for a young man's grandiosity in the telling is part of the vanity of youth, and overall I do not think that I short-changed Bosnia or its people too much in the tale.

I could never have told my story without first bending my knee to theirs: to the epic struggle between a flawed good and

incomplete evil, in which hope and tolerance were slain by the tawdry agents of sectarian hatred, in a slow time murder watched by the world.

Bosnia's plight and the moral abrogation that accompanied it, which allowed thousands of civilians to be slaughtered little over two hours' flight time away from London, blew their spores across the post-war years, so that echoes of what happened there, in the bucolic depths of the forests and valleys, still reverberate around the debates on intervention in the Middle East and North Africa today.

Yet for as much as it is an account of the war as I witnessed it, *My War Gone By* is also a personal story of lost innocence and rite of passage. Freshly emerged from metamorphosis, I was a jaded narrator when I wrote the book and, so fresh from war, inevitably thought that I was newly grown old and worldly wise. Huh! The war may have been the defining experience of my twenties, but I am old enough now to recognize how young I was then, even at war's end.

Growing older was what happened after the war in Bosnia. Growing older was war in Syria, war in Iraq, war in Afghanistan, war in Chechnya, war in Libya, war in Kosovo, war in Sierra Leone, and war in other places too: growing older was two decades of war, war, war.

Growing older was a pensioner's quota of dead friends by my mid-thirties; growing older was to hold the hand of my mother as she died; growing older was making vows and breaking them; growing older was dead lovers; growing older was to be bound and afraid and beaten and shot.

Growing older was also about love – good love, bad love, war love, all the love in every fire fight, the shared and terrible

love of it all. Growing older was cleaning up; growing older was bathing beneath the glow of fatherhood's golden skies; growing older was to cling to storm-weathered, besieged dreams despite it all; growing older was to rejoice and be thankful. (And, oh God of sinners, chancers and lucky men, I am thankful every day.)

Growing older was also to know that the answer to the question, after so many wars in so many places and with so much love and so much death, should be 'peace'. But I am not so old that I know what the question is, so I yet wander in the gardens of carnage and wonder why.

Someday, of course, I will know the right question, and I hope that by the time that day arrives my daughter will not remember her father as a fool, for to be in wars aware of age and wanting very much to live is a perilous position for a man: stupid, some would say.

As for how the others among these pages grew older? I should know the fate of everyone in this book. I do not. Youth takes few accomplices in its swift advance, and when peace came I walked out of that war hungry, wasted and nostalgic for the thrill of what it had been to me, rather than what it became for others, few of whom I ever saw again.

In quieter moments of reflection I often wonder, knowing now how desperate a fugitive time can be, what became of Momčilo, Petar, Yelena, Victorija and Milan, and of all the strangers who showed me such kindness, and what became too of the three-year-old girl, badly wounded in cross-fire, that I had helped rescue in western Bosnia so long ago. Did the beat of the butterfly's wing over her survival alter the course of the universe in some positive way? Or did she live to stride

like Medusa through her world, turning those she encountered to stone? I do not know. I found the complexity and guilt of trying to maintain relationships with those in war through no choice of their own too much to bear then, and now. Walking in and out of other people's nightmares is complicated enough, without making things worse by getting involved.

There are some here whose later fate I do know. A few – the fellow travellers, there through choosing – remain close friends, war siblings forever blooded by the Balkan Eden in which we grew up.

Others in this book I learned of through snippets in newspapers or snatches of conversation years later. Two died drunk in car crashes. One was an indicted war criminal but died during his trial. At least one went to prison. Another man, a fighter who cut ears from corpses as trophies, later became a waiter in an Australian café.

Kurt Schork, the outstanding war correspondent of his time, who was the best of us all in Bosnia and as brave and true a friend as anyone could ever wish for, was killed in Sierra Leone in an ambush in 2000 along with Miguel Gil Moreno, another pivotal figure among my comrades. The cosmos made a terrible and reckless mistake that day, killing such rare champions so far ahead of the hour of their need. Heaven must be filled with celestial error.

Kurt was my mentor as well as my friend. The road into the unknown seldom looked better than when rolling down it at dawn in his company. Fifteen years later, I remain profoundly grateful for the chance to have worked with such an inspiring man. There is little I have ever achieved since that I cannot in some way trace to his influence.

*Maktoub*, my friends: 'it is written'.

I cleaned up after Kurt and Miguel were killed. I was pretty much clean by the time it happened, after a few years slamming around the ring with heroin. About a week or so after their deaths I went out and got wasted just one more time, to remind myself of the route back to deep shelter should I need it again. After that I slid from the dream back into the world, shed the opiate cloak and walked away.

There were to be many other casualties after that. My later generation of war friends tumbled like mown hay. Some were killed; many others were wounded or irreparably burned out by the escalating demands and dangers posed by reporting on wars after 9/11.

Though we had never realized at the time, the Bosnian war represented the closure of an era of reporting. With the start of the twenty-first century, as the West became entangled in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, so the days of living and reporting 'amongst the people' ended for most Western correspondents, as the interventionist creed in which so many of us in Bosnia had believed was misapplied and ruined.

While the moral high ground tremored and crumbled beneath us, so our own credibility became grievously injured. Non-interventionism proved as dangerous. By the time the death count from the Syrian war had swamped itself in the blood of more than 200,000 dead, few people in the Muslim world still regarded Western journalists as credible witnesses, but saw us instead as the epitome of cynicism, charting the depths of depravity and suffering knowing full well that our record would neither bring good nor redress.

Looking back in sorrow from these end-of-days, the period

when we had once defined our courage merely as the ability to navigate through the impersonal currents of war violence, risking death by chance rather than by intent in order to report, seem simple and carefree by comparison.

Now we are hunted down and butchered for spectacle.

With this in mind, *My War Gone By* belongs as much to a past era as my own youth, and I flick through the pages not just with a sense of amused indulgence for the naivety and narcissism of the young man who hitch-hiked to Bosnia so long ago, but also with a trace of grief for the world as it was then, when hope and conviction and zest and friends were so in evidence and still alive.

Yet, if in the fullness of time my own daughter should come to tell me one winter day that she wishes to abandon the dull, lumpen crowd of those who aspire to fulfil their dreams but never take the risk involved with doing so: that she wishes to navigate the reefs and shorelines of certainty in a fearful world; to share the best and worst of times in the company of men and women who might smell of the winter war, of gun oil, brandy, wood smoke and tobacco swept from destroyed factory floors; to hear the thump of artillery and the chatter of machine guns, the soft jingle of muffled harnesses as the mule trains come down from the mountains with boxed ammunition and rifles as their loads; to break the yoke of familiarity and seek brave adventure over that horizon, telling others of what she sees there. If she comes to tell me this, then I hope I shall be able to reach back across the years, scratch my scars, remember my friends, recall that every great adventure starts with the lonely impulse of delight, and tell her 'go'.

11 May 2015

## PROLOGUE

# The Forest

*Srebrenica, Summer 1996*

THERE WERE PLACES among the crowded trees where the bird-song dropped away to nothing, shaded clearings with a sound vacuum: once you had stepped in no noise could reach you from the outside world except the rustling summer breeze, and you did not want to listen to that too carefully, for if you were alone your mind began to play tricks and it was more than just the grass that you heard whispering.

The bones lay strewn for miles through this woodland, paper-chasing a rough path eastwards across the hills from Srebrenica, the trail breaking then restarting in a jumbled profusion where a last stand had been made or a group of those too wounded or exhausted to go on had been found. The whole area was saturated with the legacy of the killing. There were mass graves in the valleys where prisoners had been herded, executed, then covered with a casual layer of earth which one year later was still heavy and reeking with decay. Elsewhere, more poignantly, there were solitary skeletons hidden in the undergrowth, individuals who had tried to make it out alone but had been hunted down and their lives chopped or shot from them. Even the roadsides bore tributes to the events of the previous summer.

Beside one junction a skeleton in a pinstripe suit lay tangled around a concrete post. Among the bundle of collapsed bones fast being reclaimed to the earth by brambles and moss you could see that the man's arms had been bound to the post with wire. Whatever had happened to him, it was unlikely to have been quick or painless.

If a chart could be made of ways to die then Srebrenica's dead had ticked off most of the options. Some had gone by their own hand in panicking despair; others in confused gunbattles with their own troops or those of the enemy; many more had surrendered, taking a last long walk in the summer sun to stand in rows with their comrades, the languid working of machine-gun bolts behind them the final sound they heard, except perhaps for a few last whispered words of love or contrition.

The Serbs avoided the forest whenever they could. There was still a heavy cult of the dead in the villages of eastern Bosnia, a belief that the spirit hung around the body after death. So the last thing a Serb woodsman would want to do was go into those dark woods alone, especially as most of the locals were, at the very least, complicit in the orgy of killing that had gone on beneath the canopy of leaves.

It was not only the Serbs who got the spooks. A recce troop of US soldiers from the NATO forces in Bosnia had been tasked to secure the site of a mass grave so that war crimes investigators could carry out an exhumation. More than a hundred Muslim dead lay buried in the slope of a bank capped by an earthen track leading to the hamlet of Cerska, one of numerous clusters of broken, long-abandoned buildings that huddled within the trees. The Americans were not really expecting trouble, but if it came then fire would be met and – as their staff sergeant stated

in a way that left no room for doubt – ‘most certainly overwhelmed’ with fire. They had a large array of hardware with them which if put to use could have levelled most of the remaining hamlet ruins and a lot of the forest. Somehow, though, it was the staff sergeant himself who seemed their most threatening asset. He was a large man, down to his last few months in the army, and everything he did and said was coated with the slick confidence and assuredness you find in men comfortably affiliated with taking life in a professional way. He had been a paratrooper for his first tour of Vietnam, a doorgunner with the aircav for his second. His men called him the Anti-Christ and unflinchingly obeyed his every instruction, while senior officers moved about him with wary respect.

Yet on the first night of their task, when the time came to send a foot patrol out into the trees, a tall black trooper from Mississippi refused to get out of his Humvee. He said he could hear voices coming from the bottom of the bank where the work of the investigators had scraped away the topsoil to uncover the first few bones. His mama had told him all about that stuff back in Mississippi, he told the staff sergeant. He would soldier against any enemy anywhere in the world, but there was no weapon in their arsenal big enough to deal with what he heard going down at the bottom of the bank.

The other men sort of laughed, but it was a dry sound that quickly faded into the night. There was none of the usual ragging and they shuffled their feet drawing unseen patterns in the stones of the track, not catching one another’s eyes. The black trooper chewed his lower lip, hung his head and held out his hands. ‘No, Staff,’ he mumbled, ‘I am not fucking around with you.’

A less experienced commander would have made an issue of it, forcing the trooper into a position where he would refuse to soldier and his fear would spark among the other men, clouding the mission in the days and nights ahead. But the staff sergeant did not have to prove his authority and, more pertinently, understood the way superstition can grip soldiers in the field. There are certain vibes that even the most modernized army in the world ignores at its peril. So he made the trooper hold his own gaze, broke the connection himself for a few seconds to look into the forest, then looked back into the frightened man's eyes. He ordered the man up to take over the .50 cal mounted on the Humvee and sent the white boys out into the trees. The pressure subsided so fast you could hear it hiss.

The war had been over for nine months. There was still enough of it in the atmosphere to fuel my memories and feed a sorrowful nostalgia. I reran the reels of the past four years through my mind feeling depressed, constantly seeking out friends to post-mortem the whole thing again and again in the hope of recapturing even a tiny part of its heady glowing rush, of putting it into some kind of context. The Muslim dead who still lay where they had been killed afforded a direct transfusion back to those times, a link that juiced up the whole engine again.

For several days I watched the work of the war crimes team as they dug at Cerska, my brain ceaselessly delving into the past like a tongue probing an ulcer. The smell and the flies got worse each hour but it was the patronizing tone of the team's spokesman that finally did for me. He seemed incapable of communicating without delivering some holier-than-thou aside, twinning piety with pathology in a mix that would have had a saint reaching for a bucket to throw up in. He could make

the connection between the victims at the bottom of the bank and the absent killers that pulled the triggers. Anyone could do that bit. However, the links fell apart between himself and ‘the beasts’ he demonized. He seemed to think it took something really special to kill prisoners.

It was always difficult when people who had not been in the war started voicing their opinions on it. While I loathe the way some men act as if they are a kind of higher being simply because they have seen a bit of action, nothing is guaranteed to anger me more than some Johnny-come-lately who turns up when it is all over and starts getting large with the hows and whys. Listen to some of the revisionist junk being spouted by the post-conflict generation of journalists and NATO representatives in Sarajevo and you begin to wonder if they are even talking about the same war.

So when a friend of mixed American and Yugoslav blood asked me if I would like to go back into the forest with him to find the body of a relative, I readily agreed. Anything was better than listening to the war crimes spokesman. My friend was fine company, having hung out in Bosnia for much of the war, which meant I could be sure that he would not grate my nerves with sermonizing. He had a Yugoslav’s insight and New York humour; throwaway slang and expletives rolled through his dialogue in a combination that cracked you up, the more so as the speaker appeared completely oblivious to how funny they were. A survivor of Srebrenica had given him directions of where his wife’s cousin was last seen, apparently already wounded and being carried by two others. Yet the details were typically vague. Never ask a Bosnian where something is. The answer will either be a riddle that takes hours to unravel, or

such an unformed generalization you feel embarrassed to ask for further clues.

And so it was that the friend and I ended up stumbling around in a vast segment of forest looking for 'a fallen tree'. Of course we never found the dead relative, though there were scores of others there. The dead have never lost their fascination for me. There was a time at the beginning of the war when my curiosity had often been tempered with sorrow, shock or horror at the sight of the state of bodies. Brutal mutilation would stick in my eyes like a thorn for days, or else the expression or posture of a corpse would evoke sadness and anger within me. But as you lose count of the number of dead you have seen, a hidden threshold of sensitivity is raised, neutralizing most of your reactions. Only the curiosity remains. Some of it is borne out of my inability to connect the thought of a living, breathing person with the discarded husk death leaves, even when I have seen the whole transition from life to death. There is no God behind me, and I have strong doubts concerning the existence of a soul these days, but when I look at a corpse it always seems as if there is more than simply life missing. There have been a few disturbing exceptions when death gives more than it takes. I once saw a dead Russian girl. In her early twenties, long haired and lithe, she had caught a bit of shrapnel in her chest, one of those tiny wounds that you would not believe could take a life but does. In death the rude sun-burnish went from her skin, retreating before an ethereal blue glow. Alive she was strikingly pretty. Dead she was so beautiful you could have raised an army to sack Troy just for possession of her casket. I had not wanted to look too far into that reaction within me and walked away from her presence, unnerved for days.

Many of the dead in the forest had their ID cards with them, scattered by looters around their bones, and the one-dimensional black and white faces on the photographs seemed so abstract as to be almost irrelevant. But even if their owners had still been alive, those ID pictures would probably have been obsolete. Anyone who stayed in Bosnia during the war had their face change on a level beyond the purely physical. Even the war crimes spokesman might have had something different glowing in his eyes had he been there when it was all on. It would be so trite, so inappropriate to say that the eyes lost something as they witnessed the whole madness of it all, to talk of empty stares and children with hollow gazes. But it was not what people lost in Bosnia that you noticed in their eyes, it was what some of them gained. Whether it is your own or someone else's, the taste of evil leaves an indelible mark on the iris. You can see it flickering in moments of introspection as the muscles relax. I do not know if I would have recognized the pre-war picture on my own ID card – the open baby face, tousled hair and curious innocence – had I seen it lying on the forest floor that day. I find that man almost a stranger now.

The sun sank lower in the sky, the shadows deepened and my mood darkened. I had only been clean for a few days, kicking my heels through a succession of sleepless nights in a hotel in Tuzla and, as always in the opiate backblast, I felt raw and hypersensitized, thoughts surging and abating like the swell of the sea. I have sweated through withdrawal in a variety of obscure war-torn hovels, but that forest had to be one of the strangest.

My friend kept talking but my responses grew more distant. Their dead; my dead; necro-fascinations and gravediggers that did not get it at all; nationalism, fascism, level killing fields and

equal guilt; all the crap you hear talked about Bosnia. You can break it down and build it up any way you want, throw on the cloak of interventionist or appeaser and spout the same words in a different order to broker your justifications for whatever standpoint you wish until you sicken yourself just thinking about it; pull up those bones like a Meccano set and make whatever you want of them until you find it is they, the dead, that are pulling your strings. You have to relinquish a lot until the reckoning comes, you snap off a twig in time, examine it and realize it's just the relationship between yourself, killers and victims that counts. Look some more and you see there is not much gulf at all between the three. Close your eyes, open your fingers and discover you are a hybrid. Open your eyes again, look in a mirror and someone else looks back: someone older and degraded. People call it wisdom but it is just a substitute for hope.

Before he took an icy dive into the Miljacka River and out of my life, Momćilo had once explained to me the mentality of Bosnia's killers in a few short words: 'In the morning they hate themselves, in the afternoon the world.' So, Momćilo, where are you now? For your words come from a different time, a Neverland era long past when it was all so different. Did you take that swim before the words applied to you as well? You might have warned me.

Faces, sounds and lights began to move in my mind over the dark screen of the foliage; there was the crackle of flames and screech of shellfire; Darko and The Jokers; an old woman with her broken teeth falling bloodily down her chest; a girl's severed ear; the last letter in its blue envelope; Hamdu, the Tigers and the final attack; frightened soldiers, the reek of smoke and clatter of a gunship. My war gone by, I miss it so.

If you have enjoyed these sample chapters from *My War Gone By, I Miss It So*, you can buy the book from September and all good retailers.



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