Time was, soldiers had to wait until they got back to the States to tell their stories—or at best, find a sympathetic reporter. But Iraq war grunt Colby Buzzell told his story the 21st-century way: after reading about blogs in *Time* he started one of his own, posting stories about firefights sometimes hours after they happened. Not surprisingly, this didn’t endear him to his superiors, even though they ultimately found there wasn’t much they could do about it—free speech and all.

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From the Front

Two new memoirs by recent Iraq vets display distinctly contemporary attitudes toward the war.

By Chris Barsanti

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"Stryker Soundtrack" he listens to on his iPod while on mission is a pesty teenager's wet dream, encompassing everything from the Exploited and the Dead Kennedys to Wagner and the Star Wars theme. The writing veers toward the self-consciously plain and macho; he has a boner for Bukowski and oh, does it show. But Buzzell, who also reads a lot of Orwell, succumbs to Hemingwayitis, while in Iraq, never completely succumbing to Hemingwaysy, presenting his military experience as less an exercise in manliness than just a stupid ride through a hellish place, survived by luck alone.

His blog entries—composed in the heat of the moment and apparently unedited—give the book an even more honest perspective, stripping away Buzzell's FTW pose. The high-light is "Men in Black," an epic post about a vicious ambush in Mosul. Probably one of the sharpest, nastiest accounts of a firefight ever recorded, there's no artefact to it; it's a brilliantly pared-down rendering of raw, panicked, white-hot terror. "We were stuck in the middle of a hill zone, all of us in 3.3 million dollar RPG magnets," he writes. "I've put the events of that day in a sheebox, put the lid on it, and haven't opened it since."

For all that, Buzzell isn't one for reflection. He remains to the end an immature smart-ass, albeit one with a bit more right to his antigocial tendencies. On the plane back home he snarks to himself that if this were a movie, Green Day's "Time of Your Life" would be playing and he'd be reflecting on "all the life-changing experiences and epiphanies" he'd accumulated in battle. In fact, he confesses, he's really just looking forward to that Social Distortion show in Seattle in a couple weeks.

The biggest difference between Buzzell and John Crawford, author of another new Iraq memoir, The Last True Story I'll Ever Tell, is that Crawford's probably never heard of Social Distortion. He's a well-adjusted adult who never had any intention of fighting a war he didn't believe in. But signing up with the Florida National Guard seemed like a pretty good way of paying for college, especially since he already had three years' experience in the 101st Airborne. In 1998 the chances of actually seeing action seemed slim, but four years later, while he and his wife were celebrating their honeymoon on a cruise, Crawford got the word that the unit was going to Iraq. Once overseas he downplays his life back home and puts the war front and center, letting the numbing, pointless misery of it all drive his tale. Crawford's unit crossed the border on the first day of the invasion and stayed in action for more than a year, just another group of poorly equipped guardsmen getting "passed around the armed forces like a virus" while every one of the units they fought with was rotated home. At one point, the government even announced that his unit had been pulled out of Baghdad, though, as Crawford points out, "all around us the capital of our enemy seethed."

There's a raging, scabrous rage to The Last True Story that's missing in much of what has been written so far by Iraq vets. But what's telling about Crawford's account is that his anger is directed not at the war itself, but at the men keeping him there after the regular army heroes have left. He's overwhelmed by the inevitability and ineffectiveness of the fighting. A comrade's death fills him with inexplicable rage toward an Iraqi man working in the gas station near Crawford's base. "I never wanted to hate anyone," he writes. "It just sort of happens that way in a war."

In between chasing insurgents around Baghdad, Crawford records small details that keep his book from descending into vitriol; his unit's useless Vietnam-era flak vests, the battalion commander who can't remember the names of the dead, the Iraqi translator whose house is torched because he's too friendly with the Americans. It all adds up to an unsettling portrait of a man slowly ground down by an unbelievable disgust, returning home with a "lingering, wasting
sickness that comes only when you have nothing left.”

Still, for all their different strengths, neither My War nor The Last True Story will join the ranks of classic war tales. The former is too much of its time, gripping but with a flash-in-the-pan feel, while the latter is too suffused with sadness to win many admirers. Though admirably honest and vivid in the extreme, neither book reaches much beyond individual experience. In this due to ambivalence, confusion, or simply the authors’ inability to deal with the enormity of their situation? It’s hard to say, but both books suffer from a refusal to stake out a position, to cut through the fog of war. There’s nothing in either to rank with Homage to Catalonia, Dispatches, or even Anthony Swofford’s eviscerating gulf war memoir, Jarhead, whose coda alone outstrips both Buzzell and Crawford: “Some wars are unavoidable and need well be fought, but this doesn’t erase warfare’s waste. Sorry, we must say to the mothers whose sons will die horribly. This will never end. Sorry.”

### Ink Well

**Dinner With the Family** by Ben Tausig

#### ACROSS
1. “Fiddlesticks!”
2. Turkish potentate
3. Good buddy
4. Done cooking
5. Bluff
6. Conrade in arms
7. How 24 unfolds
8. Word before box or joint
9. It’s often iced in summer
10. Open, as a toothpaste tube
11. Reddish brown gem
12. ”etc”
13. Bone in a cage
14. Powerful 209-year-old
15. What you might do after being 40-down
16. Preparation method for a squealing sheep?
17. Grill
18. Glass on the radio

#### DOWN
1. Sickness before the mirror
2. Lady of the casa
3. Chicago or Pearl
4. Citrus coolers
5. Marshal Earp
6. How the naive may be led
7. Smooth-talking
8. Powerful auto engine
9. Induces wonder
10. Louisiana accent
11. Maryland harvest
12. Male with a rack
13. White alternative
14. Majors in film
15. Luminous astronomical object
16. Travel option
17. It’s dropped for kicks
18. Houston Rockets superstar, familiarly
19. Far from rare
20. Logical conclusion
21. Logical conclusion
22. Powerful auto engine
23. Present time
24. First Bond villain
25. Line on a bill

### Last Week’s Clue

**It’s A Sign**

44. Blowup. abbr.
45. Milk container
47. In gear?
51. Sorrow
53. Laied up
56. Lucky strike
57. Capric twist on an Asian soup staple?
62. The game
64. Draft behind closed doors?
65. Weathercock
66. "Ahh..."
67. Head in
68. Old men
69. Surrender one’s hand
70. Comedy Central fete

#### Across
1. Obsesses before the mirror
2. Lady of the casa
3. Chicago or Pearl
4. Citrus coolers
5. Marshal Earp
6. How the naive may be led
7. Smooth-talking
8. Powerful auto engine
9. Induces wonder
10. Louisiana accent
11. Maryland harvest
12. Male with a rack
13. White alternative
14. Majors in film
15. Luminous astronomical object
16. Travel option
17. It’s dropped for kicks
18. Houston Rockets superstar, familiarly
19. Far from rare
20. Logical conclusion
21. Logical conclusion
22. Powerful auto engine
23. Present time
24. First Bond villain
25. Line on a bill

#### Down
52. Moves like slime
54. He had a salty wife
55. Turn down
58. Nine-to-fiver’s shout
60. Present time
63. First Bond villain
64. Michigan, in Chicago: abbr.
65. Line on a bill