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## LOCAL/STATE NEWS

### 'Soldier Dead' trends on tender ground

Former local's book examines reverence, mystery, meaning of combat losses.

April 3, 2005

By John Andrew Prime

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A writer who once called Shreveport home is about to join the ranks of authors who have caused a stir.

Mike Sledge, until just a year or so ago a Shreveport financial consultant, has penned a meticulously researched and detailed book that takes a hard -- but pensive -- look at the traditions and practice of how the U.S. military treats its dead.

The book, due out this month on the prestigious Columbia University Press imprint, is simply titled "Soldier Dead," after the term the military uses to describe the ranks of its members who have fallen in combat.

"What the book does is to give people a foundation of understanding one aspect of the cost of waging war," Sledge, now of Boulder, Colo., said near the end of a recent visit to Shreveport. He was just another casually dressed shopper sitting in the coffee cafe at Barnes and Noble on Youree Drive, where he'll sign copies of his book May 7. That important aspect, he said, is "that people are killed, and what happens after they are killed."

His book stems from experiences and a dream he had long before the current war in Iraq began, and before the media-watching and reading public became captivated, as have generations past, with soldier dead coming home.

These final homecomings have varied in openness, from great pomp and ceremony to subdued and shrouded circumstances whose meanings have been debated for decades.

The balance has been, and is, between concern for the privacy and needs of the families of the dead, and the need of the American public to know how and why its sons and now daughters died.

His book quotes a letter a parent wrote in World War II questioning the military's explanation of how a soldier died and what happened to the body. The letter was polite and deferential.



Author Mike Sledge, a Shreveporter who divides his time between a home in Colorado and here, is the author of soon-to-be-published "Soldier Dead," an examination of how and why the U.S. military care for the remains of its fallen members. (John Andrew Prime/The Times)

"Once you have stayed next to body bags, and you're not in one, and your airplane lands when they have been trying to shoot you down, you gain a whole new perspective."  
 Mike Sledge, author of "Soldier Dead"

Book signing  
 Author Michael Sledge will sign copies of his new book "Soldier Dead" from 2 to 4 p.m. May 7 at Barnes and Noble, 6646 Youree Drive, Shreveport.

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Today, Sledge said, "no parent today would write such a letter. We live in a time with a very informed and involved public. The government can't get away with some of the things it did in the past. There's been an evolution."

Sledge's book involved research that brought him into contact with the military's mortuary affairs specialists, the Army's Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii, its Quartermaster Corps, the National Archives and soldiers who are handling the delicate and necessary duties with the military casualties in Iraq.

Much to the horror of his children, he did his research in how the military handles things now first-hand, by traveling to Iraq in November 2003, a month in which at least 82 U.S. soldiers died and more than 300 were wounded.

"Once you have stayed next to body bags, and you're not in one, and your airplane lands when they have been trying to shoot you down, you gain a whole new perspective," he said.

To a degree, this nation learns the art and wiles of war anew each time a major conflict erupts. Here, the institutional ethos of war, while imparted in a training sense, is not conveyed in the blood.

"It is hard to get people to be able to kill," Sledge said. "It takes a lot of training." And the skill is quickly lost, or at least sublimated, upon return to civilian life. War and being a soldier, at least one who kills on the field of battle, "is an insanity people have to enter into, hopefully temporarily."

It is this renewal with war, the dead of war, and the cost of war in life, that leads him to conclude that the human involvement in war, and the sight and sadness of bringing war dead home, are necessary, both for having abhorrence of war and reluctance to fight it, and for steeling reasonable people to the need to fight wars when necessary.

To some, he said, it may be preferable to send unmanned airplanes and tracked robots out to fire missiles and destroy things, because it eliminates, or at least greatly reduces, the chance of U.S. soldiers or airmen getting killed.

But, he said, "it's the long run that concerns me. ... We'd lose the impact of people coming home bearing the scars of war, as bad as the scars of war are."

So we might easily forget that people are still getting killed -- our enemies, uniformed or not, and those truly innocent civilians who, for the best or the worst reasons, get in the crossfire.

Now, he said, "people are asking 'Who is dying over there?' This is an important question that needs to be answered. We don't KNOW how many people were killed in the Gulf War."

So ultimately, the dead and the living become one in purpose, with the soldier dead a grim reminder to the living that there is a higher duty and obligation.

"We have to win with ideas and morals," Sledge said. "Ultimately, we have to do that. If wars could be done just by killing people, wouldn't we have won Vietnam?"

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