



Tomas Young's War

By Mark Wilkerson

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Tomas Young's War is the tragic yet life affirming story of a paralyzed Iraq War veteran who spent his last ten years battling heroically with his injuries, while courageously speaking against America's wars.

Based on hours of interviews with Young and those close to him, the book puts the reader alongside Young as he struggles with life as a paralyzed veteran, suffering frustration and humiliation as he attempts to reenter society and resume as normal an existence as possible. It shows his fight to balance his precarious health with his drive to speak out for veterans care and against the war, and the impact his catastrophic injuries had on his family and his relationships.

This emotional and powerful book sheds light on many crucial but often overlooked issues such as veterans' care, public attitudes toward the disabled, medical marijuana, and the terminally ill. *Tomas Young's War* shares everything, as unflinchingly honest as Tomas himself: the depression, the pain, the love, and laughter . . . the *life* of this man whose world was turned upside down by an Iraqi bullet more than ten years ago. Throughout, it serves as a powerful testament to the true cost of war.

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Editorial Review

Review

"I consider myself extremely fortunate to have known Tomas Young. I'm grateful that this powerful book of Mark Wilkerson's will allow readers to experience the strength, humor and wisdom that this strong-willed and courageous man maintained til the very end. I miss him intensely."

—**Eddie Vedder**

"Tomas Young joined the army to wage war, and emerged a champion of peace. The grievous injury he suffered in Iraq consigned him to a wheelchair, but from there he rose to incredible heights, raising the hue and cry against an illegal war and those who authored it. Mark Wilkerson's biography of Tomas Young is difficult but essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the ravages of war and the torment suffered by veterans and their loved ones. This book is a tribute to Tomas, written proof that profound humanity can survive the terrible crucible of war."

—**Amy Goodman, host and executive producer, Democracy Now!**

"Tomas Young's is a story that every American should know. A soldier who paid a terrible price for the crimes of his superiors, Young courageously spoke out against the illegal war that eventually took his life, and attempted to hold those who initiated it accountable. Mark Wilkerson has done a great service in rendering Young's life, and the lives of those who cared for him, in their full humanity."

—**Glenn Greenwald**

"Tomas Young, an army soldier paralyzed in Iraq, surmounted his injuries to become one of the most powerful and eloquent voices denouncing the war. He condemned with a righteous fury those who lied to lead us into war, including George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, and called for them to be prosecuted and tried for war crimes. He grieved for all who were injured or killed in the conflict, American and Iraqi. He spoke on their behalf. And as his health deteriorated to the point where he was unable to leave his bed he penned in his last letter one of the most scathing indictments of the Iraq war and the terrible betrayal he and his fellow veterans endured. He served as the conscience of the nation. And although his life was cut short, his is the final word on a war that should have never been fought."

—**Christopher Hedges, Author and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist**

"*Tomas Young's War* is a heart-warming and heartbreaking story of a courageous soldier and his family. Few books reveal the graphic details of how families deal with the catastrophic war injuries of their loved ones—Mark Wilkerson's *Tomas Young's War* does just that in a sympathetic and at times humorous way."

—**Ann Wright, Colonel, US Army Reserve (Ret.) and former US diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq war**

"Powerful, moving, inspiring. When I finished reading this book I felt it was my duty to state again that I will do whatever it takes to ensure there are no more young Americans who will have to go through what Tomas had to endure. Never again. Thank you Tomas and thank you Mark for telling his story."

—**Michael Moore**

"There is nothing more courageous than a soldier who stands up against an unjust war. Tomas Young was a true American hero."

—**Tom Morello**

"Tomas Young's war in Iraq lasted only five days, long enough to oblige Americans who sent him there to read this intimate, harrowing account of the life he lived after."

—**Ann Jones, author of *They Were Soldiers***

"Brilliantly rendered... Amid the unpleasant realities of urinary tract infections, hollow bed sores, leaking urine bags, failed erections, a collapsing marriage and blinding loneliness, Wilkerson finds a story of love, hope and fierce loyalty... Before another Commander in Chief swaggers before the news cameras and declares 'Bring it on' I want him to read this book."

—**Phil Donahue, from the foreword**

About the Author

Mark Wilkerson: Mark Wilkerson spent eight years in the U.S. Army as an AH-1 Cobra & UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter crew chief with the 3rd Infantry & 101st Airborne Divisions. He was deployed with the 101st to Mogadishu, Somalia, for six months in 1993. Mark has three children, Alex, Nick and Sam. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky with his wife Melissa.

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Chapter 1: Growing Up

In a life so deeply affected by war, it's fitting that Tomas Vincent Young didn't make it past his first day without war already leaving its mark. His parents dropped the 'H' from his first name, using the German spelling in a nod to the baby's German paternal grandmother, but retained the name's English pronunciation to placate her husband, an American. The pair met after Young's grandmother had moved to the U.S. from Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Tomas was born in Boise, Idaho on November 30, 1979. It was a turbulent childhood. His parents abruptly divorced when Tomas was just two, his mother, Cathy, pregnant with brother Nathan. "I lived a nomadic existence as a child," Tomas recalled, citing lengthy stays in Missouri, California and Nebraska before the family finally settled in Kansas City.

There was a stepfather at one point who, Tomas remembered, "ended up physically abusing me." Hence, he said, "most of my childhood memories are not happy ones." But the bumpy ride for the small family - Tomas, Nathan and Cathy - cemented a bond between the three that remained the one constant in the turmoil. This strong connection, particularly between mother and first son, would serve Tomas well in the future, as the circumstances of his life meant that he had to lean on his mother harder than most of us ever have to. "The bond between us, I mean, especially Tomas - other than my mother, he's the person that's known me forever," Cathy told me. "So yeah, it was just the three of us, kind of just getting by on a shoestring and, what a lot of single mothers do, just milking it through, and the boys - they were all they had, you know." Still, the abuse and turmoil left young Tomas withdrawn. "I was a quiet, reserved kid after this, and I didn't really go out of the way to seek attention, and I guess I still don't," he said. He turned his attention to books and music, which helped mold his philosophical leanings and remained important to him throughout his life. Tomas would hear from his father every now and then. "He would send me birthday cards with money," he said, "or - they made comic book cards that were kind of like baseball cards but they'd have like comic book characters, and what their powers were and what not, so I'd get one of those every once in a while or my birthday, and eventually those stopped."

But things stabilized a little after the move to Kansas City. Tomas and Nathan welcomed a sister, Lisa, born a few years later.

The Army's GI Bill was an attractive means of paying for the college education Tomas desired. He enlisted

while still in high school, shipping out to basic training during the summer break between his junior and senior years, but was ultimately discharged when a shoulder problem prevented him from meeting the physical requirements.

Disillusioned and directionless, he graduated from Winnetonka High School in 1998, and began working a series of entry-level jobs. His dreams of college and a career in journalism or writing remained just that:

Dreams.

Chapter 2: 9/11 & Beyond

“When I saw the President stand on top of the World Trade Center rubble and make his megaphone declaration I was moved in a way. Yeah, I’m normally not that type of guy, but I sat there like everybody else did on September 11 for that whole day watching coverage. I’m sure there are a lot of people who weren’t that type of guy in December of 1941 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, but yet they felt moved to act in that way because of events that just unfolded.” – Tomas Young

22 year-old Tomas Young was sleeping in on the morning of September 11, 2001, enjoying a day off from what he recalls as his “menial job at K-Mart.” Around nine o’clock that morning, his friend Silas called him and told him to turn on the news. He spent the rest of the day watching the terrorist attacks on television, angered and dismayed.

He was watching three days later as President Bush promised revenge, speaking through a megaphone atop a pile of rubble at ground zero. He called a recruiter that day. “I fostered a ‘what can I do’ kind of mentality,” Tomas said. “I mean, why didn’t I decide to give blood, or volunteer to do something... but I joined the Army.” Four months later, the injured shoulder which shortened his first failed bid at Army life now healed, he was off to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia for in-processing. By summer he was an infantryman with the First Cavalry Division stationed at Fort Hood, Texas.

Tomas’ motivation for signing up was to exact some revenge on those who had attacked his country. As the months passed, developments began to indicate a shift in focus from the widely-acknowledged source of the attacks – Afghanistan – to another country with which the U.S. had unfinished business: Iraq. “Right after 9/11, I saw the president talking about how we were going to smoke the evildoers out of their cave and bring them to justice,” said Tomas. “I guess I’ve watched too many ‘Law & Order’ episodes. I thought you followed the evidence, went and took out the guilty. When we were attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, we didn’t go after the Chinese because they looked sort of similar.”

When it became clear that Tomas’ unit was to be deployed to Iraq, he became sufficiently distressed to seek professional help. He was told that part of the process of seeking help with mental health issues was to see the chaplain. “I thought well, I’m not a very religious person, but if that’s what I need to do [as part of the process] to get my mind right, then I’ll do that,” Tomas recalled. “I went to the chaplain, and I told him all my problems about how I joined to go to Afghanistan, and I felt that Afghanistan was the right fight, and I was very upset and despondent about going to Iraq. And he looks at me and puts his hand on mine and says, ‘Son, you’ll feel better when you get over to Iraq and start killing Iraqis.’ And I thought, well, you just officially put me in the ‘atheist’ column!”

Having reached a dead end seeking help, Tomas was able to transfer jobs, moving from a line infantry

platoon to a job running communications equipment in the headquarters platoon. "I thought I was going to put myself in the safest position possible," he said. "It was a horrible plan."

Chapter 3: Shipping Out / Black Sunday

"When I got shot, it didn't really feel like I had gotten shot 'cause I didn't feel anything. I just dropped my weapon and I was very dazed, so I just thought a concussion grenade had gone off, or some kind of grenade that's meant to incapacitate you for a few minutes. But I tried to pick up my weapon and couldn't. At all." – Tomas Young

Private First Class Tomas Young marked the days before his unit's deployment to the Middle East with a visit to Kansas City, bidding farewell to friends and family, and going on a date with his new girlfriend. On the day he departed for Ft. Hood, his friend Roy McHugh departed too, on a week-long cruise with friends. When McHugh returned the next week, he had two voice messages from Tomas. "He left me a drunk voice mail saying that he was having a good time back in Texas," McHugh recalled. "The other one was a couple of days later, and it was just a way different sound to his voice." The second message was from Kuwait. "I don't know if he was scared or tired, or anxious, or what, but it was just a big difference in his voice," said McHugh. "I'm sure it wasn't the easiest place to be."

Tomas arrived in Kuwait in March 2004 – almost exactly one year since the beginning of the war. A massive troop rotation was under way, something which was not lost on the insurgency, which roared to life during this period of instability and vulnerability. After a couple of weeks prepping themselves and their equipment, Tomas and his battalion deployed to their base in Iraq, Camp War Eagle, which stood on the northeastern corner of Baghdad next to their assigned zone of responsibility, a massive slum known as Sadr City, on March 31 2004.

Meanwhile, on Sunday April 4, Palm Sunday on the calendar but which would later be referred to as Black Sunday, the firebrand Iraqi cleric Moqtada al-Sadr directed his followers to "terrorize your enemy", and they duly obliged, turning Sadr City into a war zone after ambushing a U.S. Army patrol.

Tomas was thrown into the midst of the chaos as part of a hastily assembled rescue effort, ordered to join a dozen soldiers in the back of an uncovered and unreliable supply truck. The only armor he had was his flak vest and Kevlar helmet. He later described the ensuing firefight as "like shooting ducks in a barrel." The small convoy plunged into Sadr City and quickly took fire. Tomas hadn't had a chance to fire his weapon when he felt his body suddenly go numb. He dropped his M-16 and tried to reach for it, but couldn't. At first he thought perhaps a concussion grenade had exploded in the back of the truck, but quickly realized it was something far worse. "I knew something bad was going on," he told me, "and so I tried to yell, 'Somebody just finish the job, take me out,' but my lungs had collapsed, so all that came out was a very hoarse whisper."

Overheating and with several flat tires, Young's truck made an agonizingly slow exit from the chaos, sputtering to within a few hundred yards of Camp War Eagle before finally giving out. All but three of the occupants of the back of the truck had suffered gunshot wounds, many of them serious. Tomas remembered

being carried off the back of the truck by two friendly locals and placed in the back of an Iraqi bus for the short ride to Camp War Eagle, adding, “I can’t remember much after that.” He’d taken two AK-47 bullets: One had entered just below his left collarbone, severed his spine, and exited just below his right shoulder, while the other shattered his left knee. The back of his flak vest was filled with blood from the exit wound.

8 U.S. soldiers died that day, and a further 57 were wounded, including Tomas’ close friend, Riley Soden. It was their fifth day in Iraq.

Chapter 4: April, 2013 – 112 N. 113th St., Kansas City.

“All they see is the person in the wheelchair. They don’t understand that I can’t control my bladder so I have a catheter inside my urethra, that I pee into a bag that has to be emptied, and I defecate into a bag. It’s no life that I would wish on anybody, but if someone were similarly situated, I mean had the same problems that I do, I wouldn’t fault them at all if they made the decision that I made.” – Tomas Young

An introduction to Tomas’ world at the time of our first meeting, almost exactly nine years after Black Sunday. Young spends his days mostly confined to a hospital bed in a darkened bedroom in the back of the small north Kansas City home which he shares with his wife Claudia.

Symbols of the couple’s diverse interests fill the home – Tomas’ posters of Pearl Jam and Rage Against the Machine are displayed alongside those which show Claudia’s spiritual leanings: the artwork of Alex Grey and photos of Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa. While Tomas is resting, Claudia shows me his Hunter S. Thompson room, a guest bedroom turned into a shrine to the original Gonzo journalist. Tomas later tells me – and he’s only partly joking – that the room is a good litmus test for his guests. If they don’t like the Hunter Thompson room, there’s a good chance he’s not going to like them.

When Tomas is awake, I’m able to visit with him. He’s reclined in his hospital bed, long hair, unruly beard, face drawn, wearing his loose-fitting Batman t-shirt, just as he looked in the photos and online interviews I’ve seen with him recently. He has vivid blue eyes, but they are heavily lidded, as if exhausted. The colors back here are subdued - the sheets on the bed are gray, the walls in the bedroom are midnight blue. There’s a dark sheet covering the window behind Tomas’ bed. It’s quiet. He tells me later that his room is basically the opposite of what he experienced during countless hospital visits – bright lights, incessant beeping, very little peace.

Tomas requires 24 hour care and takes a dizzying array of medications. In the mornings, Claudia changes his colostomy bag and empties the urine bag from his catheter. She administers a tube feeding of liquid canned nutrient. Claudia soaks Tomas’ numerous daily pills in water to soften them up before crushing them with a pestle and mortar, mixing them with water and administering the solution through his feeding tube. The Dilaudid administered via IV by the pain pump usually takes care of the abdominal pain, which Tomas says is excruciating. When a particularly intense wave of pain comes, he can press a bolus button which will provide a short burst of additional pain medication. He inhales marijuana vapors from a vaporizer to ease anxiety and muscle spasms, a non-prescribed remedy which he swears by. Since marijuana use is illegal in Missouri, he has to purchase the drug from a dealer.

It’s been two months since Tomas announced the decision to end his life. “I’d thought about the idea for a little while,” Tomas told me, “and then once all this happened, I just saw myself going further and further into more pain, and just watching my body deteriorate over time. Technically I could live for a long time, but it’s not a life that I want to live...”

Tomas and Claudia have been sharing their home recently with a near-endless flow of camera crews,

reporters and well-wishers. He said he'll do just a few more days of interviews before backing away from the spotlight. He wishes for peace and quiet, and more time with his wife and family before ending his suffering. Tomas tells me that he finds it interesting that many of his visitors are having a harder time with his decision than he is. "I'm at peace with my decision, because I know that when it happens, I won't feel any more pain, or sadness, or anything."

Chapter 5: Mom Gets the News / Waking Up At Walter Reed

"Do you know, that when his mother first saw him, after he'd been brought to Walter Reed Hospital, when Tomas looked up and saw her, his first word was 'Mommy!' It still makes me cry to think about it. Mommy. They become 5 years old again when the bullet hits their bodies." – Phil Donahue

Tomas' mother Cathy was at work on Monday, April 5th 2004 when she received a phone call from 2-5 Cav's rear detachment informing her that her son had sustained a gunshot wound in Iraq. Maddeningly, there were no further details. Thus began a harrowing eight day back-and-forth filled with conflicting reports as to the severity of Tomas' injury, and even as to his whereabouts. "I spent probably three days in my bathrobe, not taking a shower, not eating, just sitting by the window, waiting for the government car to pull up and tell me my son was dead," she said.

Tomas woke up in a room at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington DC after having been in a medically-induced coma for the past eight days during which he'd been treated at military hospitals in Kuwait and Germany. The first thing he remembers seeing upon waking was his mother, who had just arrived. "I just started bawling like a baby," he recalled. He bore the fresh scars of several surgeries and bullet wounds. His left knee was grotesquely swollen, his spine was irreparably damaged, he had a collapsed lung and pneumonia. He weighed 75 lbs. He was on a heavy dose of morphine which saw him fade in and out of consciousness. Tomas' injury was to the T-4 thoracic vertebrae, in the mid-back. Soon after he awoke, he was informed that he was permanently paralyzed from the chest down. "Once he found that out," his mother said, "he really wanted to kill himself."

Young's mother stayed at a facility for families of wounded soldiers nearby, spending her waking hours at her son's bedside. A former EMT with a fiery disposition, she was a much-needed rock for Tomas. "She really fought for the VA to expedite my claims so I'd get paid, and got the Army to promote me to E-4, so I'd get E-4 retired pay," Tomas recalled.

After about a month at Walter Reed, Tomas was transferred to a VA facility in St. Louis which specialized in spinal cord injuries. Tomas was the youngest military patient there and had no one his age to talk to during the roller coaster of grief, sadness, depression and frustration he was experiencing. His roommate was a paralyzed Vietnam vet who was experiencing complications as a result of his 30-plus years of paralysis.

"One of the lessons I've learned from the rocky road of my life is that I can't dwell on the negatives for too long or else I'll become extremely depressed," Tomas told me. So, he pushed onward. He remembered the scene in Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill movie where Uma Thurman's character wakes up from her coma, trying to move her toe, and would try to replicate it. He told his friends that he wished he could use crutches because they felt more "normal", and

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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Here thing why this Tomas Young's War are different and reputable to be yours. First of all looking at a book is good however it depends in the content than it which is the content is as yummy as food or not. Tomas Young's War giving you information deeper as different ways, you can find any e-book out there but there is no book that similar with Tomas Young's War. It gives you thrill reading journey, its open up your own eyes about the thing that happened in the world which is possibly can be happened around you. You can bring everywhere like in recreation area, café, or even in your way home by train. Should you be having difficulties in bringing the branded book maybe the form of Tomas Young's War in e-book can be your substitute.

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