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Banding with brothers

By MARJORIE MILLER

ON a typically blissful Sunday morning in Southern California, physically and figuratively about as far as you can get from eastern Afghanistan's Korengal Valley, hundreds of people have come to hear author Sebastian Junger speak about men at war on the other side of the world.

Junger's latest book, *War*, has been compared to Michael Herr's watershed Vietnam-era *Dispatches*. To an audience at this year's *Los Angeles Times Festival of Books* at the University of California, Los Angeles, the journalist is quick to highlight the differences between Herr's subject and his own.

Vietnam, he explains, was an unpopular war fought with draftees, while the war in Afghanistan has broader public support in the United States and a force that willingly signed up to fight.

The point is driven home by the audience when Junger introduces George Santana Rueda, a 23-year-old from the platoon Junger followed for more than a year, who happens to be in town on leave. The audience breaks into heartfelt applause.

This is the age of al-Qaeda, not Aquarius; as in the book and among the soldiers themselves, political debate was largely absent from the auditorium. And there's a book festival outside, not a 1960s revolution.

With his blue-eyed, chiselled and starting-to-grizzle looks, Junger is just the specimen Hollywood would cast as a foreign correspondent in Afghanistan to ensure a box office hit. The author of *The Perfect Storm* and *A Death in Belmont* is a guy's guy type who would seem certain to get along with an all-male unit that saw more combat than almost any other ahead of President Barack Obama's surge in Afghanistan.

But to assume Junger had easy access diminishes his reporting skills and his commitment to the story. At age 48, he's a generation older than most of the soldiers he accompanied into combat over the course of their 15-month deployment and who instinctively put up their guard against an outsider.

In fact, Rueda admitted later, the guys spent most of their time trying to avoid Junger during his first couple of monthlong stints with them.

"But he kept coming back," Rueda said. "I guess it was when he got blown up by the IED (Junger was in an armoured vehicle that ran over an improvised explosive device) that we realised he really wanted to be there, that he was going through the same things we were, and we accepted him and decided we could teach him what we knew."

As Junger's books on fishermen at the mercy of a storm-stirred sea (*The Perfect Storm*, which was made into a movie in 2000 starring George Clooney and Mark Wahlberg) and the Boston Strangler (*A Death in Belmont*) suggest, he has long been drawn to the subjects of courage and danger, although he insists he's not a risk junkie.

"I'm careful," he says. "I wear a

He braved a war to share with the world what a soldier's life is really like.



Sebastian Junger learnt what it's like to be in the middle of a war and dependent on the men around him to help keep him alive. - Reuters

seatbelt when I drive. You couldn't get me to bungee jump."

Yet he did spend months – between summer 2007 and summer 2008 – in hostile territory, dug into the steep hillsides at the foot of the Hindu Kush mountains and surrounded by Afghan Taliban, where soldiers ate one hot meal a day, showered once a week, burned their faeces and alternated between weeks of unbearable boredom and as many as 13 gun battles a day.

He calls it the "Afghanistan of Afghanistan", remote and unconquerable, with June heat above 37°C and winter snowstorms, a place that previous units had said could "alter your mind in terrible and irreversible ways".

The graduate of the Ivy league Wesleyan University in Connecticut with a degree in cultural anthropology explains that countries in crisis and men in danger reveal "pretty interesting things" about the human condition.

On previous trips to Afghanistan, he had written about the Afghan people, but this time he wanted to document the life of a platoon of combat infantry in the US Army and was embedded with Battle Company, part of the 173rd Airborne Brigade, now on the front lines of the fight against the Taliban.

In the Korengal Outpost and its satellites, Junger explored what he calls the emotional terrain of combat. The resulting book is written in the first person, but it is observational, offering no critique of the combat he

witnessed, taking no position on the efficiency, logic or value of the war. He offers a close-up view of men and the raw elements of war: fear and courage, killing and death, love and brotherhood.

"I wanted to understand it unburdened by the very important but confusing and complicated political and moral issues that usually surround a discussion of war," he says.

Soldiers, he discovered, generally don't worry about the politics or moral basis for war, or even necessarily the long-term prospects for its success. They are consumed with the job they've been sent to do.

Junger would sometimes lie awake at night thinking that everything could end at any moment. Often he worried a mistake on his part could endanger the others, so even though he abided by the unwritten rule that correspondents don't carry weapons, he violated another by wearing a military-issue camouflage shirt.

What if someone died during an ambush, Junger asked himself? He would always wonder if he had triggered the attack. He was determined, he wrote, "not to become a liability".

According to Rueda, he didn't. "He never panicked," Rueda says. "He'd always get out of the way when he saw you move with purpose."

Junger realised this need he felt of protecting the group was central to the soldiers' experience.

"In combat, something awakens

in men that is compelling and intense and confusing to them," he says. They develop a bond so strong they are willing to put the security of the group above their own, to risk death to save others.

"I'd never been in a situation where my life depended on other people, and the other way around," he says.

Junger's book variously describes this bond among soldiers in terms of family, religion and love. "You're necessary to everyone else and everyone is necessary to you," he says. This is a part of what makes the return to civilian life so difficult for soldiers.

Another is the fact that while every action in combat may have life-or-death consequences, that isn't the case in civilian life: "You don't tie your shoes, you don't drink water, nothing has consequences in civilian life and if it doesn't have consequences, it doesn't feel important."

Junger found himself deeply affected by his experience with Battle Company. "I was incredibly emotional writing the book," he says. "People think you get emotional because you're upset and traumatised. In this case it wasn't that. I just felt a lot of connection with these guys."

Junger and photographer Tim Hetherington also have produced a documentary about the unit, *Restrepo*, which refers to a satellite base named for a popular combat medic, Private First Class Juan

Restrepo, who was killed in the early days of the deployment.

The film, which won the 2010 Grand Jury Prize for documentary at the Sundance film festival in January, will be released in American theatres next month and will be broadcast on the National Geographic Channel later in the year with a hybrid eBook to follow.

"It was important for me that the movie not come out with the book. I wanted each to be considered on its own merits," Junger says, adding that he wanted to make sure to reach out to soldiers, who get much of their information on the Internet. He believes the visual media will help ensure the survival of the kind of narrative writing he does, rather than undercut it.

For Rueda, the hope is that the book and documentary will convey the sense of brotherhood he and his friends developed, the sense of accomplishment they felt in the Korengal Valley, even though a new US commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, has since decided to abandon the zone after nearly 50 casualties there.

"The biggest thing for the guys was being able to tell people what it was to depend on each other," Rueda says. Junger "got a lot of it. Some parts are missing, the parts that are harder for civilians to understand, but, yeah, he got it." - Los Angeles Times/McClatchy-Tribune Information Services

War is reviewed on SM11