

**WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER** Tim McLaughlin, two things stand out. He is big, as in six-foot-three, two-hundred-pounds big. His size is consistent with his behavior on the battlefield during the invasion of Iraq ten years ago, when he was, according to his commanders and his own account, quite aggressive. His tank platoon often led his Marine battalion as it approached Baghdad—nothing ahead of him but the enemy—and this is where McLaughlin liked to be. By the end of the invasion, when he counted the number of people killed in his mercifully short war, the figure was seventy.

**BY PETER MAASS**

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se Was Named Death...

THE RAW, VIVID DIARY OF A YOUNG MAN AT WAR

ell Followed Them?





he second thing, and the surprising one, is that McLaughlin is quiet. He is one of those big guys whose voice is delicate, even high-pitched, who listens more than he talks, who doesn't give you an oversized hello the first time he sees you. His presence is small, at least when he wants it to be, which is much of the time. Although he now works in the high-stakes world of corporate law, he is not the guy on the Delta shuttle who rushes through a stack of finance magazines; he is immersed in the *New York Review of Books*. Once you understand these things, you can understand that McLaughlin '09 was both a fierce warrior and a thoughtful writer during the Iraq war. On February 21, 2003, he was at an improvised Marine base in the Kuwaiti desert, waiting for the order to invade Iraq. Sitting in a tent, he opened a blank notebook, clicked open a pen, and started his war diary. "The best writing advice I have been given is just to write," he wrote. "There will be plenty of time to edit and stylize it later." For the next few weeks, as the boredom of waiting turned into the action of invasion, he continued to write in the notebook, keeping track of everything—the violence, fear, tedium, exhaustion, anger, and sadness of war.

On one page, written before the invasion began, he drafted a letter to Victoria's Secret, explaining that he had seen one of their catalogues—"pretty much the only thing around here that

engagement in which he ordered the gunner on his tank to open fire. "Sgt Wellons coaxed it, vehicle slowed down, swerved left off road + hit tree. Civilian shot 5 times in back + legs. Continued progress to Afak."

On the final day of the invasion, April 9, his battalion thundered into Baghdad, facing almost no resistance.

"I did not know where we were going," he wrote. "Racing through neighborhoods, waving w/left hand, M-16 w/right hand." At Firdos Square, where foreign reporters were staying at the Palestine Hotel, the situation turned to the absurd. "Swamped by mass of reporters—could not move. Peace volunteer jumped on tank, I almost killed him w/M-16—scared the life out of him. Brought him back up to greet him + apologize for startling him. Reporters everywhere."

A year earlier, a statue of Saddam Hussein had been installed at Firdos Square to commemorate the dictator's sixty-fifth birthday. After the handful of Iraqis in the square were unable to tear it down on their own, the Marines prepared to finish the job with one of their vehicles, but before the final tug, McLaughlin's commander told him to fetch the flag he had brought along on the invasion. The flag had been given to McLaughlin by a family friend just a few days after 9/11. McLaughlin gave it to another Marine who handed it to yet another, and within moments his flag was placed atop the statue for all the world to see. Broadcast across the globe, his flag became an iconic image of triumph. Christiane Amanpour interviewed McLaughlin. So did Dan Rather.

When McLaughlin returned to America, he put his war diaries away and didn't open them until I came along.

The diaries are unusually intimate. They don't just describe the people whom McLaughlin shot and killed and the ease with which he did so, they also describe...his fears that everything he saw and did in Iraq would warp his mind.

isn't ugly"—and would like to become pen pals with one of the models. On an adjacent page, he wrote a letter to the parents of a Marine who had been injured in an accident before the invasion even began. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart," he wrote. "The parents of Americaput a tremendous faith in me as I am trusted with the lives of your children."

This was the prelude to war—boredom and a flash of the violence to come. For the first few days of the invasion, he hardly slept as his battalion captured the Basra airport and quickly moved north toward Baghdad. On one page, the word "disoriented" or "disorienting" appears four times. On another page, there is this: "Enemy in fields + grove. Company volley into buildings. Killed 4 soldiers trying to run away. Let 1 run for a while then killed him, legs first, then as he tried to crawl."

A different page has this: "My position is good to cut off back door exit. Kill dismounts in grove (3-7?) then 1 swimming across canal / 2 just about in canal."

Not everyone killed by McLaughlin was a combatant.

"Town car pops out on me, 200 meters," he wrote of another

**AS A WAR REPORTER,** I had followed McLaughlin's battalion to Baghdad in an SUV I had rented in Kuwait City. Because war is chaotic and the battalion counted nearly 1,000 Marines, the two of us did not meet until a half-decade later, in 2008, when we sat down to talk about what had happened five years earlier. I was researching a story for the *New Yorker* about the toppling of the statue in

Baghdad. He was entering his third year at Boston College Law School and heading to Sarajevo to work as a legal intern with a war crimes tribunal there. Going to Bosnia seemed a bit odd to me. While McLaughlin had a keen grasp, as a combat veteran, of the dynamics of killing, he had left the Marines to get away from warfare. Yet here he was, going into the legal reckoning of a particularly brutal war from the 1990s. Why?

"I really liked my law school classes but my transition was difficult because, as I sat around and thought about my war experience, I was with people who had no idea what those experiences were about," McLaughlin told me the other day. "I was in a world that bore no relation to those experiences."

**AT RIGHT:** The title on the jacket of Tim McLaughlin's diary, a variation on a verse in the "Book of Revelations," portends the violence he records inside in "The Twelve Days of Combat" and the accounting of his "kills."

**ON PREVIOUS SPREAD:** McLaughlin's photo of the view from the cupola of his tank during a dust storm on March 26, 2003.



"His horse was  
named Death...  
And Hell followed  
them."

2nd Plt.  
B Co  
1st Tank  
1st Tanks

MCLAUGHLIN

The Twelve Rays of Combat  
Chorus - "On the X day of combat,  
The Marine Corps gave to me:"

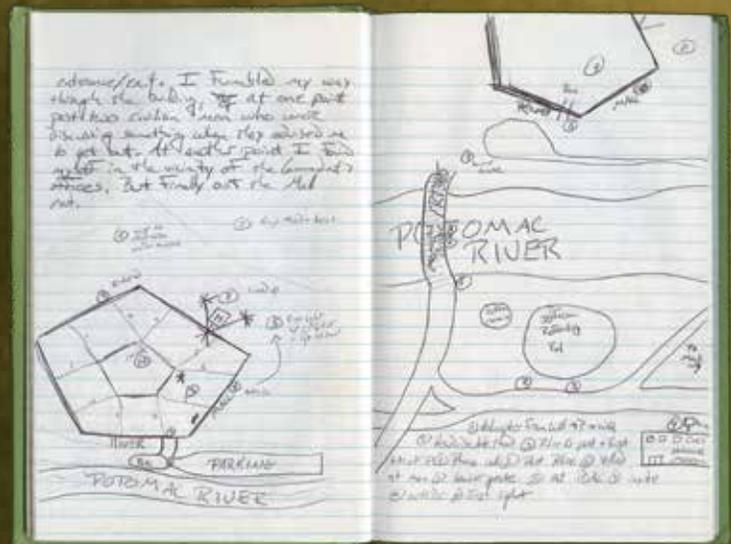
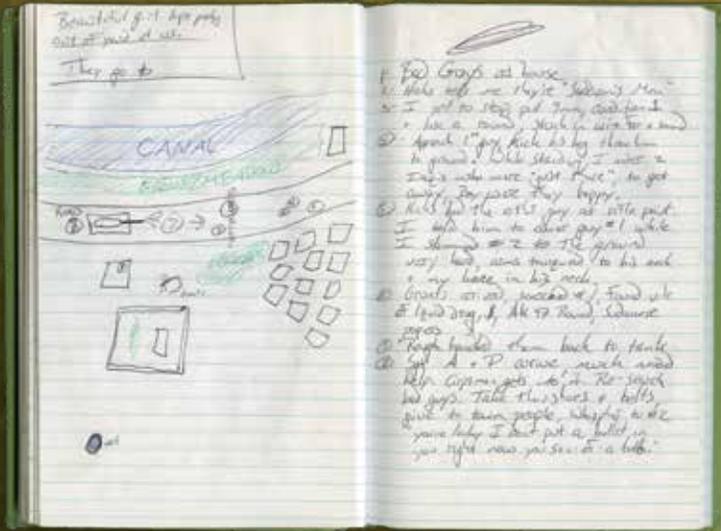
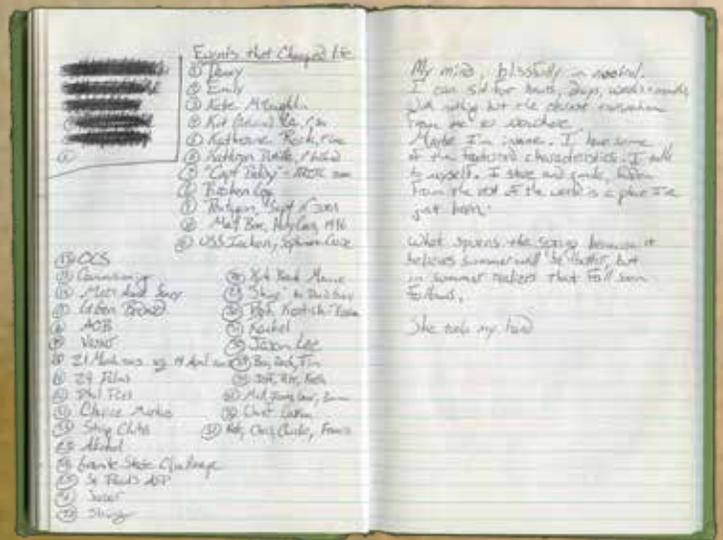
- ① The order to go cross LD
- ② Two "not-a-drills"
- ③ Three hundred clicks of roadmarch
- ④ Four rules of engagement
- ⑤ Five Feet of visibility
- ⑥ Six days of waiting
- ⑦ Seven camels theiving
- ⑧ All the grunts confused
- ⑨ Nine bullet missions
- ⑩ Red platoon on Company
- ⑪ Eleven leaders leading
- ⑫ Twelve retrograde rumors

Total Killed

- T-55	- I (1)	(1)
- T-62	- IIII (4)	(6)
- MTLB	- I (1)	(2)
- Military Trucks	- III (3)	(1)
- Technical Vehicles	- II (2)	(3)
- Anti-Air	- II (2)	(-)
- Artillery	- II (2)	(-)
- Bunkers	- IIII (4)	(10)
- TP6 Teams	- III (3)	(6)
- Troops	- 2+8+12+3+3	(28)
- Buildings	- IIII (7)	(10)
- Componds	- III (3)	(5)

70  
Boyle  
2nd

KILLS



He wanted to be away from fighting a war but also wanted to process the war he had fought. America wasn't giving him the intellectual harbor he sought. The country was cut off from its wars, he thought, focused on the Kardashians rather than Kandahar. His battlefield aggression is mirrored by moral aggression; he wants to engage hard questions, and America was not the place to get that done.

"I wanted to find a place where I could explore how the world operates for people who had my experiences," he continued. "So I went to Bosnia to meet people who had been on the other side of the gun, so to speak, and see what the world was like for them and kind of settle my own thoughts about the matter. It was important for me to have a transition time when I was surrounded by the things I was surrounded by in the Marine Corps but able to think about them in the way you think about things in law school."

I had written a book about Bosnia's war in the 1990s, so McLaughlin thought I might know more than he already did about killing and responsibility. "I don't consider myself a war criminal, but I've killed people," he wrote me in 2008, just before he left for Bosnia. "I do consider the worst of the men whom you've written about to be war criminals, and they've also killed people. Somewhere between us there is a line, but that line becomes blurred by all sorts of factors. I also think that the healing process involves time, and as time goes by there must be some sort of forgiveness or the wounds will never close. If it's even possible to describe where you think that line is, I would value your opinion."

As he did in Iraq, McLaughlin kept a diary while in Sarajevo, this one on his laptop. He had majored in Russian language and literature at the College of the Holy Cross, and dabbled in poetry, so writing was more natural for him than it was for many veterans. The thing you need to understand about McLaughlin's diaries—the brief one he typed on his laptop in Sarajevo in 2008, the longer one he wrote on notebooks in Iraq in 2003—is not that they describe an odyssey that was more brutal or searing than those of other veterans, just that he has a gift for describing and deciphering the GI experience of the 9/11 era.

What is normal, what is forgivable or unforgivable? It was a question he seemed to be asking in his Sarajevo diary.

"While I was in court with the four defendants in *Bozic*, I wondered whether they were evil people or people who had done evil things," he wrote. "Either way, if they did what they were accused of, they should be punished by society. At

the same time, however, I could not help but think that at least one of them was led down the wrong path by those who were in charge, committed his crimes because he was told to, and lost his freedom for the rest of his life. I appreciate that many people would not make this distinction and simply find all war criminals repugnant, but wars are not that simple. Responsibility

for war crimes runs in degrees, not in blacks and whites, with the most culpability understandably starting at the trigger pullers and commanders but running all the way out to the people and societies who stand idly by and do nothing."

Like the rest of us, McLaughlin is shaped by the culture around him and the education he received—in his case, a Jesuit education. In his freshman year at Holy Cross, he enrolled in a yearlong program focused on a Tolstoyan question often paraphrased as, "How, then, shall we live?" Tolstoy wasn't a Jesuit, of course, but his ideas, or at least this one, is at the center of Jesuit teaching. In a complex world, with so many human tragedies and bills to pay and reality TV shows to watch, how do we create a meaningful life?

In his choice of Holy Cross, and after that, BC Law, McLaughlin wasn't inspired by religion, although he comes from a Catholic family. Sunday Mass is not part of his routine. Instead, he was guided by the desire to get more out of life than a 4.0 GPA and 401k—Holy Cross and Boston College encouraged this. Also, public service was in his family DNA; his father and grandfather had served in the military, one of his brothers was a Marine, and another was a police officer. His father, Phillip, had also served as New Hampshire's attorney general from 1997 to 2002.

"I understood the world from a liberal arts education, from the perspective of, How am I going to make the world a

"If it weren't for the Marines, I wouldn't be as involved in my community with veterans' issues, and I wouldn't be as attuned to the needs of other people. I would see these things intellectually but they wouldn't mean as much to me."

better place?" he told me recently. "Why would I even think that? Because that is what I was taught. I was taught that by my family, by my education, and then I wound up in places where real questions were asked."

McLaughlin went straight from Holy Cross to officer training, where he broke his fibula while jumping from a truck. He was given a desk job as a general's aide in the Pentagon, and on the morning of 9/11 he left the building for a jog. McLaughlin was close enough, near Memorial Bridge, to hear the impact of the airplane. He sprinted back, ran inside as people streamed out, through smoke-filled corridors, ignoring the emergency alarm that instructed everyone to evacuate the building, and made sure that the people he worked with had gotten out.

Tolstoy's question was repurposed. How then shall we live in the aftermath of an attack on the homeland? For McLaughlin, the answer was easy: get to the frontline of war.

**IN 2010**, with my reporting into the toppling of the statue continuing, I wanted to see the famous flag; McLaughlin still had it. On a winter morning, we drove to his New Hampshire hometown of Laconia. The flag, it turned out, was not the most interesting war memento in his parents' farmhouse. McLaughlin showed me the diaries he had kept in Iraq; they

**CENTER RIGHT:** McLaughlin in combat surrounded by images and diary entries. Top right, a list of events that changed his life and a contemplation on his sanity. Center left, map and log of an encounter with "Saddam's men." Bottom right, his recollection, in the form of a diagram, of the 9/11 Pentagon bombing.

had not been opened since he returned from the war, and sand fell out of the pages as I thumbed through.

They were the most remarkable accounts of war I had seen. They read like a graphic novel, with pictures and maps that he drew, in addition to handwritten entries that conveyed his personality in a way computer fonts could not. We live in an era of smartphones and laptops, our words rendered into anodyne shapes on glowing screens—but in these diaries, there was a jolt of the individual. McLaughlin loaned me the diaries, and a few days later I showed them to photographer Gary Knight, who had also followed McLaughlin's battalion to Baghdad in 2003. Knight took a few minutes to look through the pages and announced that they should be blown up to poster-size and displayed in a gallery exhibit.

And that's what happened.

After my *New Yorker* story was published in 2011, McLaughlin, Knight, and I began plotting the exhibit, and in March it opened at the Bronx Documentary Center in New York City, featuring thirty-six pages from the diaries, along with excerpts of war stories I wrote, and Knight's photographs of the invasion. McLaughlin's most intense feelings and violent acts were described in pages that were on the walls for everyone to see—how he killed dozens of Iraqis, how he worried about the morality of it, how he missed the woman he loved, how lonely and exhausted he felt through it all. The

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man who had avoided the press since his fifteen minutes of fame in Baghdad, was in the spotlight again. *The New York Times* and a raft of news outlets covered the exhibit.

Why did he do it? The diaries are unusually intimate. They don't just describe the people whom McLaughlin shot and killed and the ease with which he did so, they also describe personal details of his life, from the first time he fell in love to his fears that everything he saw and did in Iraq would warp his mind. The question was answered in the days before the exhibit opened, when McLaughlin wrote a statement to be placed on the wall next to his diary pages.

“I worry that most people don't understand the unforgiving violence of my Marine Corps experiences. Shoot a few seconds too soon and you kill a civilian. Hesitate, and another Marine dies. There are no second chances. Killing people is ugly, brutal, and abrupt. It is final, and it stays with you for a lifetime. It's done because that's what your country asked you to do, yet most Americans will only experience war through cable news, politicians, and Hollywood. It's a flag on a statue, a talking point, and a movie. Ten years ago, when I came home, I drank too much. I stopped that on my own, but I still have difficulty in social situations, trouble connecting with people, and constant nightmares. I take prescription medicine to sleep at night. The Department of Veterans Affairs says I have post-traumatic stress disorder. I don't have a disorder. It's a natural reaction. It would be a disorder if I was unaffected.”

It is one of the ironies of being a war reporter that you are trying to describe what the men and women around you have seen and done and felt. The job exists because it is assumed—and this is usually true—that the combatants are not as skilled as you are in describing their experiences. Nor, of course, do they have enough time to take notes or write about a war while it is happening. Therein lies the great value of McLaughlin's diaries and everything that brought them about—the warrior is the writer.

“Knowing everything I know now, if I could go back in time, I would join the Marine Corps in a second with no questions asked,” he told me. “The good far outweighs the bad even on my worst days in the military. I would not recommend to anybody to replicate what I did—who knows what would happen to you. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. The stuff that makes a difference in people's lives—I've seen that from the perspective of a combatant, and from the perspective of a victim of a terrorist attack. You can't get that from a book, from a school.”

McLaughlin currently works for the law firm Holland and Knight in Boston, and he is president of a non-profit group, Shelter Legal Services (SLS), that provides free legal services to low-income and homeless vets. He works for SLS on a volunteer basis, and it forms part of his answer to Tolstoy's question about living a meaningful life—he is helping other veterans who face greater troubles than he does, and he is speaking on their behalf to whoever will listen.

“When you come from a certain universe, you are more attuned to that universe,” he continued. “If it weren't for the Marines, I wouldn't be as involved in my community with veterans issues, and I wouldn't be as attuned to the needs of other people. I'm fortunate that I have gone to good schools and that I do very well for myself as a lawyer but I am cognizant that there is a different world out there that is in a lot of need.”

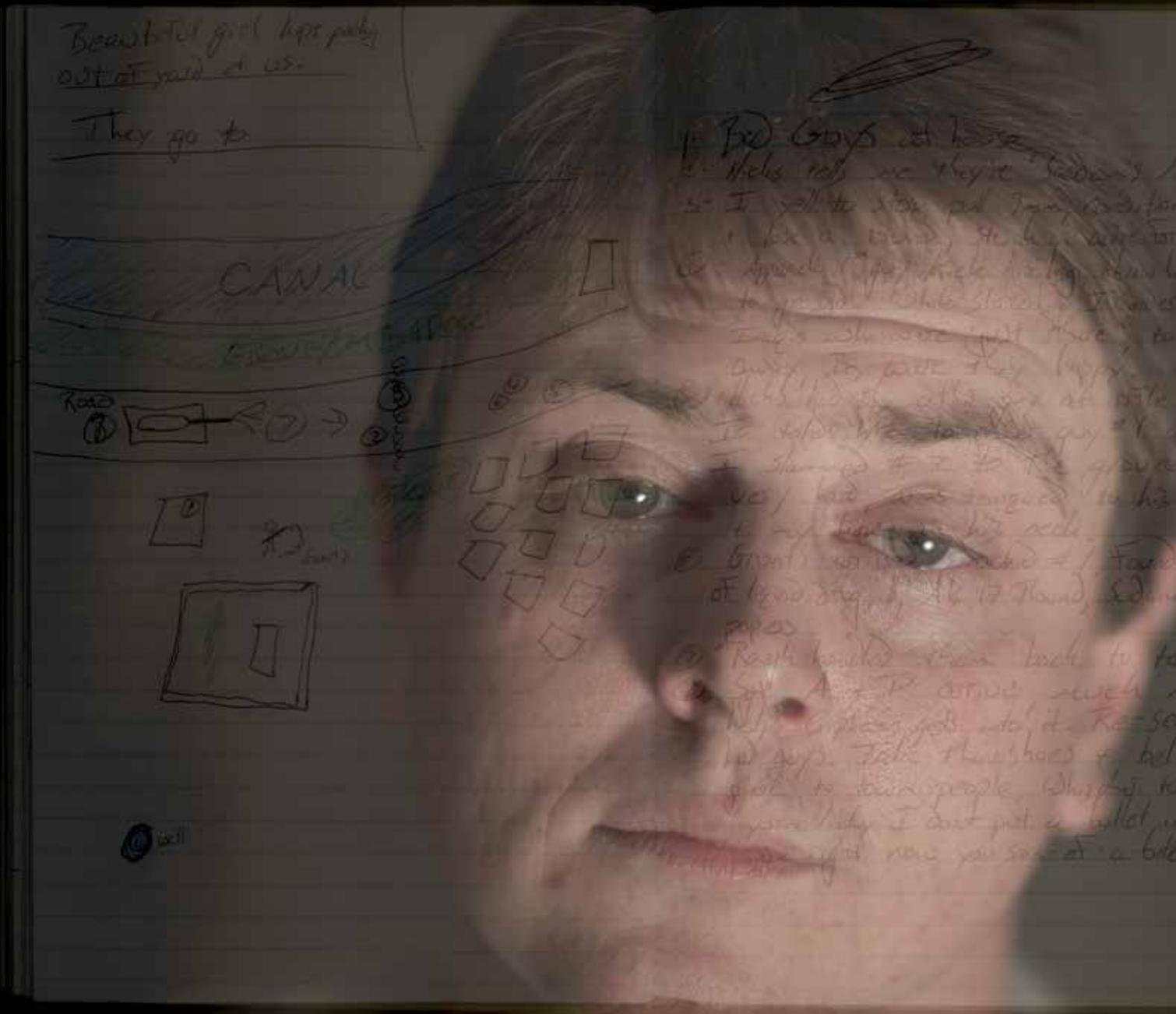
In the past year, McLaughlin also began volunteering at an urban middle school in Boston. He learned that many of the kids had changed addresses once, twice, and three times in a year; their lives are so unstable that they don't know from one day to the next where they will sleep. McLaughlin's wife, who works with incarcerated adolescents, told him that if their lives aren't stabilized soon, they will probably end up in her care.

“My goal is to try to figure out a way to make it more likely that they'll have success in life,” McLaughlin told me. “I haven't figured out how to do that yet, but when I walk back and forth from work I don't think about Iraqis. I think about the community I live in.”

How then, shall *we* live?

*Peter Maass is the author of Crude World: The Violent Twilight of Oil (Knopf 2009) and Love Thy Neighbor: A Story of War (Knopf 1996). Last year he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.*

**RIGHT:** Now an attorney at Holland and Knight in Boston, McLaughlin is president of a non-profit that provides free legal services to low-income and homeless veterans, and he volunteers at a middle school helping children at risk.



## ‘THE WAR DIARIES’ EXHIBIT COMING TO BC LAW

“**INVASION: DIARIES AND MEMORIES OF WAR IN IRAQ,**” an exhibition of the war diaries of Lt. Tim McLaughlin, the photographs of Gary Knight, and the war correspondence of Peter Maass, will be on view at Boston College Law School in the fall. The exhibit commemorates the tenth anniversary of the invasion of Iraq and includes thirty-six poster-size pages from the diaries, Knight’s photos for *Newsweek*, and Maass’ stories for the *New York Times Magazine* and the *New Yorker*. The exhibition, which was shown previously at the Bronx Documentary Center and Drexel University, can be previewed at <http://wardiaries.org>. In September, visit [www.bc.edu/schools/law/](http://www.bc.edu/schools/law/) for the dates and times of BC Law’s exhibition, reception, and panel discussion.