

In Their Boots:

Poems Inspired by Soldiers and Their Loved Ones

Book One:
The Soldiers

G. Mark LaFrancis

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About This Book

During the past two years, G. Mark LaFrancis, a veteran and an accomplished journalist and writer, has interviewed more than two dozen soldiers who served in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as their loved ones. The interviews span more than fifty hours. They have opened their hearts and souls, offering a window into their world. Thus, a collection of poignant and enlightening poems inspired by their stories has unfolded. Some stories are funny, some uplifting, and some deeply sorrowful.

"In Their Boots: Poems Inspired By Soldiers and Their Loved Ones" is not about the war, but about the warriors ... over there and at home.

Acknowledgments And Dedication

I owe a great debt of gratitude to two wonderful people: David Michael Ferry, who gave to his country all he had, and Mrs. Rhonda Hayes, who gave her son Sgt. Henry Brown to the service of his country, and who lost his life in Iraq. This book is a tribute especially to you and the other brave men and women in uniform and their loved ones.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the members of Company B, 155th Infantry Mississippi Army National Guard, Natchez, Mississippi, who have helped in many ways possible with this book. I salute each and every one of you.

To my grandfather
Maximilian W. LaFrancis,
who left behind part of his soul
in the foxholes of World War I,
and to my father
George W. LaFrancis,
who served his country bravely
in World War II.

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Little Soldier

His BDU's draped over
His shoes
His cap
Sank above
His brows
He clutched an American flag
In his little hand
He stood
So straight, so strong
That morning
When I shipped out

The night before
I read him "The Giving Tree"
And we shared ice cream
Topped with chocolate goo

On the tarmac
He picked up my hand
My right hand
And kissed it
As his dimpled
Smile offered
Me courage

The bus pulled up
To take us to the plane
And I knelt
To my little soldier
And I pulled him tight
And felt his little
Heart beat against mine
I rubbed my hand through
His curly hair

I strained not to cry
He reached into his pocket
And there in his hand
Was the plastic sheriff's badge
I gave him so long ago

"This'll protect you, Daddy
Show 'em this."

And there it happened
My son saw me cry
My son loves me so
He gave his best badge

I turn and head
For the bus
My heart torn
Whether to look back
Or not

So I do ... so I do

And my little soldier
Gave me
A sweet salute
And a cute smile
So I saluted back
And smiled
To my little soldier
My heart racing
With utmost fear
I might not see
This little guy
Little soldier
Again

The Bus

Gasoline fumes
Seeped into
The bus
As we rumbled
From the
Baghdad Airport

Frozen in a dark
Womb we rode
My buddies
The Two-Charlie
The 11-C
The mortar guys
All aboard
The bus
For a tour of duty
In Iraq ... all aboard

A chilly breeze
Seeped through
The shaded windows
Shaded, lest "they" see us
"They," the same "they" who
Have hurt and killed many

The bus
So silent
So strange
For twelve guys
Twelve buddies
We've drunk together
Trained together
Sighed heavily together

And here we are
On the bus
Flak vests weighing heavily
Packs clinking
Rifles tightly gripped
Iraqi music blaring
Over the driver's
Radio
Wanting so much
To look
In each other's eyes.
Fearing we'd see
Feelings
We didn't
Want to see

Jason, Paul, James
Jarvis, Freddy,
Brian, Michael,
Stewart, Antonio,
Glen, Ricky ...
Black and white
We're here
On the bus

In the depths
Of my heart
I pray
Dear Lord
Let us be on
The bus
Home
Too

Ten Seconds

Ten seconds
Off the bus
Just ten seconds
A thin wail
Overhead
The shell misses
Explodes
A football field
Away

We run
Grab gear
Helmets, flak vests
Then fly to
Mortar positions
The wail returns
Closer now

We jump
Behind the bunker
The ground shakes
The noise pounds
Our ears
Just ten seconds
Off the bus

That Day

Her kiss was warm
Please let it last
Forever ... please

The smoothness of her
Skin against mine
Was like powder
So fresh, so fine

My wife, my friend
Embraced me
With her love
With her power

Two days ago
We exchanged vows
And now I'm headed back
To Iraq

*My eyes glistened
With tears
I knew he didn't
Want to leave me
He didn't want
To return to Iraq
Yet he did
Because his buddies were there
His mission was there
Part of his heart was there*

"I love you, Lindsay,"
I whispered
"And when I return
We'll have such a great party
And make such beautiful
babies
I love you, Lindsay,"

I whispered just two days after
our wedding
Just one day before I had to
return
To Iraq

*My heart almost jumped
From me to him
My smile almost melted
But I forced it not to
My arms wrapped
Around Dustin
Tight
Oh, so tight*

And I grabbed my bag

And he grabbed his bag

And I stepped onto the bus

And he stepped onto the bus

And I disappeared

*And he disappeared
And I wanted to run after the
bus
I wanted to stop it in its path
Force him not to leave
Force him to be with me
But I didn't
Instead, I stood and watched
Half my heart on that bus
Half my heart with me
All of my soul
With Dustin*

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*All of it
I saved none for me*

I swallowed hard

I swallowed hard

*And the bus pulled out
Sending me to another fourteen
months
In Iraq
I sat frozen wanting so much
To look back
To my beautiful Lindsay
My wife, my friend, my
purpose in life
But I didn't*

*I stood frozen wanting him
To look back
My handsome, my strong
Dustin
My husband, my friend, my
purpose in life
But he didn't*

*I sat hopeful
I'd be on this bus home*

*And there it was
A broken thread
Me heading back to Iraq
Her standing in the parking lot
Me hoping I'll never forget*

Her smells; her kisses

*And there it was
A broken thread
Him heading back to Iraq
Him in the bus, moving from
me
Me hoping I'll never forget his
smells
His kisses
His love*

*I sat straight
I sat tense
I looked back*

*I looked up
To see his eyes
Riveted on mine
And we "talked"
Of strength,
Hope
Love*

*And I
"heard" her
Say to me
You are my love
Now and forever
As I looked back
To see her
One last time
That night*

My Journey

I was going to post this on the
web
You know, as a video
For all to see
I was going to call it My
Journey
Maybe it could be a hit
On You Tube
And Good Morning America
And CNN

But here
In Anbar Province
My camera saw too much
Our convoy was hit
And hit hard
By a roadside bomb
Six of us died
Not stuff for You Tube, Good
Morning America, CNN
And later that week
A young Iraqi boy was caught
In a firefight
His arm almost burned off
I shut off my camera
And turned on my emotions

We had a cool drink

From a sweet, old woman
Who offered us what little fresh
water she had
We gave her a flashlight, some
MREs and our smiles.
She smiled back

I kept my camera off
She was too sweet and nice
To be part of a video

We rode into a tight-knit
village
We knew insurgents were there
But people were too afraid
I kept my camera off
No reason to compound their
fear

So I turned the camera
On myself
This is my journey
I told the camera
This is where it all begins
And may end
I might not be back
So please remember me
So please don't let my journey
End here

Fear

When I was ten
I feared Bubba Johnson
He had fifteen pounds on me
And was as mean as a rattler
And I stayed awake
Thinking of ways
To avoid him
To attack him
To survive him

Now look where I am
There are hundreds of
Bubba Johnsons
And fear eats at me
Every second
Of every hour
Of every day
And I see death
And I smell death
And I walk by death
And I survive death

And fear eats at me
Every second
Of every hour
Of every day
It's hard to believe

I have a future
Beyond this
Fear

To marry
To have a son
To cut grass
To drive a little too fast
Up Highway 55
To fish for bass
To watch the Saints
On television
To shout "Amen"
In church
To sit quietly
In the huntin' stand
To listen to
The fish jump
In the lake
To not have
A day
Of fear

But here
Fear eats at me
Every second
Of every hour
Of every day

Giraffe

Bring me a giraffe	No medicine
Daddy	No toilets
No, not a real giraffe	No giraffes.
She giggled.	
You know	I wish I could
	See with
Sandstorms	A five-year-old's eyes
Insects	Beyond war
Scorching heat	Beyond fear
Emaciated dogs	And see
Sad faces	The giraffes
Weary eyes	
No giraffes.	But Angel
	I cannot
IEDs	Bring you
Body armor	A giraffe
Patrols	I pray
No giraffes.	I can
	Bring you
Hungry children	Your daddy
No schools	Back home

Give Me Strength

I'll never know why
The truck we passed
That moment, that hour
That day
Decided
We were to die

That truck
Instead
Slammed into
A truck behind
A truck of clerical
workers
Mostly ladies

*Give me strength, Lord
As I look back*

The explosion
So powerful
So deadly
So sinister

*Give me strength, Lord
As I look back*

You do not want me
To tell you
What I saw
I do not want to tell
Either
And there at that
moment
Lives were gone
Sweet lives

Mothers, sisters,
Granddaughters
Just people
Like me
Like you
You do not want me
To tell you
What I saw

*Give me strength, Lord
As I look back
Give me strength, Lord
As I open my eyes
And see
What a twenty-year-old
Young man
From Mississippi
Was never meant
To see
Give me strength*

So the days
Came and went
As we rode
The same roads
Where our friends
Lost their lives
Constant was our fear
Our vigilance
Our sadness at our loss
Our hope
To go home

*Give me strength
Lord
Dear Lord,
Give me strength*

Sadness

This day	Here
Sadness	On the ground
The most	Blood
overwhelming	Runs thick
Sadness	Death
The deepest pain of	Is
Sadness	Here
The harshest	At our feet
Sadness	In our eyes
Ate us	The old men
Consumed us	The children
Left us	The women
Speechless	All dead
	All dead
As we stood	
In the market	Tears trickle
In Baghdad	Behind my sunglasses
I gasped for breath	I'm a Marine
So many, so quickly	I'm tough
Lost their lives	I'm solid
	Yet
Overhead	I weep
Blue skies	For them
And fluffy white	For me
clouds	For us
Float	All
Unnoticed	

The Kiss

A dark night	Her eager face
In Fallujah	Her finger
Fear gripped us	Beckons
Insurgents	Me further
All around	And I give in
Rifle at ready	Silently, eagerly, hopefully
Mind focused	
Life on the edge	Shots burst outside
The razor's edge	But inside
Cut or be cut	There is
	A silence
We slip into	Of deep dread
A home	
Actually a hovel	I lean to her
Two, no three	But she
Squeezed into	Doesn't speak
A corner	No
	She kisses
And then I see her	Me
Her dark eyes	On the cheek
Enveloping mine	And smiles
Her parents	
Fearing	I force back tears
She beckons with	I'm a soldier
A baby finger	
She smiles	I want to protect
A baby smile	Her and her family
	But at that moment
I smile as I walk	I admit I love her
Closer to her	This little girl
A candle	Who kissed me
Illuminates	On the cheek
Her gem-like eyes	Amid the terror
Her sparkling eyes	Of her life

