

This is the definitive version of *The Forever War*. There are two other versions, and my publisher has been kind enough to allow inc to clarify things here.

The one you're holding in your hand is the book as it was originally written. But it has a pretty tortuous history.

It's ironic, since it later won the Hugo and Nebula Awards, and has won "Best Novel" awards in other countries, but *The Forever War* was not an easy book to sell back in the early seventies. It was rejected by eighteen publishers before St. Martin's Press decided to take a chance on it. "Pretty good book," was the usual reaction, "but nobody wants to read a science fiction novel about Vietnam".

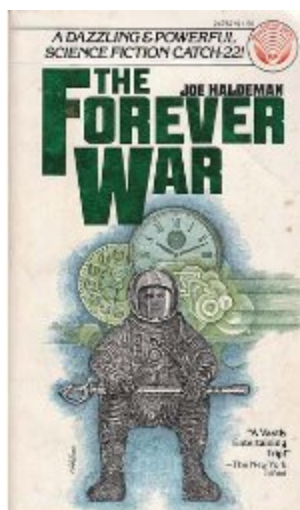
Twenty-five years later, most young readers don't even see the parallels between *The Forever War* and the seemingly endless one we were involved in at the time, and that's okay. It's about Vietnam because that's the war the author was in. But it's mainly about war, about soldiers, and about the reasons we think we need them.

While the book was being looked at by all those publishers, it was also being serialized piecemeal in *Analog* magazine. The editor, Ben Bova, was a tremendous help, not only in editing, but also for making the thing exist at all! He gave it a prominent place in the magazine, and it was also his endorsement that brought it to the attention of St. Martin's Press, who took a chance on the hardcover, though they did not publish adult science fiction at that time.

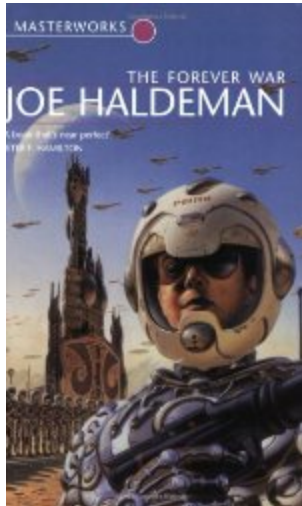
But Ben rejected the middle section, a novella called "You Can Never Go Back." He liked it as a piece of writing, he said, but thought that it was too downbeat for *Analog*'s audience. So I wrote him a more positive story and put "You Can Never Go Back" into the drawer; eventually Ted White published it in *Amazing* magazine, as a coda to *The Forever War*.

At this late date, I'm not sure why I didn't reinstate the original middle when the book was accepted. Perhaps I didn't trust my own taste, or just didn't want to make life more complicated. But that first book version is essentially the *Analog* version with "more adult language and situations", as they say in Hollywood.

The paperback of that version stayed in print for about sixteen years. (It has a white cover showing a guy in a spacesuit with a sword, with symbolic clocks all around.)



Then, in 1991, Avon Books outbid its competitors and won the right to publish the book. The editors agreed to let me reinstate my original version. But alas, not all of the changes got in, and the book had some internal contradictions because of things left over from the earlier one. (The cover of that one has a futuristic soldier who looks like Robin Williams in a funny hat.)



This version, finally, has everything restored — with a less funny cover illustration. The *dates* in the book are now kind of funny; most people realize we didn't get into an interstellar war in 1996. I originally set it in that year so it was barely possible that the officers and NCOs could be veterans of Vietnam, so we decided to leave it that way, in spite of the obvious anachronisms. Think of it as a parallel universe.

But maybe it's the real one, and we're in a dream.

Joe Haldeman
Cambridge, Massachusetts

PRIVATE MANDELLA

1

"Tonight we're going to show you eight silent ways to kill a man." The guy who said that was a sergeant who didn't look five years older than me. So if he'd ever killed a man in combat, silently or otherwise, he'd done it as an infant.

I already knew eighty ways to kill people, but most of them were pretty noisy. I sat up straight in my chair and assumed a look of polite attention and fell asleep with my eyes open. So did most everybody else. We'd learned that they never scheduled anything important for these afterchop classes.

The projector woke me up and I sat through a short tape showing the “eight silent ways.” Some of the actors must have been brainwipes, since they were actually killed.

After the tape a girl in the front row raised her hand. The sergeant nodded at her and she rose to parade rest. Not bad looking, but kind of chunky about the neck and shoulders. Everybody gets that way after carrying a heavy pack around for a couple of months.

“Sir” — we had to call sergeants “sir” until graduation — “most of those methods, really, they looked ... kind of silly.”

“For instance?”

“Like killing a man with a blow to the kidneys, from an entrenching tool. I mean, when would you *actually* have only an entrenching tool, and no gun or knife? And why not just bash him over the head with it?”

“He might have a helmet on,” he said reasonably.

“Besides, Taurans probably don’t even have kidneys!”

He shrugged. “Probably they don’t.” This was 1997, and nobody had ever seen a Tauran; hadn’t even found any pieces of Taurans bigger than a scorched chromosome. “But their body chemistry is similar to ours, and we have to assume they’re similarly complex creatures. They *must* have weaknesses, vulnerable spots. You have to find out where they are.

“That’s the important thing.” He stabbed a finger at the screen. “Those eight convicts got caulked for your benefit because you’ve got to find out how to kill Taurans, and be able to do it whether you have a megawatt laser or an emery board.”

She sat back down, not looking too convinced.

“Any more questions?” Nobody raised a hand.

“OK. Tench-hut!” We staggered upright and he looked at us expectantly.

“Fuck you, sir”, came the familiar tired chorus.

“Louder!”

“FUCK YOU, SIR!” One of the army’s less-inspired morale devices.

“That’s better. Don’t forget, pre-dawn maneuvers tomorrow. Chop at 0330, first formation, 0400. Anybody sacked after 0340 owes one stripe. Dismissed.”

I zipped up my coverall and went across the snow to the lounge for a cup of soya and a joint. I’d always been able to get by on five or six hours of sleep, and this was the only time I could be by myself, out of the army for a while. Looked at the newsfax for a few minutes. Another ship got caulked, out by Aldebaran sector. That was four years ago. They were mounting a reprisal fleet, but it’ll take four years more for them to get out there. By then, the Taurans would have every portal planet sewed up tight.

Back at the billet, everybody else was sacked and the main lights were out. The whole company, had been dragging ever since we got back from the two-week lunar training. I dumped my clothes in the locker, checked the roster and found out I was in bunk 31. Goddammit, right under the heater.

I slipped through the curtain as quietly as possible so as not to wake up the person next to me. Couldn’t see who it was, but I couldn’t have cared less. I slipped under the blanket.

"You're late, Mandella," a voice yawned. It was Rogers.

"Sorry I woke you up," I whispered.

" 'Sallright." She snuggled over and clasped me spoonfashion. She was warm and reasonably soft.

I patted her hip in what I hoped was a brotherly fashion. "Night, Rogers."

"G'night, stallion." She returned the gesture more pointedly.

Why do you always get the tired ones when you're ready and the randy ones when you're tired? I bowed to the inevitable.

2

"Awright, let's get some goddamn back into that! Stringer team! Move it up — move your ass up!"

A warm front had come in about midnight and the snow had turned to sleet. The permaplast stringer weighed five hundred pounds and was a bitch to handle, even when it wasn't covered with ice. There were four of us, two at each end, carrying the plastic girder with frozen fingertips. Rogers was my partner.

"Steel!" the guy behind me yelled, meaning that he was losing his hold. It wasn't steel, but it was heavy enough to break your foot. Everybody let go and hopped away. It splashed slush and mud all over us.

"Goddammit, Petrov", Rogers said, "why didn't you go out for the Red Cross or something? This fucken thing's not that fucken heavy." Most of the girls were a little more circumspect in their speech. Rogers was a little butch.

"Awright, get a fucken move on, stringers — epoxy team! Dog'em! Dog'em!"

Our two epoxy people ran up, swinging their buckets. "Let's go, Mandella. I'm freezin' my balls off."

"Me, too," the girl said with more feeling than logic.

"One — two — heave!" We got the thing up again and staggered toward the bridge. It was about three-quarters completed. Looked as if the second platoon was going to beat us. I wouldn't give a damn, but the platoon that got their bridge built first got to fly home. Four miles of muck for the rest of us, and no rest before chop.

We got the stringer in place, dropped it with a clank, and fitted the static clamps that held it to the rise-beams. The female half of the epoxy team started slopping glue on it before we even had it secured. Her partner was waiting for the stringer on the other side. The floor team was waiting at the foot of the bridge, each one holding a piece of the light, stressed permaplast over his head like an umbrella. They were dry and clean. I wondered aloud what they had done to deserve it, and Rogers suggested a couple of colorful but unlikely, possibilities.

We were going back to stand by the next stringer when the field first (name of Dougelstein, but we called him "Awright") blew a whistle and bellowed, "Awright, soldier boys and girls, ten minutes. Smoke'em if you got 'em." He reached into his pocket and turned on the control that heated our coveralls.

Rogers and I sat down on our end of the stringer and I took out my weed box. I had lots of joints, but we were ordered not to smoke them until after night-chop.

The only tobacco I had was a cigarro butt about three inches long. I lit it on the side of the box; it wasn't too bad after the first couple of puffs. Rogers took a puff, just to be sociable, but made a face and gave it back.

"Were you in school when you got drafted?" she asked.

"Yeah. Just got a degree in physics. Was going after a teacher's certificate."

She nodded soberly. "I was in biology..."

"Figures." I ducked a handful of slush. "How far?"

"Six years, bachelor's and technical." She slid her boot along the ground, turning up a ridge of mud and slush the consistency of freezing ice milk. "Why the fuck did this have to happen?"

I shrugged. It didn't, call for an answer, least of all the answer that the UNEF kept giving us. Intellectual and physical elite of the planet, going out to guard humanity against the Tauran menace. Soyashit. It was all just a big experiment. See whether we could goad the Taurans into ground action.

Awright blew the whistle two minutes early, as expected, but Rogers and I and the other two stringers got to sit for a minute while the epoxy and floor teams finished covering our stringer. It got cold fast, sitting there with our suits turned off, but we remained inactive on principle.

There really wasn't any sense in having us train in the cold. Typical army half-logic. Sure, it was going to be cold where we were going, but not ice-cold or snow-cold. Almost by definition, a portal planet remained within a degree or two of absolute zero all the time — since collapsars don't shine — and the first chill you felt would mean that you were a dead man.

Twelve years before, when I was ten years old, they had. discovered the collapsar jump. Just fling an object at a collapsar with sufficient speed, and out it pops in some other part of the galaxy. It didn't take long to figure out the formula that predicted where it would come out: it travels along the same "line" (actually an Einsteinian geodesic) it would have followed if the collapsar hadn't been in the way-until it reaches another collapsar field, whereupon it reappears, repelled with the same speed at which it approached the original collapsar. Travel time between the two collapsars ... exactly zero.

It made a lot of work for mathematical physicists, who had to redefine simultaneity, then tear down general relativity and build it back up again. And it made the politicians very happy, because now they could send a shipload of colonists to Fomalhaut for less than it had once cost to put a brace of men on the moon. There were a lot of people the politicians would love to see on Fomalhaut, implementing a glorious adventure rather than stirring up trouble at home.

The ships were always accompanied by an automated probe that followed a couple of million miles behind. We knew about the portal planets, little bits of flotsam that whirled around the collapsars; the purpose of the drone was to come back and tell us in the event that a ship had smacked into a portal planet at .999 of the speed of light.

That particular catastrophe never happened, but one day a drone limped back alone. Its data were analyzed, and it turned out that the colonists, ship had been pursued by another vessel and destroyed. This happened near Aldebaran, in the constellation Taurus, but since "Aldebaranian" is a little hard to handle, they

named the enemy “Tauran.”

Colonizing vessels thenceforth went out protected by an armed guard. Often the armed guard went out alone, and finally the Colonization Group got shortened to UNEF, United Nations Exploratory Force. Emphasis on the “force.”

Then some bright lad in the General Assembly decided that we ought to field an army of footsoldiers to guard the portal planets of the nearer collapsars. This led to the Elite Conscription Act of 1996 and the most elitely conscripted army in the history of warfare.

So here we were, fifty men and fifty women, with IQs over 150 and bodies of unusual health and strength, slogging elitely through the mud and slush of central Missouri, reflecting on the usefulness of our skill in building bridges on worlds where the only fluid is an occasional standing pool of liquid helium.

3

About a month later, we left for our final training exercise, maneuvers on the planet Charon. Though nearing perihelion, it was still more than twice as far from the sun as Pluto.

The troopship was a converted “cattlewagon” made to carry two hundred colonists and assorted bushes and beasts. Don’t think it was roomy, though, just because there were half that many of us. Most of the excess space was taken up with extra reaction mass and ordnance.

The whole trip took three weeks, accelerating at two gees halfway, decelerating the other half. Our top speed, as we roared by the orbit of Pluto, was around one-twentieth of the speed of light — not quite enough for relativity to rear its complicated head.

Three weeks of carrying around twice as much weight as normal it’s no picnic. We did some cautious exercises three times a day and remained horizontal as much as possible. Still, we got several broken bones and serious dislocations. The men had to wear special supporters to keep from littering the floor with loose organs. It was almost impossible to sleep; nightmares of choking and being crushed, rolling over periodically to prevent blood pooling and bedsores. One girl got so fatigued that she almost slept through the experience of having a rib push out into the open air.

I’d been in space several times before, so when we finally stopped decelerating and went into free fall, it was nothing but relief. But some people had never been out, except for our training on the moon, and succumbed to the sudden vertigo and disorientation. The rest of us cleaned up after them, floating through the quarters with sponges and inspirators to suck up the globules of partly-digested “Concentrate, High-protein, Low-residue, Beef Flavor (Soya).”

We had a good view of Charon, coming down from orbit. There wasn’t much to see, though. It was just a dim, off white sphere with a few smudges on it. We landed about two hundred meters from the base. A pressurized crawler came out and mated with the ferry, so we didn’t have to suit up. We clanked and squeaked up

to the main building, a featureless box of grayish plastic.

Inside, the walls were the same drab color. The rest of the company was sitting at desks, chattering away. There was a seat next to Freeland.

"Jeff — feeling better?" He still looked a little pale.

"If the gods had meant for man to survive in free fall, they would have given him a cast iron glottis." He sighed heavily. "A little better. Dying for a smoke."

"Yeah."

"*You* seemed to take it all right. Went up in school, didn't you?"

"Senior thesis in vacuum welding, yeah. Three weeks in Earth orbit." I sat back and reached for my weed box for the thousandth time. It still wasn't there. The Life Support Unit didn't want to handle nicotine and THC.

"Training was bad enough," Jeff grouched, "but *this* shit—"

"Tench-hut!" We stood up in a raggedy-ass fashion, by twos and threes. The door opened and a full major came in. I stiffened a little. He was the highest-ranking officer I'd ever seen. He had a row of ribbons stitched into his coveralls, including a purple strip meaning he'd been wounded in combat, fighting in the old American army. Must have been that Indochina thing, but it had fizzled out before I was born. He didn't look that old.

"Sit, sit." He made a patting motion with his hand. Then he put his hands on his hips and scanned the company, a small smile on his face. "Welcome to Charon. You picked a lovely day to land, the temperature outside is a summery eight point one five degrees Absolute. We expect little change for the next two centuries or so." Some of them laughed halfheartedly.

"Best you enjoy the tropical climate here at Miami Base; enjoy it while you can. We're on the center of sunside here, and most of your training will be on darkside. Over there, the temperature stays a chilly two point zero eight.

"You might as well regard all the training you got on Earth and the moon as just an elementary exercise, designed to give you a fair chance of surviving Charon. You'll have to go through your whole repertory here: tools, weapons, maneuvers. And you'll find that, at these temperatures, tools don't work the way they should; weapons don't want to fire. And people move v-e-r-y cautiously."

He studied the clipboard in his hand. "Right now, you have forty-nine women and forty-eight men. Two deaths on Earth, one psychiatric release. Having read an outline of your training program, I'm frankly surprised that so many of you pulled through.

"But you might as well know that I won't be displeased if as few as fifty of you, half, graduate from this final phase. And the only way not to graduate is to die. Here. The only way anybody gets back to Earth — including me — is after a combat tour.

"You will complete your training in one month. From here you go to Stargate collapsar, half a light year away. You will stay at the settlement on Stargate 1, the largest portal planet, until replacements arrive. Hopefully, that will be no more than a month; another group is due here as soon as you leave.