



Marine Corps veteran Timothy J. McLaughlin (second from left), Kuwait, March 2003

From Troy to Baghdad...to New Hampshire: A Reflection on Dialogues of War

by Ann-Maria Contarino, *Dialogues on the Experience of War* Team Manchester Facilitator

***Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns
driven time and again off course...***

These opening lines offer *The Odyssey's* first characterization of the Greek warrior Odysseus. He has spent ten years in combat at Troy and ten more making his return voyage to Ithaca, a land so beset with conflict in his absence that he will turn his own home into a battlefield before he can take possession of it. Battle-wary. Long-suffering. Scarred. Patient. Odysseus combats not only physical obstacles, but psychological and emotional ones as well. He fights to stay connected to his domestic identity while away at war – and then to reintegrate his military identity into his roles as husband, father, and son once he returns.

Every veteran understands the pain of Odysseus' struggle from the inside out – and each one brings his or her insights to a reading of *The Odyssey* in compelling ways, as evidenced by the powerful conversations taking place during each meeting of the *Dialogues on the Experience of War & Homecoming* veterans' groups. Participants are miraculously willing to examine the poem and their own experience with equal depth and care; what results is a combination of literary analysis and personal narrative that cuts across age, rank, branch, and length of service. As one of the veterans in the Manchester group commented the first week, "We are all peers here." The most surprising insight may be that this "peer group" includes the characters in the poem as well, since the genuine truth of the human experience in *The Odyssey* collapses the boundary between ancient and modern, history and fiction.

The length and structure of the poem show us that "homecoming" is not a single event or moment, but rather a process that unfolds gradually – and not necessarily in a linear way. The veterans in our reading groups often examine and explain Odysseus' process in light of their own; the poem offers a neutral place to locate discussions of sensitive or volatile personal experience. Though Homer couches many of Odysseus' homecoming struggles as adventures, each still presents a dangerous detour for Odysseus to navigate, some brutal and ugly, some seductive and tempting. It is not difficult to read these adventures metaphorically as battles with drug use, alcohol, infidelity, thrill seeking, and post-traumatic stress.

Of course, seeing these common threads cannot eradicate the isolation felt by each veteran, but *Dialogues on the Experience of War & Homecoming* allows groups of veterans to undertake the reading as a community, and, what's more important, to pursue their ongoing reintegration in solidarity. No one would presume that reading one text or having a series of conversations can heal what Philip Klay has called the "moral injury" of military service, but it can do a number of remarkable things. It can foster understanding, ease burdens, build bridges, give voice. Homer knew, above all things, the transcendent power of storytelling. At the end of *The Odyssey's* opening invocation he instructs his Muse to:

***Launch out on his story... daughter of Zeus
start from where you will – sing for our time too.***

