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Wars Remembered (2003)

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Wars Remembered

Vin, my father, did not die until 1950, but he was a casualty of World War II, though his hard times during the Great Depression and his postwar trials contributed as well. But war finally did him in. Memoirs of warfare during the last century reveal that war has similarly defined or destroyed millions of lives.

Perpetual warfare marked the twentieth century, as we so painfully remember. In *The Book of War*, historian John Keegan writes: “The First World War, its course and its outcome, determined the nature of the rest of the century, ensuring that it would be one of almost unrelenting conflict.” Bloody as that war was, accounting for some ten million deaths, the Second World War was worse, killing some fifty million. Those numbers stagger the imagination, but it is peace, not war, that is truly unimaginable.¹

Not only did the magnitude of warfare increase dramatically, but technological development of weaponry altered approaches to warfare, particularly after Hiroshima. “The strategies, tactics and, above all, the weapons of these wars were almost exclusively European,” culminating in the “battle of decision,” until “alternative warfare,” tactics of guerilla fighting and delay, employed by the North Vietnamese against French and then American forces, proved successful. Seen in Keegan’s terms, the attack on the United States by stateless Islamic militants on 9/11/01 announced a new form of warfare—a hit-and-run *hot* war that has succeeded the mutual destruction stand-off of the Cold War—that combines religious ideology, guerrilla stealth, and command over sophisticated technology to create weapons of mass destruction.²

War, then, surrounds us, like poisoned air. As Gardner Botsford notes in the opening sentence of his World War II memoir, *A Life of Privilege, Mostly*, “For anyone old enough to have been born during the First World War, like me, and damn near killed in the Second, also like me, war was a regular presence in the course of growing up.”³ Or, as Samuel Hynes, another World War II veteran, writes in his study of war narratives, *The Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War*, “war is not an occasional interruption of a normality called peace; it is the climate in which we live.”⁴ War, indeed, was the regular presence and climate—call it the stormy weather—that drove my father, a former Navy Seabee and combat veteran of the Pacific island campaigns, to take his own life on a spring day in 1950.

Tempted by suicide, Anthony Swofford, a Marine in the Gulf War of

1991, in his memoir, *Jarhead*, thought of Ernest Hemingway's death by gunshot: "What a shot. What despair. What courage." But Swofford, though more than half in love with easeful death, did not kill himself and returned "to the thing I know best, possibly the only thing I truly know: being a jarhead."⁵ But by 1950, my father had lost the things he knew best—my mother, who died at twenty-nine; me, handed over to his sister to bring up; finally, his role as a warrior and his place in the great scheme of things.

Like most soldiers, Vin drank heavily during the war years. On leave before he was shipped to the Pacific, he disappeared on three-day bays. His sister, my Aunt Jane, would get a call from Boston, Providence, or Worcester, and we would drive off into the night in her 1938 Dodge to bring him home, just west of Boston, and sober him up before he returned to his base at Newport, R.I. After the war, Vin drifted further and drank more, ending up as a cook at a veterans' hospital, where he should have been a patient; living in his deceased father's house; married (unhappily) for the second time; at the end of his rope. So, on that spring day that I recall as mockingly sunny, he sealed himself inside his father's kitchen; he turned on the gas and he left, without a word of goodbye. What despair. What courage, indeed. But also, what a mess he left behind. And what questions he left unanswered.

I've never understood why Vin enlisted in 1942, though reading veterans' accounts of warfare gives me hints. Vin was thirty-eight then, safe from the draft, and he had me to think about. All that aside, Hynes settles questions of motivation by bluntly saying "a young man goes to war because it is there to go to."⁶ My father was not young, but perhaps the same principle applies to a man who was desperate and directionless after his wife's death. World War II, of course, was the Good War, a struggle between good and evil, but most World War II memoirs undercut noble motives with irony, "the serum that inoculated Americans against the disillusionment that had caused England its long hangover" after World War I, argues Hynes.⁷ Yet war, former warriors tell us, holds many romantic attractions. "War expands and extends what is possible in life for an ordinary man" and "war offers experiences that men value and remember."⁸ And I remember that men who did not enter the service during World War II, whatever their reasons, bore some shame, so it would have been hard for my father to resist the call to duty after Pearl Harbor.

War, then, as Chris Hedges puts it in the title of his reflections on the wars he witnessed as a reporter in the 1990s, "is a force that gives us meaning."⁹ Furthermore, "war is an exciting elixir. It gives us resolve, a

cause. It allows us to be noble.”¹⁰ But, for Hedges, noble motives and romantic dreams turn to pervasive “infection” that invades both the warrior and the body politic of his nation. “For even as war gives meaning to sterile lives, it also promotes killers and racists.”¹¹ My father was one of those infected by war, diseased beyond the anodyne of irony’s serum.

World War II for me—I was ten years old when it ended—was a prolonged, patriotic party: war bond drives in grammar school, Victory Gardens, Movietone newsreels of aircraft carriers blasting Japanese-held Pacific islands where I knew my father would soon be fighting. I vividly recall the rapture and relief of V-J Day, milling in the crowd of celebrants on Main Street—the kissing, the shouting, the prospect of peace and prosperity, the promise of love and happiness that we felt in hearing on the radio Doris Day sing “I’ll be seeing you in all the old, familiar places.”

Worrisome moments came only after the war, culminating in my father’s 1950 suicide. On Christmas Day 1947, he caused a scene that alienated his sister and her long-suffering husband, my beloved Uncle Cliff. Vin had been drinking all day, stewing silently in grief without relief, when my aunt insisted I play the piano before we sat down to Christmas dinner. We all moved to the “front room,” the museum where she displayed her best knick-knacks and furniture, a room off-limits, apart from Christmas celebrations and my dogged piano practice sessions. I reluctantly and haltingly performed my repertoire, “Nola,” and “Kitten on the Keys,” while the adults suffered in silence. Only when Aunt Jane urged me to play “White Christmas” did my father stir from his boozy funk, to say, “Don’t play that damn thing. We heard enough of it in the Pacific from Tokyo Rose!” But Aunt Jane had her way and I played the damn thing.

I was somewhere in the “may your days be merry and bright” passage when I heard the first crash, followed by another. I didn’t want to face what trouble had descended upon us, so I finished up—“and may all your Christmases be white”—as Aunt Jane was screaming for Vin to *stop!* But I turned to see that he would not cease until every one of her curios was examined and then thrown against a wall. Uncle Cliff reluctantly intervened, calmed Vin down and guided him to my bedroom, where he could sleep off his rage. What was that all about? Eventually I was able to understand—though the explanation did not reveal the meaning of the mystery—that Vin had idly picked up one of Aunt Jane’s knick-knacks and noticed “Made in Japan” painted on its base. That, combined with alcohol and anger against what he must have seen as the mockery of “White Christmas,” was too much for him, so he threw the piece of ceramic apostasy against a wall, then looked for more to break. Christmas

1947 was as shattered as Aunt Jane's curios. None of us realized just how shattered Vin was, as well.¹²

For Henry James, writing in August 1914, The Great War represented "the plunge of civilization into the abyss of blood and darkness . . . that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, . . . making it too tragic for words."¹³ But not, as it turned out, beyond the reach of language, for James's eloquent epiphany anticipates the floodtide of words poured out to describe and account for modern warfare. For war, whatever else it may be, is a painful process of initiation and enlightenment, a motivation for reflection and an inspiration for journalism, memoirs, fiction, and poetry. Indeed, the tragic may only be contained, fully imagined, in language.

"Never such innocence," wrote Philip Larkin of the British who went off to war in "MCMXIV":

Never before or since,
As changed itself to past
Without a word—the men
Leaving the gardens tidy,
The thousands of marriages
Lasting a little while longer:
Never such innocence again.¹⁴

But innocence among the young men who fight wars and the citizenry who applaud them as they march "over there," while qualified by the record of previous wars, is, it seems, infinitely renewable, so the terrible facts and lessons of warfare require constant retelling. War, as H. G. Wells wrote, "is just the killing of things and the smashing of things," but "when it is all over, then literature and civilization will have to begin again."¹⁵ The literature of warfare of the last century, particularly war memoirs, then, stands as an eloquent claim to civilization under siege and threatened by destruction; such literature is testimony to the transformation, for soldiers and civilians, affected by unimaginable experience, from innocence to awareness.

Two works from World War II illustrate this arc of increasing awareness in their titles, plots, and themes: Martha Gellhorn's novel of European combat in World War II, *Point of No Return*, and Samuel Hynes's memoir of his experience as a Navy aviator in the South Pacific during the same war, *Flights of Passage*. Gellhorn's novel, when published in 1948, was titled *The Wine of Astonishment*, "a ludicrously wrong title," wrote Gellhorn in the Afterword to the renamed novel,

reissued in 1995. Ludicrously wrong, perhaps, because the astonishment she dramatized had nothing to do with anything so soothing as wine. Better *Point of No Return*, taken from what the R.A.F. called the “turn or die” point, beyond which their planes would be certain to run out of fuel and crash after they completed their bombing mission over Germany. Her novel centers on an Army soldier, Jacob Levy, “a good, simple, unthinking young man, hardly a man yet, wonderfully looking though he was unconscious of his appearance,” her updated version of Melville’s saintly innocent, Billy Budd. Gellhorn uses Levy to relive her memory of Dachau, where she was present as a reporter and as a witness to Nazi genocide on the day Germany’s surrender was announced. In “Dachau,” her June 1945 report for *Collier’s*, Gellhorn conveys her sense of relief with the irony of a troubling new awareness: “I was in Dachau when the German armies surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. It was a suitable place to be.”¹⁶ There, more intensely, Jacob Levy “was blasted into a knowledge of evil that he had not known existed in the human species; and so was I. I realized that Dachau has been my lifelong point of no return.”¹⁷ After such knowledge, never such innocence again.

Samuel Hynes, only eighteen when he entered Navy Flight School, recalls being just such an innocent abroad in a world of warfare. Growing up in the 1930s, when flight was romantic, “I was a true believer in the religion of flight.”¹⁸ Aloft, like Icarus, Hynes felt he had ascended into a new realm of being, a flight of passage into knowledge and behavior available only to adults. “I would never die. I would go on flying forever.”¹⁹ But then, perhaps like Daedalus, he later “realized that some of the men I knew would die, that they would be killed by planes, by bad luck, by their own errors. At that moment the life of flying changed” and he confronted his own mortality.²⁰ That is, Hynes had reached his point of no return. Thereafter, he entered a world of death and destruction on one South Pacific island after another: Majuro, Guam, Ulithi. “It was strange—it was a new world, unfamiliar in every particular, with an unexplained code of behavior, full of puzzles and mysteries.”²¹ He moved deeper into the realm of mystery on Saipan, then on Okinawa, where he flew one hundred missions, bombing Japanese troops and transporting goods to American forces, in the prolonged battle for the island.

Finally, well on the other side of his point of no return, Hynes became accustomed to warfare, the company of men without women, the intensity of danger, the beauty of flight, the horror of death. When war ended, he was relieved that he and his fellow pilots would not have to fly missions during the planned invasion of Kyushu, but he was also saddened, for something had gone out of his life. “Our common enterprise had come to

an end; the invasion of Kyushu, and our flaming deaths in combat, would not take place.”²² He was faced with what he would not allow himself to imagine while flying missions: what to do with the rest of his life. Hynes returned to Pensacola, where he had trained to fly. Before his discharge from the Navy, he took one final flight over Florida’s piney woods. “It was all over now, we were at the end of the adventure; we had become men with families and responsibilities and futures. The end of flying had made us mortal.”²³

Decades after World War II, Samuel Hynes, then a Princeton professor of literature, returned to the study of war in three eloquent books, covering the literature of World War I, memoirs of twentieth-century wars, and his own war experience. Hynes’ Princeton colleague, Paul Fussell, another veteran of World War II, has also written insightfully about the two world wars, particularly in *The Great War and Modern Memory*; Hynes further illuminates what Fussell calls “the ironic structure of events” that characterizes World War I.²⁴

In *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*, Hynes insists that “loss is the great theme of this war; not victory, not defeat, but simply *loss*.”²⁵ Not only innocence was lost, but also a coherent sense of the world and a familiar language in which to describe it. “War had created a new reality; and a new reality may require a new language, and devalue an old one.”²⁶ The high patriotism and call for heroic sacrifice in Rupert Brooke’s war sonnets (“If I should die, think only this of me: / That there’s some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England.”) gave way to the anger and cynicism of Siegfried Sassoon’s poetry (“The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still, / And I remember things I’d best forget.”) and the bitter pathos of the poems of Wilfrid Owen (“What passing-bells for these who die as cattle? / Only the monstrous anger of the guns.”), who was killed in the last days of the war.²⁷ Like Fussell before him, Hynes sees the literature of the Great War as a version of the anti-pastoral.²⁸ Romantic landscapes became the killing fields of trench warfare. The art that portrayed that war was “without heroes, without a tradition, and without Nature, in which men were martyrs and the earth was a devastated anti-landscape.”²⁹

Satire became the dominant postwar tone, in such works as Robert Graves’s memoir, *Goodbye to All That*. Under attack were the conventional values, institutions, and representative men and women that had propped Victorian England: “patriotism, women, mothers, generals, heroes, the Church.”³⁰ Thus the Great War shaped a distinctly modern sensibility, exemplified in Ford Maddox Ford’s *Parade’s End*, a novel written in a “fragmented, elliptical, difficult form,” for modernism “is

most fundamentally the forms that postwar artists found for their sense of modern history: history seen as discontinuous, the past remote and unavailable, or available only as the ruins of itself, and the present a formless space emptied of value.”³¹ The poppies of Flanders Field were bombed into a wasteland, the ironic emblem of the modern age.

In *Goodbye to All That*, Graves suggests that memoirs of “some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities.”³² After the experience and literature of the Great War, war would be seen in modernist terms, with irony and suspicion. In a searingly beautiful Vietnam memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War*, Tobias Wolff writes of the many ways “we were lied to, and knew it. Misinformed, innocently and by design. Confused.” Reality, then, was as much composed as observed; still “it was the reality you lived in, that would live on in you through the years ahead, and become the story by which you remembered all that you had seen, and done, and been.”³³ Anthony Swofford succinctly makes the same point: “what follows is neither true nor false but *what I know*.”³⁴ *Story*—the composition of plausible narrative to name, contain and explain incredible experience—increasingly characterizes twentieth-century war memoirs.

Hynes’s *The Soldier’s Tale* examines the ways warriors sought to preserve their war experiences in personal narratives, stories “about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them,” as Philip Caputo puts it in his Vietnam War memoir, *A Rumor of War*.³⁵ Hynes’s overview of twentieth-century war narratives stresses the soldier’s initiation into a world where the only constants are strangeness and death. These memoirs, most written by soldiers from the officer ranks in World War I, came increasingly from enlisted men in World War II and the Vietnam War. Typically they were composed in the plain style, suggesting that embellishment would be an inappropriate way to represent the surreal experience of war. These writers “have reported their wars in a plain, naming vocabulary, describing objects and actions in unmetaphorical terms, appealing always to the data of the senses.”³⁶

The nearly forty million casualties of The Great War brought about a sense of helplessness before its random force, particularly in the trench warfare that emblemizes the war. “This would be the first psychopathological war,” in which soldiers were designated as “shell-shocked.”³⁷ The experience of war found in memoirs by Graves, Sassoon, and many others traces “a movement through strangeness to comprehension.”³⁸ But what these innocent, once-adventurous, Edwardian young men came to comprehend—at least those fortunate enough to survive the slaughter and write about their experiences—was the

emptiness of the values that had drawn them to fight for their nation.

The lessons of irony and death that emerge from writings on The Great War were not lost on soldiers of World War II. Hynes: “The war-in-the-heads, when war came, would not be the romantic fancies of nineteenth-century writers but the antiwar myth of the Western Front.”³⁹ After the German blitz on London and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the whole American nation, it seems, enlisted “for the duration,” as was said at the time.

Still, this war also initiated young men into a daunting realm of consciousness, testified to by Gardner Botsford in his graceful memoir, *A Life of Privilege, Mostly*. Botsford, who found himself at the Normandy landing, was awed by the magnitude of what he witnessed on Omaha Beach. “I could hardly take in the immensity of the scene, which was setting the heavens roaring from one edge of the horizon to another.”⁴⁰ This landing scene was so overwhelming that Botsford, looking back over the decades in wonder, could record only impressionistic responses, “snapshots of tiny fragments of the world’s stupendous event, snapshots with no anchor in time or meaning.”⁴¹ Life-preservers washing up on the shore, wounded soldiers, German prisoners, corpses, stench, chaos. But Botsford, before and after the war a savvy *New Yorker* writer and editor, protected himself with humor against both the horror of war and the “tutti-frutti sentimentality” of war propaganda. For example, General George S. Patton, who fined Botsford for not wearing his lieutenant bars, despite being in a battle zone, “looked like an overstuffed owl seeking out mice.”⁴² Still, once discharged, Botsford, thinking of himself as an Odysseus home from the wars, found himself transformed; war had made him a man, but anger and restlessness marked his initial home life; he required considerable time and support from his wife and the *New Yorker* to adapt to the undramatic demands of civilian life. “This metamorphosis, in fact” was the legacy of war, the destructive element in which his character was shaped.⁴³ Yet, Botsford survived to succeed in his public and private life, able to give his experience artful form in his memoir, published nearly half a century after his most intense war experiences.

The Good War ended in the cataclysm of Hiroshima and the horror of Auschwitz, revelations beyond anything Americans could possibly have imagined, unnerving emblems of future wars of unchecked force and unabated vindictiveness. Soon enough, notes Hynes, in Vietnam, American fought a “Bad War after a Good War: it was like a fall from grace.”⁴⁴ As the Great War was a shock of recognition to England, Vietnam was occasion for America’s initiation into new realms of consciousness marked by irony and senselessness.

“You might say that the war in Vietnam was ironic from the beginning, that its essential meaning was the *absence* of a single coherent meaning in its events,” suggests Hynes.⁴⁵ If World War II was a force that gave America meaning, then Vietnam was a lingering, national disease, “like the memory of an illness, a kind of fever that weakened the country until its people were divided and its cause lost.”⁴⁶

Tobias Wolff’s memoir, *In Pharaoh’s Army*, beautifully illustrates his transformation as an Army lieutenant in Vietnam from innocence to experience, from romance to realism, from idealism to cynicism. He was drawn into the military because “the men I’d respected when I was growing up had all served, and most of the writers I looked up to,” particularly “Hemingway, to whom I turned for guidance in all things.” Determined to be a writer, Wolff became predatory about gathering experience and saw war as the ultimate experience.⁴⁷ He also sought honor, to distinguish himself from his con-man father. In other words, Wolff had a lot to learn and his memoir—also, like those written by Hynes and Botsford, published long after his war experience—is an eloquent, distanced recollection of his education under fire.

Though in the Army, Wolff did not see action for some time. He went to Airborne jump school, then Officers Candidate School, after which he became a lieutenant, assigned for a year to learn Vietnamese at the Defense Language Institute in Washington. So Wolff had plenty of time to modify his high-minded ideals and to think about what he had got himself into. Wolff becomes aware of growing antiwar sentiments and began to read about Vietnam. Graham Greene’s 1952 novel, *The Quiet American*, set in Vietnam, “affected me disagreeably,” but Wolff recoiled from what he saw as the novel’s cynicism and its criticism of the novel’s central character, “Pyle, the earnest, blundering American. I did not fail to hear certain tones of my own voice in his, and this was irritating, even insulting. Yet I read the book again, and again.”⁴⁸ The pale cast of thought—first that of others, then his own—focused exquisite and somewhat debilitating self-consciousness on all that would come next for Lieutenant Wolff.

In Vietnam, Wolff entered a world of constant danger and threats of death, a world without rhyme or reason. In one of his several close calls, for example, Wolff tells of a colonel who was standing next to another lieutenant, near Wolff, as they listened to distant battle reports coming though their radio. The colonel arbitrarily picked the lieutenant nearest him to go into action, a lieutenant who was killed later that day. Wolff still lives with the haunting memory that he could have been, perhaps should have been, chosen. He cannot explain why another man was arbitrarily

chosen to die and he was allowed to live, so he gives up asking. “In a world where the most consequential things happen by chance, or from unfathomable causes, you don’t look to reason for help. You consort with mysteries.”⁴⁹

But the Tet Offensive, the nationwide Vietcong attack on American forces that began on January 31, 1968, “which I think of now as a kind of birthday; the first day in the rest of my life, for sure,” was Wolff’s true initiation into mysteriousness.⁵⁰ He became an avid student of the “lesson” the Vietcong taught American forces. Under fire from all sides, Wolff and his 150 men were on their own to protect themselves and guard My Tho, a village that they ended up laying waste to in the process of defending it. “When you’re afraid you will kill anything that might kill you. Now the enemy had the town, the town was the enemy.”⁵¹

Only when Wolff was discharged, did he realize how much warfare had changed him. Wolff found he could not reenter the circle of family and friends; he was “morally embarrassed,” feeling “a sense of deficiency, even blight, had taken hold of me. In Vietnam I’d barely noticed it, but here, among people who did not take corruption and brutality for granted, I came to understand that I did, and that this set me apart.”⁵²

In a bar, Wolff tried to tell civilians a fantastic story about a captain who insisted that a Chinook pick up a gun in the middle of a refugee village; as it descended, the huge helicopter blew the thatched roofs off hooches. But Wolff failed to find a way to adequately convey the absurdity of the tale or to make clear his own complicity in it, for Lieutenant Wolff so disliked the captain that he did not try to prevent him from destroying the villagers’ homes:

How do you tell such a story? Maybe such a story should not be told at all. Yet finally it will be told. But as soon as you open your mouth you have problems, problems of recollection, problems of tone, ethical problems. How can you judge the man you were now that you’ve escaped his circumstances, his fears and desires, now that you hardly remember who he was?

Wolff accuses himself of posing and self-pity in telling such a story. “And isn’t it just like an American boy, to want you to admire his sorrow at tearing other people’s houses apart? And in the end who gives a damn, who’s listening? What do you owe the listener, and which listener do you owe?”⁵³

It would take years for Wolff to gain sufficient distance to shape his tale of war, to balance personal anger with literary order. Then, when he

found his way into writing about his Vietnam experience, Wolff felt “I was saving my life with every word I wrote, and I knew it.” He attended Oxford University for four years, reading for an honors degree in English language and literature, trying to recover from his marred life in war. “I’d carried a little bit of Vietnam home with me in the form of something like malaria that wasn’t malaria, ulcers, colitis, insomnia, and persistent terrors when I did sleep. Coming up shaky after a bad night, I could do wonders for myself simply by looking out the window.”⁵⁴ Then, by looking back on all he had seen in war, Wolff began to write himself out of his long disease.

After Vietnam, America’s wars grew even stranger, leaving its veterans with a permanent sense of psychic damage. “It took years for you to understand that the most complex and dangerous conflicts, the most harrowing operations, and the most deadly wars, occur in the head,” writes Anthony Swofford in *Jarhead*, his painful memoir of the Gulf War of 1991.⁵⁵ In retrospect, that war did not amount to much, at least in comparison with what would soon follow: unnumbered deaths from wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, indeed all across the globe. Swofford realized that Desert Storm was a lesser war. “When compared to what we’ve heard from fathers and uncles and brothers about Vietnam, our entire ground war lasted as long as a long-range jungle patrol, and we’ve lost as many men, theater-wide, as you might need to fill two companies of grunts.”⁵⁶ But that knowledge did not lessen the intensity of what Hynes called “the war in the head” that haunts veterans. The long buildup to the Gulf War gave American forces time to brood upon what they believed awaited them across the berm that was the border between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia: the prospect of death in battle, from bombing or through biochemical attack. When Iraqi troops set Kuwait oil wells ablaze, he knew “a burning, fiery oil of hell awaits us,” just ahead.⁵⁷ Just behind, it was rumored, a hundred thousand body bags had been stored in Riyadh, ready to carry home dead American soldiers in what Iraqis predicted would be “the Mother of All Battles.”

Indeed, once in Kuwait, hot petrol did rain down on Marines and they came under “friendly fire” from U.S. tanks. Still, Swofford got what he wished for in Saudi Arabia, arriving two days after his twentieth birthday with the Seventh Marines: vindication of his manhood through warfare. “This is war, I think. I’m walking through what my father and his father walked through—the epic results of American bombing and American might.”⁵⁸ Son of an American sergeant, Swofford had been conceived at the Honolulu Hilton, during his father’s R&R from fighting in Vietnam. Though his father was a war casualty, a man unable to unclench his fists

as a civilian, Anthony determined to find or to form himself in the military. He did just that, as *Jarhead* eloquently testifies, but he also yielded his innocence and came to understand that he was fighting not for high principles but “for the vast fortune of others” who wanted to protect the oil fields of Kuwait.⁵⁹ The cynicism of his mission and the haunting thoughts of impending doom made him put the muzzle of his rifle in his mouth and contemplate suicide. He did not pull the trigger because he would not betray his Marine “family,” which Swofford grants is dysfunctional. Indeed, he would live with his complex realization: “The warrior always fights for a sorry cause. And if he lives, he tells stories.”⁶⁰ Swofford’s story is an extended complaint; the military that gave him his identity, and taught him to kill and face being killed also deceived him and dismissed his importance. “I have gone to war and now I can issue my complaint . . . I am entitled to speak, to say *I belonged to a fucked situation.*”⁶¹ *Grand Illusion* is more than the title of a great antiwar film about World War I; it is the theme of modern war memoirs.

My father, after his war in the Pacific, did not find a way to save his life through writing or anything else, though he preserved it for a time in alcohol. Dead at forty-six, he would be one hundred now, had he lived. He came of age in the bubbly 1920s, toughed it out through the daunting 1930s, and patriotically volunteered for service after Pearl Harbor. In his own small way, he was a hero in a just war; his grave marker, a flat stone in front of the large family tombstone, is inscribed “Massachusetts SC2 USNR World War II.” By his rank and service he will be remembered, for he too took his long day’s journey into night, through fields of fire, wartime experiences so eloquently evoked in the memoirs of those, unlike him, who survived the wars of the twentieth century and lived to write another day.

Notes

1. “The Second World War, five times more destructive of human life and incalculably more costly in material terms, was the direct outcome of the First.” John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 3.
2. John Keegan, ed., *The Book of War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), xvii–xix.
3. Gardner Botsford, *A Life of Privilege, Mostly* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 3.
4. Samuel Hynes, *The Soldier’s Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (New

- York: Penguin Books, 1998), xiii.
5. Anthony Swofford, *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 74.
 6. Hynes, *Soldier's Tale*, 49.
 7. *Ibid.*, 115.
 8. *Ibid.*, 23.
 9. Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002).
 10. *Ibid.*, 3.
 11. *Ibid.*, 9, 104.
 12. American soldiers' hatred for the Japanese in the South Pacific was not only the result of racism, Samuel Hynes argues, it was also a response to their willingness to commit suicide in attacks and their brutality. War in the Pacific was "remote from the continents, the history, the civilizations that men from Western nations knew." Hynes, *Soldier's Tale*, 159–63.
 13. Henry James, cited in Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1991), 3.
 14. Philip Larkin, cited in Hynes, *Soldier's Tale*, 106.
 15. H. G. Wells, cited in *ibid.*, 127.
 16. Martha Gellhorn, "Dachau," *Reporting World War II, Part Two: American Journalism 1944–1946* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 730.
 17. Martha Gellhorn, afterword in *Point of No Return* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 330.
 18. Samuel Hynes, *Flights of Passage: Recollections of a World War II Aviator* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 14.
 19. *Ibid.*, 60.
 20. *Ibid.*, 75.
 21. *Ibid.*, 164.
 22. *Ibid.*, 252.
 23. *Ibid.*, 270.
 24. "The ironic structure of events was becoming conventional, even Hardy-esque: if the pattern of things in 1915 had been a number of small optimistic hopes ending in small ironic catastrophes, the pattern in 1916 was that of one vast optimistic hope leading to one vast ironic catastrophe. The Somme affair, destined to be known among the troops as the Great Fuck-Up, was the largest engagement fought since the beginning of civilization." Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 12. In *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), preface, Fussell traces "the psychological and emotional culture of Americans and Britons during the Second World War." In *Doing Battle: The Making of A Skeptic*, Fussell tells of the war experiences that changed him utterly (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996).
 25. Hynes, *War Imagined*, 52.
 26. *Ibid.*, 109.
 27. Rupert Brooke, "The Soldier"; Siegfried Sassoon, "The rank stench of those bodies haunts me still"; Wilfrid Owen, "Anthem for a Doomed Youth," Jon Silkin, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 81, 124, 183.
 28. Larks and nightingales, emblems of English romantic verse, became ironic

- announcements of upcoming shelling. Fussell, *Great War*, 231.
29. Hynes, *War Imagined*, 16.
 30. *Ibid.*, 243–44.
 31. *Ibid.*, 433. Fussell traces “the passage of modern writing from one mode to another, from the low mimetic of the plausible and the social to the ironies of the outrageous, the ridiculous, and the murderous.” *Great War*, 312.
 32. Cited in Hynes, *Soldier’s Tale*, 16.
 33. Tobias Wolff, *In Pharaoh’s Army: Memories of the Lost War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 20.
 34. Swofford, *Jarhead*, 2.
 35. Cited in Hynes, *Soldier’s Tale*, 3.
 36. *Ibid.*, 26.
 37. *Ibid.*, 62.
 38. *Ibid.*, 73.
 39. *Ibid.*, 108.
 40. Botsford, *Life of Privilege*, 22.
 41. *Ibid.*, 25.
 42. *Ibid.*, 36, 69.
 43. *Ibid.*, 77.
 44. Hynes, *Soldier’s Tale*, 178.
 45. *Ibid.*, 201.
 46. *Ibid.*, 177.
 47. Wolff, *Pharaoh’s Army*, 44.
 48. *Ibid.*, 68.
 49. *Ibid.*, 96.
 50. *Ibid.*, 133.
 51. *Ibid.*, 138.
 52. *Ibid.*, 195.
 53. *Ibid.*, 208. Wolf’s reflections on the art and purpose of war stories echo those of Tim O’Brien in *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990). In “How to Tell A War Story” O’Brien reflects: “In any war story, but especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way.” (78)
 54. Wolff, *Pharaoh’s Army*, 223–25.
 55. Swofford, *Jarhead*, 247–48.
 56. *Ibid.*, 239.
 57. *Ibid.*, 200.
 58. *Ibid.*, 222.
 59. *Ibid.*, 63.
 60. *Ibid.*, 134.
 61. *Ibid.*, 254.