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REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Where's our 'Iliad'?

As American soldiers fight and die in unknown and unpronounceable places, we back home must try harder than in past wars to understand what they are going through. We should put our trust in what men and women who have been through war have written about it.

How many of us who have not fought overseas can conjure up more than a handful of names of places in Vietnam, Korea, the Pacific and now Afghanistan? But listen to American ambulance driver Frederic Henry in Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to

Arms": "There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. . . . Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates."

John Dawes, in his new book "The Language of War," explains that writers who know war "anchor" their language in the real. Soldiers remember the flooded trenches of the Somme and the bitterly frozen terrain along the Changjin Reservoir. Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien in "The Things They Carried" distills war down to the 70 pounds of high-tech firepower and equipment humped by American foot soldiers, and the shorts, sandals, rice and rifle found on a 15-year-old Viet Cong soldier lying dead in a ditch. "True war stories . . . do not indulge in abstraction or analysis. . . . A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe. . . . A true war story is never moral."

For this reason, soldiers often have nothing to say to us about their time at war. They use three-word phrases for the inexplicable: "There it is" or "Don't mean nuthin'." Some use absolute silence to keep sacred things that only their fellow soldiers can fully share. This is why James Bradley had to write "Flags of Our Fathers." His flag-raising father's courageous service as a medical corpsman in the brutal fighting on Iwo Jima left him with nothing to say to his son about wartime heroism except that the real heroes didn't come back.

We owe it to the soldiers who are now fighting and dying for us civilians to be informed about what Gen. Tommy Franks has ominously called "our ongoing operations in Vietnam." Patriotism asks for frank truth from government and media sources.

Patriotism also requires that we try to understand and respect the enemy. Demonizing the enemy has been identified as contributing to the incidence of post traumatic stress disorder in combat veterans. It is unnecessary. The literature of war from all periods documents the kindred respect soldiers develop for "the enemy" who are undergoing the same terrifying and life-threatening stresses they are. Americans respect suicidally fanatical Japanese troops in James Jones' "The Thin Red Line" and German soldiers recognize the humanity of allied soldiers in Erich Maria Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front."

We see this most clearly at the beginning of western warfare, embodied in Homer's "Iliad." The Greeks fought war upon war upon war throughout their long history. Their "bible" had to prepare young men and women for war. So the "Iliad" has a realistic hero.

The once-young warrior Achilles has fought bravely for nine long years at Troy. He has conducted 23 successful assaults on surrounding military targets. He finally reaches his breaking point. He speaks with public anger against his commander-in-chief. He goes AWOL. His absence causes the loss of countless Greek lives — including his best friend's. He descends into uncontrolled barbaric slaughter. He mercilessly kills his chief adversary Hector, military leader of Troy, and desecrates his corpse. He eventually comes to humane terms with Hector's father, Priam king of Troy.

The "Iliad" has no room for John-Wayne patriotism or false representations of courage and honor. It depicts even its heroes as flawed and human, at times cowardly. It has no demonized enemies. The men, women and children of Troy and their soldiers are portrayed so humanly that some scholars have argued that Hector is the true hero of the poem. The later Greeks use the word "polemioi" to mean enemies. In the "Iliad," it simply means men at war.

Patriotism in times of war has 20-20 vision of how things are. The Greeks knew it. Let's hope we see things just as clearly in our war on terrorism.

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