

Do People Ever Really Remember the Names of the War Dead?
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*Tell me what were their names, tell me what were their names,
Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?*

*One hundred men were drowned in that dark watery grave
When that good ship went down only forty-four were saved.*

Woody Guthrie began writing his ballad about the *USS Reuben James* right after its torpedoing by a German submarine on Halloween Day 1941. In the song he first wrote, he sang out all eighty-six names of those lost at sea. But other songwriters, like Pete Seeger, told Guthrie that Americans would be bored by such a list. So those dead are now anonymous, and even their number has been rounded up for "singability."

We are now told that our men and women will be dying in Iraq for anywhere between two and twelve years. We like to think that these soldiers are dying for something, that their names will live on, like those of veterans killed in our twentieth century wars inscribed on the plaque on the courthouse grounds in Marfa, Texas. But what does such a memorial mean and what is it worth?

I visited Marfa just after Memorial Day and read those names again and again. It is pious to use the names of fallen soldiers, like those in Marfa, to honor and lament the dead. It would be better to ponder why so many deaths from such a small town are necessary, again and again. But I think it is impious to use such memorials to encourage the latest generation of young men and women to be willing to kill and die when so directed by our leaders. They should be told that their posthumous fame will be brief and that their deaths will only leave profound sorrow for their families and friends.

Siegfried Sassoon recoiled at the list of names on the Menin Gate memorial of the 90,000 British soldiers who died senselessly in the ghastly battles at Ypres during the First World War. He wrote:

*Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
"Their name liveth for ever," The Gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulcher of crime.*

The propagandistic use of the names of the dead is insidious. It is worse than the military's deceitful glorification of individual deaths, like that of Pat Tillman, which his own parents find repugnant. Worst of all may be the exploitation of the names and memories of our greatest generation. *US News and World Report* (June 6, 2005) claimed that President Ronald Reagan's speech marking the 40th Anniversary of D-Day in 1984 freed World War II veterans to speak out and to remind our cynical nation that America was "still the shining city on a hill."

This is a jingoistic misuse of history. In my experience, World War II vets, like my father, were silent about their war experiences because they wanted to put the horrors of war behind them. Many of them saw clearly that subsequent wars and U.S. foreign and domestic policy after 1945 had tarnished any shine our country once had.

As we read day after day now the names of American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan, it might be good to read what some of our greatest generation veterans--those who did the fighting, tried to save the dying, and nursed the grotesquely wounded--actually had to say about our one "good war." Here is a characteristic sample of their witness as collected by oral historian Studs Terkel in the early 1980's. It was published in 1984. Terkel did not interview Ronald Reagan, because Reagan, like our current president, never saw combat.

"I was raised in a house that believed in God. All right? But it took something like this to hammer it home to me: I am totally averse to killing and warfare. I saw it with my own eyes and it didn't do a dadratted thing. And the wonderful boys we lost over there."

--Elliott Johnson, D-Day veteran, artillery, landed June 6, 1944

"Americans have never known what war really is. No matter how much they saw it on television or pictures or magazines. Because there is one feature they never appreciated: the smell. It's not discriminating, [the rotting corpses] all smell the same. Maybe if Americans had known even that, they'd be more concerned about peace."

--Dr. Alex Shulman, a young army surgeon during the Battle of the Bulge

"I was interviewing Pacific survivors: burn victims, basket cases, the real horrors of war. I used to feel it would be terrible to expose the public to the sight of these people. Then I felt it would be criminal not to expose them. The public has to know what war is."

--Frieda Wolff, first navy public relations and then Red Cross nurse in Europe after D-Day

"It's only the glamour of war that appeals to people. They don't know real war."

--Betty Bayse Hutchinson, Army nurse for critically injured GI's

"[I heard] General Patton addressing these thousands upon thousands of young Americans. Some of them had never seen anything outside their high school. The hardest drink they ever had was a milkshake. He said to these young boys, 'With your blood and my guts'--I'll never get over that till the day I die. Your blood and my guts."

--Frieda Wolff

"Downtown Pasadena after the war was a very elite community. Nicely dressed women just standing there staring [at the severely wounded soldiers who were still getting reconstructive surgery]. In the Pasadena paper came letters to the editor: Why can't they be kept on their own grounds and off the streets? The patients themselves showed me these letters....It's like the war hadn't come to Pasadena until we came there."

--Betty Bayse Hutchinson

"And now, I'm simply antiwar, that's it." --Frieda Wolff

Bottom line. The World War II vets I know and the ones whom Terkel interviewed believed that if we are going to send young men off to the horrors of modern mechanized war, we had better have a damned good reason--and we had better tell them truthfully what they are getting into.

A slightly shorter version of this piece appeared in the *Austin American-Statesman*. The article is reprinted here with permission of the author.

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