

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# What's the truth of war?

**I**t took Kurt Vonnegut nearly 20 years to figure out how he wanted to memorialize his own experiences of World War II. Erich Maria Remarque took almost a decade to memorialize the suffering of German and French soldiers in World War I. And Rolando Hinojosa-Smith memorialized the frozen carnage of the Korean War 25 years after he left Korea.



My friend Chuck Patterson knew right away some of what he wanted to memorialize about his friend and fellow Marine, Marion Henry Norman, who died at Khe Sanh on March 30, 1968. But it took him 15 years to write the rest of his poem about “laughing, smiling Hank.”

It is hard for veterans who come back from war to know what to say to civilians about their experiences. But what do those who died at war want to say to us?

This Memorial Day will be the first since my former student, good friend and scholarly collaborator, Col. Theodore Westhusing, died outside of Baghdad last June 5. He was 44 years old. Ted left in unimaginable grief his wife of 17 years, their three young children, his parents and his brothers and sisters.

In 1983, Ted graduated third in his class from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. A friend recalls that Ted lived his life with “‘Duty, Honor, Country’ always echoing in the background.” In the time I knew him, Ted often placed these principles squarely in the foreground, in what he thought and said, and in how he lived. Duty called Ted voluntarily to take a leave from his position as an academy professor at West Point and go to Iraq as senior adviser in counter terrorism-special operations.

I think of Ted every day. The card from his memorial service sits on my bookshelves at home. A photograph of his soldier's memorial in Iraq (his boots, rifle and helmet) faces me as I sit at my desk at the University of Texas. They help me remember his sacrifice and our loss.

A month ago, I was asked to speak at the unveiling of a Texan Fallen Soldiers Mural in the School of Social Work building at UT. There is a long tradition of speaking at soldiers'

memorials. Each year in ancient Athens, a single individual was chosen to speak about the honor fallen soldiers had conferred upon their city and their families. All adult male Athenian citizens were soldiers. They expected to hear praise and hear truth.

I thought, “What would Ted and these fallen soldiers from Texas want me to say?”

Fortunately, Ted had already answered my question. He once told me, “If you want to know what soldiering is about, read E.B. Sledge’s ‘With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa.’” He then sent me a copy, with a handwritten dedication that I cherish now, despite its hyperbole: “To Professor Palaima — One of the ‘Old Breed’ of teachers.”

John Keegan, the great modern historian of war, says that “With the Old Breed” “will be read and cited as long as the Pacific campaign is remembered.” Combat veteran Paul Fussell, who has written award-winning accounts of World Wars I and II, calls Sledge’s book one “of the finest memoirs to emerge from any war.”

Ted obviously agreed. But what did he want me to know? Probably some kind of truth. What is Sledge’s truth?

Fifty years after his fighting ended, Sledge was still having nightmares about Okinawa, which he calls “the most ghastly corner of hell I had ever witnessed.” He speaks with unapologetic honesty about “the incredible cruelty that decent men could commit when reduced to a brutish existence in their fight for survival amid the violent death, terror, tension, fatigue and filth that was the infantryman’s war.” And he says, “I don’t like to watch television shows with violence in them.”

Most poignantly, Sledge writes, “There was nothing macho about the war at all. We were a bunch of scared kids who had to do a job. People tell me I don’t act like an ex-Marine. How is an ex-Marine supposed to act? They have some Hollywood stereotype in mind. The only thing that kept you going was your faith in your buddies. It was stronger than flag and country.”

This Memorial Day, think hard about what American and other soldiers have gone through — both those who came back and those who never will.