

Palaima: Take time to heed stories of war

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We owe it to the shrinking percentages of American men and women who now fight our wars to practice what Phil Klay, a former Marine who served in Iraq, preaches in a recent [commentary](#). Klay encourages nonveteran civilians to use our sympathetic imaginations and our own experiences of trauma to take in what those who have been through war have to say about it, despite the widely acknowledged “divide” between soldiers and civilians.

In World War I, 23,000 Australian soldiers were killed in six weeks during the Somme Offensive. One Aussie soldier cries out to us still, “For Christ’s sake, write a book on the life of an infantryman and by doing so you will quickly prevent these shocking tragedies.”

You might reply cynically that plenty of books have been written about the war to end all wars, yet wars continue. But ask yourself what stories get told? And how many of us listen in the right way?

We have a great chance right now to experience a war and the telling of a war start to finish. Set aside about three hours. Go to the exhibition [The World at War, 1914–1918](#). It runs free and open to the public until August 3, 2014 at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Meditate upon the items that curators Jean Cannon and Elizabeth Garver have put on display.

Notice what is there and what is missing in the newspaper clippings, manuscripts, photographs, recruiting and movie posters, official

leaflets, letters, and books. Listen to the audio readings by members of Actors from the London Stage. The Great War is laid out, from the prophetic words of Otto von Bismarck circa 1897 that “the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans” to facts about operations on facial disfigurement performed in Kent, England on 5,000 patients between 1917 and 1925. One photo shows us what mechanized warfare did to human faces.

The exhibition helps us see how the war was “marketed” in official propaganda. The British relied on an all-volunteer army until May 1916. A recruiting poster from 1915 proclaims “Step Into Your Place.” Its drawing shows a long line of men snaking off into the distance. At its front, healthy soldiers march in crisp uniforms and helmets, rifles on their shoulders. At the rear, stepping into line and blending with soldiers are civilians with different attire and accessories: top hat and tails, barrister’s wig and robe, briefcase, pickax, farming fork, a miner’s tool kit, even a golf club. Nowhere are we told that 1 out of 3 of those who joined the line were killed or wounded, about 3 million total.

If you have read the poems of British officer Wilfred Owen or his letters, you will never forget that these once healthy men a short time later cursed through a sucking octopus of mud, moved like old beggars under sacks, drowned in water-filled shell holes, and coughed to death like hags from poison gas. A German poster from 1917 encouraging book donations shows jolly, clean-shaven, clean-dressed soldiers lazily reading in a tidy trench with books stacked neatly on a crate as if by a librarian. The newspaper photos of the dry trenches look like they were taken at a Boy Scout camp. That’s what the people back home saw of the war.

Only one photo in the exhibition shows what might be a dead soldier. But the Allied and Central Powers, by the war’s end, produced more than 13 1/2 million corpses. The war also produced 21 million wounded. Yet a photo of the wounded from the “New York Journal American” shows fifteen soldiers relaxed and smoking on an open

hillside. Three have neat head bandages. Three have arms in slings. None is an amputee.

A counter-balance to this public face of war is offered by Hugh Walpole's letters of June 1915, written while he served in the Russian Red Cross in the Balkans: "Every kind of horror. Wounded on both sides of the road in the wood crying and screaming. ... Day before yesterday eight hundred wounded in twelve hours. I cut off fingers with a pair of scissors easy as nothing!"

Ernest Hemingway, if he were alive today, might advise you to read the letter of Henri de Lallemand at the Ransom Center. Then go home and read Hemingway's poem "Champs d'Honneur."

And think.