Honor the fallen, ignoring the horror

T elli me what were their names, tell me what were their names, Did you have a friend on the good Reuben James?

Honor the fallen, ignoring the horror

One hundred men were drowned in that dark watery grave

Woody Guthrie began writing his ballad about the USS Reuben James right after it was torpedoed by a German submarine on Halloween Day 1941. He began singing out all 86 names of those lost at sea. But other songwriters, such as Pete Seeger, thought his catalogue was too boring. So those dead are now anonymous, and 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 12 years. We like to think that they are dying for something, that their names will live on—like those of veterans killed in our 20th century wars inscribed on the plaque on the Marfa courthouse grounds. 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 the dead 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 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 critically injured in Europe.

I was interviewing Pacific veterans: burn victims, basket cases, the ones that burned themselves from 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 people.

—Dr. Alex Shulman, a young Army surgeon during the Battle of the Bulge.

It 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 furor, the indignation: the end of the war, and we’re still here. The patients themselves showed me these letters.

—I heard General Patton address these thousands upon thousands of young Americans. Some of them had never seen anything outside their high school. The first thing they ever drank 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.”

—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 furor, the indignation: the end of the war, and we’re still here. 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 am simply antiwar. That’s it.

—Frieda Wolff

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There are now anony-