Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Honoring the fallen, ignoring the horror

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 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 fallen soldiers 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.

The propagandistic use of the names of the dead is more insidious than the military's deceitful glorification of individual deaths, such as that of Pat Tillman. But the worst exploitation may be of the names and memories of our greatest generation.

On June 6, 2005, U.S. News and World Report claimed that President Reagan's speech marking the 40th anniversary of D-Day in 1984 freed World War II veterans to speak out and galvanized them to remind our cynical nation that America was "still the shining city on a hill."

This is a jingoistic misuse of history. As we continue to read reports of American casualties in Iraq, it might be good to read what some greatest generation veterans — those who did the fighting, tried to save the dying and nursed the grotesquely wounded — had to say about their war. Here is a characteristic sample of their witness, as collected by oral historian Studs Terkel in the early 1980s and published in 1984:

"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 GIs.

"(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."

— 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'm simply antiwar. That's it."

— Frieda Wolff

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas. Quotations are from Studs Terkel, "The Good War."