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THE GOOD WAR?

Those of you who have read Studs Terkel's latest book might think this title is gross plagiarism but, except for the title, I use his work only to compare the experience of others as they relate to my own. This is not a book review, but I will use Terkel's format in relating to an account of my own experiences of the good war.

The shoots for this presentation were propagated from the paper "The Final Solution" that I presented two years ago. As you might remember, in that paper, I attempted to learn more about myself in conjunction with "the final solution." That research and my inward reflections caused me to question my own actions during World War II. Incidentally, from here on, I'll use just war in place of World War II unless stated otherwise for this paper.

One of the catalysts for my questioning had to do with the Vietnam War veterans. Here they were after returning from a questionable, and in the conclusion, an extremely unpopular war suffering the indignities of vilification, ridicule, and humiliation for being so naive as to serve in such a conflict. These young men were, in general, less educated and monied than those of their generation who had not served their country. They were more inclined to feel it their duty to do the bidding of their government. Also, they had been reared under the glamour of "the good war," influenced by fathers, uncles, and older

brothers who had served in that war. As one retired Red Cross worker in Terkel's book says, "The war was fun for America. I'm not talking about the poor souls who lost sons and daughters. But for the rest of us, the war was a hell of a good time."

As a former young rifleman recalled, "World War II has affected me in many ways ever since. In a short period of time, I had the most tremendous experiences of all of life. Of fear, of jubilation, of misery, of hope, of comradeship, and of endless excitement. I honestly feel grateful for having been a witness to an event as monumental as anything in history and, in a very small way, a participant."

Finally, when a monument was erected for the Vietnam War it depicted , probably justifiably, the dark side of the war rather than these young men's heroic efforts for their government. They had only been following authority's demands, doing what was asked of them. While in actual combat the aforementioned young rifleman recalls, "The reason you storm the beaches is not patriotism or bravery. It's that sense of not wanting to fail your buddies. There's sort of a special sense of kinship."

The reason I recall these accounts is that I, too, was that innocent young man, caught up in doing what the government said, for they were the "authority" and were unquestionably right. In a sense, going along with the norm of the group was the accepted thing to do. Sometimes I questioned or had doubts, even rejecting certain actions personally, but I tried not to impose my ideas on others.

I felt that one of the main reasons for rejection of the

American Viet veteran was the nightly T.V. showing of the atrocities of looting, rape, maiming, and murder. By now, I knew it was time to evaluate my own life. Maybe even if I could not condone their actions, at least I could understand where they were coming from and be sympathetic.

Some may think that this is only an attempt to unload all of my guilt through this paper. But I think not; guilt is nebulous. My actions then were based on my thoughts and knowledge at the time, and now I may regret my actions, but cannot condone guilt for ignorance.

One of the travesties of this type of paper is, I believe, that unless the audience has been in a similar situation, it is difficult to convey one's thoughts at the time. If you have not been in combat, you cannot feel the same. This was brought home to me within this past year when a card group one evening, including two members of fortnightly, were having a discussion. An incident was related concerning war in North Africa. The narrator told of an old man and his donkey pulling a cart across "no man's land" between American and enemy troops. Suddenly a shell burst under this triad, blowing all to smithereens. Something in my past conjured up the spectacle of flying arms, legs, mane, tail, and cart and caused me to burst out laughing; even the story teller smiled at the grizzly humor of such a situation. Albeit, the other men and our wives looked with aghast at such merrymaking, but, unless you have been there --?

One other thought crossed my mind as I reflected on this paper. Maybe it's just the ramblings of an old soldier with a captive audience. It could be said, "An old soldier never dies;

he just daydreams away." But the aging process does give us pause for thought, so here goes.

On a day about a month after cessation of the war in Europe, our command post was operating out of a German home, commandeered from the local populace. As we were lounging out front one day, a couple of small German boys spied a bruised summer apple on the ground and, as they walked by, swiped a greener apple from the tree. The housefrau, who had been observing from across the street, stormed out and proceeded to chase the boys with a broom. Well, we boy soldiers sensing a miscarriage of justice, attempted to rectify the situation by climbing the two bountiful trees and vigorously shaking over half of the very green apples to the ground. One small boy was enticed to make a run for a handful of apples, but hurriedly left on the approach of the broom wielder, probably to suffer more punishment later. Needless to say, the full furor of the frustrated frau was vented through eye contact on us as perpetrators. Unable to understand her anger at the time over a few apples, by now I realize the life-threatening loss in a food-short post-war era.

On a Christmas after the war, while going to the American University at Biarritz, we decided we needed a Christmas tree. Most of us had been absent from our families for at least two Christmases. As this was in warm southwest France, the only evergreen trees in evidence were spied through the iron gates of a stone wall which encircled an old French mansion. The night chosen to liberate said tree was cloudless. After climbing over the broken-glass-topped wall, we had a difficult time

at first finding and then cutting down the tree with pocket knives. As we later sat around the sad, minutely decorated tree far from our families, realizing the crime committed for our celebration, our sorrow outweighed our Christmas spirit.

Before the war ended, however, more serious looting and plundering were the norms as we stormed across Germany. In a constantly moving unit, we were often out of touch with our own mess facilities, so were expected to live on canned and packaged food. As this processing was not as sophisticated or tasty as present day packaging, we chose, instead, to live off the land. As a farm lad having grown up in the 30's, I was well prepared to utilize the food found in the rural German homes we encountered. The glass jar home-canned fruit, vegetables, chicken and beef in the cellars, the cured hams and bacon hanging from the rafters in the attic, the potatoes in the bin and eggs in the hen house, were my normal fare. I should mention, I was the unofficial cook for about ten fellows. As we traveled, we carried a bountiful supply of said food stock in a pilfered hope chest secured to the back of our armored car, replenishing it as needed. After capturing a village, the first duty was to set up security guard posts, but almost simultaneously the hen houses would be checked for fresh eggs. Sometimes a little too soon, as once, when I was walking into one door of a large chicken coop, I spied a German soldier scooting behind a far partition. I yelled at a buddy to prevent exit at another door, but he arrived too late to prevent the soldier from escaping into the woods behind.

Another time we were in a home where the attached dairy

barn had been shelled to the extent that the milk cows had escaped to the adjacent pasture. I was lamenting the fact that the cows wouldn't get milked that night when one of my city buddies decided he wanted fresh milk. As the pasture was overlooked by a German-held elevated forest area, I was at first reluctant, but when two city fellows offered to be cowboys we went out on a roundup. We managed to corral only one tall, skinny, shell-shocked heifer into the barn. Her fear was so strong and I was a stranger. As soon as I was sitting down on my little stool to milk, a kick sent me sprawling in the manure to the merriment of the onlookers. A pair of kickers rectified the situation and we had milk for a few days.

This looting of food would probably not be considered a severe crime by most standards, but a different situation arose. In taking a village, I had checked out one house for enemies, and leaving the back door of that house, I entered the rear door of the next house. There on the shelves was an inviting array of canned cherries. The tantalizing recall of their taste caused me to pause in the war games. Because the lid couldn't be loosened by hand, I tapped it with my bayonet, breaking the jar. Hurriedly, without an eating utensil and unable to eat from the broken jar, I poured the contents into my hand, letting the red juice filter through the fingers before consuming the cherries. Next, I found a cache of wine behind a door and I filled my pockets and opened jacket with all of the ten or twelve bottles. Racing out the front door I accosted the housewife who at first let out a terrifying scream. Then, with a horrified look, she tried to tell me something in German.

As she left I realized her terror upon seeing an enemy coming from her home, hand grenades hanging from the belt, bayonets in both combat boots, hand gun on the hip, carbine in one hand and blood-red hands and blood-red juice dripping from my face. Her horrent German was soon apparent as she approached with the English-speaking village priest. He explained that the wine was sacramental and should be returned. Being in a quandary, I found my sergeant and asked what I should do. Neither the sergeant nor I were of the Catholic faith, so the sarg asked the priest what the wine was to be used for. On the explanation it would be used for celebrations, the sarg gave the priest half of the bottles and me the other half, stating that the church could celebrate their way, and that we could have our own celebration.

In the course of looting homes we soon learned to save time by checking out only the locked doors or drawers, as that was where the better loot was. But the most valuable items were either taken by the fleeing civilians or so well-hidden we couldn't find them in a hurry, resulting in our accumulation of the cheaper watches, rings, jewelry, perfune, etc., whose volume in a fast-moving outfit was such a burden that nearly all was disposed of later along the way.

The looting of small factories was a farce. One could always tell the kind of factory we had just liberated. A cigar factory, and soon everyone had pockets full of cigars and were puffing away with the inferior smokes soon being discarded. Our looting of an unbrella factory was recalled about a month ago when the present army reiterated the rule that it was un-

soldier-like to carry such a protective device. Needless to say, umbrellas in combat proved to be their undoing as they, too, were tossed away. Once we took a small clerical office with many typewriters. These seemed much better to send messages home than writing, but the sheer bulk soon caused their demise, except for one large old style typewriter a pack-rat soldier lashed to the top of his belongings on a jeep. After rain, wind, and snow had taken their toll, it too died. One of the more humorous liberations was that of a tall pop-up formal black hat factory. Can you visualize combat soldiers going into battle wearing these stove-pipe hats.

Also, as we rode around the country-side in small convoys from one place of action to another on a cold winter day, it was the custom that whenever we stopped we started a fire and made coffee. Most of the time the stop was too short to heat water, but always the fire was started. Not having been to Germany since, I don't know if it is still the custom, but at that time most house yards were enclosed by wood picket fences. I still remember the glare of the homeowners as we decimated their fences, furniture, or whatever could be burned to make our fire for the coffee that rarely got made.

Often when occupying a village there were not enough intact houses to house all the troops, so we enlisted men would build our own shelter. Doors ripped from their hinges, table tops with their legs broken off, backs of destroyed cabinets and chests of drawers, or any large flat surface could be fashioned to form a crude abode.

Nearly all that we took from the civilian population of

Germany was later destroyed and abandoned.

Another incident occurred as we swept through Germany northwest of Berlin on a drive to link up with the Russians. As we were securing the town, a German woman, one of the masses fleeing the Russian hoard, approached me and asked in passable English if we Americans were now going to fight the Russians and keep them from destroying Germany. I, heeding the propaganda of the time, informed her the Russians and Americans were comrades and delighted in her torment as she left wailing to inform her friends.

Once again, shortly after the ceasing of hostilities, a group of the boys decided to go wild boar hunting in a nearby woods. Spread out in a line advancing through the meticulously checked trees, one man saw movement behind a small bush. He took aim and when something started to rise, fired. When the hunting party returned to camp they were asked if the trip was successful. No wild boars were claimed, only the village burgomaster. It seemed the town mayor, questioning what the Americans were up to, had somehow gotten in front of the skirmish line only to be shot in the head. At the time it seemed like poetic justice for questioning American actions.

The context of our company included such diversity as the appropriately nicknamed "Herman the German," an illiterate, unkempt coal miner from Pennsylvania. Herman, whose professed goal was to kill a German, had successfully asked for and received a transfer from a rear echelon outfit to a combat outfit. He arrived in our unit as an armored car driver of which I was the radio operator. The ardor of his goal was such that

once while leading a patrol down a probable mined road he jeopardized our lives by concentrating at firing on fleeing civilians over a mile away, rather than looking for land mines. The MI's tracer bullets high arched trajectory left little doubt as to their ineffectiveness, but Herman delighted in seeing the scrambling civilians. He was reluctant to cease even when prevailed upon for our own safety. To show his recklessness, he once, while we were ravaging a home, picked up a hand gun from a drawer and without checking it, aimed it at me and pulled the trigger. When I informed him he could have killed me he said no one would put a hand gun in a drawer with bullets in it and if they would have, the safety would be on.

Other grizzly humor included the time we sat on the west bank of the Rhine River, downstream from the Remagen Bridge, with Germans occupying the east bank. We were billeted in a huge stone wall-surrounded castle-like structure from whose upper windows we could observe German civilians and soldiers across the river. Casualties were few as the distance made rifles ineffective. In our unit we had a very young southern gentleman from Alabama, "Bill," who, although carrying a loaded gun and going into the most dangerous situations, avowed he would never kill or shoot his gun at the enemy. Even when asked about a direct confrontation one on one with an armed enemy soldier, he stated he would rather die than shoot if the accosted did not surrender. Having later become very good friends with Bill and meeting his family, I believe this to be true. But on this particular date, it was decided we would play a trick on him. We persuaded an officer to set up a

situation whereby we could test fire our mortars for practice in zeroing in on buildings across the Rhine. Bill, conned into believing we would be firing at buildings, agreed to fire the mortar. Out of sight he did not know the actual target was an old German who with the help of a cane was inspecting his river-sloping frontage to ascertain the damage to his trees, building, fences, and garden. The inaccuracy of aiming the mortar was such that the first shell exploded some distance from the old gentleman, resulting in his looking up. Adjustments caused the next burst to be close enough for the old man to start for his house some distance away. With the proximity of the third explosion he dropped his cane and ran for the house. Even though we got a great laugh out of Bill's firing at innocent civilians, the agility of the old man's race to shelter made us wonder if he might not have been an enemy soldier disguised as an old man to check on our positions.

The dilemma of how to treat civilians enmeshed in the combat area was a consternation. One such time was when we were attempting to pass through a solid mass of civilians, again making their escape from the marauding onslaught of the Russian army. This particular day I was riding gunner, sitting in the turret behind a 50-caliber machine gun in the lead vehicle on a convoy being engulfed by the oncoming civilians. Most people, old men, women, and children, were walking with as many of their material possessions as they could carry. There was an occasional bicycle, baby carriage, cart, wheel barrow, or whatever was available, also weighted down. There were no motorized vehicles. To our dismay we soon confronted directly in front of us a

magnificent pair of draft horses pulling a ^{richly}~~ricketty~~, ornate conestoga-style wagon, carrying every possible article that could be piled or tied thereon. Sitting on the driver's seat was a handsome, stylishly-dressed older gentleman and next to him a jewel-adorned woman in her fur coat, both completely out of place. Because of the pressing mass of refugees there was no place for the wagon to exit from our path. As we were stopped dead in our tracks, our commander, in a jeep behind us, could not see the problem and admonished us to get moving. Gesturing to the couple seated at eyelevel height on the wagon seat less than thirty feet away only caused the frau to lift her shoulders and arms in perplexity. Again we were told to get the lead out, so haphazardly pointing the machine gun in their direction I caused the woman to excitedly harangue the driver, still without result. So, crouching behind the menacing 50-caliber, I slowly took deliberately direct aim at the woman whose fearful scream caused the driver to whip the horses, whose rearing lunge dispersed the crowd. The wagon nearly overturned as it cascaded over the edge of the road down through the grader ditch. I've often wondered since, what my reaction would have been had she called my bluff. A few miles down the road, I saw the injuries and death of a probable similar confrontation between Russian troops and German civilians.

It was common practice to take rings, watches, cigarette cases, or anything of value from captured enemy soldiers and I was as guilty as anyone. One thing that bothered me was the day the aforementioned Herman the German and I were scouting up a badly gullied farmer's lane and came across a dead soldier. On

the wedding finger of said soldier was a nondescript gold band desired by Herman. Unable, because of bloat to remove the ring, he took out his bayonet at which point I decided to scout ahead and hurriedly left the scene.

Another hobble was the infusion of sex into the deprived soldier--enemy female relationship. The enemy woman's tact was much different than what I would suspect of our American female counterpart in a similar situation; this was manifested in many ways. An example would be when about two weeks after the war, a dozen servicemen riding in the open back of a truck headed for a three-day pass from northwest of Berlin to that corner of Holland which juts down between Belgium and Germany. On the return to our bivouac area soon after entering Germany, we were hailed by two German ladies, one in her early fifties and the other some older. When we stopped, the younger woman explained in fair English that with the ceasing of hostilities and fearful for her aged mother's welfare, she had left her home in central Germany to come check, now attempting a return home with her mother. As there was absolutely no public transportation at this time, she attempted the mission by hitchhiking with enemy soldiers. Feeling kindly, we loaded the dismally-dressed frau and their string-encased cardboard box of possessions into the truck and took off. Directly, the younger woman revealed that she knew what was expected from women who hitchhiked with enemy soldiers. She knew this was the price she must pay under the circumstances to get her mother home with her, and was agreeable, only asking for an exception for her mother because of age and infirmities. It should be stated the young boy soldiers in this

truck and I presume fellow American troopers, were not so disposed. From my limited perspective I am sure Russian and probably German soldiers would not have proceeded similarly.

Now that the stage has been set I will delineate another scenario. In the process of capturing a village, some of the men proceeded to secure the houses while a few of us veered off to check out a very small factory a short distance from the village. The building housed only a garden seed processing plant and without the thrill of exciting loot, we too headed for the village, only to be met by a fellow comrade who informed us there were three beautiful girls in the next house. My curiosity piqued, I proceeded to the home with the following scene. In a rather large kitchen sitting just inside the door to my left from whence I entered was an elderly gentleman; toward the left side and corner next to a cast iron stove and sparce kitchen cupboard, were an older woman and young girl in her early 20's. Directly across from the door was a kitchen table and two other younger girls, probably 18 and 20. On the right were a half dozen lecherous young soldiers standing or seated on a built-in bench. The object of their lust was conspicuous as the three curvaceous, gorgeous, bosomy, platinum blonde fraulines demurely avoided the eyes of the soldiers. The apprehensive mother busied herself at the stove while keeping an eye on her daughters. The dour father with a puff on his pipe with each forward swing of his rocking chair probably surmised the fate of his three daughters in accord with strife-ridden European standards. He likely did not comprehend the innocent unsophistication of the American combatant.

Perceiving humor in the tense situation I took a straight-backed kitchen chair and set it slightly away from the wall on the other side of the door from old Dad. Filling and lighting my pipe, I tilted my chair back and attempted the dour expression as I rocked to and fro puffing my pipe in perfect unison with the old man, looking neither to right or left. My fellow men-in-arms were soon roaring with laughter. Shortly, the youngest daughter smiled and began to laugh as the next younger girl cracked a grin. Each of the three girls were soon caught in diminishing merriment, in the satire of their father. Even momma had a faint trace of a smile and quickly looked away to keep her composure. But the protective old gentleman's concern was so intense he never wavered in decorum. With the easing of the situation, we, the enemy, left to go about our daily drudgery. I can honestly say I don't believe a German girl was ever raped by a front line combat soldier of our troop of the squadron. Possibly lack of time and suitable situations were a deterrent.

Knowing the brutal nature of the Russian soldiers I observed in their dealing with the sick, wounded, and captured German military, civilian, and ah, yes, even their own, I believe the Americans were extremely humane. Still, there were those individuals who were the exception to the rule and I shall conclude this paper with two examples. As we swung across Europe, we picked up unofficial individuals who attached themselves to our unit. Once we had two scruffy French-speaking men from North Africa, I believe Algerians. Having fought the Germans, been captured, lived in a P.O.W. camp, liberated by us, they were now willing to join in combat. So, once when we had captured two Germans, the Algerians offered to take them back to our P.O.W. camp. We gave

them a jeep and sent them on their way. We were delighted to be spared the arduous twenty-some jolting mile ride. We realized the underestimated animosity of the North Africans when shortly after they rounded a hill, we heard small-arms fire and a few minutes later the two guards were back in camp. When asked if they got the prisoners back okay, they said they had no trouble at all.

My final descriptive atrocity is the one that has bothered me the most since. We had relieved a badly decimated infantry outfit, dug in on the outskirts of a very small valley village, who had suffered numerous casualties when the Germans attacked from a higher, forested area across a one-third mile open, fairly steeply sloping, pasture. The repulsed enemy also received many casualties. As the day brightened we could see and hear the crying out of a wounded German soldier on the open pasture about half way between our dug-in position and the treed area held by the Germans. As the day wore on and the call for help became feeble, a friend and I offered to go up under a white flag and bring the prisoner in. Our commanding officer would not let us risk our lives for he felt the Germans could come from their position and retrieve the wounded man under a truce flag which we were to honor. Eventually, as the German soldiers did nothing to rescue their own, the town's old mayor offered to take a wheel barrow up for the wounded man. Again, the commander would not allow this, as, for our sake, he was fearful the burgomaster would escape to the Germans giving them sufficient information on our positions so that we might suffer undue casualties. As the day wore on the cries were hardly audible. We went about our

task of preparing something to eat. Hearing the pop of a pistol we rushed around the side of a house, only to observe an American soldier taking pot shots at the wounded man. Incredulously we asked what he was doing. "Only target practice," we were informed, which he thought was more realistic with a live target. We pleaded with him to stop, but he said, "No, the soldier would probably die anyway and a hit would put him out of his misery." We tried to prevail that as he was out of range with a hand gun and many missed shots would intensify the wounded man's suffering, the least he could do would be to use a rifle to end the agony at once, all to no avail.

This has been a gruesome rendition of a few atrocities observed by one individual in "the good war." In reliving these events for this paper I find that humor was often used as an escape from those terrors of war, I'm reminded of the T.V. series "MASH." The events as presented here were occasionally light, but those same events, if depicted as in a movie such as the semi-documentary "The Killing Fields," or as shown on news releases from the Viet war period, could be, except in degree, superimposed. The differences between the good war and the Vietnam War are less than their similarities.

As stated in the beginning, condonement for myself and later for the Vietnam veterans is not expected, but condemnation is not justified unless one was there under the same set of circumstances, with the same degree of mental and educational development.