

*Edward W. Wood, Jr.*

Revisiting My Memoir:  
*On Being Wounded*

**F**ifteen years ago this September I returned to the place of my wounding in WWII at the first attempted crossing of the Moselle River in eastern France in the fall of 1944. Later that month, in 1984, I settled in Chartres, near the Cathedral, where I wrote the first draft of my memoir, *On Being Wounded*.

Now, a decade and a half later, and eight years after the book was published, I have a better sense of what my book is about, its successes, its regrets, the direction it has given my life and my writing.

In retrospect I understand that the most important act I performed in writing *On Being Wounded*, not even realizing it at the time, was *to write, without being pejorative or preachy*, a book both antiwar and anti-violence.

My book deals with the consequences of a serious wound received in combat, how it changed my life in ways I, at the time, neither understood nor expected. In the deepest sense, my wounding destroyed my relation to my parents, never to be made whole again. The wounding, certainly for years, inhibited my sexual life. It brought me under the care of a psychiatrist for as many years. It caused me to break irrevocably with my past, turn to other paths for career, avocations, pleasures. Finally, it led me to “give up the gun,” seek gentler ways of living outside the frame of weapons and war in which I, as a Southern boy, had been raised.

My book details in what I hope is my deepest honesty the consequences of a wounding in war—the impacts of war on one individual, impacts seldom seriously considered in America, with its pervasive, shoddy worship of violence in its media and its video games. Yet, on another level, I also understand that my slim book scarcely penetrates the mysterious

skein of wars and woundings, scarcely penetrates what war did to me on the deepest levels of my unconscious, and how war hurt those close to me in childhood and youth.

I did not see when writing *On Being Wounded*—was I afraid to look at my darkness?—that, in my unconscious, coiled the terrible shame of combat. After a lifetime of struggling to understand war, I now am sure that every person in serious combat, under the terrible pressure of that pitiless place, does something for which they are always ashamed. For me, it was the simple act of being wounded after but four days in my Division and one day at the front. What kind of man was I not to have lasted any longer? For others “the shame of combat” may involve acts of commission, the simple act of breaking the commandment, “Thou Shall Not Kill,” the more complex infliction of atrocities, sometimes, more often than we think, the betrayal of a friend. “The shame of combat” includes acts of omission, betrayals of all sorts, refusals to fire, realities seldom discussed in the literature of war.

So, as I say, I was haunted by the question: had I really been a man?—with all that may mean for an American male, particularly one with ancestors participating in every major American war, beginning with the French and Indian War of 1756. It took returning to my place of wounding forty years after the event, struggling to write a book, then years absorbing its most serious meanings to finally face this condition of shame, to recognize that what I had done—entering combat alone, a replacement—had actually been an act of immense courage: doing what I was told under fire without emotional support of any kind. The shame lay in the simple reality of being wounded, my flesh, my soma so badly hurt, not as a consequence of my actions at the front, but simply the result of war. Had I not written my book, I would have never made that discovery, never been as whole as I am today.

Regrets about the book I wrote?

Most of all I did not understand when I finished and published *On Being Wounded* how profoundly I wished I'd talked to my parents about my wounding before their death. And how I wished they had talked to me. My wound became a secret among us, a dark and dirty fact none of us could admit. My father, I have learned from letters written to his brother, always wondered why I was in combat for such a short time, though he never questioned me. My mother's deep and maternal compassion for my wounded flesh was more than I could bear: it threatened me, turned me back into her child, intensified my unconscious shame in

unbearable emotion. I fled from her embrace. The healthiest thing I could have done—*we* could have done—was speak of what had happened to me. It would have helped me see my father and mother with greater clarity. My father, a pilot in WWI, had cracked up, lost his front teeth, *but had never been in combat*. Were his Silver Wings the equivalent of my Combat Infantryman's Badge? Both symbols of what we sensed as failure? Did my father wonder about his manhood, having never been in air combat? Could we have shared the same story of human weakness, discovered our courage in adversity together, eschewed our shame? Oh, how much I would that we had!

If my mother and I had talked, could I have absorbed my mother's tears, cared for her in turn, then salved her wounds in those awful days when cancer wracked her flesh and it was too late to share our mutual pain? I most bitterly regret that I did not write my book before my parents' death. Had I, we might have talked. Had we talked, we might have loved, recaptured the joy of a family in the distant days of my youth and childhood. And, yet, by waiting so long, so many years, to write the book, then absorb its layered meanings, I've finally reached new understandings, richer and more complex than those in my memoir.

I finally begin to grasp how *woundings*, the weapons that cause them, are passed on from generation to generation, in large part because of an inability to talk of inflicted pain, the shame of men killing and being killed. I see that opening one door to such discussions, may well be the best contribution I may have made. And I understand that by walking through this door myself, I have stepped into a room much wider than I knew existed when I first finished *On Being Wounded*.

—*Denver, Colorado, 1999*

### **From *On Being Wounded*: Fulcrum Publishing, 1991**

My loneliness, my sense of alienation, intensified as the members of the squad took their regular seats on the half-track in which we would roll toward Germany. Their words and laughter poured over me, around me, under me. Until I proved myself in combat, I simply did not exist. I had been told by fellow replacements at the repple-depple that this was the way I would be treated when I joined the squad. Replacements knew no one as their friends. Sometimes they were even given the tasks of greatest danger as guinea pigs, targets of opportunity, while the rest of the squad crouched in greater security.

Meat for the butcher.

We rolled toward the Moselle that morning, stopping only when great tanks at our side fired their artillery pieces high above barren hills. I marveled at the peasants who came up to the tanks and methodically seized empty shell casings (so they could later sell the brass), seemingly oblivious to German fire.

Twice we dismounted. Once at a rumor of poison gas. Then to penetrate a French village—a high brick wall at our side, five yards between each man, alert for the hand grenade that might come lobbing over the wall. At the edge of the village, we halted in the ditch at the side of the road.

“Put on those fuckin’ bayonets!” the sergeant said when he ran back from crouching at the lieutenant’s side. “We gonna cross the road and clean those motherfuckers outta that house behind the wall.”

My fingers trembled as I fastened my bayonet to the end of my rifle.

We ran in little groups across the road and ducked behind the wall. Nothing happened. The Germans had fled.

My bayonet jammed when I tried to remove it from my rifle. The soldier seated on the ground next to me pulled it free, glaring at me with contempt.

Somewhere later that afternoon, north and west of Metz, the track halted near a road sign to Luxembourg. We lay behind it while shells from a German 88-millimeter artillery piece smashed into a farmhouse across the road. (The explosions lacked all the drama of a shelling in a movie; rather, they looked like dirty backfires from an old car.) We retreated back down the highway as a tank joined us.

At dusk we dismounted from the half-track. We walked at the side of the tank. Once we stopped, and the lieutenant talked fiercely to a Frenchman who then motioned us down a darkened side road, its trees forming great menacing arches above our heads. We moved warily into a forest where fog slipped through black branches and rain dripped from sodden leaves. As we penetrated deeper into that darkness, gravel suddenly splattered my leggings, stinging me. The pavement in front of me exploded with an orange burst of fire; a blue hole cut into the fog ahead. I scrambled toward the ditch, crawling on my hands and knees like a terrified animal.

The spectacle had just ended, the movie choreographed by Hemingway, starring John and Gary and Humphrey. I was no longer an observer; I was suddenly, instantly, peeingly, playing a part in it: SOMEONE OUT THERE WANTED ME DEAD, little ol’ Eddie Wood, his momma’s boy, dead!

I buried myself in the ditch, branches snapping above my head.

“WHO THE FUCK IS THAT?” the soldier behind me cried.

My teeth chattered so I could not speak.

“I goddamn near shot ya. Be quiet, for Chris’ sake.”

The lieutenant fired over our heads at a blur that suddenly popped up from the ditch ahead of us and ran; the silhouette sprawled back upon the road, its rifle clattering to the black pavement.

The lieutenant hesitated. He waved us ahead. I walked by the dead German, a boy no older than I, his blond hair plastered to his face with rain.

Whenever the lieutenant crossed a culvert, he leaned over and fired bursts from his machine gun into the opening. I shuddered, imagining myself trapped in a tunnel beneath the ground, bullets slamming from the concrete, shredding my unprotected flesh.

At dawn we stopped, mounted the track again. We entered another town, its streets deserted. The signs were in German. Nobody visible. Nobody. As if all human beings had disappeared. Shutters on the buildings slammed in the early morning wind. We parked in the middle of the square. Shells whispered over our heads, tearing through the gray sky. They should have been the ducks I shot with my father as a boy.

We left the village with its closed shutters and doors. The road swung to our left, then our right, a ninety-degree turn. We could not see around the corner.

The lieutenant and the sergeant dismounted. The soldier who had cursed me in the dark the night before jumped from the track. He shouted to the lieutenant, then pointed up at me, glaring ferociously. The lieutenant slowly calmed him, then jerked his arm at our squad. I clambered from the half-track with the other men, my rifle awkward in my arms. As we started around the curve in the road, expecting enemy fire at any moment, my mouth could not form words, my breath seemed louder than any shellfire. I hugged the ditch at the side of the road. When nothing happened, I stepped from the shrubs to the macadam pavement. The air was still. Fog hovered around the trees, masking the mansard roof of a French farmhouse that towered above the poplars to my right. For that moment, that small moment in time, though I did not know it, we were in front of the whole Third Army. The Germans had fallen back across the Moselle River ahead to regroup.

Up the road I could just distinguish the outline of a bridge. I walked toward it. With each faltering step I seemed to penetrate a great vaulted tomb of silence, a silence never known or experienced before—as if all

time and motion had ceased and I was the only living being in the universe. This was the silence I had encountered the day I first joined the men of the division—their refusal to help the stranger, the replacement, until he had proven himself under fire. Men did not support each other in comradeship as they did in all those movies I had seen. They entered a place of intense stillness where each lived alone in terror of immediate death. The silence deepened, hovering about me, palpable, almost as if I must soon slip into it and sink into eternity.

I sank to my knees when the lieutenant joined us. I could not speak, my throat constricted with fear.

Just ahead of us, on our side of the river, west of the Moselle, lay a barge canal twenty or thirty yards wide. Before retreating, the Germans had blown a bridge spanning it. Made of steel I-beams, the bridge had broken apart at the explosion and jackknifed into the green water of the canal, forming a V. Gingerly, we clambered down one side, holding the steel trusses with one hand, our rifles with the other. I feared I might be shot and tumble, helpless, into the canal. The gap between the two sets of trusses, just before they penetrated the water, was two or three yards. I tensed my legs. Jumped. One foot swung into the water. I yanked it up, climbed the slippery steel to the other bank. The lieutenant joined us there.

We stood beneath the abutment on the other side of the bridge. A machine gun fired, its bullets whining off the concrete. The lieutenant gentled us as if we were wild animals. He motioned us to the top of the abutment when the machine gun stopped its chattering.

In the distance, several hundred yards to our left, I could see another bridge, much longer, rising out of the mist over the Moselle. Little figures of men ran up the abutment.

“Fire, goddamn it!” the lieutenant cried. “Fire!”

I threw my rifle to my shoulder, settled on a running silhouette. I led it as I did the quail I had shot as a boy. I started to pull the trigger. The bridge exploded like a concrete geyser: rubble and steel and smoke hid the man at whom I aimed. I fired into the haze.

“Shit!” the lieutenant cursed. “We’ll have to cross the fucking river in boats now.”

He motioned us back down the slope and across the canal, not knowing we were the forward contingent of the whole Third Army.

The bank of the canal offered us protection from enemy fire. Our tanks were ranged below it. We dropped, exhausted, at the forward lip of the bank. The tanks fired over the rise.

I rolled over on my back and looked down the hill.

A great plain lay behind me. Though it was misty and gray, I could see for miles. The road was lined with tanks and trucks and half-tracks and jeeps and men who stood in little clumps like ants. Airplanes, small artillery spotters, buzzed overhead. Dirty smoke from shellfire drifted over the road and hid it for an instant like dark mist following a heavy rain. Men shouted at each other, gesticulated; I could not hear their words. The air snapped with the shriek of lightning.

One of the men who had crossed the canal with me stood at the bottom of the hill. He yelled commands to a mortar squad firing at a group of apartment buildings, just this side of the Moselle. A dirty puff of smoke suddenly exploded at his side. He spun as if a giant had slammed him in the shoulder, bouncing off the ground as he fell. A medic ran to him where he flopped up and down like a chicken with its head cut off, spurting blood from his arm.

Another puff of smoke dirtied the air. A piece of shrapnel slammed into the earth at my side. The grass around it curled. The lieutenant made hand signals to us to assemble at a stand of trees farther back, near the road that led to the farmhouse. I grabbed a box of .30-caliber machine gun ammunition and ran, understanding, for the first time, how to survive here: live for the moment. Don't think about the near future, not even the next few minutes.

We started to dig foxholes under the trees. I hit a root almost immediately. I struck furiously at it, using the edge of my metal entrenching tool as an ax. The blade was too dull; the root would not snap. At any moment I was sure another artillery shell would split the air above me, send hot shrapnel tearing into my flesh. I frantically slammed at the pulpy mass. My breath was choked. I could not breathe. Sweat poured from my face, though a cold September mist drifted through the grove of trees.

The men at my side had their holes half dug. They had moved farther out from the tree trunk where the roots were smaller. I scrambled over the ground to their side. No one spoke to me.

I started to dig. My blade met no roots. The shovel pierced the deep black earth, the sweet earth in which I would soon hide . . . and then, then, the slam of a sledgehammer lifted me high and I whirled up and up and up through a tunnel of green leaves toward the sky, my hands extended as if to grasp those leaves and the dark brown limbs rushing by me, halting my flight into eternity. My fingers brushed over them. They would not hold.

I flew higher into the sky and seemed to merge with the clouds, mix with their wispy tendrils, not knowing whether to continue this arc toward eternity or fall back to the sweet, sweet earth. With a falling, sliding swoop I tumbled out of the sky. Fell to my knees. I put my fingers up to my face. Blood, thick and red and dark, swiftly pumping, covered them. I reached up and touched my head. My helmet was gone. Blood poured from a hole on the left side of my skull. A hard lump protruded from my torn scalp. A piece of shrapnel was embedded in the bone. I looked behind me. My pants were ripped away, my right buttock was blown open. Beneath the yellow-white fat, I could see the raw, red meat, like the steaks my father had once fed me.

“Hold still, Wood! Hold still!” the medic cried, blood from the tip of his wounded nose spraying my face. “Stop wiggling, goddamnit! I gotta get this morphine in ya.” The blood from his own wound sprinkled over me like spittle from a dying sneeze.

As he poked at my arm, I heard the whisper of the shells above me and wondered why their sigh sounded like the wings of the ducks my father and I had once shot in Mississippi bayous. Not yet in pain, I lay there, loose-jointed, until they tumbled me into a stretcher and ran with me toward the ambulance parked on the macadam road near the grove of trees. Once they dropped me, leaving me helpless, as an artillery shell slammed too close. I stared up at them as they hovered in the lee of the ambulance, their place of sanctuary.

When the shelling stopped, they lifted me into the ambulance.

“You didn’t like it much up here, did you, Wood?” the lieutenant asked as they slammed the door.

My journey into the land of the wounded began in that ambulance after one day of combat, before I had proven myself, those men in arms still uncertain of my courage and my strength, the lieutenant’s words my epitaph.

Being moved by ambulance from Battalion Aid Station into World War I bunkers, I smelled the cloying odor of blood, feeling it drip on me from the stretcher above. Here at the front, before there were forms and bureaucrats to describe and fasten to me some categories of wound and pain, I touched men who, for an instant, cared for me with greater compassion than I had ever experienced at any time or place in my life—men who lit my cigarette and held it in their fingers while I puffed, men who returned to me again and again, seeing if my paralyzed hand would



yet move, if my bowels were free, my urine not pink with blood, murmuring to me gently, even crying. I remember one boy my age who had ridden to the front with me, weeping as he cut off my bloody clothes in Battalion Aid Station. I remember the soldier I had watched being wounded visiting me in the field hospital, his arm still bloody in its sling, offering me a package of cigarettes.

Gentleness and compassion, a softness so difficult for the American male to express—always there but held back, contained by some impenetrable shell, breaking open now and warming me after I was wounded, as if love could be given only within the frame of violence and one must be expressed in conjunction with the other. The language of war and peace, violence and love, hate and compassion that I have sought to understand on my journey through the land of the wounded.

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Edward W. Wood, Jr., lives in Denver, Colorado. He has received two Wurlitzer Foundation Grants and an award from the National Council of Senior Citizens for his essay "The Contribution of the Aging in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century." His book, *Beyond the Weapons of My Fathers*, an extended personal essay about war and peace, violence and compassion in American males, is forthcoming from Fulcrum.