

*Commentary by Edward W.
Wood, Jr.*

On Judging World War Two: The Greatest Generation?

How does that generation born after World War Two best judge the films, the books about that war—fiction and nonfiction—pouring from the media today, a virtual fountain of information interpreting and re-interpreting what is clearly the most important event of the last century: a media event which surely will continue well into this new century just as Civil War books and TV spectaculars continue to appear a hundred and forty years after that war which changed the nation?

As John Keegan, the military historian, has so clearly stated, there are no standards for judging the quality of battle books and films: “The treatment of battle in fiction is a subject almost untouched by literary critics. . . .” (And even less touched in both film and nonfiction, I would add.)

This lacunae in this critical judgment of war art was so clearly illustrated in the Oscar selections in 1999: Why did *Saving Private Ryan* receive all the accolades and *The Thin Red Line* none? The starting difference between the films was never clearly explored, nor was the basis for choosing Steven Spielberg’s film over Terrence Malick’s. The criteria determining a “good” war novel are just as difficult to ascertain. In fictionalizing WWII, which writer is best? Norman Mailer? James Jones? Why? What of the novel, *The Thin Red Line*, on which the film is based, how does it fit into the equation of war narratives?

In areas of nonfiction, is the author, Stephen Ambrose, to be trusted in his worship of the “Citizen Soldier” as the primary weapon in achieving American victories in Europe in WWII? Is Tom Brokaw to be trusted when he calls the generation that won WWII “The Greatest

Generation?" What of the war memoirs bursting from the press? Which are true? Which, bluntly, lie? How can we discover reasonable answers to these questions? As important as they are, why are they seldom asked? What critical frame, beyond myth and hero worship, can be formed to help us make such judgments?

As a replacement into the Seventh Armored Division, and severely wounded by Nazi artillery fire during the liberation of France in the late summer of 1944, I have devoted over fifty-five years of my life to developing a critical frame for judging the art of WWII, reading war fiction and viewing war films, writing books about war, struggling, always, to develop reasonable criteria beyond myth, hero worship, and sentiment.

Seeking such discernment, quite simply, has been a matter of life and death for me. I was hit in head, buttock, and back after only a day and a half of combat. That wound shredded not only my body but also my emotions: I spent many, many years in recovery. *I had to understand war, what it was, what it did to me, to other men in battle if I, myself, were to come to terms with what happened to me at nineteen and rediscover my sanity.*

Out of that time in combat, those days and nights in the hospital, those memories of terror, confusion, gravel biting me from exploding shells, machine gun fire as we crossed a canal on a broken bridge, mortar fire shredding leaves above my head, men at my side slammed into the earth by shrapnel, blue holes of rifle fire punched into the night, a dead German boy at my feet—out of that time, those years, I reached the conclusion that I had penetrated the darkest levels of the unconscious, places where men became animals, places no human should ever be asked to enter, the center of war a vast womb of silence, a place of pitiless forces, dominated by death and killing's harsh mystery, a place where soldiers become inarticulate: grunts, shouts, screams, ordinary words, meaningless forms of expression in the chaos of terror in which they floundered.

This belief in war as a place without pity led me to my life-long examination of memoirs, fiction, films, and nonfiction of WWII, led me to form my critical frame for judging those works of that war. This frame was rooted in my certainty that such judgment, above all, must root itself in a few simple and cogent questions which a work must answer in a meaningful and positive fashion if it is to be accepted as a successful and authentic rendering of battle:

Does the work of art—fiction, non-fiction, memoir or film—give a sense of war’s animal nature, a mysterious and ruthless place: a killing zone, where men live with the certain fear of death?

How is the act of killing treated? Is the haunting reality of imminent death or massive crippling from men’s violence shown in all its brutality and finality, dismemberment of flesh, and does that destruction, in the deepest bodily sense, resonate with the quality of overwhelming mystery and grief, linked in anger, almost a sacrament?

Is the extraordinary complexity of human reaction to death and killing in combat adequately presented beyond the clichés of courage and comradeship? Death from violence in war puts many faces on the human being, ranging from fierce rage, “Ill get that son of a bitch,” to longing for flight, acts of betrayal, emotions of shame and guilt, sometimes, refusal to participate through cowardice, self-wounding, refusal to fire, firing into the air, combat exhaustion.

What meaning is given to comradeship under fire? Is it real, how long does it last? Could the notion of comradeship be mythical, the creation of a courageous reality to deny the horrors of wounding, death, and killing?

Is the inane quality of dialogue in combat accepted so that action and monologue and emotion are given greater weight than the spoken word, silence more important than speech?

Do these complexities of war resonate through time far into the future, where their real meaning is determined, impacts over future decades?

It has taken me 55 years to boil my pain and my emotions into these few critical questions which, when seriously answered, help me judge those books of fiction and nonfiction, those films and memoirs about WWII and, even more important, may help a generation which has never known war to reach some real understanding of the war their

fathers and grandfathers fought, its terror, its complexity, sometimes its majesty, and even why sometimes men loved it.

Two authors—Stephen E. Ambrose and Tom Brokaw—and two films—*Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*—have recently attracted the greatest attention in the stunning revival of interest in World War Two. Since 1993, Ambrose had published *Band of Brothers*, *D-Day*, *Citizen Soldiers*, *The Victors*, and *Americans At War* while Tom Brokaw has given us *The Greatest Generation* and its sequels, *The Greatest Generation Speaks* and *An Album of Memories*. To understand these books, these films, the stories they tell, to reject what appears to be false, accept what appears to be true, is an effort that is likely to bring us to an understanding of that war.

That generation—my generation—which knew the war's agonies and its delights over fifty years ago is dying at the rate of thousands of men a year. Soon who will be left to ensure that a just and accurate story be told and passed on to future generations of potential soldiers? I believe that the truthful core of that story may be found in the nexus of the books and the films I mention.

Tom Brokaw and Stephen Ambrose tell us one story about the American men who fought in WWII, Steven Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan* a second, and Terrence Malick and James Jones in both the film and novel, *The Thin Red Line*, a third.

For Brokaw and Ambrose the American men who fought WWII were heroes. Given a dirty job, they did it. Among these thousands of soldiers there were few cowards, no betrayal, little shame or guilt, great comradeship. Most remarkable is the manner in which both Brokaw and Ambrose tell us of these young men in battle. Both writers employ the words, "kill and wound," over and over again yet the reader never really senses the blood, never—is this the problem?—smells it, so sticky sweet in the air.

Ambrose is more sophisticated than Brokaw. He tells us of replacements, castigates the Army for its replacement policy. Death is present, killing, sometimes a haunted reality, yet the reader senses that Ambrose is so stuck with the "heroism" of the American combat infantryman, the "citizen soldier," that he refuses to penetrate the ruthless quality of the killing zone, the "combat numbness" of which James Jones writes so tellingly in his *The Thin Red Line*:

A crazy sort of blood lust, like some sort of declared school holiday from all moral ethics had descended on them. They

could kill with impunity and they were doing it...But John Bell for one...could not help wondering if any of them could ever really become the same again. He didn't think so. Not without lying anyway.

Perhaps long years after this war was done they could pretend to each other that they were men . . . and avoid admitting they had once seen something animal in themselves that terrified them.

So Doll had killed his first Japanese. For that matter his first human being of any kind. Shooting well, at anything, was a pleasure . . . And Doll hated the Japanese, dirty little yellow Jap bastards . . . But beyond these pleasures there was another. It had to do with guilt. . . He had done the most horrible thing a human being could do, worse than rape even. And nobody in the whole damn world could say anything to him about it. . . He had gotten away with murder. . . .

James Jones understood and shows us the animal nature of combat, the combat numbness that so inhibits and destroys moral choice. He recognizes and explains the ease with which some American men learned to kill, the highest standard of truth. Neither Ambrose nor Brokaw ever achieve his brutal honesty about the things the "citizen soldier" actually did in combat (perhaps because, never having been in combat themselves, they finally cannot grasp its dark meaning?), a reality they mask with saccharine sentimentality.

Ambrose opposes Jones' reality with his faith in the "citizen soldier," the young American in his teens or early twenties who "stood to the test," and through courage and comradeship won the war, far from the Pacific Theater which so concerned Jones, the enemy there the "bestial Jap," atrocities so easily committed by the American soldier.

Other evidence beyond the work of James Jones raises troubling issues about American men in combat. In *America's Forgotten Army* by Charles Whiting and *Closing With The Enemy* by Michael Doubler, high levels of combat exhaustion are emphasized. Desertion in Europe was around 40,000, Whiting writes. Paul Fussell in *Wartime* points to the maximum combat the American soldier could take, around 200 to 240 days. Gerald F. Linderman in *The World Within War* indicates that some participants thought this figure was entirely too high: the limit of battle

could be reached within as few as twenty or so days.

Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall hypothesizes in *Men Against Fire*:

(In World War Two). . . In an average experienced infantry company in an average stern day's action, the number engaging (firing). . . any and all weapons was approximately 15% of total strength. In the most aggressive infantry companies. . . the figure rarely rose above 25% of total strength. . .

Though this conclusion has been bitterly contested (See *The Secret Of The Soldiers Who Didn't Shoot*, Fredric Smoler, *American Heritage*, March, 1989; *The Deadly Brotherhood* by John C. McManus; *The Men Of Company K*, Harold Leinbaugh and John Campbell), combat exhaustion, the replacement policy, desertions, self-inflicted wounds cannot be ignored: combat is a far more complex reality than most of us dare admit.

In *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* Russell Weigley emphasizes the force of American artillery in winning World War Two. German soldiers testified to its overwhelming power.

High turn over rates in many frontline Divisions, sometimes exceeding 200%, desertions, combat fatigue, sometimes refusals to fire, the enormous force of the artillery, each and all question the conclusions Ambrose and Brokaw come to in the case of the American combat soldier. These harsh realities of war also make us pause when the claim of comradeship in combat is put forward, particularly by Ambrose. Since illness, woundings, killings, and combat fatigue so decimate frontline troops, it is difficult to understand how the bonds of caring are maintained: men simply disappear to be replaced by others who, in their turn, vanish. The problem of the frontline soldier comes down to survival in the harshest of realities where only peace, wounding, or death mark the path to escape.

The emphasis of Stephen Ambrose on the courage and comradeship of the young "citizen soldier" and the glorification of the "greatest generation" by Tom Brokaw do little to help us understand what the war was really about. Paul Fussell has stated: "America has not yet understood what the Second World War was like and has thus been unable to use such understanding to re-interpret and re-define the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity." Insights of far richer complexity and far greater sophistication than those of Ambrose and Brokaw are needed to reach that re-interpretation and maturity.

At war's end, Ambrose's and Brokaw's soldiers return to the U.S., seemingly untouched by what they had seen and done in combat. They shut up, do not complain, and go about their business of building a new America. According to Ambrose:

They had seen enough destruction; they wanted to construct. They built the Interstate Highway system, the St. Lawrence Seaway, the suburbs (so scorned by the sociologists, so successful with the people), and more. They had seen enough killing; they wanted to save lives. They licked polio and made other revolutionary advances in medicine. They had learned in the Army the virtues of a solid organization and teamwork, and the value of individual initiative, inventiveness, and responsibility. They developed the modern corporation while inaugurating revolutionary advances in technology, education, and public policy . . . they supported NATO and the United Nations and the Department of Defense. They had stopped Hitler and Tojo; in the 1950's they stopped Stalin and Khrushchev. . . .

Brokaw clearly agrees. His Greatest Generation “helped convert a wartime economy into the most powerful peacetime economy in history. They made breakthroughs in medicine and other sciences. They gave the world new art and literature. They came to understand the need for Federal Civil Rights Legislation. They gave America Medicare.”

Of course, other conclusions can be drawn about the world created by Americans since WWII. With eight percent of the world's population, we use 40 percent of its resources to create our consumer economy. We plunge into greed and glut while children in third world nations starve. Our technology leads to the destruction of the globe's air, water, earth, animals, fish, insects and has formed the Mega-City, urban sprawl, congestion, pollution. Our distribution of income creates a permanent domestic underclass. In the 1950's our domestic purge of those believed to be Communists, largely initiated and carried out by veterans of WWII, led to the destruction of a generation of liberals and the loss of our East Asian experts with tragic consequences in Vietnam. Veteran organizations led vicious attacks on Paul Robeson. Many of those who opposed Civil Rights legislation in the south were veterans who helped lynch, beat and kill African Americans, many of whom were discharged

soldiers themselves. Veterans all, Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, either initiated or led us deeper into the morass of the Vietnam War.

The nature of the America the veteran of WWII created has a far darker side than that proposed by Ambrose and Brokaw, and is rooted in the sins of gluttony, avarice, prejudice, and violence. In their cleaned-up stories, the GI is, in the oddest kind of way, so pure and so courageous he seems bloodless, with little of that animal nature of which Jones so movingly writes.

In his book about the Civil War, *Embattled Courage*, Linderman helps us understand the purification of memory, the startling change in the way combat is remembered by the veteran thirty years after the War. By 1890, service in the Civil War had become the icon for political and economic success, the war sentimentalized into something it never was: fear, death, brutality, killing denied.

Siegfried Sassoon, the British war poet of WWI, tells us the same story about his war:

Songbooks Of The War

In fifty years when peace outshines
 Rememberance of the battle lines,
 Adventurous lads will sigh and cast
 Proud looks upon the plundered past.
 On summer morn or winter's night,
 Their hearts will kindle for the fight,
 Reading a snatch of soldier-song,
 Savage and jaunty, fierce and strong;
 And through the angry marching rhymes
 Of blind regret and haggard mirth,
 They'll envy us the dazzling times
 When sacrifice absolved our earth.

Some ancient man with silver locks
 Will lift his weary face to say:
 "War was a fiend who stopped our clocks
 Although we met him grim and gay."
 And then he'll speak of Haig's last drive,
 Marvelling that any came alive
 Out of the shambles that men built

And smashed, to cleanse the world of guilt.
 But the boys with grin and sidelong glance,
 Will think, "Poor grandad's day is done."
 And dream of lads who fought in France
 And lived in time to share the fun.

Ambrose and Brokaw pursue the same falsification of memory. The generation which follows the war generation apparently must turn their father's war into a neater, cleaner experience than that thankless place which lies at the heart of battle.

Not so with parts of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Spielberg's war resonates in such contrast to the war of Ambrose and Brokaw. The only soldier shown to come home in *Saving Private Ryan* is Private Ryan himself—to a life that must have always been so painful that, at the end of the film, he asks his wife if he had been a "good man."

Private Ryan's whole life must have been haunted, night and day, by the memory of the men who died to give him a chance. War—with me, with Private Ryan, with James Jones, with, I believe, all men who survive serious combat—always shadows the future. Spielberg's film is to be given the highest marks for his grasp of war's resonance over time. The film otherwise, though, does not rise to such benchmarks.

Spielberg's war is noisy, literally bursting with sound, from the invasion on Omaha Beach to the final firefight at the bridge. The silence of battle is what I remember: tanks fired ten feet from me and I did not hear a sound. The silence of war, its terrible isolation and loneliness, is lost amidst the loud rattle of the film. Moreover, the fact of death and killings slips away. What Spielberg offers instead is a war of loud and murderous firepower—incessant gunfire—and a place where men talk too bloody much in sentences unlikely to be formulated in the center of battle.

In my experience, men near death are quiet, quiet and alone, for words cannot bridge such distance. Perhaps a touch, an embrace, tears, sobs, but not words. Articulate language is too sophisticated for the facts of death and the emotions which throb with killing.

Though to be fair, Spielberg renders many scenes with a realism laced with brutal irony, but always missing is that aura of silence that so dominates the place of killing where spirits of those just killed seem to writhe through the air, spirits of the dead and dying, the pain they leave behind them in this ominous, brooding place of terror.

The film *The Thin Red Line*, from its opening scene to its conclusion, broods in that place of death where strange and wonderous events occur, mystery, even majesty, a darkness that verges on the beautiful.

In this film, men talk but seldom to each other; rather they ruminate or hear voices about this place of war they have come to inhabit. In Malick's take, the beauty of the natural world—its destructive capacity—is forcefully shown: the silent wind sweeping over the fields of grass in fading summer sun, men dying in those fields of fire, nature and men juxtaposed in the rage of war to give a sense of evil: a personification of the darkness in the human soul, yet that darkness shown in a way that breaks the heart: Lieutenant Colonel Tall driving his soldiers so he can obtain his General's star; the corporal extracting gold teeth from dead Japanese, a darkness revealed in scenes as brutally realistic as those in *Saving Private Ryan*.

But Spielberg's film, though also visually realistic, finally reinforces those clichés we learn from Ambrose and Brokaw—issues of sentimental comradeship and bravery. Malick's art offers the mystery, the poetry and the pain, which always lie at war's hard core. Perhaps *The Thin Red Line* excels because it rises from what, for me, is the best novel about WWII, James Jones' book by the same title. *Saving Private Ryan* is a Hollywood concoction, having little to do with the war and its most fundamental meanings.

In his novel, Jones depicts a company in combat, a hundred fifty men dealing with their essences and who they are as humans in the terrible center of war. A few of these soldiers are courageous, some cowards, some murderous, some cruel, some kind, most doing what they have to do. But most seem multidimensional and marked by their experience. They seem real, not figures of literary irony. They seem men changed by war.

And perhaps it is this fact of being crippled in ways they cannot articulate that makes both the novel and the film, *The Thin Red Line*, so much more powerful than other attempts to deal artistically with WWII. Some of us may have come back like the heroes Ambrose and Brokaw describe, but more of us never really recovered, never became the men we might have been, a part of us lost forever in the world of combat where we discovered truths about ourselves that changed us in ways we never truly understood.

The generation born after WWII has a choice of stories it can use to understand and interpret the war of its fathers and grandfathers. It can

select the tales of Ambrose and Brokaw, the “hero,” the man unafraid in war, surrounded by comrades, competent in peace. It can follow Spielberg, the veteran, haunted forever by what he saw and did, war never all it really seems, but a place of hidden truths, sudden turns, instant ironies, exposed by the most brutal realism. Or with Jones and Malik, it can search that brutalism for powerful statements of good and evil, for acts of violence intimate to the human and natural world, even visions of beauty born from conflict, to discover a place of mysterious and terrible silence which lies at the core of life, all we may never know of the divine.

It is in this vision of war that war’s deepest meaning may be best discovered.

The story a generation elects to tell about the war of their fathers will determine in part the nature of the next war, the one their children will fight, and my guess is that the story this generation selects to pass ahead will be a combination of the tales of Ambrose and Brokaw, the courage and comradeship of the “Citizen Soldier,” mixed with the realism and irony of Spielberg. The meaning of *The Thin Red Line* as film or novel may slowly disappear over time, too uncomfortable a tale for a generation bred outside of war, the mystery of death and killing at the core of war, that pitiless place from which there is no return. It is not the war story people wish to hear.

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