

## Ed Wood: Wounds, War, and Friendship

I met Ed Wood last fall, when Sam Halpert, a B-17 navigator during World War II, spoke at the United States Air Force Academy. Ed and Sam hit it off that evening, trading what war stories they had, bonding in a way the rest of us could not. As the evening wore down, Ed and I were introduced; my wife and I sat next to Ed while Sam Halpert read from *A Real Good War*, his novel about the air war over Europe. I watched Ed nod in agreement as Sam read. Afterward they gravitated back toward each other, but not before Ed and I had struck up a friendship of our own.

That friendship has continued, and we e-mail each other, always signing off with “Best,” or “Take Care.” Ed always includes greetings to my wife, and when we meet next for lunch, he’s asked that she come along. I appreciate that. I appreciate Ed, and I am grateful for his story. He’s the sort of anonymous guy you pass by on the street every day, but I know the stories you don’t. It’s only right that you meet Ed Wood, as well. You’ll be better for having done so.

Since I met him I’ve read two of Ed’s books: *On Being Wounded* (1991), and *Beyond the Weapons of our Fathers* (2002). Both, he tells me, have the support of Paul Fussell and Howard Zinn. So I’m supposed to automatically like them, right? Well, they are good books, but sometimes tough to read—mainly because I don’t agree with some of what he writes. Our biggest area of disagreement is over guns. Ed hates them. I, on the other hand, have two semi-automatic pistols at home. Both are loaded with 5 hollow-point bullets each. When I lived in Montgomery, Alabama, a police officer with whom I spoke said, “hollow points have better stopping power.” *What he means*, I thought to myself, *is killing power*. I wasn’t fooled by euphemism, but his sugar-coating didn’t stop me from buying hollow points later that week.

Ed wouldn’t approve of my weapons. He wouldn’t approve of my lifetime



NRA membership. He wouldn't approve of the lapel pin I have at home. It reads, "I ♥ my semi-automatic." But that's the great thing about our friendship. I read his books, and don't always agree, but I still respect the guy. He's been through a lot, and I can respect that, and him.

In fact, *On Being Wounded* is all about what he's been through. Ed was in France in September of 1944. He was wounded pretty badly, and now, years later, he writes about his experiences. He says, "I had seen shrinks but they never were able to resolve the problems of my disquiet. I had never faced out the impact of my experiences in World War 2, including combat and being severely wounded at nineteen after only two days of combat. Those experiences had been repressed and were knocking—no, screaming!—at the door to be let out and examined."

Being wounded. I wince at the thought of being wounded as badly as he was. In *On Being Wounded* Ed tells the story of taking shrapnel in his skull, having his right buttock sheared off, and how a hot piece of metal punctured his pelvic area. The shrapnel in his head temporarily paralyzed him. When I ask him how his wound changed him, he says, "the physical impacts were loss of much sensory feeling in my right hand, a hitch in my walk, problems in my privates, and a great loss of faith in my body as a functioning organism. My emotions were smashed. Linked to this was a curious sense of shame—in a real way I think most of us seriously wounded experience shame for being hit. And, for me, that shame was exacerbated by only having been in combat for two days and by being hit in the buttock. Both together made my life extremely difficult. The massive nature of my wound, physical and emotional impacts, has made me search the literature of war and peace for the causes of war, and the consequences of war."

Ed works through these problems in *On Being Wounded*. Beyond them, however, he talks about the tremendous role his family played in his life. When he returned from the war he shunned his mother and father, and it was only after his father died that he was able to make peace with the man who had raised him, the man of whom Ed was so proud. Even though he was proud of his father, however, it was his father who "showed me the ways of war," and Ed does not like war.

It is his father's way of war Ed seeks to extinguish, when he shares what is, for me, the most moving piece in *On Being Wounded*. After his father dies, Ed drives south from Massachusetts with the rifle his father had taught Ed to shoot. He charts a sailboat and sails out to a point off the Mississippi coast, and there, in the same spot where he and his father had fished so many years ago, Ed holds the rifle over the edge of the boat, and opens his fingers: "the rifle tumbles down into the clear artesian water below me. The barrel glints and twists as it sinks deep into pure water, surrounded by the dark and murky sea" (*Wounded* 166). By doing so, Ed begins the process of giving up, of rejecting, the weapons of his fathers.

That process continues in Ed's second book: *Beyond the Weapons of our Fathers*. In this book he enters into a "conversation" with his ancestors, men who fought in our country's wars. He argues with them, and tries to get them to give up their weapons, to move beyond the call of the gun. It is a difficult thing, because his family has a history of violence: "I have had forebears in all major American wars since 1675: King Philip's War in Massachusetts/Rhode Island, then the French and Indian War, the Revolution, the Civil War, two ancestors wounded on both sides in that one, World War One where my father flew."

These men lived a life of battle, Ed notes, and hundreds of thousands of American men like them have joined with the men of his family, making this country one of warfare, one which kills first and considers its actions later. Ed found a distant relative, however, who is what he calls a Person of Peace: Levi Tiffany asked "how can any man love his brother, and at the same time, be doing him the greatest possible injury, by seeking to take his life?" (*Beyond* 45). Ed finds in Levi a compatriot, and it is Levi, and the people Ed lists on pages 48-50 of *Beyond the Weapons of our Fathers*, who will help us become a peaceful nation.

I'm a young man, and as I read *Beyond the Weapons of our Fathers* I found myself drifting toward the cynicism of youth. How can we not have solved our conflicts without weapons? Was King George simply going to leave us alone? Would Hitler have given up if we asked nicely? While I like the *theory* of People of Peace, the *practice* is often much different than how we would like things to be. Perhaps that's due to my age. Perhaps in a few years I'll think differently. So what do I do with these books? What do I do with Ed Wood? Do I dismiss him as another raving peacenik? Do I sit across the restaurant table and let the words flow around me, but not really listen? What do I think about Ed Wood?

First, I think he's a hero. Anyone brave enough (or, as Tim O'Brien would say, cowardly enough) to put himself in harm's way, specifically if he doesn't necessarily agree with what he's doing, is heroic. In that case Ed Wood is a hero for doing what he did in 1944. Ed doesn't think he's a hero. He tells me so: "I don't think of the word 'heroic' when I think of myself. For a couple of days I did my duty. . . and that is enough for me." Nicely worded, I think, but off the mark. You're a hero, I tell him. Again, he doesn't think so.

So I ask him for his definition of "heroism." He says, "there are really two kinds. The first makes a stand, kills the enemy, protects his or her comrades from the enemy, often gives his life for the cause, or for those friends. The second is the medic, the guy who heals others under fire. These are quite different actions and need to be considered separately as our thinking about the first is often masked by myth."

He's right, of course. He's right when he says that "we don't want to see the consequences of the first type of hero's actions, the enemies the 'hero' has

mutilated, body parts bleeding on the ground. We want our wars to be acts of glory with the killing denied, hidden, masked. Since war is a brutal process of killing, being wounded, the taking of lives and body parts from both combatants and innocent civilians, by making the acts of the 'hero' glorious we deny what war really is, killers and victims." Ed wants us to favor the second type of hero: "the company medic, the guy who, under fire, begins the process of healing the wounded. He needs no victims to define his heroism, the highest form of courage."

We are sitting in the Grumpy Gringo in Castle Rock, Colorado over lunch. He says to me, "the American hero is that man or woman who sacrifices life, career, wealth for a principle greater than self." The problem, he decides, is that America too often finds its heroes in war. Why is that? I ask. He looks at me: "heroes and heroism make war more palatable to our taste. We see the hero as destroying the dark enemy and, in so doing, war begins to have a quality of glory. We seldom look at the dark side of the hero's actions, the victims made, cities destroyed, children made fatherless. Since war is so intimate to our past we tend not to think of the 'hero' as the doctor who saves lives or the man or woman of peace who struggles for a compassionate world. We tend to see the hero as the man with the gun, slaying our enemies."

He's right.

He's right about something else, as well. We talk about how memory affects war, another tender subject with Ed. He tells me that "the memory of war tends to change over decades so that the war we remember after thirty or forty years is not the war that was fought, not the war of the sweet stink of blood but the war of glory and heroism." He gets angry when he talks about Tom Brokaw, about movies such as *Saving Private Ryan*, and the HBO series *Band of Brothers*: "we don't know what war is like. The media, particularly in such movies as *Saving Private Ryan*, except for the first few minutes, give us a lie. To begin with, there are many points of view in a real combat situation, not the single one of the camera. It's seldom a place of men together. Rather, it's a bunch of men widely separated. Occasionally there is the mutter of fire; one man falls down and doesn't get up. It's eerily silent much of the time. Men don't talk in sentences, rather in grunts, exclamations, gesticulate a lot." I'll let Ed talk for a while. He recently wrote to me:

The memories of war are made by those who were never there except for a few writers who get it honestly: Hemingway, E.E. Cummings, James Jones, Paul Fussell, Howard Zinn, Sam Halpert, Norman Mailer, and Philip Caputo, for example. Movies and TV lie. What did someone say? The first victim in war is the truth. We turn war

into something it never was. And not just the media, but those who were in it and recall it. A perfect example is this baloney of *The Greatest Generation*. We don't want to know what our soldiers really do in war. A friend of mine in the Fourth Division which went across Europe from D-Day to V-E Day says he was terrified as he watched American Rednecks rape and loot their way across Europe. Scarcely the picture of *Saving Private Ryan*.

Scarcely *The Greatest Generation*. The truth of World War Two has yet to be told.

So what is the truth, I ask him? How can you find out the truth about war? I relate a story, about a time several years ago when I wrote to a World War II veteran and asked him how he could remember in such vivid detail the things he wrote about in his book. The vet told me, "I see them in my mind—things that happened 60 years ago are as clear as day." When I tell Ed that story he laughs. "That guy can't remember things so clearly. Much of the things I write about are hazy. That's war. Some things were so hazy to me that I had to leave them out of *On Being Wounded*."

I ask him this: If you have one hundred guys in the same battle and give one hundred interviews, are you going to get a hundred battles? His answer is emphatic: "YES! A hundred stories. Each soldier has a slightly different viewpoint of what is happening in a firefight. His is never the whole story. It is only when they are all put together that one gets that story. It's something movies, the media, and most books don't do."

This gets us back to Ed's books. I ask him, what do you hope to gain? In response he refers back to the falsehoods he sees in much of the movies and books about war: "I'm always searching for the way to say my truth about these issues of war and peace. I certainly haven't been very successful in terms of books sold or money made, but I know I have been successful in sticking to the truth as I see it. I know I am an honest writer and I intend to remain so."

Easy enough, I think, but let's up the ante. I e-mail him to ask the big one: what have you learned in your lifetime? Can you sum up what you have learned? After a few days he responds: "that's a damn hard question. Most of all, that thing of honesty. . . as a person and as a writer. So many facts of our lives lead us to dishonesty. . . careers, the need to make money, authority, sexual temptations, a whole range of pressures in the real world. If one is going to write, one simply must struggle to be honest in both one's personal life and one's artistic life. Without those there is no hope for the art and truth of prose. What the world needs now, to paraphrase a popular song, is honesty. . . for, maybe, honesty comes

before love?”

And finally (I can imagine him smiling as he types this): “without honesty, one has nothing.”

Ed Wood has been around for a long time. He’s seen a lot of things. He’s been in more hospitals than I’d care to, he’s walked a lot of miles to overcome his wound, and he’s struggled to make ends meet while trying to tell his story. It’s a story people need to hear. Ed Wood is many things; the one thing he is not is insincere. He’s a man with a good heart, a man dedicated to what he believes is right. He’s a man I’m honored to call a friend.

**Glenn Leinbach** served as an instructor in English and Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy. He looks forward to a long friendship with Ed Wood.