

Chapter 14
Pro Patria Mori

Death. The Dead. The military dead. Soldiers. Who cares about them. Why do they care? Why should we?

The work of Michael Sledge in *Soldier Dead: How We Recover, Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*, and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, have answered these questions. They have lead me down avenues to streets, and down streets to alleys, and alleys into dark corners of my country's and my own deepest thoughts, and denials that shattered everything I was ever taught about war, the, "field of honor," life and death.

My parent's generation was somehow able to marshal themselves against the bias and prejudice they had been borne into, and create the society our country's founding fathers had envisioned. It took a war that killed 72 million people [including 47 million non-combatants], laying waste to archipelagoes and continents to accomplish it, but they did it. And when the war was over, these citizen soldiers in the United States of America came home and expected to pick up their lives where they left them.

Perhaps they were silly, foolish, or naive to expect the world back home hadn't changed during their absence. Despite what they had seen and done they returned home the same as they had left. Small town boys with dreams of the big city. Big city boys with dreams of college. In years they were men but not in maturity. They returned to a world left behind that could never again be the same.

For all the destructive nature of war, something good does occur. The old is recast. The new, kicking and screaming like a newborn, is brought into the world. Progress usually comes in fits and starts. After world war, progress comes in giant steps. People living through such changes and with such sacrifices expect certain things. The most primal expectation is that promises made are debts unpaid.

I suppose that since the very first war soldiers have been promised one thing or another. As Sledge and Faust make so clear in their books, there is one promise our government, unlike all other governments, has made and sticks to. Made and sticks to through war after war, budget cut after budget cut, manpower shortage after manpower shortage. It is best summed up in the mission of JPAC, the Joint Prisoner of War - Missing in Action Accounting Command. "To achieve the fullest possible accounting of all Americans missing as a result of the nation's past conflicts." Lest they be forgotten, no soldier will be left behind. As a nation we cannot honor the men and women who have

died to maintain our ideals unless we bring their bodies home.

This is a tall order.

It explains the effort involved in retrieving the remains of Leo Mustonen and Glenn Munn. It explains our nation's responsibility to our soldier dead.

It hasn't always been this way.

* * *

My friend, Art Marquez, died during the writing of this book. He was 83 years old, a native of Los Angeles, California, from a family that arrived in California with the Spaniards in the early, nineteenth century. We met at Camp Wolverton where he volunteered as Camp "doctor." Another friend from Camp, Rich Stowell, explained Art's duties at Wolverton during Art's eulogy. "It didn't matter to any of us at Wolverton that Art wasn't an actual doctor. To us, Art was everything we thought a doctor should be. He always got to know you as he treated your blister, bandaged your hand, pulled out that splinter. As it turns out, there are very few doctors like Art."

Because his family came to California so long ago, Art embodied that historical California so beautifully portrayed in Isabel Allende's novel, Zorro. A special place where Europeans never tired of questioning travelers to the New World. A place, "confused with a mysterious, steamy island." That isle was long the dream and wish of travelers in the Old World for the New - the legend of California. Raised on movies, books, and history, I think it must have been the same for Lt. Gamber and his cadets when they arrived in the Golden State in 1942. "So, this is it. It!" they surely thought. Like latter-day emigrants from the farmlands of Ohio, Minnesota, and the Idaho frontier. They had arrived in a mystic place.

During World War II, Art was a medic in the United States Marines. In 1944 he was in training at Camp Pendleton, a wild land of wilderness and open space along the southern California coast between Los Angeles and San Diego. A soldier's duty is to wait. And wait. Always a patient man, Art had lost patience. He wanted to do something. Too much sitting around. So, when an officer suggested a project needed two volunteers, Art, in desperation of something to do, volunteered. He even convinced a fellow medic, also tired of life without purpose, to volunteer.

Those of us raised on movies know a soldier's greatest sin is to volunteer. Art and his buddy had moved beyond that. Purpose had done that. So, when a few months later their compatriots were

assigned to the forces assaulting Iwo Jima, Art and his buddy remained behind in California, educating United States Marines on how to avoid, or treat [if they had failed in avoiding] the ravages of venereal disease. War. War!

And here is a lesson. Casualties at Iwo Jima were horrendous. Horrendous enough to convince our government that assaulting the islands of Japan would create such unforgivable casualties as to turn American public opinion for the war against the United States. By some accounts, what happened at Iwo Jima led our country into being the only nuclear nation to drop atomic bombs on another country. On civilian populations.

Had Art not volunteered when he did, he could have been a casualty of Iwo Jima. And in being a casualty, the impacts of one man - unassuming, tolerant, courteous and kind, and giving by nature, might have been negated. Art touched a thousand lives and made each one greater a thousand-fold. Imagine this multiplied by 20,000 for those U.S. soldiers who died at Iwo Jima. Magnify that by all the millions killed during World War II. Such losses.

And now, imagine the deep significance of JPAC's mission. Why the people of this organization believe, within their heart of hearts, in the importance of bringing home, from every battlefield, those who sacrificed their lives in defense of our country, our history, our ideals, and our Constitution. That these sons and daughters of America, who gave the last full measure of devotion, did not die in vain.

During World War II, Michael Sledge says that 25% of U.S. soldier deaths were not combat related. That translates to 100,000 dead from disease, automobile accidents, training accidents - whatever. Comprehending the number of United States soldier deaths during the war is difficult but Sledge has an effective way of communicating that loss. "On an average daily basis, the United States lost service personnel equal to the number killed in the crash of a Boeing 747 with a full complement of passengers." The period between 1944 and 1945 saw our highest casualties. "It was as though several jumbo-jet-loads of men and women went down daily."

As terrible as our nation's losses sound, there were worse. Germany lost 5.5 million soldiers and 1.6 million civilians. Japan lost 2.1 million soldiers and 580,000 civilians. The United Kingdom lost 382,000 service personnel; France lost 217,000 plus 282,000 civilians. Poland lost 5.6 million civilians. The Soviet Union lost 10.7 million soldiers and 11.4 million civilians. How much is a million? The estimated population of Los Angeles in 2008 was 10.3 million.

* * *

Grieving is a natural condition but for the men involved in training or in battle, there wasn't always time to stop and grieve. Bill Davis was in navigation training at Mather Field in the same class as Mortenson, Munn, and Mustonen. He said to me, "Things were moving very rapidly [in autumn, 1942], as you know, for at that time they were in a hurry to get flight crews together for the air offensive in Europe. We were in classes or flights morning, afternoon, and evening, daily." It must have been difficult to keep track of when one airplane with a crew of four disappeared. But it's not that people didn't care.

* * *

Drew Gilpin Faust writes that our government's first action to recognize soldier's supreme sacrifice was in establishing national cemeteries. This didn't occur until during the Civil War when our nation experienced a, "newly and self-consciously humanitarian age." Commitment to individual rights meant people were, "more easily moved by the spectacle of human misery," than any time in the past. Battlefield losses, "undocumented, unconfirmed, and unrecognized," were intolerable to the public.

July, 1864 Congress passed an act that, "established a new organizational principle for handling casualties," with the creation of a special graves registration unit. This unit was organized under the Quartermaster Corps. Prior to 1864, burying the dead after battle had been mostly an afterthought for the army and a matter of public health to the civilians who lived near battlegrounds. Poems and ballads from early English history are full of descriptions of swine, crows, and wild animals gorging themselves on the bodies of those slain in battle.

Incorporated within the concept of the good death was a decent burial. During the Civil War, families would journey to battlefields searching for sons and fathers or friends to provide proper burial. The Christian Commission and the Sanitary Commission, among others in the north, was established to locate the bodies of soldiers killed in action, ascertain their names [if possible], and transmit that information to families. If anything could be worse than contemplating the death of a family member it had to be not even knowing whether they were dead or alive.

Mark Harris points out in, *Grave Matters*, that having a body to grieve over is an accepted part of the American way of death. Through history and custom, this is what we have come to expect. The funeral trade has only helped it along by christening the, "embalmer's creation a 'memory picture,' a pleasing illusion of a

loved one who has simply slipped off to sleep." As I learned from reading about how this custom developed, it's easily understood why civilians saw the necessity of viewing the deceased's remains, soldier or not. It's all part of the acceptance that a death has occurred, enabling, "the necessary grieving and subsequent healing process." Having a, "pleasant and true-to-life," picture makes it easier to, "acknowledge the death and, perhaps, let go."

In Civil War days families learned of soldier deaths from often highly unreliable lists published in newspapers. A more reliable method was a letter home from the soldier's commanders. Even better was a letter by the soldier's companions since they were the ones most likely to have witnessed the death. By World War II had come the War Department telegram, "The President regrets to inform you that your son..."

The pain experienced by nineteenth century families over the loss of their loved ones must have been excruciating, made even more so by the manner in which so many of the dead were treated. The dead were buried, often hastily and not terribly deeply, by the hundreds in trenches - unmarked and unregistered. Faust writes, "In the absence of arrangements for interring and recording overwhelming numbers, hundreds of thousands of men - more than 40% percent of deceased Yankees and a far greater proportion of Confederates - perished without names," known only as unknown.

Soldiers in the field were understandably not happy with this arrangement, especially when considering how their own deaths would be treated. From this evolved the idea that government was obligated for not only treating the wounded but dealing with the dead as well.

Faust writes this change in attitude developed due to commitment to individual human rights that derived from the principles soldiers on both sides fought for. "Honoring the dead became inseparable from respecting the living."

Before the dead can be honored, they must be named. JPAC currently spends more than \$100 million/year, "in the effort to find and identify the approximately 88,000 individuals still missing from World War II, Korea, and Vietnam." Soldiers and families of the nineteenth century would be pleased by this. "The obligation of the state to account for and return - either dead or alive - every soldier in its service," is unquestioned today. Soldiers began to wear some form of official identity badge during World War I. They had to wait until the Korean War before our country established a policy of identification and repatriation of every dead soldier.

Pursuing this policy has never been cheap. Quartermaster General and other documents reported by Michael Sledge in, *Soldier Dead*, say our country spent \$18 million by 1922 repatriating 45,588 World War I service personnel. That figure jumped to \$96.5 million by 1952 to return 171,000 World War II service personnel.

As famously portrayed by George C. Scott, General George Patton just as famously reminded soldiers their main occupation in war is to kill the enemy. Dealing with the aftermath of such an occupation created huge problems during the Civil War. The numbers of dead threatened to overwhelm not only the soldiers but families and civilian witnesses to battle as well. How we, as individuals and as a nation, developed to deal with these amazing numbers of dead became important because, as the Antietam National Cemetery trustees wrote in 1869, "One of the striking indications of civilization and refinement among a people is the tenderness and care manifested by them towards their dead."

Burying the dead therefore became more important than simply disposing of the bodies. Burying the dead became a way to honor and preserve the dignity and privacy of the deceased. The United States was a very Christian country in mid-nineteenth century. Faust writes, "Redemption and restoration of the body were understood as physical, not just metaphysical, realities," so it mattered greatly to soldiers that their remains be dealt with reverence and care. They believed their bodies served as a, "repository of human identity," and, "intrinsic selfhood and individuality of a particular human." If a soldier expected to rise from the dead, as promised by his faith, it was important his body be given proper burial.

* * *

Following World War II, families had the choice not only of repatriation but of leaving soldiers buried overseas. Initially there was great reluctance to inter American soldiers in enemy soil, as if any remains buried in those countries would be contaminated. Michael Sledge writes, "Obviously, the soil in Germany or Japan is inanimate, soulless, and indifferent to whose remains it holds, and remains certainly do not care where they are buried - or if they are even buried at all." No, the objections to leaving Americans behind in these countries stemmed from, "feelings of the living and the generalized enmity felt towards a warring nation and its people."

That we consider these subjects during life is not fascination with the macabre. Neither, I feel, is our culture's fascination with death as witnessed by a near obsession for slasher movies and the popularity of television crime scene investigation shows. Though scientific and religious views may have evolved on this

subject since the 1860s, people's views have not. There will always been a fascination with life and its transition to death. We humans express the singularity of our existence by our knowledge of how transitory is that existence. In a culture that values sharing life experiences, there is only one experience that can be experienced yet never communicated to others. You will only know it once.

War is a great dehumanizer, turning some people into creatures worse than brutal and savage. Losing one's humanness reduces a person to the level of beast. When we can no longer find reason to separate ourselves from the beasts of the forest we can no longer consider ourselves created in God's image. This was impossible to accept during the Civil War and soldiers worked assiduously to hang on to their humanness as the war devolved ever deeper to the level of bestial. To me this indicates that slaughter and butchery of our fellow creatures may be the norm for some but it is not so for our species. It is an aberration.

* * *

The most palpable result of all this death associated with war is what happens to the survivors: they go on living. Some mourn for a short time and get on with their lives. Others never recover.

In letters written between Mamee, Glenn Munn's mother, and Leo Mustonen's mother, Anna, it's clear that Mrs. Mustonen never got recover from her loss. Marjorie Freeman was a young war bride in 1942, staying with her mother-in-law. Anna Mustonen would visit every morning for coffee. It was the same every day, carrying grief so heavy it weighed her down. "Oh my poor Leo - if only he could come home." Knowing he had disappeared, presuming he was dead, but never knowing how or why tore at her until her own death in 1969. Thinking of Mrs. Mustonen and her grief, I can't help but agree with what Thomas Mann wrote. "A man's dying is more the survivors affair than his own."

Grieving for the dead makes us human. In wartime, when carnage and slaughter occur on such grand scales, understanding this loss on any meaningful level means confronting and accepting individual loss. Wasn't it Stalin who said, "One death is tragic. A million is a statistic." At any rate, he ought to know.

One difficulty in accepting death comes from lacking a body to grieve over. Every culture has its own process for resolving the death of a loved one. This is ours. The work of JPAC is an important component in bringing home the finality of death by supplying the body and providing final proof.

Though our country was established as a secular state, we have

always been a deeply religious people. During war, as casualties mount, this religiosity seems particularly relevant. Religion is many things to many people but it's easy to see its palliative character in helping us grieve and understand and find meaning in death. The ceremony of a funeral helps with closure, marking an end to the life we have known and loved. And whether heaven exists or not, it is comforting to think it does and that our loved ones, lost in suffering and pain, are waiting for us in comfort and paradise. Consolation is an important requisite for moving on with our lives.

Faust's discussion outlining a nation's obligation to those who died for that nation bear directly on the missing crew. The Army spent so much time and effort to recover the four men of 41-21079 because governmental responsibility, accounting for the dead, and repatriating them back to their families was expected. It evolved from Civil War experiences. Such were the numbers of battlefield dead, and death by disease, of so many left unburied or interred in shallow and unmarked graves, that the nation required a formal system be inaugurated. There could be no other way to dispel the distress and anxiety felt by Americans, both south and north, to confer some amount of dignity upon those slain during the war.

In that tradition Capt. Roy F. Sulzbacher journeyed not once, but twice, to Mendel Glacier in 1948 to recover the crew from the wrecked Beech 18. That he failed in his obligation is not because of Capt. Sulzbacher's lack of duty, initiative, or will, but due to climate, geology, and the captain's own imminent death.

More than most, Capt. Sulzbacher knew, from experience throughout the Pacific Theater during World War II, the responsibility of government to locate, identify, and give decent burials to soldiers who died for their country. A basic tenet of human rights obliges governments to provide care for its veterans and its dead in order to not deny them their humanity. Or, more simply put; this is what civilized people do.