GLOBAL

The Real War 1939-1945

On its fiftieth anniversary, how should we think of the Second World War? What is its contemporary meaning? One possible meaning, reflected in every line of what follows, is obscured by that oddly minimizing term "conventional war." With our fears focused on nuclear destruction, we tend to be less mindful of just what conventional war between modern industrial powers is like. This article describes such war, in a stark, unromantic manner

PAUL FUSSELL AUGUST 1989 ISSUE

WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THE SECOND WORLD War that moved the troops to constant verbal subversion and contempt? What was it that made the Americans, especially, so fertile with insult and cynicism, calling women Marines BAMS (broad-assed Marines) and devising SNAFU, with its offspring TARFU ("Things are really fucked up"), FUBAR ("Fucked up beyond all recognition"), and the perhaps less satisfying FUBB ("Fucked up beyond belief")? It was not just the danger and fear, the boredom and uncertainty and loneliness and deprivation. It was the conviction that optimistic publicity and euphemism had rendered their experience so falsely that it would never be readily communicable. They knew that in its representation to the laity, what was happening to them was systematically sanitized and Norman Rockwellized, not to mention Disneyfied. They knew that despite the advertising and publicity, where it counted their arms and equipment were worse than the Germans'. They knew that their automatic rifles (First World War vintage) were slower and clumsier, and they knew that the Germans had a much better light machine gun. They knew, despite official assertions to the contrary, that the Germans had real smokeless powder for their small arms and that they did not. They knew that their own tanks, both American and British, were ridiculously underarmed and underarmored, so that they would inevitably be destroyed in an open encounter with an equal number of German panzers. They knew that the anti-tank mines supplied to them became unstable in subfreezing weather, and that truckloads of them blew up in the winter of 1944-1945. And they knew that the single greatest weapon of the war, the atomic bomb excepted, was the German 88-mm flat-trajectory gun, which brought down thousands of bombers and tens of thousands of soldiers. The Allies had nothing as good, despite the fact that one of them had designated itself the world's greatest industrial power. The troops' disillusion and their ironic response, in song and satire and sullen contempt, came from knowing that the home front then

RECOMMENDED READING

Purgatory at Sea
IAN URBINA


American Special Ops Forces Are Everywhere
MARK BOWDEN


After the Blast
RANIA ABOUZEID


could (and very likely historiography later would) be aware of none of these things.

The Great War brought forth the stark, depressing *Journey's End;* the Second, as John Ellis notes in *The Sharp End,* the tuneful *South Pacific.* The real war was tragic and ironic beyond the power of any literary or philosophic analysis to suggest, but in unbombed America especially, the meaning of the war seemed inaccessible. Thus, as experience, the suffering was wasted. The same tricks of publicity and advertising might have succeeded in sweetening the actualities of Vietnam if television and a vigorous, uncensored, moral journalism hadn't been brought to bear. Because the Second World War was fought against palpable evil, and thus was a sort of moral triumph, we have been reluctant to probe very deeply into its murderous requirements. America has not yet understood what the war was like and thus has been unable to use such understanding to reinterpret and redefine the national reality and to arrive at something like public maturity.

"Members Missing"

IN THE POPULAR AND GENTEEL ICONOGRAPHY OF war during the bourgeois age, all the way from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century history paintings to twentieth-century photographs, the bodies of the dead are intact, if inert—sometimes bloody and sprawled in awkward positions, but, except for the absence of life, plausible and acceptable simulacra of the people they once were. But there is a contrary and much more "realistic" convention represented in, say, the Bayeaux tapestry, whose ornamental border displays numerous severed heads and limbs. That convention is honored likewise in the Renaissance awareness of what happens to the body in battle. In Shakespeare's *Henry V* the soldier Michael Williams assumes the traditional understanding when he observes,

> But if the cause be not good, the King himself hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads chopped off in a battle shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, 'We died at such a place'—some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left.

And Goya's eighty etchings known as *The Disasters of War,* depicting events during the Peninsular War, feature plentiful dismembered and beheaded cadavers. One of the best-known of Goya's images is that of a naked body, its right arm severed, impaled on a tree.

But these examples date from well before the modern age of publicity and euphemism. The peruser *(reader* would be the wrong word) of the picture collection *Life Goes to War* (1977), a volume so popular and widely distributed as to constitute virtually a definitive and official anthology of Second World War photographs, will find even in its starkest images no depiction of bodies dismembered. There are three separated heads shown, but all, significantly, are Asian—one the head of a Chinese soldier hacked off by the Japanese at Nanking; one a Japanese soldier's badly burnt head (complete with helmet), mounted as a trophy on an American tank at Guadalcanal; and

one a former Japanese head, now a skull sent home as a souvenir to a girlfriend by her navy beau in the Pacific. No American dismemberings were registered, even in the photographs of Tarawa and Iwo Jima. American bodies (decently clothed) are occasionally in evidence, but they are notably intact. The same is true in other popular collections of photographs, like *Collier's Photographic History of World War ll,* Ronald Heiferman's *World War II,* A.J.P. Taylor's *History of World War II,* and Charles Herridge's *Pictorial History of World War II.* In these, no matter how severely wounded, Allied soldiers are never shown suffering what in the Vietnam War was termed traumatic amputation: everyone has all his limbs, his hands and feet and digits, not to mention an expression of courage and cheer. And recalling Shakespeare and Goya, it would be a mistake to assume that dismembering was more common when warfare was largely a matter of cutting weapons, like swords and sabers. Their results are nothing compared with the work of bombs, machine guns, pieces of shell, and high explosives in general. The difference between the two traditions of representation is not a difference in military technique. It is a difference in sensibility, especially in the ability of a pap-fed public to face unpleasant facts, like the actualities apparent at the site of a major airplane accident.

What annoyed the troops and augmented their sardonic, contemptuous attitude toward those who viewed them from afar was in large part this public innocence about the bizarre damage suffered by the human body in modern war. The troops could not contemplate without anger the lack of public knowledge of the Graves Registration form used by the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps, with its space for indicating "Members Missing." You would expect frontline soldiers to be struck and hurt by bullets and shell fragments, but such is the popular insulation from the facts that you would not expect them to be hurt, sometimes killed, by being struck by parts of their friends' bodies violently detached. If you asked a wounded soldier or Marine what hit him, you'd hardly be ready for the answer "My buddy's head," or his sergeant's heel or his hand, or a Japanese leg, complete with shoe and puttees, or the West Point ring on his captain's severed hand. What drove the troops to fury was the complacent, unimaginative innocence of their home fronts and rear echelons about such an experience as the following, repeated in essence tens of thousands of times. Captain Peter Royle, a British artillery forward observer, was moving up a hill in a night attack in North Africa. "I was following about twenty paces behind," he wrote in a memoir,

> when there was a blinding flash a few yards in front of me. I had no idea what it was and fell flat on my face. I found out soon enough: a number of the infantry were carrying mines strapped to the small of their backs, and either a rifle or machine gun bullet had struck one, which had exploded, blowing the man into three pieces—two legs and head and chest. His inside was strewn on the hillside and I crawled into it in the darkness.

In war, as in air accidents, insides are much more visible than it is normally well to imagine. And there's an indication of what can be found on the ground after an air crash in one soldier's memories of the morning after an

artillery exchange in North Africa. Neil McCallum and his friend "S." came upon the body of a man who had been lying on his back when a shell, landing at his feet, had eviscerated him:

> "Good God," said S., shocked, "here's one of his fingers." S. stubbed with his toe at the ground some feet from the corpse. There is more horror in a severed digit than in a man dying: it savors of mutilation. "Christ," went on S. in a very low voice, "look, it's not his *finger*."

In the face of such horror, the distinction between friend and enemy vanishes, and the violent dismemberment of any human being becomes traumatic. After the disastrous Canadian raid at Dieppe, German soldiers observed: "The dead on the beach—I've never seen such obscenities before." "There were pieces of human beings littering the beach. There were headless bodies, there were legs, there were arms." There were even shoes "with feet in them." The soldiers on one side know what the soldiers on the other side understand about dismemberment and evisceration, even if that knowledge is hardly shared by the civilians behind them. Hence the practice among German U-boats of carrying plenty of animal intestines to shoot to the surface to deceive those imagining that their depth charges have done the job. Some U-boats, it was said, carried (in cold storage) severed legs and arms to add verisimilitude. But among the thousands of published photographs of sailors and submariners being rescued after torpedoings and sinkings, there was no evidence of severed limbs, intestines, or floating parts.

If American stay-at-homes could be almost entirely protected from an awareness of the looks and smells of the real war, the British, at least those living in bombed areas, could not. But even then, as one Briton noted in 1941, "we shall never know half of the history . . . of these times." What prompted that observation was this incident: "The other night not half a mile from me a middle-aged woman [in the civilian defense] went out with an ambulance. In a smashed house she saw something she thought was a mop. It was no mop but a man's head." So unwilling is the imagination to dwell on genuine—as opposed to fictional or theatrical—horrors that, indeed, "we shall never know half of the history. . . of these times." At home under the bombs in April, 1941, Frances Faviell was suddenly aware that the whole house was coming down on top of her, and she worried about "Anne," who was in bed on the top floor.

> With great difficulty I raised my head and shook it free of heavy, choking, dusty stuff. An arm had fallen round my neck—a warm, living arm, and for one moment I thought that Richard had entered in the darkness and was holding me, but when very cautiously I raised my hand to it, I found that it was a woman's bare arm with two rings on the third finger and it stopped short in a sticky mess.

You can't take much of that sort of thing without going mad, as General Sir John Hackett understood when he saw that the wild destruction of enemy human beings had in it less of satisfaction than of distress. Injured and on the German side of the line at Arnhem, he was being taken to the German medical installation. Along the road he saw "half a body, just naked buttocks

and the legs joined on and no more of it than that." For those who might have canted that the only good German is a dead German, Hackett has a message: "There was no comfort here. It was like being in a strange and terrible nightmare from which you longed to wake and could not."

The Democracy of Fear

IN THE GREAT WAR WILFRED OWEN WAS DRIVEN VERY near to madness by having to remain for some time next to the scattered body pieces of one of his friends. He had numerous counterparts in the Second World War. At the botched assault on Tarawa Atoll, one coxswain at the helm of a landing vessel went quite mad, perhaps at the shock of steering through all the severed heads and limbs near the shore. One Marine battalion commander, badly wounded, climbed above the rising tide onto a pile of American bodies. Next afternoon he was found there, mad. But madness did not require the spectacle of bodies just like yours messily torn apart. Fear continued over long periods would do the job, as on the merchant and Royal Navy vessels on the Murmansk run, where "grown men went steadily and fixedly insane before each other's eyes," as Tristan Jones testified in *Heart of Oak.* Madness was likewise familiar in submarines, especially during depth-bomb attacks. One U.S. submariner reported that during the first months of the Pacific war such an attack sent three men "stark raving mad": they had to be handcuffed and tied to their bunks. Starvation and thirst among prisoners of the Japanese, and also among downed fliers adrift on rafts, drove many insane, and in addition to drinking their urine they tried to relieve their thirst by biting their comrades' jugular veins and sucking the blood. In one sense, of course, the whole war was mad, and every participant insane from the start, but in a strictly literal sense the result of the years of the bombing of Berlin and its final destruction by the Russian army was, for much of the population, actual madness. Just after the surrender, according to Douglas Botting, in *From the Rains of the Reich,* some 50,000 orphans could be found living in holes like animals, "some of them one-eyed or one-legged veterans of seven or so, many so deranged by the bombing and the Russian attack that they screamed at the sight of any uniform, even a Salvation Army one."

Although in the Great War madness among the troops was commonly imputed to the effects of concussion ("shell shock"), in the Second it was more frankly attributed to fear, and in contrast to the expectations of heroic behavior which set the tone of the earlier war, the fact of fear was now squarely to be faced. The result was a whole new literature of fear, implying that terror openly confessed argues no moral disgrace, although failure to control visible symptoms is reprehensible. The official wartime attitude toward the subject was often expressed by quoting Marshal Ney: "The one who says he never knew fear is a compound liar." As the 1943 U.S. *Officers Guide* goes on to instruct its anxious tyros,

> Physical courage is little more than the ability to control the physical fear which all normal men have, and cowardice does not consist in being afraid but in giving away to fear. What, then, keeps the soldier from giving away to fear? The answer is simply—his desire to retain the good opinion of his friends and associates . . . his pride smothers

> his fear.

The whole trick for the officer is to seem what you would be, and the formula for dealing with fear is ultimately rhetorical and theatrical: regardless of your actual feelings, you must simulate a carriage that will affect your audience as fearless, in the hope that you will be imitated, or at least not be the agent of spreading panic. Advice proffered to enlisted men admitted as frankly that fear was a normal "problem" and suggested ways of controlling it. Some of these are indicated in a wartime publication of the U.S. National Research Council, *Psychology for the Fighting Man.* Even if it is undeniable that in combat everyone will be "scared—terrified," there are some antidotes: keeping extra busy with tasks involving details, and engaging in roll calls and countings-off, to emphasize the proximity of buddies, both as support and as audience. And there is a "command" solution to the fear problem which has been popular among military theorists at least since the Civil War: when under shelling and mortar fire and scared stiff, the infantry should alleviate the problem by moving—never back but forward. This will enable trained personnel to take care of the wounded and will bring troops close enough to the enemy to make him stop the shelling. That it will also bring them close enough to put them within range of rifles and machine guns and hand grenades is what the theorists know but don't mention. The troops know it, which is why they like to move *back*. This upper or remote-echelon hope that fear can be turned, by argument and reasoning, into something with the appearance of courage illustrates the overlap between the implausible persuasions of advertising and those of modern military motivators.

There was a lot of language devoted to such rationalizing of the irrational. A little booklet issued to infantry replacements joining the Fifth Army in Italy contained tips to ease the entry of innocents into combat: Don't believe all the horror stories circulating in the outfit you're joining. Don't carry too much stuff. Don't excrete in your foxhole—if you can't get out, put some dirt on a shovel, go on that, and throw the load out. Keep your rifle clean and ready. Don't tape down the handles of your grenades for fear of their flying off accidentally—it takes too long to get the tape off. Learn to dig in fast when shelling starts. Watch the ground for evidence of mines and booby traps. On the move, keep contact but don't bunch up. And use common sense in your fight against fear:

> Don't be too scared. Everybody is afraid, but you can learn to control your fear. And, as non-coms point out, "you have a good chance of getting through if you don't lose your head. Being too scared is harmful to you. " Remember that a lot of noise you hear is ours, and not dangerous. It may surprise you that on the whole, many more are pulled out for sickness or accident than become battle casualties.

(After that bit of persuasion, the presence of first-aid sections on "If You Get Hit" and "If a Buddy Gets Hit" seems a bit awkward.)

This open, practical confrontation of a subject usually unmentioned has its counterpart in the higher reaches of the wartime literature of fear. The theme of Alan Rook's poem "Dunkirk Pier," enunciated in the opening stanza, is

one hardly utterable during earlier wars:

> Deeply across the waves of our darkness fear
> like the silent octopus feeling, groping, clear
> as a star's reflection, nervous and cold as a bird,
> tells us that pain, tells us that death is near.

William Collins's "Ode to Fear," published in 1746, when the average citizen had his wars fought by others whom he never met, is a remote allegorical and allusive performance lamenting the want of powerful emotion in contemporary poetry. C. Day Lewis's "Ode to Fear" of 1943 is not literary but literal, frank, down-to-earth, appropriately disgusting.

> Now fear has come again
> To live with us
> In poisoned intimacy like pus. . . .

And fear is exhibited very accurately in its physical and psychological symptoms:

> The bones, the stalwart spine,
> The legs like bastions,
> The nerves, the heart's natural combustions,
> The head that hives our active thoughts—all pine,
> Are quenched or paralyzed
> When Fear puts unexpected questions
> And makes the heroic body freeze like a beast
> surprised.

The new frankness with which fear would be acknowledged in this modernist, secular, psychologically self-conscious wartime was registered in W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939," in which the speaker, "uncertain and afraid," observes the "waves of anger and fear" washing over the face of the earth. And the new frankness became the virtual subject and center of *The Age of Anxiety,* which Auden wrote from 1944 to 1946.

Civilian bombing enjoined a new frankness on many Britons. "Perfect fear casteth out love" was Cyril Connolly's travesty of I John 4:18, as if he were thoroughly acquainted with the experience of elbowing his dearest aside at the shelter entrance.

If the anonymous questionnaire, that indispensable mechanism of the social sciences, had been widely used during the Great War, more perhaps could be known or safely conjectured about the actualities of terror on the Western Front. Questionnaires were employed during the Second World War, and American soldiers were asked about the precise physical signs of their fear. The soldiers testified that they were well acquainted with such impediments to stability as (in order of frequency) "Violent pounding of the heart, sinking feeling in the stomach, shaking or trembling all over, feeling sick at the stomach, cold sweat, feeling weak or faint."

More than a quarter of the soldiers in one division admitted that they'd been so scared they'd vomited, and almost a quarter said that at terrifying moments

they'd lost control of their bowels. Ten percent had urinated in their pants. As John Ellis observes of these data,

> Stereotypes of "manliness" and "guts" can readily accommodate the fact that a man's stomach or heart might betray his nervousness, but they make less allowance for his shitting his pants or wetting himself.

And furthermore, "If over one-fifth of the men in one division actually admitted that they had fouled themselves, it is a fair assumption that many more actually did so." One of the commonest fears, indeed, is that of wetting oneself and betraying one's fear for all to see by the most childish symptom. The fear of this fear augments as the rank rises: for a colonel to wet his pants under shellfire is much worse than for a PFC. The U.S. Marine Eugene B. Sledge confessed that just before he landed at Peleliu, "I felt nauseated and feared that my bladder would surely empty itself and reveal me to be the coward I was."

If perfect fear casteth out love, perfect shame can cast out even agony. During the Normandy invasion a group of American soldiers came upon a paratroop sergeant caught by his chute in a tree. He had broken his leg, and fouled himself as well. He was so ashamed that he begged the soldiers not to come near him, despite his need to be cut down and taken care of. "We just cut off his pants," reported one of the soldiers who found him, "and gently washed him all over, so he wouldn't be humiliated at his next stop."

Men more experienced than that paratrooper had learned to be comfortable with the new frankness. A soldier unused to combat heard his sergeant utter an obscenity when their unit was hit by German 88 fire:

> I asked him if he was hit and he sort of smiled and said no, he had just pissed his pants. He always pissed them, he said, just when things started and then he was okay. He wasn't making any apologies either, and then I realized something wasn't quite right with me either. There was something warm down there and it seemed to be running down my leg. . . .
>
> I told the sarge, I said, "Sarge, I've pissed too," or something like that, and he grinned and said, "Welcome to the war."

Other public signs of fear are almost equally common, if even more "comic." One's mouth grows dry and black, and a strange squeaking or quacking comes out, joined sometimes with a stammer. It is very hard for a field-grade officer to keep his dignity when that happens.

For the ground troops, artillery and mortar fire were the most terrifying, partly because their noise was so deafening and unignorable, and partly because the damage they caused the body—sometimes total disappearance or atomization into tiny red bits—was worse than most damage by bullets. To be killed by bullets seemed "so clean and surgical" to Sledge. "But shells would not only tear and rip the body, they tortured one's mind almost beyond the brink of sanity." An occasional reaction to the terror of shelling was audible "confession." One American infantryman cringing under artillery fire in the

Ardennes suddenly blurted out to his buddies, "In London I fucked prostitutes and then robbed them of their money." The shelling over, the soldier never mentioned this utterance again, nor did his friends, everyone understanding its stimulus and its meaning.

But for the infantry there was something to be feared almost as much as shelling: the German *Schü* mine, scattered freely just under the surface of the ground, which blew your foot entirely off if you stepped on it. For years after the war ex-soldiers seized up when confronted by patches of grass and felt safe only when walking on asphalt or concrete. Fear among the troops was probably greatest in the staging areas just before D-Day: that was the largest assembly of Allied troops yet unblooded and combat-virgin. "Don't think they weren't afraid," one American woman who worked with the Red Cross says in Studs Terkel's *"The Good War."* "Just before they went across to France, belts and ties were removed from some of these young men. They were very, very young."

What Unconditional Surrender Meant

FOR THOSE WHO FOUGHT, THE WAR HAD OTHER features unknown to those who looked on or got the war mediated through journalism. One such feature was the rate at which it destroyed human beings —friendly as well as enemy. Training for infantry fighting, few American soldiers were tough-minded enough to accept the full, awful implications of the term "replacement" in the designation of their Replacement Training Centers. (The proposed euphemism "reinforcement" never caught on.) What was going to happen to the soldiers they were being trained to replace? Why should so many "replacements"—hundreds of thousands of them, actually—be required? The answers came soon enough in the European theater, in Italy, France, and finally Germany. In six weeks of fighting in Normandy, the 90th Infantry Division had to replace 150 percent of its officers and more than 100 percent of its men. If a division was engaged for more than three months, the probability was that every one of its second lieutenants, all 132 of them, would he killed or wounded. For those being prepared as replacements at officer candidate schools, it was not mentally healthy to dwell on the oddity of the schools' turning out hundreds of new junior officers weekly after the army had reached its full wartime strength. Only experience would make the need clear. The commanding officer of the 6th King's Own Scottish Borderers, which finally arrived in Hamburg in 1945 after fighting all the way from Normandy, found an average of five original men remaining (out of around 200) in each rifle company. "I was appalled," he said. "I had no idea it was going to be like that."

And it was not just wounds and death that depopulated the rifle companies. In the South Pacific it was malaria, dengue, blackwater fever, and dysentery; in Europe, dysentery, pneumonia, and trench foot. What disease did to the troops in the Pacific has never been widely known. The ingestion of Atabrine, the wartime substitute for quinine as a malaria preventive, has caused ears to ring for a lifetime, and decades afterward thousands still undergo their regular malaria attacks, freezing and burning and shaking all over. In Burma, British and American troops suffered so regularly from dysentery that they cut large

holes in the seats of their trousers to simplify things. But worse was the mental attrition suffered by combat troops, who learned from experience the inevitability of their ultimate mental breakdown, ranging from the milder forms of treatable psychoneurosis to outright violent insanity.

In war it is not just the weak soldiers, or the sensitive ones, or the highly imaginative or cowardly ones, who will break down. All will break down if in combat long enough. "Long enough" is now defined by physicians and psychiatrists as between 200 and 240 days. For every frontline soldier in the Second World War, according to John Ellis, there was the "slowly dawning and dreadful realisation that there was no way out, that . . . it was only a matter of time before they got killed or maimed or broke down completely." As one British officer put it, "You go in, you come out, you go in again and you keep doing it until they break you or you are dead." This "slowly dawning and dreadful realisation" usually occurs as a result of two stages of rationalization and one of accurate perception:

1. It *can't* happen to me. I am too clever / agile / well-trained / good-looking / beloved / tightly laced / etc. This persuasion gradually erodes into

2. It *can* happen to me, and I'd better be more careful. I can avoid the danger by keeping extra alert at all times / watching more prudently the way I take cover or dig in or expose my position by firing my weapon / etc. This conviction attenuates in turn to the perception that death and injury are matters more of bad luck than lack of skill, making inevitable the third stage of awareness:

3. It *is going to* happen to me, and only my not being there is going to prevent it.

Because of the words *unconditional surrender,* it became clear in this war that no sort of lucky armistice or surprise political negotiation was going to give the long-term frontline man his pardon. "It soon became apparent," John Ellis writes, "that every yard of ground would have to be torn from the enemy and only killing as many men as possible would enable one to do this. Combat was reduced to its absolute essentials, kill or be killed." It was this that made this second Western Front war unique: it could end only when the line (or the Soviet line) arrived in Berlin. In the Second World War the American military learned something very "modern"—modern because dramatically "psychological," utilitarian, unchivalric, and unheroic: it learned that men will inevitably go mad in battle and that no appeal to patriotism, manliness, or loyalty to the group will ultimately matter. Thus in later wars things were arranged differently. In Korea and Vietnam it was understood that a man fulfilled his combat obligation and bought his reprieve if he served a fixed term, 365 days—and not days in combat but days in the theater of war. The infantry was now treated somewhat like the air corps had been in the Second War: performance of a stated number of missions guaranteed escape.

"Disorganized Insanity"

IF MOST CIVILIANS DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THESE things, most soldiers didn't know about them either, because only a relatively small

number did any fighting that brought them into mortal contact with the enemy. For the rest, engaged in supply, transportation, and administrative functions, the war constituted a period of undesired and uncomfortable foreign travel under unaccustomed physical and social conditions, like enforced obedience, bad food, and an absence of baths. In 1943 the United States Army grew by 2 million men, but only about 365,000 of those went to combat units, and an even smaller number ended up in the rifle companies. The bizarre size and weight of the administrative tail dragged across Europe by the American forces is implied by statistics: from 1941 to 1945 the number of men whose job was fighting increased by only 100,000. If by the end there were 11 million men in the American army, only 2 million were in the ninety combat divisions, and of those, fewer than 700,000 were in the infantry. Regardless of the persisting fiction, those men know by experience the truth enunciated by John Ellis that

> World War II was not a war of movement, except on the rare occasions when the enemy was in retreat; it was a bloody slogging match in which mobility was only occasionally of real significance. Indeed, . . . the internal combustion engine was not a major consideration in the ground war.

The relative few who actually fought know that the war was not a matter of rational calculation. They know madness when they see it. They can draw the right conclusions from the fact that in order to invade the Continent the Allies killed 12,000 innocent French and Belgian civilians who happened to live in the wrong part of town—that is, too near the railway tracks, the bombers' target. The few who fought are able to respond appropriately —without surprise—to such a fact as this: in the Netherlands alone, more than 7,000 planes tore into the ground or the water, afflicted by bullets, flak, exhaustion of fuel or crew, '"pilot error," discouragement, or suicidal intent. In a 1986 article in *Smithsonian* magazine about archaeological excavation in Dutch fields and drained marshes, Les Daly emphasized the multitudinousness, the mad repetitiveness of these 7,000 crashes, reminding readers that "the total fighter and bomber combat force of the U.S. Air Force today amounts to about 3,400 airplanes. To put it another way, the crash of 7,000 aircraft would mean that every square mile of the entire state of New Jersey would have shaken to the impact of a downed plane."

In the same way, the few who fought have little trouble understanding other outcroppings of the irrational element, in events like Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or for that matter the bombing of Hamburg or Darmstadt or Tokyo or Dresden. The destruction of Dresden *et al.* was about as rational as the German shooting of hostages to "punish" an area, or the American belief that an effective way into Germany was to plunge through the Hürtgen Forest, or the British and Canadian belief, two years earlier, that a great raid on Dieppe would be worthwhile. Revenge is not a rational motive, but it was the main motive in the American destruction of the Japanese empire.

Those who fought know this, just as they know that it is as likely for the man next to you to be shot through the eye, ear, testicles, or brain as through the

shoulder (the way the cinema does it). A shell is as likely to blow his whole face off as to lodge a fragment in some mentionable and unvital tissue. Those who fought saw the bodies of thousands of self-destroyed Japanese men, women, and infants drifting off Saipan—sheer madness, but not essentially different from what Eisenhower described in *Crusade in Europe,* where, though not intending to make our flesh creep or to descend to nasty details, he couldn't help reporting honestly on the carnage in the Falaise Pocket. He wrote, "It was literally possible to walk for hundreds of yards at a time, stepping on nothing but dead and decaying flesh"—formerly German soldiers, who could have lived by surrendering but who chose, madly, not to.

How is it that these data are commonplaces only to the small number who had some direct experience of them? One reason is the normal human talent for looking on the bright side, for not receiving information likely to cause distress or to occasion a major overhaul of normal ethical, political, or psychological assumptions. But the more important reason is that the news correspondents, radio broadcasters, and film people who perceived these horrors kept quiet about them on behalf of the war effort, and so the large wartime audience never knew these things. As John Steinbeck finally confessed in 1958, "We were all part of the War Effort. We went along with it, and not only that, we abetted it. . . . I don't mean that the correspondents were liars. . . . It is in the things not mentioned that the untruth lies." By not mentioning a lot of things, a correspondent could give the audience at home the impression that there were no cowards in the service, no thieves or rapists or looters, no cruel or stupid commanders. It is true, Steinbeck was aware, that most military operations are examples of "disorganized insanity," but the morale of the home front could not be jeopardized by an eyewitness's saying so. And even if a correspondent wanted to deliver the noisome truth, patriotism would join censorship in stopping his mouth. As Steinbeck noted in *Once There Was a War,* "The foolish reporter who broke the rules would not be printed at home and in addition would be put out of the theater by the command. "

The Necessity of Euphemism

THE WAY CENSORSHIP OPERATED TO KEEP THE real war from being known is suggested by Herbert Merillat, who during the war was a bright and sensitive public-relations officer attached to the Marines on Guadalcanal. In addition to generating Joe Blow stories, he had the job of censor: he was empowered to pass stories consonant with "the war effort" and to kill all others. Of a day in November, 1942, he wrote in *Guadalcanal Remembered,*

> A recently arrived sergeant-reporter came around this afternoon, very excited, very earnest. Having gone through one naval shelling and two bombings he has decided that war is hell, and that he should write something stark. He showed me a long piece on the terror of men during bombings and shellings, the pain of the wounded, the disease and unpleasantness of this place. It was a gloomy and distorted piece; you would get the idea that every marine on the island is a terror-stricken, beaten man. I tried to tell him the picture

> was badly skewed.

That's how the people at home were kept in innocence of malaria, dysentery, terror, bad attitude, and psychoneurosis. Occasionally there might be an encounter between home front sentimentality and frontline vileness, as in an episode recalled by Charles MacDonald, a rifle-company commander in Europe, in his 1947 book *Company Commander*. One glib reporter got far enough forward to encounter some infantrymen on the line, to whom he put cheerful questions like, "What would you like best from the States about now?" At first he got nothing but sullen looks and silence. But finally one soldier spoke:

> "I've got something to say. Tell them it's too damned serious over here to be talking about hot dogs and baked beans and things we're missing. Tell them it's hell, and tell them there're men getting killed and wounded every minute, and they're miserable and they're suffering. Tell them it's a matter more serious than they'll ever be able to understand"—

at which point "there was a choking sob in his voice," MacDonald remembered. Then the soldier got out the rest of his urgent message: "Tell 'em it's rough as hell. Tell 'em it's rough. Tell 'em it's rough, serious business. That's all. That's all."

Ernie Pyle, well known as the infantry's advocate, was an accredited correspondent, which meant that he, too, had to obey the rules—that is, reveal only about a third of the actuality and, just like the other journalists, fuel all the misconceptions: that officers were admired, if not loved; that soldiers were dutiful, if frightened; and that everyone on the Allied side was sort of nice. One of Pyle's best-known pieces is his description of the return to his company in Italy of the body of Captain Henry T. Waskow, "of Belton, Texas." Such ostentatious geographical precision only calls attention to the genteel vagueness with which Pyle was content to depict the captain's wound and body. Brought down from a mountain by muleback, Captain Waskow's body was laid out on the ground at night and respectfully visited by officers and men of the company. The closest Pyle came to accurate registration was reporting that one man, who sat by the body for some time, holding the captain's hand and looking into his face, finally "reached over and gently straightened the points of the captain's shirt collar, and then he sort of arranged the tattered edges of the uniform around the wound." While delivering an account satisfying on its own terms, this leaves untouched what normally would be thought journalistically indispensable questions, and certainly questions bound to occur to readers hoping to derive from the Infantry's Friend (as Pyle was often called) an accurate image of the infantry's experience. Questions like these: What killed Captain Waskow? Bullet, shell fragments, a mine, or what? Where was his wound? How large was it? You imply that it was in the traditional noble place, the chest. Was it? Was it a little hole, or was it a great red missing place? Was it perhaps in the crotch, or in the testicles, or in the belly? Were his entrails extruded, or in any way visible? Did the faithful soldier wash off his hands after toying with those "tattered edges"? Were the captain's eyes open? Did his face look happy?

Surprised? Satisfied? Angry?

But even Pyle's copy, resembling as it does the emissions from the Office of War Information, is frankness itself compared with what German correspondents were allowed to send. They were a part of the military, not just civilians attached to it, and like all other German troops, they had taken the oath to the Führer. Their job was strictly propaganda, and throughout the war they obeyed the invariable rule that German servicemen were never, never to be shown dead in photographs, moving or still, and that their bodies, if ever mentioned, were to be treated with verbal soft focus. Certainly, so far as the German home front knew, soldiers' bodies were not dismembered, decapitated, eviscerated, or flattened out by tank treads until they looked like plywood. Even more than the testimonies sent back by such as Steinbeck and Pyle, the narratives presented to the German people were nothing but fairy stories of total heroism, stamina, good will, and cheerfulness. This meant that for almost six years a large slice of actuality was declared off limits, and the sanitized and euphemized remainder was presented as the whole. Both sides were offered not just false data but worse: false assumptions about human nature and behavior, assumptions whose effect was to define either a world without a complicated principle of evil or one where all evil was easily displaced onto one simplified enemy—Jews on the Axis side, Nazis and "japs" on the Allied. The postwar result for the Allies, at least, is suggested by one returning Canadian soldier, wounded three times in Normandy and Holland, who recalls (in *Six War Years 1939-1945,* edited by Barry Broadfoot) disembarking with his buddies to find on the quay nice, smiling Red Cross or Salvation Army girls.

> They give us a little bag and it has a couple of chocolate bars in it and a comic book. . . . We had gone overseas not much more than children but we were coming back, sure, let's face it, as killers. And they were still treating us as children. Candy and comic books.

Considering that they were running the war, it is surprising how little some officials on each side knew about the real war and its conditions. Some didn't care to know—like Adolf Hitler, who refused to visit Hamburg after its terrible fire storm in the summer of 1943. Some thought they knew about the real war—like Josef Goebbels, who did once visit the Eastern Front. But there he "assimilated reality to his own fantasies," as Neil Acherson has said, and took away only evidence establishing that the troops were "brave fellows" and that his own morale-building speeches were "rapturously received." His knowledge of ground warfare remained largely literary: the course of the Punic Wars and the campaigns of Frederick the Great had persuaded him (or so he said) that in war "spirit" counts for more than luck or quantity of deployable men and munitions.

In addition to a calculating ignorance, a notable but not unique emotional coldness in the face of misery helped insulate him from the human implications of unpleasant facts. In his diary for September 20, 1943, airily and without any emotion or comment (not even a conventional "I was sorry to see" or "It is painful to say"), he totaled up the casualty figures for two years on the Eastern Front alone: "Our total losses in the East, exclusive of

Lapland, from June 22, 1941, to August 31, 1943, were 548,480 dead, of whom 18,512 were officers; 1,998,991 wounded, of whom 51,670 were officers; 354,957 missing, of whom 11,597 were officers; total 2,902,438, of whom 81,779 were officers." If it was callousness that protected Goebbels from the human implications of these numbers, it was rank and totemic identity that protected King George VI from a lot of instructive unpleasantness. According to John W. Wheeler-Bennett, his official biographer, what the King saw on his numerous visits to bombed areas fueled only his instinct for high-mindedness. He concluded that among the bombed and maimed he was witnessing "a fellowship of self-sacrifice and 'good-neighbourliness,' a comradeship of adversity in which men and women gave of their noblest to one another, a brotherhood of man in which the artificial barriers of caste and class were broken down." The King never saw perfect fear operating as Connolly saw it, and it is unlikely that anyone told him that while the Normandy invasion was taking place, "almost every police station and detention camp in Britain was jam-packed full," as Peter Grafton put it, in *You, You and You*. "In Glasgow alone . . . deserters were sitting twelve to a cell." It is hard to believe that the King was aware of all the bitter anti-Jewish graffiti his subjects were scrawling up in public places. Nor is it recorded that he took in news of the thievery, looting, and robbing of the dead which were widely visible in the raided areas. Thirty-four people were killed in the cellar ballroom of the Café de Paris on March 8, 1941, when a bomb penetrated the ceiling and exploded on the bandstand, wiping out the band and many of the dancers. Nicholas Monsarrat, in his autobiography *Breaking In, Breaking Out*, recalled the scene that followed.

> The first thing which the rescue squads and the firemen saw, as their torches poked through the gloom and the smoke and the bloody pit which had lately been the most chic cellar in London, was a frieze of other shadowy men, night-creatures who had scuttled within as soon as the echoes ceased, crouching over any dead or wounded woman, any *soignée* corpse they could find, and ripping off its necklace, or earrings, or brooch: rifling its handbag, scooping up its loose change.

That vignette suggests the difficulty of piercing the barrier of romantic optimism about human nature implicit in the Allied victory and the resounding Allied extirpation of flagrant evil. If it is a jolt to realize that blitzed London generated a whole class of skillful corpse robbers, it is because within the moral assumptions of the Allied side that fact would be inexplicable. One could say of the real war what Barbara Foley has written of the Holocaust—not that it is "unknowable" but that "its full dimensions are inaccessible to the ideological frameworks that we have inherited from the liberal era."

Unmelodramatized Horror

FINDING THE OFFICIAL, SANITIZED, "KING George" war unbelievable, not at all in accord with actual human nature, where might one turn in search of the real, heavy-duty war? After scrutinizing closely the facts of the American Civil War, after seeing and listening to hundreds of the wounded, Walt Whitman declared, "The real war will never get in the books."

Nor, of course, will the real Second World War. But the actualities of the war are more clearly knowable from some books than from others. The real war is unlikely to be found in novels, for example, for they must exhibit, if not plot, at least pace, and their characters tend to assume the cliché forms demanded by Hollywood, even the new Hollywood, and even if the novels are as honorable as Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun,* Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead,* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22.* Not to mention what is perhaps the best of them, James Jones's *The Thin Red Line.* Sensing that action and emotion during the war were too big and too messy and too varied for confinement in one 300-page volume of fiction, the British have tended to refract the war in trilogies, and some are brilliant: Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honor* (1965) of course, collecting his three novels about Guy Crouchback's disillusioning war, written from 1952 to 1961; Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* (1960-1965); Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time: Third Movement* (1964-1968); and Manning's *Levant Trilogy* (1977-1980). The American way seems to be less to conceive a trilogy than to produce three novels of different sorts and then, finding them on one's hands, to argue that they constitute a trilogy, as James Jones did. Despite many novels' undoubted success as engaging narrative, few have succeeded in making a motive, almost a character, of a predominant wartime emotion—boredom—or persuading readers that the horrors have not been melodramatized. One turns, thus, from novels to nonfiction, especially memoirs, and especially memoirs written by participants not conscious of serving any very elevated artistic ambition. The best are those devoid of significant dialogue, almost always a sign of *ex post facto* novelistic visitation. Because they were forbidden in all theaters of war, lest their capture reveal secrets, clandestine diaries, seen and censored by no authority, offer one of the most promising accesses to actuality. The prohibition of diaries often meant increased devotion and care on the part of the writer. In Cairo in April of 1943 D. A. Simmonds, an RAF pilot officer, addressed his diary thus:

> I understand that the writing of diaries is definitely forbidden in the services, and you must therefore consider yourself a very lucky diary to have so much time and energy expended on you when you're not entitled to be in existence at all.

And, a month later, "You are becoming quite a big lad now, my diary; slowly but surely your pages swell."

One diary in which much of the real war can be found is James J. Fahey's *Pacific War Diary* (1963). Fahey, a seaman first class on the light cruiser U.S.S. *Montpelier,* was an extraordinarily patient, decent person, devoid of literary sophistication, and the authenticity of his experience can be inferred from his constant obsession with hunger and food, subjects as interesting as combat.

> For breakfast we had some hash and 1 bun, for dinner baloney sandwich, and for supper we had coffee, baloney sandwich, 1 cookie and 1 candy bar. This morning our ship shot down its lucky #13 Jap plane and one probable.

Almost as trustworthy as such daily entries, unrevised later, are accounts of events written soon after by intelligent participants, like Keith Douglas

(Alamein to Zem Zem, 1946), John Guest *(Broken Images,* 1949), and Neil McCallum *(Journey With a Pistol,* 1959). Those are British, and they are typical British literary performances, educated, allusive, artistically sensitive, a reminder of the British expectation that highly accomplished and even stylish young men would often be found serving in the infantry and the tanks. There they would be in a position to create the sort of war memoirs virtually nonexistent among Americans—the sort that generate a subtle, historically conscious irony by juxtaposing traditional intellectual or artistic images of transcendence against an unflinching, fully mature registration of wartime barbarism.

The best American memoirs are different, conveying their terrible news less by allusion and suggestion and ironic learned comment than by an uncomplicated delivery of the facts, in a style whose literary unpretentiousness seems to argue absolute credibility. No American would write of his transformation from civilian into soldier the way John Guest did, in *Broken Images:* "I am undergoing a land-change into something coarse and strange." American attempts to avoid the plain frequently backfire, occasioning embarrassing outbreaks of Fine Writing. Speaking of the arrival, finally, of American planes on Guadalcanal, one U.S. Marine, Robert Leckie, wrote in *Helmet for My Pillow:*

> All of Guadalcanal was alive with hope and vibrant with the scent of victory. . . . The enemy was running! The siege was broken! And all through the day, like a mighty Te Deum rising to Heaven, came the beat of the airplane motors. Oh, how sweet the air I breathed that day! How fresh and clean and sprightly the life that leapt in my veins.

In contrast, the American procedure at its best, unashamed of simplicity, is visible in Eugene Sledge's memoir of a boy's experience fighting with "the old breed," the United States Marines. His *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981) is one of the finest memoirs to emerge from any war, and no Briton could have written it. Born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1923, Sledge enlisted in December, 1942. After his miraculous survival in the war, he threw himself into the study of zoology and ultimately became a professor of biology at the University of Montevallo, in Alabama. The main theme of *With the Old Breed* is, as Sledge indicates, "the vast difference" between what has been published about these two Marine Corps battles, which depicts them as more or less sane activities, and his own experience "on the front line." One reason Sledge's account is instantly credible is the amount of detail with which he registers his presence at the cutting edge, but another is his tone—unpretentious, unsophisticated, modest, and decent. Despite all the horrors he recounts, he is proud to have been a Marine. He is uncritical of and certainly uncynical about Bob Hope's contribution to the entertainment of the forces, and on the topic of medals and awards he is totally unironic—he takes them seriously, believing that those who have been given them deserve them. He doesn't like to say *shit* and he prays, out loud. He comes through as such a nice person, so little inclined to think ill of others, that forty years after the war he still can't figure out why loose and wayward straps on haversacks and the like should be called, by disapproving sergeants and officers, *Irish pennants:* "Why Irish I never knew. " Clearly he is not a man to

misrepresent experience for the momentary pleasure of a little show business.

If innocent when he joined the Marines, Sledge was not at all stupid, and he knew that what he was getting into was going to be "tough": in training, the emphasis on the Ka-Bar knife and kicking the Japs effectively in the genitals made that clear. But any remaining scales fell from his eyes when he saw men simply hosed down by machine-gun fire on the beach at Peleliu: "I felt sickened to the depths of my soul. I asked God, 'Why, why, why?' I turned my face away and wished that I were imagining it all. I had tasted the bitterest essence of the war, the sight of helpless comrades being slaughtered, and it filled me with disgust." Before the battle for Peleliu was over, with casualties worse even than at Tarawa, Sledge perceived what all combat troops finally perceive: "We were expendable! It was difficult to accept. We come from a nation and a culture that values life and the individual. To find oneself in a situation where your life seems of little value is the ultimate in loneliness. It is a humbling experience." He knew now that horror and fear were his destiny, unless a severe wound or death or (most unlikely) a Japanese surrender should reprieve him. And his understanding of the world he was in was filled out by watching Marines levering out Japanese gold teeth with their Ka-Bar knives, sometimes from living mouths. The Japanese "defense" encapsulated the ideas and forms and techniques of "waste" and "madness." The Japanese knew they could neither repel the Marines nor be reinforced. Knowing this, they simply killed, without hope and without meaning.

Peleliu finally secured, Sledge's decimated unit was reconstituted for the landing on southern Okinawa. It was there that he saw "the most repulsive thing I ever saw an American do in the war"—he saw a young Marine officer select a Japanese corpse, stand over it, and urinate into its mouth. Speaking of the "incredible cruelty" that was commonplace when "decent men were reduced to a brutish existence in their fight for survival amid the violent death, terror, tension, fatigue, and filth that was the infantryman's war," Sledge notes that "our code of conduct toward the enemy differed drastically from that prevailing back at the division CP." Unequivocal is Sledge's assertion that "we lived in an environment totally incomprehensible"—not just to civilians at a great distance but "to men behind the lines."

But for Sledge, the worst of all was a week-long stay in rain-soaked foxholes on a muddy ridge facing the Japanese, a site strewn with decomposing corpses turning various colors, nauseating with the stench of death, "an environment so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool." Because there were no latrines and because there was no moving in daylight, the men relieved themselves in their holes and flung the excrement out into the already foul mud. It was a latter-day Verdun, the Marine occupation of that ridge, where the artillery shellings uncovered scores of half-buried Marine and Japanese bodies, making the position "a stinking compost pile."

> If a marine slipped and slid down the back slope of the muddy ridge, he was apt to reach the bottom vomiting. I saw more than one man lose his footing and slip and slide all the way to the bottom only to stand up horror-stricken as he watched in disbelief while fat maggots tumbled out of his muddy dungaree pockets, cartridge belt, legging

> lacings, and the like. . . .
>
> We didn't talk about such things. They were too horrible and obscene even for hardened veterans. . . . It is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane. . . . To me the war was insanity.

And from the other side of the world the young British officer Neil McCallum, in *Journey With a Pistol,* issued a similar implicit warning against the self-delusive attempt to confer high moral meaning on these grievous struggles for survival. Far from rationalizing their actions as elements of a crusade, McCallum and his men, he said, had "ceased largely to think or believe at all."

> Annihilation of the spirit. The game does not appear to be worth the candle. What is seen through the explosions is that this, no less than any other war, is not a moral war. Greek against Greek, against Persian, Roman against the world, cowboys against Indians, Catholics against Protestants, black men against white—this is merely the current phase of an historical story. It is war, and to believe it is anything but a lot of people killing each other is to pretend it is something else, and to misread man's instinct to commit murder.

IN SOME WARTIME VERSES TITLED "WAR POET," THE British soldier Donald Bain tried to answer critics and patriots who argued that poets were failing to register the meaning of the war, choosing instead to note mere incoherent details and leaving untouched and uninterpreted the great design of the whole. Defending contemporary poets and writers, Bain wrote:

We in our haste can only see the small components of the scene;
We cannot tell what incidents will focus on the final screen.
A barrage of disruptive sound, a petal on a sleeping face,
Both must be noted, both must have their place.
It may be that our later selves or else our unborn sons
Will search for meaning in the dust of long deserted guns.
We only watch, and indicate and make our scribbled pencil notes.
We do not wish to moralize, only to ease our dusty throats.

But what time seems to have shown our later selves is that perhaps there was less coherent meaning in the events of wartime than we had hoped. Deprived of a satisfying final focus by both the enormousness of the war and the unmanageable copiousness of its verbal and visual residue, all the revisitor of this imagery can do, turning now this way, now that, is to indicate a few components of the scene. And despite the preponderance of vileness, not all are vile.

One wartime moment not at all vile occurred on June 5, 1944, when Dwight Eisenhower, entirely alone and for the moment disjunct from his publicity apparatus, changed the passive voice to active in the penciled statement he wrote out to have ready when the invasion was repulsed, his troops torn apart

for nothing, his planes ripped and smashed to no end, his warships sunk, his reputation blasted: "Our landings in the Cherbourg-Havre area have failed to gain a satisfactory foothold and I have withdrawn the troops." Originally he wrote, "the troops have been withdrawn," as if by some distant, anonymous agency instead of by an identifiable man making all-but-impossible decisions. Having ventured this bold revision, and secure in his painful acceptance of full personal accountability, he was able to proceed unevasively with "My decision to attack at this time and place was based on the best information available." Then, after the conventional "credit," distributed equally to "the troops, the air, and the navy," came Eisenhower's noble acceptance of total personal responsibility: "If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt, it is mine alone." As Mailer says, you use the word *shit* so that you can use the word *noble,* and you refuse to ignore the stupidity and barbarism and ignobility and poltroonery and filth of the real war so that *it is mine alone* can flash out, a bright signal in a dark time.

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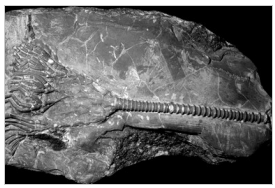

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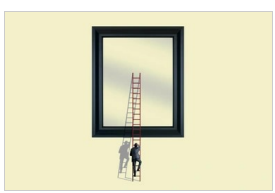

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