
CHAPTER ONE

The Man Who Was There

Take David Jones, to begin with: a gifted Anglo-Welsh painter and writer who served on the Western Front in the First World War and was wounded in the Somme offensive, and who later wrote a strange poetic war narrative, *In Parenthesis*. The subject of Jones's book is his own war, but it doesn't end on the Western Front; the last lines are from the story of a medieval battle—Roncevaux, from the *Chanson de Roland*:

The geste says this and the man who was on the field ...
and who wrote the book. ... The man who does not know
this has not understood anything.

Here, in the borrowed last words of his book, Jones lays a soldier's claim to authority for what he has written. The *geste* (that is, the tale) says this, and the man who was there, and who wrote the book, says it too. It is true *because* he was on the field; if you don't know that, you don't understand anything.

And that is where we must start in our consideration of war narratives, with the assertion of the authority of ordinary men's witness. About war, men who were there make absolute claims for their authority, as Jones did: war cannot be comprehended at second-hand, they say; it is not accessible to analogy or logic. "How can they judge who have not seen?" a French soldier-writer of the First World War asks; and another agrees, in a

sentence that seems to echo the *Roland* poet: "The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it." And an Englishman, from the Second War: "You have to have seen things with your own eyes before you believe them with any intimacy." And a German: "Those who haven't lived through the experience may sympathize as they read, the way one sympathizes with the hero of a novel or a play, but they certainly will never understand, as one cannot understand the unexplainable." I feel that way too. I hear a man at a dinner party say confidently of the siege of Sarajevo: "We could take those guns out with a little napalm," and I think: You have never seen napalm dropped, you don't know how it flows and spreads like a wave of fire and burns *everything*. You weren't there. It's a natural response, and I have adopted it in this book by choosing to consider only war narratives that are the testimonies of participating witnesses.

It's easy to see why men remember their wars. For most men who fight, war is their one contact with the world of great doings. Other men govern, sign treaties, invent machines, cure diseases, alter lives. But for ordinary men—the men who fight our wars—there will probably be only that one time when their lives intersect with history, one opportunity to act in great events. Not to alter those events—no single soldier affects a war, or even a battle—but simply to be there, *in* history.

So men feel a need to say, like the ubiquitous Kilroy, "I was there." Winston Churchill is supposed to have said, after the defeat of the Afrika Korps, that in years to come, when the men who were there were asked what they did in the war, they need only answer: "I marched with the Eighth Army." Everyone who fought in that war has his equivalent of that remark; he will tell you, I was on Omaha Beach, or at Anzio, or in Burma, or on Guadalcanal, or at Midway—naming the resonant names of the theaters of war and the big battles. And there will be a kind of satisfaction in his voice, that he was once a figure in an action that mattered to the world. A young British officer who was in

the first wave on the first day of the Battle of the Somme later wrote: "July 1st 1916 was the most interesting day of my life." and you can see what he meant. Nothing in his life, before or after, could be so vast, or so fatal. It was the British Army's worst day; to be there, to be a witness to that huge catastrophe—of course that would be interesting, wouldn't it?

But though the old soldier, remembering, is proud of the great events he touched, it isn't their greatness that is his essential subject. He isn't concerned with the vastness of the battles of which he was a part, or the causes and consequences, or even who won. What his subject *is* Philip Caputo tells us in the Prologue to *A Rumor of War*, his memoir of the war in Vietnam:

This book does not pretend to be history. It has nothing to do with politics, power, strategy, influence, national interests, or foreign policy.... It is simply a story about war, about the things men do in war and the things war does to them.

The two stories that war narratives tell are in that last sentence: "the things men do in war"—that's obviously essential: war is actions; but the "things war does to them" is also important. The things that are done are of two kinds: there are the inflicted sufferings of war—the wounds, the fears, the hardships, the losses—which are in the nature of war and must be accepted. Not that soldiers are merely victims—they are always to some extent agents in their lives—but much of soldiering is passive endurance: standing, not flinching, surviving. But there is also something else that is done to men by wars: no man goes through a war without being changed by it, and in fundamental ways. And though that process will not be explicit in every narrative—not all men are self-conscious or reflective enough for that—it will be there. Change—*inner* change—is the other motive for war stories: not only what happened, but what happened *to me*.

That complex story of doing and being done to has not

usually found expression immediately after the events it records: war narratives are by their nature retrospective. To perceive the changes that war has made in a man requires the passage of time and the establishment of distance from the remembered self, and it isn't surprising that most war memoirs come late in life, that memory dawdles and delays.

There are exceptions—immediate memoirs, written while a war was being fought, by young men who in many cases then returned to their war and died in it (two writers of the Second World War, Richard Hillary and Keith Douglas, are examples). But for most men understanding comes more slowly, and imagination must wait upon memory to reveal itself. That has been true since the beginning of written wars: Xenophon was twenty-nine when he joined the Persian Expedition, but he didn't write *Anabasis* until he was over fifty; Robert Lamb (the "Sergeant Lamb" of Robert Graves's two historical novels) served in the British Army during the American Revolutionary War but waited until 1809 to publish his "original and authentic journal" of his experiences there; Rifleman Harris published his *Recollections* nearly forty years after he fought in the Peninsula; Elisha Stockwell was fifteen when he joined the Wisconsin Volunteers in 1861 and eighty-one when he wrote down the story of his battles. New memoirs of the First World War were still being written in the 1980s, and three important accounts of the Second War have appeared in the past two or three years. Old men *do* remember.

The stories that men tell of war belong to a curious class of writing. In most war narratives there is nothing to suggest that the author is aware of any previous example: no quotations or allusions or imitations of earlier models, and no evident knowledge of previous wars, or even of other theaters in the war that he is recalling. War writing, it seems, is a genre without a tradition to the men who write it. Still, it has a place among established literary kinds: such writing, we might say, is something

like travel writing, something like autobiography, something like history.

It's like travel writing because wars are usually fought somewhere else, in places that are unfamiliar and odd to ordinary soldiers—on islands, in deserts, over mountains, in ruined landscapes that are nothing like what they knew back home. The teller of the story will have to give exact physical existence to those strange places and to describe his immersion in the alien, often terrible existence there and how he learned to live in it, or through it. That is what good travel books do; though one might add that it's also what *The Divine Comedy* does.

A war memoir is like autobiography in that it is the personal narrative of one man in his life; though it would be more precise to consider it a subcategory of this genre, conversion-literature, since it is a testament of a profound inner change in the teller. Most war stories begin with a nobody-in-particular young man, who lives through the experience of war, to emerge in the end defined by what has happened to him. Out of that nobody, war has forged a Self. Nobody, however young, returns from war still a boy, and in that sense, at least, war does make men.

But if it makes men, it also isolates them from other men—cuts off the men who fought from older and younger men who did not share that shaping experience, and intensifies the feeling every modern generation has anyway, that it is separate, a kind of secret society in a world of others. Here is an English soldier of the First World War reflecting on this generation sense in 1930:

Throughout Europe the phrases "before the war" and "since the war" are among the commonest on men's lips. They are used to divide the age into three periods, the world of men into three generations. Middle-aged men, strenuously as they attempt to deny it, are united by a secret bond and separated by a mental barrier from their

fellows who were too old or too young to fight in the Great War. Particularly the generation of young men who were soldiers before their characters had been formed, who were under twenty-five in 1914, is conscious of the distinction, for the war made them what they are. Generally speaking, this secret army presents to the world a front of silence and bitterness.

It may be that this sense of isolation is one motive for the writing of war memoirs, that these books are communications among the members of that secret army, the men who have been there and will understand, as other generations will not and cannot.

War narratives are also something like history. Every narrative of war must move within a chronology of actual world events; the teller's battles, however minor, must have their historical locations among the great ones, and the origins of his experiences must be in the actual decisions of historical leaders. Sometimes a leader will enter the story: a general or a political man will pass by, or news of a leader will come to the teller's ears, somewhere far from the event but affected by it. (I stood outside a Quonset hut on Saipan in April 1945 and heard that Franklin Roosevelt had died, and that moment became part of my war story.) They're like history in another sense too: war narratives take the *shape* of history, they deal in causes and consequences, and in events that are ordered in real, linear time.

So war narratives are something like travel writing, something like autobiography, and something like history. But different too. They're *not* like travel writing, because a travel book makes the reader feel that he knows the place he is reading about, that he could move familiarly in the Hebrides, or the Hindu Kush, or Patagonia. War narratives don't do that; though they make war vivid, they don't make it familiar. Indeed, one motive for writing them seems to be to show how *unfamiliar* war is, how strange and desolate its ordinary scenes are. Here,

as an example, is the German officer Rudolph Binding describing the landscape near the Somme battlefield during the German advance of April 1918:

I can still find no word nor image to express the awfulness of that waste. There is nothing like it on earth, nor can be. A desert is always a desert; but a desert which tells you all the time that it to be a desert is appalling. That is the tale which is told by the dumb, black stumps of the shattered trees which still stick up where there used to be villages. They were completely flayed by the splinters of the bursting shells, and they stand there like corpses upright. Not a blade of green anywhere round. The layer of soil which once covered the loose chalk is now buried beneath it. Thousands of shells have brought the stones to the surface and smothered the earth in its own entrails. There are miles upon miles of flat, empty, broken, and tumbled stone-quarry, utterly purposeless and useless, in the middle of which stand groups of these blackened stumps of dead trees, poisoned oases, killed for ever.

I called this desolation "landscape," but it isn't that: it's *anti*-landscape, an entirely strange terrain with nothing natural left in it. It's the antithesis of the comprehensible natural world that travel writers inhabit.

War's human scenes are as grotesque as its natural ones. Private Elisha Stockwell describes the regimental camp after the Civil War battle of Corinth, Mississippi:

When I got back to camp, they had everything loaded on the wagon, and we moved on to the east of town where they were fetching the wounded. They were laying them in rows with just room to walk between. They had tents for those that were the worst off, and where they were amputating arms and legs. There was a wash-out back of one tent that had a wagon load of arms and legs. The legs had the shoes and stockings on them.

War turns landscape into anti-landscape, and everything in that landscape into grotesque, broken, useless rubbish—including human limbs. Reading soldiers' accounts of Shiloh or Waterloo, Ladysmith or the Argonne or Hué, we see with estranged eyes. These lives are nothing like ours, and these places are like nothing we could possibly find in our familiar civilian world. War, we see, is not a place we could travel to.

War narratives aren't like autobiography, either. Autobiographies narrate continuous lives; but a war narrative concerns a separate life that, however vividly it remains in the memory, is not continuous with the life the teller lives as he writes. Old soldiers, recalling themselves when young and at war, look back as though at some distant stranger: "the rather romantic tone, taken (if I read him right) by that lad who ten years ago was I" (that's from a First War memoir); "As I look upon the young man who allegedly was I in that wartime spring" (that's from the Second War). Of course that young self seems a stranger to the late rememberer: he is an innocent, on the other side of experience.

For everyone except career soldiers, military service is a kind of exile from one's own real life, a dislocation of the familiar that the mind preserves as life in another world. Farley Mowat, a young Canadian fighting on the Italian front in the Second World War, writes to someone at home:

The damnable truth is we are in really different worlds, on totally different planes, and I don't *know* you anymore, I only know the you that was. I wish I could explain the desperate sense of isolation, of not belonging to my own past, of being adrift in some kind of alien space.

That sense of isolation is not simply a condition of combat; it is common to the whole state of being in a war. For war is more than actions; it is a culture. Military traditions, values, and patterns of behavior penetrate every aspect of army life and make the most ordinary acts and feelings different.

Friendship, for example, is different there—different enough to need another name: *comradeship*. The first thing to be said of comradeship is that it is accidental. Comrades in war are not chosen: they are simply the men picked by the system to stand beside you. Because they come together so randomly, by the alphabet or by numbers, they are sure to be more different from each other, socially and geographically and psychologically, than any peacetime circle of friends could possibly be. They share no common past (which is the glue of ordinary friendship); their ties are all in the present, in the war culture they share: the daily life, the work, the skills, the hardships and dangers, the boredom, of war.

But though comradeship is accidental, it is intense beyond the likelihood of back-home life. A soldier spends virtually all his time, awake and asleep, with his mates; he is with them more continuously than most men are with their wives. And at critical moments his life may depend on their fidelity and courage. Most marriages don't come to that.

Intense, but also fragile: men die; tours of duty end; even wars end. In this sense, too, the comradeship of soldiers is all in the present. This double sense of intensity and temporariness is expressed in many narratives of war. Here is Guy Chapman, at the end of the First World War, watching his battalion march into billets:

this body of men had become so much a part of me that its disintegration would tear away something I cared for more dearly than I could have believed.

And Alex Bowlby, a British rifleman in the Second War:

I was afraid of anything coming between me and the Company, afraid of losing the love and support I had found there.

Add the Canadian Farley Mowat:

Although I knew very little of the past lives and inner beings of those thirty men, I had been more firmly bound to them than many a man is to his own blood brothers.

Note the scale of the attachments: not to an army or a nation or a cause, but to a battalion, a company, a platoon. For a man adrift in alien space, his unit becomes the focus of his love and loyalty, like a family, and his feelings for it may be as strong, as complex, as family feelings are.

If affection among men is different in war, so is its opposite—hostility, and its expression in violence. There are moments in war when men become *different* men, who can do things that in their peacetime lives they would call monstrous and inhuman. We don't like to believe this—that men can change their essential natures—but it must be true, or there would be no atrocities. And there *are* atrocities, in every army, in every war. On the battlefield, in prison camps, in besieged and captured cities, the restraints of law and society lose their authority, power rules, and men are brutal and cruel. We will see examples of the cruelty of power as we consider the wars of our century.

War is another world, where men feel and act differently; and so, when they return to the other world of peace and ordinariness, they feel a need to tell their tales of the somewhere else where they have been. In memory, war seems like a dream, or the life of some other man, remembered with a kind of astonishment. Rifleman Harris retired from his soldiering to keep a shoemaker's shop in Soho, and there, forty years later, he remembered a dead Frenchman on the field at Vimiero:

He was lying on his side amongst some burnt-up bushes; and whether the heat of the firing here had set these bushes on fire, or from whatever cause they had been ignited, I cannot take upon me to say; but certain it is (for several companions saw it as well as myself, and cracked many a joke upon the poor fellow's appearance) that this man, whom we guessed to have been French, was as completely roasted as if he had been spitted before a good kitchen-fire. He was burnt quite brown, every stitch of clothes was singed off, and he was drawn all up like a dried

frog. I called the attention of one or two men near me, and we examined him, turning him about with our rifles with no little curiosity. I remember now, with some surprise, that the miserable fate of this poor fellow called forth from us very little sympathy, but seemed only to be a subject for mirth.

Harris the middle-aged shoemaker looks back upon himself as a young soldier with surprise, as though that person were someone else. How could he have laughed at the poor dead Frenchman? Where was his human compassion? But he did laugh: in war, even humor is different, because it is full of death; and the man who laughed was different too, in a life that was discontinuous from that of the shoemaker who remembered.

So war narratives are not quite autobiography. They're not quite history either. Historians tell the big stories, of campaigns and battles, of the great victories and the disastrous defeats; synthesizing the reports and the statistics, drawing their conclusions about strategy and tactics, assigning credit and blame, turning war's chaos into order. The men who were there tell a different story, one that is often quite ahistorical, even anti-historical. Their narratives are indifferent to the exact location of events in time (they rarely put dates to their actions) or in space (either they never knew exactly where they were or they have forgotten the names). But that seems right for the soldiers' tale they tell; exact dates and precise geography would turn personal experiences into battles, into the accounts that appear in newspapers and history books; unlocated narrative keeps it in the individual's realm. Nor do they have much to say about strategy, or about other battles, fought on other fields. They aren't even interested in victory or defeat, except as it affects them personally; survival is their happy ending.

Most of all, they are not concerned with *why*. War narratives are experience books; they are about what happened, and how it felt. *Why* is not a soldier's question: Tennyson at least got that

part of the Charge of the Light Brigade right: "Theirs not to reason why." Yet the soldier assumes—*must* assume—that if he did ask that question, if he were allowed to ask it, there would be a rational answer, that what he is doing and suffering makes sense to someone farther up the chain of command. On occasions when it becomes clear that the answer isn't rational, or doesn't exist, the soldier's response is anger and bitterness (as we will see later when we come to the defense of Singapore). *Why* is the momentum behind the narratives; but it isn't the story.

The stories that soldiers tell are small-scale, detailed, and confined—"very local, limited, incoherent," as Edmund Blunden put it—and necessarily so, for that is the way they see war. Rifleman Harris has something to say about this too, as he begins his account of his actions in the battle of Roliça,

I do not pretend to give a description of this or any other battle I have been present at. All I can do is to tell the things which happened immediately around me, and that, I think, is as much as a private soldier can be expected to do ... a soldier knows no more of his position and what is about to happen in his front, or what *has* happened (even amongst his own companions), than the very dead lying around.

That was written a century and a half ago, but it has remained true. "Shell-hole and trench have a limited horizon," a German soldier wrote after the First World War. "The range of vision extends no further than a bomb-throw; but what is seen is seen very distinctly."

Even when the range was longer, the intelligibility of what could be seen was no greater. Here is a paragraph from the journal of an infantry officer on the Somme in the third week of the offensive there:

Today near Bazentin we watched an attack launched about a mile away on our left. It was a terrible incident of modern

war. There was suddenly a noise like the mad beating of hundreds of mighty drums, and every second or two a great crash; a rolling cloud of dust and smoke arose from the plain, and moved slowly forward, the whole inferno dying as suddenly as it began. From first to last we could distinguish no living creature, and what happened we never knew.

This is war without men, without movement, and without meaning: nothing but noise and dust and smoke. It was, it seems, the *most* you might see of that terrible battle.

The visibility was just as bad in the Second War for the men who fought; and for those who fought in machines it was worse. Here is a British tank commander in the middle of the war's most spacious battle, the Normandy invasion:

One morning ... I was told by the brigade major to report more precisely and more often what was going on. I replied that since I was shut up inside a camouflaged, stationary tank with its turret closed down I had precisely nothing, often or not, to report. ... Could he tell *me* what was going on?

Men outside the machines might see more, but with no greater comprehension of what was seen. An American in the North African campaign, waiting for Rommel to attack at the Kasserine Pass, remarked that he could see for miles across the open countryside, but added: "We actually know no more, as usual, than the folks back home except about our little sector."

The view from a plane was not much better. A pilot in the First War might be close to the ground, yet he wouldn't see much and would understand less. "From the air," an American pilot wrote near the end of that war,

it is often very difficult to distinguish where the lines are or to tell just what is going on. What you do see are thousands of shell holes, the frequent flashing of guns, and a

great quantity of smoke; sometimes large heavy columns of it, more often hundreds of little streaks of smoke.

It's no better than the infantryman's view: a warscape with no soldiers, no fighting, no movement of any kind, only ruination and flame and smoke, like a vision of hell, but lacking the damned souls.

Fliers in the Second War flew higher and faster than those in the First War, but they saw less. Read any account of the bombing of Germany in the Second War, and see how little you are told about the European earth below, or the large plan of attack, and how much you learn about the inside of a B-17, what flak looks like, how a plane falls and burns. One must conclude that wars are fought, and remembered, by men who are unaware of events and meanings beyond their own vision, because their attention is on other, closer, mortal things.

No man will see much of the battle he's in; and what he does see he will not remember as other men who were there will. So personal narratives will always be fallible authorities, as historians who have worked with them have found: Rudyard Kipling, for example, who interrupted his literary career just after the First War to write a war history of the Irish Guards. Kipling was determined to get behind the rumors and myths, behind the official version, to reach into the memories of the men who fought in the Guards and find the truth there. His introduction to his history tells us that he failed, and why;

A battalion's field is bounded by its own vision. Even within these limits, there is large room for error. Witnesses to phases of fights die and are dispersed; the ground over which they fought is battered out of recognition in a few hours; survivors confuse dates, places and personalities, and in the trenches, the monotony of the waiting days and the repetition-work of repairs breed mistakes and false judgements. Men grow doubtful or oversure, and, in all

good faith, give directly opposed versions. The clear sight of a comrade so mangled that he seems to have been long dead is burnt in on one brain to the exclusion of all else that happened that day. The shock of an exploded dump, shaking down a firmament upon the landscape, dislocates memory throughout half a battalion; and so on in all matters, till the end of laborious enquiry is too often the opening of fresh confusion. When to this are added the personal prejudices and misunderstandings of men under heavy strain, carrying clouded memories of orders half given or half heard, amid scenes that pass like nightmares, the only wonder to the compiler of these records has been that any sure fact whatever should be retrieved out of the whirlpools of war.

This is an unusually personal and emotional passage to find in an official unit history—a confession of failure at truth telling, there at the beginning of the book. But Kipling had good reason to know the limitations of evidence from men at war and to empathize with those who gave it. His only son had fought with the Guards in the battle of Loos and had simply disappeared during the fighting; his body was never discovered, and though Kipling interviewed everyone he could find who was there, none had witnessed his son's death or seen his body. The one event in the history of the Irish Guards that he cared most about he could not record.

What Kipling learned about personal recollections is obviously true: as history they are unsatisfactory: restricted, biased, afflicted by emotion, and full of errors. Memoirists themselves confirm that view. Take Robert Graves, for example. His *Good-bye to All That* is one of the books from which later generations have constructed their understanding of the First World War. Yet when he considered the truthfulness of war books, he concluded that personal memoirs could not meet the test of historical accuracy:

It was practically impossible (as well as forbidden) to keep a diary in any active trench-sector, or to send letters home which would be of any great post-War documentary value; and the more efficient the soldier the less time, of course, he took from his job to write about it. Great latitude should therefore be allowed to a soldier who has since got his facts or dates mixed. I would even paradoxically say that the memoirs of a man who went through some of the worst experiences of trench warfare are not truthful if they do not contain a high proportion of falsities. High-explosive barrages will make a temporary liar or visionary of anyone; the old trench-mind is at work in all over-estimation of casualties, "unnecessary" dwelling on horrors, mixing of dates and confusion between trench rumours and scenes actually witnessed.

True but not truthful: Graves's paradox is an apt one. Personal narratives are not history and can't be; they speak each with its own human voice, as history does not, and they find their own shapes, which are not the shapes of history. They are neither better nor worse, neither more nor less valuable than history; they are simply different.

If war narratives aren't travel writing, aren't autobiography, aren't history, what are they? *Stories*, first of all: responses to that primal need we all have to tell and to hear individual experiences, and so to understand our own lives and imagine the lives of others. Stories answer the questions that we ask of any experience, whether our own or somebody else's: What happened? What was it like? How did it feel? The soldier asks those questions of his war life and answers them in the telling of his story, and so discovers its meaning and gets his war straight in his mind. We, his readers, ask those questions too: they are our motive for reading.

The narratives that soldiers tell are all different, and all the same: different because armies change, weapons evolve, and battlefields shift; but the same too, because behind those vari-

ables there is always one story—the individual's journey from innocence into experience, the serial discovery of what had before been unimaginable, the reality of war. And because that is true, we must be conscious, as we contemplate the narratives of many wars, of both what changes and what is constant.

To get a sense of what has changed, consider the British soldier's existence in the early nineteenth century, at the time of the wars with Napoleon. We know what Wellington thought of his troops: "the scum of the earth," he called them, "—the mere scum of the earth." We know, too, what the authorities in those common soldiers' lives, both in the army and in society, thought of them, alive and dead. Two quotes from English newspapers of the time will make those attitudes clear:

Alive: a paragraph from the *Manchester Guardian*, August 3, 1822:

John Furnel was tried by a court-martial for having in his possession a silver spoon, which had been stolen from the mess. He was sentenced to receive 300 lashes which punishment was inflicted. After lingering in great torture until Friday July 19 he expired.

Dead: a paragraph from the *London Observer*, November 18, same year:

It is estimated that more than a million bushels of human and inhuman bones were imported last year from the continent of Europe into the port of Hull. The neighborhood of Leipzig, Austerlitz, Waterloo, and of all the places where, during the late bloody war, the principal battles were fought, have been swept alike of the bones of the hero and the horse which he rode. Thus collected from every quarter, they have been shipped to the port of Hull and thence forwarded to the Yorkshire bone grinders who have erected steam-engines and powerful machinery for the purpose of reducing them to a granularly state. In this condition they are sold to the farmers to manure their lands.

Brutes while alive, fertilizer when dead: both the floggings and the abandoned dead are recorded in many soldiers' narratives of the century.

What did such treatment do to the men who suffered it? Did it make them less aware of their separate existences as men, each with his own story? Did it deny them a sense of the individual value of those stories? That might be one explanation of why so few common soldiers wrote war narratives of nineteenth-century wars. Though the surest reason is that most of them couldn't: they were illiterate. But then, so was Rifleman Harris: he had to dictate his *Recollections* to an ex-officer who heard Harris telling his stories in his cobbler's shop.

These circumstances of war—the cruel discipline, the abandonment of the dead, the general illiteracy of the troops—are among the variables; all have changed since Harris's time. For example, discipline: Field Punishment No. I in Wellington's army meant flogging—three hundred, five hundred, even eight hundred blows—while the victim was tied spread-eagled to the wheel of a wagon or an artillery piece. By the time of Kitchener's army, a century later, the flogging had been stopped, but not the crucifixion on the wheel; Max Plowman, marching to battle on the Somme, saw a man tied that way and was shocked to find such cruelty to his own troops when death was so near at hand. So there were changes, in modern war and in modern armies, and those changes are part of the subject of this book; but there were also attitudes that remained, and those, too, will concern us.

And what are the constants? Many things, beginning with the radical strangeness of war to the new and innocent conscript. When Harris joined his first regiment, he was put at once into a firing squad and ordered to shoot one of his fellow soldiers (which he obediently did). That isn't what one expects in a war, is it? But war is like that, continually strange and unexpected. Similar surprises occur in memoirs from other wars. When Rod

Kane arrived in Vietnam, he expected a war of ordinary violence; he didn't expect to be attacked immediately by a child with a sack of hand grenades—but he was. Nothing in my own experience was as startling as that, though I remember very well my first sight of my Japanese enemy when I entered a ruined bunker on Saipan and found a foot there—an unattached human foot, still wearing its split-toed sandal. You don't expect war to be composed of such odd incidents; but it is out of remembered astonishments like these that war narratives are made.

Strangeness is the great constant in remembered wars. The young man who goes to war enters a strange world governed by strange rules, where everything that is not required is forbidden, a world without women or children or old people, a violent and dangerous world where, out there in the darkness or just over the hill, strangers wait whose job it is to kill you.

Strangest of all is the presence of death, and the ways it is present. Most young men—certainly most young men in our century—reach adulthood without ever having confronted death face-to-face, or until the morticians have turned it into unreality. Then they go to war, where death is the whole point, the truest truth, the realest reality; and they find that death, when you see it up close, isn't what you expected, that it's uglier, more grotesque, less human. And so astonishing death is a recurrent subject in the soldiers' tale. Here are some examples of how it appears, from the three wars this book particularly examines.

From the First World War—a soldier marches through a ruined village:

Just past the last house on the left was a small pond, whence protruded the grey-clad knee of a dead German. The water around him was green and on his knee was perched a large rat making a meal.

From the Second World War—a German infantryman is retreating on the Russian front:

We had just passed a bunker in which we noticed a body lying at the bottom. Two emaciated cats were eating one of its hands.

From the Vietnam War—a young officer remembers:

A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses—a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.

And from that other war, the death-camp war:

Eventually there was no food at all, and I have a vivid memory of seeing somebody kneeling (as a punishment) with a human ear in his mouth. It was the beginning of cannibalism.

War is an activity in which men become the food of predatory animals, in which rats and cats and pigs eat people, even people eat people. In war every kind of monstrosity is possible. And the witness sees it more with fascination than with disgust, arrested by its strangeness. It's a simple but true proposition: in war, death is grotesque and astonishing.

So, too, are the wounds men suffer. War is men shooting at each other; but their wounds, when they occur, don't seem as straightforward or intentional as that. Thomas Hardy could write in a war poem, "I shot at him as he at me, and killed him in his place," but that was because Hardy had never been in a war. Real combat isn't man against man, someone over there shooting at you. And the man who is hit doesn't think at once: Somebody shot me! or I've just been shot in the arm! No; to be wounded, as men's narratives tell it, is a sudden explosive strangeness, more like a natural disaster or a visitation of the wrath of God than a human act. It's like this (from the first day of the Somme offensive):

What I felt was that I had been hit by a tremendous iron hammer, swung by a giant of inconceivable strength, and then twisted with a sickening sort of wrench so that my head and back banged on the ground, and my feet struggled as though they didn't belong to me. For a second or two my breath wouldn't come. I thought—if that's the right word—"This is death," and hoped it wouldn't take long.

Or like this (from an action in Tuscany during the Italian campaign in the Second World War):

The lull came. I jumped up and took my first step out of the trench, and the whole world cracked open in a sheet of flames. There was a noise like a dinner gong ringing inside my head. My face was all sticky and hot liquid streamed into my eyes. I knew that a shell had hit me, but I felt no pain. As I staggered downhill, my left arm felt numb and loose—I was quite unable to lift it when I tried to wipe my eyes.

The emotion here is not anger or fear—nothing so familiar and personal as that—but only astonishment. A serious wound hurls a man into a different existence, in which his feet don't belong to him, or a strange hot liquid runs into his eyes, and he can no longer perform an ordinary act like raising his arm. Like deaths, wounds are astonishing accidents in a war world that is entirely strange.

The strangeness of war's happenings is a constant; so is the confusion of battle; and the killing, the dying, and the dead—more dying than killing, in most men's memoirs, and more dead friends than foes. And the military virtues? The big soldierly words like "courage" and "cowardice" and "heroism": are they constants too? Certainly those terms do persist in the soldiers' tale from Rifleman Harris's time to our own, though their meanings shift. Harris believed in courage of the dashing, cavalry-charge sort and used words like "gallant" and "brave" and "hero" freely; and he despised cowardice (he once threatened to

shoot a fellow soldier who turned to run from a battle). But his own war story is not about heroic courage; it is about the other, less spectacular kind, the courage of endurance by which men at war survive. That kind of courage is one of the constants in the soldiers' tale.

But perhaps the most striking constant is the feeling that is expressed in this paragraph near the end of Harris's book:

For my own part I can only say that I enjoyed life more whilst on active service than I have ever done since; and as I sit at work in my shop in Richmond Street, Soho, I look back upon that portion of my time spent in the fields of the Peninsula as the only part worthy of remembrance.

That is the true voice of the man who was there; you find it everywhere in the personal narratives. It's not that Harris's war was particularly heroic or victorious; the stories he tells are of British disasters—the retreat to Coruna during the Peninsula campaign, the Walcheren expedition in the Netherlands. It's simply that when those things happened he was present, as soldier and as witness. Other men in other wars have said the same thing; for example, a lance corporal who was in the British attack at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli wrote: "It was a horrible and a great day. I would not have missed it for worlds." I feel that, too, about my own war, and so do other men I know who were in it. I have never met a man who fought in the Second World War—actually *fought*—who regretted having been there.

This seems to be just as much a constant in men's memories of other wars. Here, as an example, is William Merritt at the end of his memoir of the Vietnam War, having a conversation with himself on the point of it all:

"So much noise and expense. Why did we do it?"

"For you."

"For me?"

"So you wouldn't have to spend your whole life selling insurance. Sorry?"

"Hell, no."

What do these testimonies amount to? Do they offer, as a constant, the conviction that war is a good, enriching thing in men's lives? Not exactly. But they do say that war expands and extends what is possible in life for an ordinary man, that for once he need not be simply a man mending shoes in Soho, or an insurance salesman. War offers experiences that men value and remember: shoes and insurance don't do that.

The subjects of war narratives are the things men do in war and the things war does to them. But not usually as those things happened. Memoirs are retrospective, filtered reality, what memory preserves. Remembering is like looking at the sun at sunset, through the earth's atmosphere; It's still the sun, but the light of midday has been turned to red. Time is like that, an atmosphere that alters what we see.

And so, though memory is the muse and source of memoirs, it is untrustworthy, not only as a source of history but as a story of a self. It selects and colors the shapes and feelings of the past that it offers us, and so may become, it seems, an obstacle to truth.

There is a passage on this point in a recently published memoir by the Italian writer Italo Calvino. Calvino fought as a partisan against the Fascists during the Second World War; some time later, in the 1960s or '70s, he wrote his recollections of that time in an essay, "Memories of a Battle," that is really a meditation on the nature of memory.

The battle was an abortive partisan attack on a village held by the Fascists; Calvino remembered it only in disconnected fragments of sense data. "What I would like to know," he wrote,

is why the broken net of the memory holds some things and not others: I remember one by one these orders that

were never carried out, but now I would like to remember the faces and names of my companions in the squad, the voices, the dialect phrases, and how we managed to cut the wires without pincers. I even remember the battle plan, how it was supposed to unfold in various phases, and how it didn't unfold. But to follow the thread of my story I'll have to remember it all through my ears: the special silence of a country morning full of men moving in silence, rumblings, shots filling the sky. A silence that was expected but that lasted longer than expected. Then shots, every kind of explosion and machine-gun fire, a muddle of sound we can't make sense of because it doesn't take shape in space but only in time, a time of waiting for us stationed at the valley bottom where we can't see a damn thing.

I continue to gaze into the valley bottom of the memory. And my fear now is that as soon as a memory forms it immediately takes on the wrong light, mannered, sentimental as war and youth always are, becomes a piece of narrative written in the style of the time, which can't tell us how things really were but only how we thought we saw them, thought we said them. I don't know if I am destroying the past or saving it, the past hidden in that besieged village.

Calvino is playing a game with us, of course, using his catalogue of difficulties to invest his half-remembered story with a sharp credibility. The uncertainties, the ignorance, the muddle, are all parts of the reality; all attacks in war are like that: confusion is an essential element of battle. But he is acutely right in what he says about the operations of memory: as we remember, and write it down, the past becomes words, a *story*, a *style*. But it is all we have, all that *can* be saved from that remembered morning in the valley.

When we put Calvino's passage beside those that I quoted from Kipling and Robert Graves, we have the truth problems of war narratives spelled out: the failures of observation in the

field, the confined vision of witnesses, the infidelities of memory after the events, the inevitable distortions of language. These problems are not peculiar to war narratives; they are inherent in all our relations with the past. But it seems that the circumstances of war intensify the distortions and increase the difficulties of putting events into words.

We are confronted with an apparent contradiction here: the man-who-was-there asserts his authority as the only true witness of his war; but the truth that he claims to tell is compromised by the very nature of memory and language. Compromised, too, by the cloud of witnesses, each telling his own relative truth of events. I think, though, that the contradiction is not absolute. It can be resolved if we think of the truth of war experience as being the sum of witnesses, the collective tale that soldiers tell. That tale will be an imperfect version of the everything-that-happened that is a war complete; not all the witnesses will testify. Still, that tale is the closest we will get to the reality of what men did, and what was done to them, in this war or that one. We don't need to call that convergence of witnesses historical truth, if that seems too confident; call it instead the recoverable past of war. Such recovery is possible; it is more than possible: it is imperative. What other route do we have to understanding the human experience of war—how it felt, what it was like—than the witness of the men who were there?

Calvino worried, in the passage I just quoted, that the witness of memory would fail to render the reality, that what had happened would be translated out of experience into the style of the time, into literature. That's not a problem that can be solved philosophically; memories become words when you record them, and words become literature. It is striking, though, how little the writers of personal narratives of war have been affected by the literary fashions of their time: tellers of Victorian wars have not been notably Victorian, narrators of modern wars have not been Modernists. Whatever their dates, they have nearly all been realists, adopting a common style that would

come as close as language can to rendering the things of the material world as they are. Whether they were one-book amateurs or would-be men of letters doesn't seem to matter; they have reported their wars in a plain, naming vocabulary, describing objects and actions in unmetaphorical terms, appealing always to the data of the senses.

"Life is always deep in details," Boris Pasternak said, and that is certainly true of life in war, as memoirs have recorded it. War is details, to be put down plainly. But what odd details! Harris's roasted Frenchman, Stockwell's wagonload of legs, pigs eating people. The style in which these sights are described remains flat and uninflected; but *realism* somehow doesn't seem quite the right term for such grotesque occasions. For this kind of reality of war, perhaps we need a new term. Suppose we call such visions "Battlefield Gothic." We will come upon examples of it many times before we are done, when we observe the dead or, more precisely, when we observe soldiers observing the dead.

For the one-book memoirists, realism was no doubt an inevitable, natural style: you simply put down what happened. But for more self-conscious writers it was a choice. Here, as an example of that act of choice, is a passage from an American memoir of the First World War, Hervey Allen's *Toward the Flame*:

I have tried to reproduce in words my experience in France during the great war. There is no plot, no climax, no happy ending to this book. It is a narrative, plain, unvarnished, without heroics, and true. It is what I saw as nearly as memory has preserved it, and I have set it down as a picture of war with no comment.

Most war memoirs are like that: everything that might be called "the style of the time" left out, only the things that the senses record and memory stores left in, because the truth is in the particulars. Maybe that's why old soldiers hang on to the

things of their wars, why in my attic there are two tattered pilot's logbooks, an air-wing shoulder patch, and a yellowed plastic container that once held survival gear and now is full of old photographs. I keep them, I suppose, for their reality.

Allen chose a plain, uninflected realism for his memoir because it enabled him to tell the truths about war—the truths that a young man can't anticipate but must learn for himself in actual combat. Philip Caputo offers his version of those truths in *A Rumor of War*:

what fear feels like and what death looks like, and the smell of death, the experience of killing, of enduring pain and inflicting it, the loss of friends and the sight of wounds ... what war was about.

How physical that all is, how entirely concerned with the senses—*seeing* and *smelling* and *feeling* war—and how emptied of abstractions. These are the lessons that are learned with the body, and they must be expressed with the body's vocabulary (remember the Frenchman I quoted at the beginning of this chapter: "The man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it.").

Grim lessons; yet Caputo confidently asserts elsewhere in his book that "anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat." That sounds like a contradiction of the other passage, and certainly it goes against the conventional civilian view of war in general and that war in particular. Yet it seems true, on the evidence of many men's narratives from many wars: most men do feel war's high excitement and romance, and even its beauty (to which there are many testimonies), and not only *before* they experience war but *after*.

Some soldiers never lose that excitement. They are the war lovers, and we must acknowledge that they exist and always have. You find them in literature—Homer's Achilles is one, Othello is another—and you find them in life, in every army. In

modern wars, they turn up as the adventurers, who lead the daring raids and fly the fighter planes, and sometimes as the generals (Patton was certainly one). And as the dictators: Hitler and Mussolini loved war.

What is it, exactly, that war lovers love? Not the killing and the violence, I think, but the excitement, the drama, and the danger—life lived at a high level of intensity, like a complicated, fatal game (or a Wagnerian opera). For career soldiers, there must also be a deep and abiding interest in the problems of war, in decision making, leadership, how you turn strategy into actions. Junior officers and enlisted men, the ones who do the actual killing, will become engrossed in the physical problems, the skills of soldiering; for them, war is a collection of manual arts, it's demanding, interesting work. (You learn a lot about those skills in their war narratives: how to dig a foxhole under fire, how to attack a fortified hill or shoot down an ME-110 or land a helicopter in a jungle clearing. Those lessons are part of the appeal that war memoirs have for readers who will never do any of those things.)

War is an exciting, dangerous, skillful, physical occupation, to which most men respond while they're there. Some men never lose their taste, or their need, for that excitement but go on being war lovers all their lives. They make good soldiers, but they are by and large no good for war memoirs; they stand too close to the center of war's values, and whether they mean to or not, they act out the mottoes on the flags and the slogans on the posters. What suits memory best is a war life lived close to the action but at some distance from the values, by a man who is by nature or circumstances an outsider, who can be a witness as well as a soldier, who has felt war but doesn't love it.

But even those men who return from their wars to subside willingly enough into unexciting peaceful lives retain some of war's excitement: their narratives tell us that. However terrible the actions they relate, old soldiers also bear witness to the powerful appeal war has for men, and especially for the secret army

of the young who come of age in war. The excitement is there in their memoirs, a kind of energy, a momentum that moves them through their roughest days. And the most honest and self-aware of them, when they reflect on their lives as soldiers, confess to feeling nostalgia for that strange, exciting world. That nostalgia must be one reason why they write.

And us? Do we, too, feel something like nostalgia for past wars we didn't fight in? Are we, who are surely appalled by war, yet drawn to its old excitements? And if so, why? There is an answer to that question in a passage from Eric Partridge's memoir of the First War. Partridge fought at Gallipoli and on the Somme, but this part of his story is a recollection of himself *before* experience, when he was still a boy, eighteen years old, on a training-camp march in the winter of 1914-15:

The early-winter morning was fresh and cold, yet not sharp; the air, without bite, had an invigorating tang; the sun shone clear, though weak, through the trees, merely to be alive was a joy, young legs moving freely, easily, young eyes seeing every frosted leaf aglisten, young voices singing some foolish song, young hearts astir with their entry into war, war which, next to love, has most captured the world's imagination.

There are many things worth noting in this passage: the exact physicality of the perceptions, the exuberant life, the excitement the young volunteers feel at the prospect of war, the emotional energy in young life remembered ("the war, old chap," said a French veteran to an English one, "is our youth, secret and interred"). But I quote it mainly for the sake of the phrase "war which, next to love ..." Partridge is not telling about actual experience of war here; at this point in his life he had not had any. Yet war had power to stir him even then; it existed in his mind as an idea, or as a complex emotion—a motive strong enough to take him eventually to scenes of real death and suffering. After which he would bear his witness to that reality.

The war that was in Partridge's imagination must have come from many sources: from the classic wars in Homer and Virgil (he was a classics student in Australia when he enlisted); from English history, as it was taught to schoolboys; from Victorian adventure novels of boys in battle by writers like Henty; from Tennyson and Kipling; from the recruiting posters. Every generation has such images of war; a quarter of a century after Partridge, I made my war-in-the-head out of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *G-8 and His Battle Aces*, and movies like *Hell's Angels* and *The Dawn Patrol*, and all the vestiges of past wars that were around me: the old men marching on Memorial Day, and the bands and the flags; the two-minute silence on Armistice Day; the rows of soldiers' graves at Fort Snelling. Vietnam veterans remember the films of John Wayne and Audie Murphy. Readers of this book, in their various generations, will have their own sources for their wars-in-the-head. We all imagine war before we know it—we can't help it. The idea of war is part of the fundamental furniture of our minds.

Those imaginary wars, however vivid and violent they may be, are romances: they are war turned into fictions, into shapely untruths. They feed our imaginations with the big abstractions of war—Heroism, Fame, Valor, Glory; they make death sentimental and battle melodramatic. Above all, they make war *familiar*; they can't not do it—the conventions of war in art are simply too expected, too established, too dictatorial to elude.

Personal narratives are not like that: they subvert the expectations of romance. They work at a level below the big words and the brave sentiments, down on the surface of the earth where men fight. They don't glorify war, or aestheticize it, or make it literary or heroic; they speak in their own voices, in their own plain language. They are not antiwar—that is, they are not polemics against war; they simply tell us what it is like. They make war actual, without making it familiar. They bear witness.

CHAPTER TWO

'Fourteen-'Eighteen: Civilian Soldiers

A familiar British recruiting poster of the First World War shows a middle-class father sitting uneasily in his easy chair, with his little daughter on his knee. The child is asking, with a worried look: "Daddy, what did *YOU* do in the Great War?" That poster wouldn't have worked in any previous British war. Daddy wouldn't have gone to fight the Russians in the Crimea, or the Zulus at Isandhlwana, or the Dervishes at Khartoum; the regular army would have done the job. But *this* war would be different. It would be fought on such a scale that it could not be manned in the traditional way, by an army of the "scum of the earth" commanded by professional soldiers of the old officer caste. The working class and the aristocracy would provide their numbers, as they always had; but this time there would also have to be a vast recruitment of men like Daddy.

Such men volunteered in large numbers in 1914–1915. They became the junior officers of Kitchener's New Army and commanded the actions of war at the tactical level, the level of actual fighting. They were the lieutenants who cried "Follow me!" and went over the top, who led patrols into no-man's-land, who flew the planes and directed the artillery pieces, and who died in greater proportion to their numbers than any other rank.

They were also the ones who wrote the memorable war books. Think of the books from the First World War that we still read: the memoirs—*Good-bye to All That*, *The Memoirs of*