



Remembering Armageddon:

Reflections on a Century of War

by R. Bedford Watkins

A LittleLeaf Press, Inc. PUBLICATION

introduction

War brutalizes every life it touches, ennobling some, anointing others with the seal of sacrifice, sometimes destroying the ones who cannot suffer the savagery.

Among those who survive, some share their story with former comrades or understanding friends. Others never speak of it. A few live every day with the horror indelibly etched on the inner eye of memory.

These poems reflect the sadness, the pathos, and the often sardonic humor of men in battle. They also express my rage at the maddening obscenity of war as I remember my own experiences while serving in the European Theater of Operations during World War II. It is my hope that they may resonate with others who were there.

R. Bedford Watkins

1 At the Somme

This field is rife with flowers now,
more fertile than when weary men
in muddy puttees paced the slimy duckboards
tracing endless trenches lined with wire
and laced with hate, the haunting stench of war.
There gaunt men crouched in fear or dread,
or leaned a cautious head against
the sodden, sandbagged walls
to peer across the savaged land
where dead still lay,
or maybe to hear soft sobs of wounded,
still untended,
weeping in their lonely dying,
lying where they fell that summer day.

■ ■ ■

Deep below this blossomed earth
their bleak bones lie in silent, mirthless shade.
Forgotten now the hellish din
of screaming shell and spinning spray of shrapnel
in the deadly fire that fell from those indifferent skies.
For with them lies no calm repose,
no grace to face the requisites of death.
Gone is their principled conceit,
their firm defiance in defeat,
even their sweet life-giving breath.
The mawkish, unconsoling choir
of praise for noble sacrifice,
each tiresome phrase of tribute or remorse
lies hushed upon their bloody bier,
now buried in the near oblivion of the dreary sod.
Nor can a mem'ried smile be raised
except in grief
by those who loved them
and who gave them over to their glory
and to God.



2 Rue Bordieu, 1917

Souls desolate and torn with dread—
 far worse than fetid shrapnel wounds
 or strands of shredded flesh—
wrench instant bravery from the ubiquitous,
 obscene dead,
rise dutifully from the filth of the intestinal trenches
and rush, mindlessly, into the raw, black maw of Hell.

Even Ares wept as legions fell facing full
 the devastating shell that swept clean
 every shattered feature above ground.
Again and then again, they ran at each command,
 enriching every bloody ditch they fell in.
Some lived and soon were moved to other fields,
 as brash, unwary pawns for further play.

■ ■ ■

They're coming now along a Caesar's road,
the way of warriors since before Augustus' day.
All night slow, lumbering caissons scar the ancient stones
and the narrow street intones
a constant drum of endless ranks of weary men,
thoughtless but for the next stop nearer rest.

Rifle laden, rain sodden.
plodding in arrhythmic cadence,
thinking only of a sleep,
they trudge the muddy miles that take them,
guileless, to their final rest at Ypres.



3 Uncle Mack

Sitting beneath the summer trees,
his knobby knees drawn up to rest
his arms and mercifully ease
his trembling hands against his chest;

the grasping hands that had tried to press
the mask against his face as best
he could before he gasped and gagged
and sucked the fire into his breast.

Those hands that through long years practiced
no art nor plied a craft or threw
a ball to a son but only knew
the empty pain of sacrifice.

■ ■ ■

Sometimes at noon he'd tilt his face
to the burning summer sun and through
closed eyes he'd see the hellish place
he left his youth in the bloody dew.

Those restless hands that shook a ceaseless
rhythm through the years are blest
in stillness now, a hallowed peace
to sanctify a hero's rest.



4 Gene Hardin

Gently, still, the undulating surface swells to neap
and slowly falls in an eternal rhythm where you sleep
within the steel-hulled shell.
Nor can the solemn bell buoy
be heard within that hall of
honored dead entombed with all
their undone dreams forever resting in the deep.

We mourned you on that day, Gene,
we suppliants, as you lay
caught in the twisted bowels of the Arizona's gray
and shattered hulk. The waves
still wash the hold and lave
with love the white bones that still lie
just as you fell that winter "day of infamy"
in an inferno half a world away. ■ ■ ■

And when men pray each year
 above your broken, briny bed,
what can they say about your sacrifice
that's not been said
 in studied, morbid prose
 or poetry by those
 of us who can never know
 your horror when you died below—
No matter, for our eloquence is lost among the dead.



5 U.S.O.

Stumbling through the old cobbled road

into the dark street,

listening for the sweet slurring of

a blue-blared horn,

the slight stirring of the heart

at a familiar tune—

no sound but the weary feet

of a late night clerk,

the harried cadence echoing

along the damp, dreary

corridor of vacant shops.

(-- only a few more days

before we move--)



From shadowed doorways come soft, lewd whispers,
an occasional intimate touch,
the artless offer of a crude caress
and promise of such a lust
as must be had to fill the emptiness—
no light but the waving wands
of search lights
near the ack-ack batteries
conducting their nightly symphony,
silently sweeping the corners
of the black abyss,
yellow brushes swaying over
praying hands and sleeping
children.
(--the channel can be rough
this time of year--)

■ ■ ■

Just ahead a small band sound,
rude siren with a mocking moan,
luring lonely souls to the only sentient rock around.
Passing through the black-out curtain
into a bright revelry of tinseled solicitude,
welcomed by a gracious, graying mother
of a lost son—somewhere in the North Sea—
offering the ubiquitous coffee and doughnuts
with a sad smile and questions about
home and family—
a sharing of worn photos,
of a young sister,
a brave mother's face,
the hometown football team —



an introduction to a young girl,
guileless in her faint perfume
and earnestness to please—her father
did not return from Dunkirk—
the warm, consenting flesh of her small hand,
the first cautious moves on
the barren warehouse dance-floor,
the unbearable sweetness of a girl in your arms
swaying to the cumbrous playing
of a valiant piano and a stodgy clarinet.

(--this may be the last time--)

Blinking lights signal the last dance.

Polite goodbyes, well wishes,
“God keep you safe.”

Out into the night.

An icy mist informs the many shining shapes
that grace the gloomy street.

Head down, collar up,
return to base.



6 Saar Basin: 1945

From the black spleen of holy-centered night
and the fetid dank of our own
dark days mourned,
as the unseasoned borealis
rumbled on the low horizon,
the command came.

Slowly, a monstrous tube cranked skyward
elevating its obscene host,
poised to spew the consecrated wafer
into soft mouths screaming the ritual.



On the flank a tracered needlepoint swept cleanly,
 paused,
 and methodically resumed its stuttering stitch,
 sealing the seam of that
 particular patch of hell.

 The pause—the dreaded silence—then
the sky split, the crack peeled the
black skin of night raw-red,
shrill hell burst wide and spilled its excrement
across the damned,
squirming mole-like in holes,
their terror tearing through numbered
 limbs
stretched on the leaden rack of fear.



Remembering the catechism

recalls the sense of doom

of days we bled and gagged
on the acrid stench of powder
still burning memory's tongue;
a comrade's scream still ringing,
caught in the siren-filled,
eternal din of our inhumanity.

Hear the unconscionable benediction:

Be consoled. Dying finds its sweet mint
in the tightened grasp,
the heaving gasp of terror
melting instantaneously
on the shattered tongue of silence.



7 Alone

Alone,

lying mud-cushioned in a shallow shell hole,
warmed only by the cold steel of my rifle,
as human marker for my unit to advance
toward my position near the front,
I watch the wretched carnival
and its various attractions
curtained by the black night's chaos.

Just ahead arrhythmic staccato cracks
of small-arms fire
punctuate the deep-dinning artillery—
a demonic music drowning the hilarious screams
of desperate actors playing their life away.

...

A machine-gun's rapid snare
splits the crude cacophony
and an occasional cymbal clash of lead shot
careens off a steel fire shield.

On the low horizon Ares paints fiery, red swatches
like a gaudy sideshow canvas,
an ever-changing, kaleidoscopic caricature
of death as art.

The entertainment continues
as the acrid stench of powder
permeates the low-lying mist
like remembered popcorn.



Soon we'll enter stage left
to join the glorious maelstrom
and taste again the insatiable rage of war.

Suddenly,

a shocking silence ends the action.

No applause is heard—
only the intense straining to hear
the slightest sound of any movement.

I lie motionless in chilling sweat,
staring into the ominous, black abyss,
alone.



8 The Helmet

Moving up slowly

through the thin, dirty snow
that covered ruined rows
stapled by winter stubble
to the unyielding field,

we paused,

wary of the ill-concealed rubble
from a recent fight
still strewn across the ravaged ground.

...

To the right

a single helmet,

like a fat tortoise, lay alone,

one clean hole through the center

of the forehead,

a few bone splinters,

a little flesh, still fresh,

pinned beneath the edge,

an unintended monument –

probably bobby-trapped –

a modest stela

commemorating one sudden rise to glory.

■ ■ ■

Always a surprise,
death in war
leaves little time
to savor the sacrifice—
an instant explosion of blinding light,
the abrupt dark of nothingness,
-----illimitable silence.



9 "After a fire-fight..."

After a fire fight,
after the wounded, whimpering or screaming
or stoically staunching the urge to cry,
have been taken to the rear,
after the dead have been moved,
an unholy calm comes,
broken only by the occasional harassing fire
of a 105
or the whispered offer of a cigarette.

...

No birds sing,
the holes of small creatures are deserted,
a soft-soughing wind may move the oily smoke
rising from a shattered vehicle
or brush a lonely stalk of weed.
The stillness, like a mantle of peace,
lies over the carnage.

Exhausted, men recover from the terror slowly,
check their ammo, shift the dirt in their holes
for a more comfortable lie

and wait.



As the evening damp descends
their fear-fed sweat begins to chill.
Darkness invites the welcome warmth
in the glow of a cigarette
underneath a tented blanket
and a K-ration with tepid canteen water.

Taking hand grenades and extra ammo
they crawl to a hurried briefing for a night patrol,
and, soon after, move out.



10 Two Beneath a Tree

They lay as if asleep —
the head of the younger on the shoulder of the older
like a brother.

A light frost glistened
on the stubble of a graying beard
and sealed a stale saliva bubble
playing on pale, lifeless lips.

Swaying in a soft, Schwarzwaldler breeze
the indifferent trees in tidy rows
spread a green pine panoply
above their untroubled rest.

Dressed in woodsman's clothes
and cobbled boots, their visage showed
no hint of horror to suggest death's throes,
no wounds or signs of grief in either face,
no evidence, no trace of fear
in their repose.



Since the fighting was so near
we could not pause to hear
the eloquence of their silent peace
but moved steadily windward
toward the clear, sharp sounds of war.
Nor could we comprehend
the twisted warp of fate
that left two innocents
as weft in death's design.

In war, men must leave enigmas such as these
behind them.

Perhaps a sorrowing wife or mother
soon might find them.



11 "Sorry, I just cannot..."

"Sorry, I just cannot become ecstatic over the new ones – the M16, multiple warheads, etc. Give me the old crossbow, or better yet, the saber. Now there's a weapon you can make a part of you—you can feel the cleave and puncture much like a strong trout on a flyline.

Some people are a little squeamish about it. They prefer it neat and clean, push-buttony, but that way you tend to lose the sport in it, the glory, too.



Even women are protesting these days,
asserting their right to be heard, in tears—
“Do not weep, maiden,” the poet said.
Hell, women always weep,
but you can make them forget—
there are ways!

Yeah, war’s too impersonal these days.
I miss the closeness, the him-or-me gamble,
that one-on-one contact, which, after all,
is the basis for the best in human relationships.

I remember the second day after we were committed,
we were moving slowly through this small wood.....”



12 The Enemy

The shattered 88 listed to the right in the gun
emplacement. The shell holes near the site revealed
the deadly devastation of our fire.

One was left behind.

He lay half in the sun

in full uniform and helmet

and with a stunned look in glazed, half-closed eyes,
the half-surprise that death in war can bring.

His face betrayed how he had tried to cling to life
and wondered why I had not died instead of him,
or why his fire had been less true.



The grim reality we knew—
circumstance determines fate;
the whim of chance,
the dance of unknowns
circling 'round our centered core
that cautioned us to wait for want of knowing
if his fire would be more lethal than before.

Had he, too, friends, a lover,
dreams of wise ways to discover
deeper hues of happiness?
Could I have loved him as a brother,
though an enemy, an other than my kind
I had to kill?

Perhaps in still another place
we'll touch, embrace, and there
we can remember without rancor
that our own much-bloodied inhumanity's design
through given grace, was made divine.



13 Dooley

Dooley was an artist. One
whose cursing was so deftly done
that none could match his wanton wit
or even catch a hint of his despair.

His canvas was the air he breathed,
his tongue a brush that seethed with filthy
epithets and crudities
that gushed in endless, carping repartee.

His art of scathing diatribe
on everything that fueled his vile
irreverence could bring a smile
even from those who sought to squelch
his sordid prose.

■ ■ ■

Once caught straddling a slit trench
when a barrage came he hit
the putrid pit full face down
and lay throughout the twenty rounds
then rose in stinking rage to spit
obscenities beyond the bounds
of even man's depravity.

In exquisite detail he cursed
the Huns who crewed the guns describing
their bestial provenance—their kin
and forbears all had been of such
unspeakable birth that purest evil
could not bring its Mephistophelian
force to sting their tail but could only
fling them below the lowest ring of hell.

■ ■ ■

He'd curse in verse and, even worse,
elaborate upon a word
that never could be heard again
untainted as it once had been.

Sometimes his blasphemies could be construed
as near approaching prayer, a rude
beseeching for a grace to hold
the fiendish joy that lit
his vivid face.

■ ■ ■

And later, after he was shot
and sent back to the rear, we got
no word of what he said, except
that when the night was clear
and the front was still
it was said by some that they could hear
a faint, familiar profanity
that lay like a low, thin mist
around our battered hill.
And some of those who heard then thought that
somewhere, maybe a world apart,
Dooley was still practicing his art.



14 "Grieve the fallen..."

Grieve the fallen in a thousand fields
now lying in shallow, sunken graves
or rotting beside a withered copse,
their riotous worms working a wondrous way
of fetid richness.

Praise the chosen underneath
the town square monument bearing his name
and extolling his deeds of killing.

Heed the passing bells that toll
the exceeding sadness
for the dead and those who mourn them.



Listen to the lame litany
in the hush of death and
hope of resurrection.

Preach the glory of battle
to young, eager minds
that they may also thirst
for the slaughter and the sacrifice.

Hail humanity's progress
toward the perfection
of insensate, obscene cruelty.

In the name of holy WAR,

Amen



15 War Museum

Crawling along with the slow-moving crowd, the boy and his father viewed with much interest the many artifacts in the vast exhibit hall.

Huge machines, many stories high, of all sizes, shapes and designs. Some with wheels, others with tracks. Almost all had hollow tubes of various sizes protruding at different angles and seemingly sophisticated guidance and operating systems.

A few had what appeared to be some kind of wings as if they were meant to fly, but the boy couldn't believe that the heavy, inflexible wing material could actually lift such a monstrous mechanism into the air.



What brilliant minds, what intelligent beings
to conceive and build such gigantic devices,
he thought.

The boy stopped at one curious display.
It seemed to be made of a substance similar to
the bones of large, dead animals he had seen.
It was long—seven or eight times as long
as the boy himself—slightly curved and knobby.

With his father looking over his shoulder
the young cockroach read the tablet:

----- BELIEVED TO BE THE LEFT METATARSAL
OF A ONCE NUMEROUS AND THRIVING
CREATURE BELONGING TO A SPECIES OF
HOMINOID, NOW EXTINCT.



16 "Lay him gently..."

Lay him gently underneath the tree.

Cover what's left of his face.

He was proud of his neat mustache—

his girl friend used to trim it for him—

he said she liked to feel it on her face

when she kissed him.

Why didn't he keep his head down?

What was he looking for?

He had planned to marry

and open a small printing shop—

he was good with machinery.

Wash the blood off the dog-tags—they'll

send those home.

What size combat boots do you wear?

These are almost new.

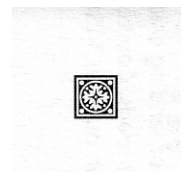
Check his billfold to be sure there's nothing

he wouldn't want his mother to see.

Graves Registration is not always careful.

DIVE!

INCOMING!



17 "Bedcheck Charlie"

Old Charlie came around each night,
buzzing, diving, dipping right above our guns,
tipping his wings to see the dark ground
for any sign of light that might be left uncovered.

He hovered over each new-found thatch,
searching each low-crowned hummock
then sputtered away to another, further field
or black-edged patch and fluttered briefly,
lurching like a comic, mustachioed Munchhausen.

The risky game was played as well
with ack-ack on a nearby hill
which finally found his range
and hit him with a twenty-millimeter shell. ■ ■ ■

He fell a few feet from my hole.

We dragged him from the cockpit whole but shattered
like a thin, loose sack of broken coal.

And curious to see the comic face
imagined from our hidden place
we turned him roughly on his back.

The beardless skin was cleanly peeled
from below his chin to the top of his brow.

The bloody, frontal skull revealed
no humor there nor any trace
of amusement on his vacant face.



18 "Do not dwell..."

Do not dwell on the carnage—

the shredded tendrils of torn flesh,
the lead embedded in a fresh wound,
no trace of a missing head,
but there, a fair, young face
burned beyond recognition.

Pay no attention to the bare, rough-cut feet,

the bloodied hands trying to stuff
a sweet, severed gut back into
the gaping, intestinal hole,
an anguished soul reaching
with one good hand
for a shattered arm blown off,
lying five feet away in the scattered debris,
still gripping the loaded clip. ■ ■ ■

Ignore the quizzical visage

of one sitting motionless beneath a tree,
a clean hole through his left eye
and the back of his head blown out.

Do not doubt the certainty that the quiet one,
now crazed with numbing, crippling fear,
will spend his friendless days
thumbing a blank page of memory
and then relive the horror each night
when, exhausted,
he can resist sleep no longer.

■ ■ ■

19 Landsberg, 1945

We entered the compound
through the barbed-wire gate, now open,
a short while after it had been abandoned.
Everything in the camp was bleak, colorless,
only black and dirty gray.

In the center of the muddy enclosure
were several hundred bodies,
piled like discarded wood
three to four feet high.

The dead who were clothed at all
wore the ubiquitous, filthy, pajama stripe,
no shoes, no coat.

■ ■ ■

Remembering, Lord,
the hatred,
the squalor,
the beatings,
the cold,
the misery of untold terror and pain,
O, the sufferings inflicted again and
again and again.

Who can forget?

Who then can forgive?

The wooden barracks, doors locked,
were set afire. Arms and hands, late writhing,
still extending from beneath the walls

■ ■ ■

where they had desperately clawed
the frozen soil of the dirt floor to get out
but could not escape the flames.

Remembering, Lord,
the hunger,
the torture,
the lack of water,
the sound of derisive laughter
and being spat upon,
the horror of seeing a loved one slain,
O, the inhumane brutality seen again and again
and again.

Who can forget?

Who then can forgive?

■ ■ ■

And in a nearby wood
a dozen or more bodies
machine-gunned to pieces,
a head here, an arm there,
like meat, torn apart and strewn about.
The only color,
the white, emaciated skin
on fleshless bones,
stark against the dark forest floor.

Remembering, Lord,
never a kind word,
never a smile,
only curses heard,
only the vile corrupting hatred

■ ■ ■

spilled on every vestige of
humanity that remained.

O, the profane bestiality borne again and again
and again.

Who can forget?

Who then can forgive?

Three young men somehow escaped the slaughter,
hiding in a small bunker atop a nearby hill.

We found them, pajama-clad, eyes glazed,
lips swollen, numb with hunger, cold and fear.

We gave them food and clothing.

I gave one my last two packs of cigarettes.

He lowered his bruised head

and with cracked lips

he kissed my hand.

■ ■ ■

O, the sufferings inflicted again and again
and again.

Remembering, Lord,
Your love for all,
even for these.

Through Your given grace,
perhaps one can forget,
perhaps even forgive.



20 The Wall

... WALTER PRITCHARD ... ALTON WILLIAMS, III ...
... THOMAS F. DORAN ...

chiseled in black granite,
reflected in the faces
of those who read the names.

... SAMUEL I. KEMP ... HAROLD ARNOLD ...
... BILLY RAY MOORE ...

names of the fallen – fathers, sons, lovers —
whose fair flesh fed the ravenous maw
of war's obscenity.

■ ■ ■

The long, black stela crypts
the brooding spirits of those honored dead
which hover over all who stand
in sacramental silence to remember.

And when they touch a well-loved name
a healing comes, and peace,
like touching the garment of Christ.

. . . CHARLES T. MC CORKLE . . . JOSE LOPEZ . . .

. . . HARRY CURTIS MC CARTNEY . . .

. . . JAMES BAINES WOODS . . .



21 "A day will come..."

A day will come
when silence drowns the battle's din
and men will creep from bunkers
deep within the ruined earth
to wring their wrath at what their hate has brought.

And when the long-sought peace has come
some little child will smile
spilling a tearful mirth as rain,
filling our arid souls with joy
where pain had been.

■ ■ ■

Then weary men may sit beside
their humble door
in quietness,
remembering what they struggled for.
Their comrades lie in honor now
beneath a foreign cross,
reminder of the grievous loss they bore
and symbol of their sacred vow
that war will be no more.

