

DEATH'S CITIZENS

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

*"Soldiers are citizens of death's gray land,
drawing no dividend from time's tomorrows"*
~SIEGFRIED SASSOON

It is 85 years since the Great Slaughter ended at the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month of the 18th year of the 20th century. By the time World War 1 ended the empires and societies of pre-war Europe had vanished or were disrupted beyond recognition.

'The War to End Wars' was the beginning of the final triumph of the Industrial Revolution — flesh yielded to steel. The shells that fell upon its soldiers like rain for four years, three months and one week made mockeries of courage, fear and sacrifice, pummeled them into bloody particles and blotches. Whom the shells missed the machineguns harvested.

No other war was as attritious to its soldiers except the American Civil War half a century earlier. In each the infantry was charged enmasse into sure death and the battlefields of both wars were littered with the corpses of thousands. Rapid advances in weaponry were not matched in either war by changes in tactics: Civil War leaders charged their troops into mass formations of riflemen and artillery; World War 1 generals sent their soldiers against barbed wire and machine guns. The paralyzing trench warfare of the latter war was a desperate innovation of the former.

The short miserable life of soldiers was never more grim than the stagnant war of attrition fought on the western front of Europe from late 1914 when the summer's war of movement settled into trench warfare until the Armistice four years later.

More than 10 million were counted dead, the majority of them soldiers. The next war a generation later would decimate many times more civilians than combatants as a result of technological improvements in artillery, long-range bombing and the development of nuclear power. World War 1 was a short-range war. Artillery and airplanes were not able to kill at long range as they later were. Soldiers were the main targets and were ceaselessly under attack by artillery barrages that lasted for days and were bombed and machinegunned from the air; poisoned gas and infantry-fired machine-guns were primarily aimed at soldiers unable to escape them, the poor unknowns whose deaths prematurely consumed an entire generation of European men, and hundreds of thousands of colonial troops from Asia and Africa were slaughtered, plus thousands more from Australia and North America. It was a soldiers' war, perhaps the last one in which soldiers did most of the killing and dying.

Not all of them quietly accepted the indifferent sacrifice of their lives and sanity. Siegfried Sassoon, considered one the best war poets of World War 1, was a British infantry officer during the war who was severely wounded and highly decorated. In July, 1917 he publicly disclaimed the war in a statement that voiced the feelings of millions on both sides. He titled it "Finished With The War, A Soldier's Declaration."

I am making this statement as an act of willful defiance of military authority, because I believe the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it.

I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on the behalf of soldiers. I believe that this war, upon which I entered as a war of defense and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation.

I have seen and endured the suffering of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust.

I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed.

On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practiced on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the continuance of agonies which they do not share, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realize.

Sassoon was sent to a psychiatric hospital as punishment for this statement where he met Wilford Owen, perhaps the best war poet ever. Owen was killed just before the Armistice and Sassoon, who returned to the front in France, posthumously published Owen's poems after the war.

"With them in Hell," Owen wrote just before his death,
*the sorrowful dark of hell
Whose world is but the trembling of a flare
And heaven but as the highway for a shell.*

Armistice is defined as a temporary truce, but to the American President Woodrow Wilson, the Armistice 85 years ago this November 11 was to be an end to war forever. He died a few years later miserably aware his plan for a League of Nations had failed and that small wars were even then erupting all over the planet.

Hundreds of millions had prayed for his success, and Armistice Day became a symbol of peace to the world's ordinary people who suffer horribly during times of war.



DEATH WEARS A GAS MASK IN A DRAWING BY GEORGE GROSZ

Each Armistice Day a full minute of silence was observed at the 11th hour in memory of the fallen. By the time German armies invaded Poland September 1, 1939, millions who had hoped for peace were already dead from wars, assassinations, mass executions, pogroms. Fifty-seven million more died in the following six years.

All but the western hemisphere was ravaged by World War 2, but at the beginning of the 21st century every place on the planet is vulnerable to nuclear-armed missiles, everywhere about a half-hour away from annihilation.

Two nuclear bombs ended World War 2 and might have put an end to war for good. The development of nuclear weaponry makes the ultimate future for war the obliteration of civilization and probably humanity. The response instead was a nuclear arms race designed to indiscriminately wipe out entire populations.

The only alternative to nuclear holocaust is disarmament and the destruction of nuclear weapons, yet those who possess them derive their power from their arsenals and making treaties that allow for more and deadlier weapons.

Almost all of them who survived World War 1 are finally dead (hardly more than 500 still alive in the USA alone), joining at last their comrades who died in the trenches and on the wire in 'No Man's Land'. They follow the last veteran of the Civil War, a Confederate soldier who died nearly half a century ago in 1959. The World War 2 generation, so young in the countless replay of 1940s war movies, is old now and dying at a rapid rate. Soon Vietnam veterans will be the aged war survivors, following the exit of those who fought in Korea. Newer generations endure newer wars as if the litany of horror human beings perpetrate upon each other will never end.

In the United States Armistice Day is now devoted to veterans. Instead of recalling war's cost, the day celebrates veterans as superior citizens for their service to the state.

The day that ended the first of the 20th century's great slaughters and which was a day that humanity expressed its longing for a peaceful world is dangerously trivialized into an effort to recruit more offerings to Mars.

Michael McCusker is a Vietnam veteran and charter member of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, which many vets believe should be reorganized to combat the current militarization of the USA.

AVAGALLERY

ASTORIA VISUAL ARTS
160 10TH ST., ASTORIA
BACK ON THE BLOCK 2 DOORS DOWN

HOPE L. HARRIS

LICENSED
MASSAGE
THERAPIST

503/325-2523



ON PASSING THE NEW MENIN GATE

*Who will remember, passing through this gate,
The unheroic dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate, —
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?
Crudely renewed, the salient holds its own,
Paid are its dim defenders by this pomp;
Paid, with a pile of peace-complacent stone,
The armies who endured that sullen swamp.*

*Here was the world's worst wound. And here with pride
"Their name liveth forever," the gateway claims.
Was ever an immolation so belied
As these intolerably nameless names?
Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime
Rise and deride this sepulcher of crime.*

~SIEGFRIED SASSOON

