



FRANZ MASEREEL

BY MARGARET R. FRIMOTH

It is Memorial Day weekend. I am safe. Protected. At least I feel safe and protected, surrounded by the environment I call home. I look forward to the long weekend because it allows more time for enjoying home, friends and family. Because I have an extra day to relax. Not because I want to take time to feel remorse or guilt due to wartime repercussions. I check the listing of local weekend activities. Parades. Bugle corps presentations. More parades. And memorial services in local cemeteries.

A Memorial Day holiday represents a ritual of coping with the memories of those who died during our various wars. Grief acted out through holiday. A startling contradiction.

This weekend I want to imagine myself safe and protected. Don't we all? In truth, our nations build vestiges of warfare, pretending that defensive arms will create safety. I do not want to have to stare war in the face. I know it exists, but I don't want to deal with it directly. We trick ourselves into believing the myth of safety because it is simpler to fathom than the complicated truth of the many definitions of war acted out through violence.

Ultimately, war has nothing to do with the amount of defense arms we have. War is a mind-set that transforms the act of protecting into the socially acceptable act of power over others. War is the act of protection taken out-of-context and redefined as the right to be violent. Ultimately, we do stare war in the face. Daily. Unconsciously.

## MY FATHERS' WARS

The existence of war is a constant force in all our lives. War haunts our land and invades our environment. War slips into our homes disguised as entertainment on television shows and movies. War, in the form of domestic violence, interrupts relationships and destroys families. War attacks children in its forms of neglect and abuse. We, as a nation observe Presidents and politicians alike, throwing around rationalizations for defensive actions and decisive attacks like they were volleyballs at a tournament. However, the end result is never a trophy; it hardly seems successful to win at war.

I guess I have been spared personal grief because my family history is not filled with military deaths. Both my Grandfather and Father are veterans. They both survived the act of war, but its powerful imprint lives and is passed through my family today. My American-born, Danish-raised Grandfather stole away from Denmark to return to America and become a World War 1 daredevil air fighter. A hero, who narrowly escaped many plunging fiery deaths, my Grandfather fought to reclaim a brave heritage with hopes for eventual wealth in the land of the free. He was successful as an air fighter. But success and the all-American dream did not make him wealthy. His neighborhood grocery store/creamery with 30 flavors of ice cream never outgrew Clinton, Iowa, although the idea has since proved plentiful for Baskin & Robbins. He believed that he deserved a good life because he had fought the good fight. He believed that risking his life while taking the lives of others would somehow equip him with the formula of notable success. My Grandfather passed on his expectations of success and wealth to his youngest child and only son, my Father.

At age 18, my Father was drafted. He curtailed his American dream of becoming a successful electrical engineer and went to Europe to fight in the war to end all wars. And to be a hero like his Dad.

The stories my Father tells of World War 2 delighted much of my childhood. He was a star basketball player on the Army team. He was the responsible money-keeper for his buddies when they went to the European bars. He ate quarts of ice cream while his friends sucked down beer. He was granted a leave and traveled to Denmark to spend Christmas with our distant relatives. But on rarer occasions my Father explained how the war had changed his life. I grew to understand why he never saw heroism in fighting; why he never bought me toy guns (though I begged to be like all the other kids); why he uneventfully passed on his dusty unused engineering tools to my youngest brother; why my Grandfather cursed him for marrying a small-town minister's daughter; why he was cursed again for choosing a small-church ministry rather than seeking business wealth. I remember the few occasions when Dad spoke different words about the war. How his face changed to reflect unspeakable pain, a cringe of memory as he quietly told of a postwar march towards a concentration camp; of smelling it before seeing it; of knowing the undisguised truth of war through the stench of burned bodies. War kills. It kills lives and dreams and hope and unity. What is freedom or safety after such a toll? In simple actions and penetrating stories, my Dad changed the family interpretation of war. He recognized the freedom that lay waiting, in peace.

My family heritage impacts me. I have two models of power to learn from. War teaches about power. Do I believe my Grandfather's truth? My Grandfather whom I love because he was strong and tough — a survivor from the old country, an immigrant who dared to build a vision of an American dream. I loved my Grandfather when he was alive, and felt his presence when I stepped on Danish soil.

Or do I look towards my Dad and see his struggle with my beloved Grandfather? My Dad dared to give up. Dared to be ridiculed. Dared to be rejected. The paradox of power is that its strength is in change.

We are neither safe, nor protected. The unfortunate truth is that violence remains the simplest means to acquiring a desired end. I cannot help but believe that this simplicity is the matter that binds us, limits us. We falter in our quest to rise above destruction because we tolerate violence as a means to end war. By practicing war, we fall prey to it.

Until we hold accountable any act of violation — whatever the reasons or justification — we will never be able to give up war. And we risk the possibility of peace.

I am relaxing while Beethoven's "Symphony No. 9" plays in the background. The rush of vibrato followed by flowing melodies — power and tranquillity — guides my thoughts. The music sets the tone for the Memorial Day weekend. Mental reflections. Questions and contradictions. Grief is a natural part of life. As is joy. What remains unnatural is the pretense that we are unaffected by violence, and therefore removed from accountability. Commemorating violence will never be acceptable if we truly desire peace.

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## IN MEMORY OF THE BEST & BRIGHTEST

*"When you're in a war, you're already dead."*

~JIM JOSEY, Vietnam veteran,  
who committed suicide on  
Thanksgiving Day, 1978.

Nothing more focuses a war than being in it or knowing someone who is — especially if this person is killed by it. One I have known since he was a baby was recently killed in Iraq, Aaron Kent, a Navy medical corpsman whose job was to save the lives of wounded Marines. A 'roadside bomb' ended his short life in the infamous city of Fallujah on April 23.

Aaron's mother Lara learned about his death less than a day later. She answered her doorbell, saw three Navy petty officers in full uniform standing on her porch, shut the door and sat in a chair. She said later that she was swept by waves of sorrow, pain and anger, but disbelief most of all that her 28 year old son whom she had worried about every day he was in Afghanistan, then Iraq, was so suddenly and irrevocably dead.

His father Gary was an Army infantryman in Vietnam and was wounded on April 21 the year he was there. He had anxiously (with rational superstition bred by combat) hoped Aaron would get past that day this year unharmed — which he did by a day and a half. Gary's anguish is magnified with a feeling that his son was killed as a sort of payback because he had survived his war.

The death of another American also helps define the Iraq War for me, a young woman the same age as Aaron, a civilian volunteer aid worker who died in the course of saving civilians. Her name was Marla Ruzicka, also killed by a roadside bomb a week before Aaron's death. She was co-founder of Campaign for Innocent Victims in Conflict (acronym 'CIVIC'), which is devoted to securing compensation for relatives of innocent victims killed in Afghanistan and Iraq, and she worked to help thousands of noncombatants who have been wounded or displaced. She also attempted to persuade the U.S. government to publicly report on civilian casualties of the war — She was killed collecting that information; her CIVIC colleague Faiz Ali Salim died with her.

A newspaper reporter friend, Phillip Robertson, wrote of her, "Marla Ruzicka believed that families of civilians killed by the U.S. should receive compensation — she argued that the U.S. government had a duty to all innocents injured by its

weapons, especially children who needed urgent medical care. These simple proposals cut straight to the heart of our collective responsibility during wartime."

It would be a stretch to imagine that Aaron and Marla might have run across each other in Afghanistan or Iraq, yet they had much in common, such as compassion and concern for those who are injured by conflict. I don't know how Aaron felt about the war — he was probably stressed with conflicting emotions and kept his own focus on the war on what he could do, which was saving the lives of Marines he went on combat patrol with. If he had survived the war he planned to go into medicine, perhaps as a nurse or EMT (paramedic). Maybe even as an MD.

I have felt remorse about Vietnam more than ever since the invasion of Iraq two years ago, and now with the death of Aaron I think I feel much the same as his father — and I can't help asking: Why weren't we able to convey the waste, absurdity and criminality of war by our own experiences?

I wonder why this country has become so inverted that a decorated war veteran who spoke against war is denounced as a coward and traitor, and a war deserter who vocally supported the same war but left others to fight it, who was probably not elected in either of his two Presidential campaigns, is nevertheless the

saluted commander-in-chief of all American military forces, parading around in specially designed quasi-military uniforms, even after his lies about the reason for war have been exposed.

We seem to have either forgotten or simply ignore the betrayal by the American government of its soldiers in Vietnam to have allowed a much greater deception in the Middle East; the American public seems to be politically catatonic.

Military experts are covertly saying to the media that they expect U.S. forces to occupy Iraq for at least ten years. This assumption has previously been met with harsh Pentagon rejection — but lately the Pentagon has been silent; and of course President Bush says he will not set a timetable for withdrawal. In the meantime large American military bases are under construction.

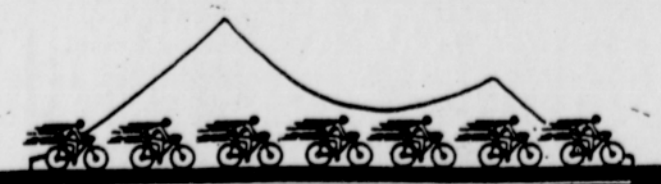
A significant number of those who are now in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan might eventually see through the fabric of lies they risk their lives for and overcome the hardrocked denial common to combatants who try to believe such horror they cause and are exposed to must be truly righteous for them to bear it. A group, Iraq Veterans Against the War, has already formed.

The conventional piety is that the country's lifeblood is nourished by its war dead rather than drained. The truth is that the nation loses its vitality when those among its best and brightest die in its wars, whether these wars are regarded as "just" or "unjust."

Marla wrote in an article a week before her death: "In my two years in Iraq, the one question I am asked the most is: 'How many Iraqi civilians have been killed by the American forces?' The American public has the right to know how many Iraqis have lost their lives since the start of the war and as hostilities continue...A number is important not only to quantify the cost of war, but as a reminder of those whose dreams will never be realized in a free and democratic Iraq."

Her friend Phillip Robertson said that she was herself an innocent victim of the Iraq War, "but at the end she wasn't a powerless victim. She had already won. She fought cruelty and bloodshed and indifference. Marla Ruzicka was a true enemy of war and she triumphed over it again and again with every person she helped."

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

  
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