

DANIEL CLAYTON

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## “They were soldiers, just like us...”

“**T**hey were soldiers, just like us,” is a refrain commonly heard in the narratives of WWII combat veterans of the European Theater of Operation in talking about the German enemy they remember. The American GIs certainly didn’t sentimentalize the German soldiers in this way during the war, of course, when they killed and died fighting them every day from November 1942 to the end of the war in early May, 1945. The narrative of a shared soldierly kinship is largely a myth, but like all mythical representations of lived experience, there is a basic truth in the memory.

Even after Nazi Germany declared war on the United States on December 11, 1941, American attitudes toward the German enemy were ambivalent. Jordan Braverman in *To Hasten the Homecoming* reported that in one government poll taken in mid-summer of 1942 “almost one-third of the American people would be prepared for a negotiated peace with German army leaders and nearly 50% of those polled confessed that they were not clear what the war was about” (Braverman, 51). Enthusiastic patriotism in a population united behind a common cause was not much in evidence at the outbreak of the war, either. The prevailing public mood was best characterized as somber. There was nothing of the joyful exuberance that sent the Yanks off to war in 1917. Most Americans were anxious about going to war in 1941. The racial divide deepened in the early 1940s and American anti-semitism peaked in 1943, according to wartime public opinion polls (Wiebe, 122).

This state of affairs occasioned a spirited public/private collaborative effort by the Office of War Information and the popular media to educate the American public and the fighting troops, too, about the grave dangers presented by Nazi

Germany; patriotism needed to be sold and unity manufactured. Exemplars of this propaganda campaign included the Frank Capra film series *Why We Fight* and Henry Luce's *Life* magazine. In both cases, German soldiers, with no distinction between regular army and SS troopers, were depicted as evil brutes who committed acts of violence against any in their path, women and children alike. *Life* wanted the American people to know the truth about the malevolent nature of the German threat and the kind of criminal behavior the German soldiers would exact on us if they invaded and occupied the United States. *Life* published graphic photographs of German soldiers killing civilians in countries they occupied to bring the point home. As seen in *Life* and various propaganda posters, American women and children would be at the mercy of evil, brainwashing thugs dedicated to the forced imposition of Nazi culture.

Beginning with North Africa in 1942, American soldiers didn't need any more schooling about the dangers they faced; Germans became the hated enemy. American and German soldiers killed each other every day for three years. On both sides, bodies were usually blown to bits by artillery fire. During the course of WWII in Europe, German soldiers killed 138,000 Americans, and American soldiers killed 835,000 Germans.<sup>1</sup> And when American GIs began liberating the concentration camps in Germany in April 1945 and saw first-hand what Germans had done to Jews and others, there was no question about why the war was fought.

Ohrdruf, a sub-camp of the Buchenwald camp network located near Weimar, was the first concentration camp liberated by Americans, on April 4, 1945. On April 12, 1945, the day FDR died, Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton visited Ohrdruf together, an occasion that prompted Ike to send a cable to George C. Marshall. "The things I saw beggar description," the shocked Eisenhower communicated to his boss. "The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty, and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick.... I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda (Michael Hirsh, *The Liberators*, 101)."

Patton, who did vomit, described Ohrdruf as "one of the most appalling sights that I have ever seen. In his dairy, he wrote:

In a shed...was a pile of about 40 completely naked human bodies in the last stages of emaciation. These bodies were lightly sprinkled with lime, not for the purpose of destroying them, but for the purpose of removing the stench. When the

shed was full...the bodies were taken to a pit a mile from the camp where they were buried...when we began to approach with our troops the Germans thought it expedient to remove the evidence of their crime. Therefore, they had some of the slaves exhume the bodies and place them on a mammoth griddle composed of 60 centimeter railroad tracks laid on brick foundations. They poured pitch on the bodies and then built a fire of pinewood and coal under them. They were not very successful in their operations because there was a pile of human bones, skulls, charred torsos on or under the griddle which must have accounted for many hundreds (Hirsh, 101-102).

Eisenhower ordered all GIs who weren't in front-line action to see Ohrdruf. "We are told that the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least, he will know what he is fighting against," the General exclaimed (Hirsh, 100). And, of course, the worst was still to be seen.

Philip D. Antonelli, Regis College class of 1949, was one of the GIs ordered to bear witness to German crimes against humanity. Antonelli was 19 years old when he passed through Ohrdruf in mid-April 1945 on the way to the end of his war in Europe. Phil, too, saw the bodies covered with lime as he and the other members of the 258<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion made their way to the shed, which stood at the top of a small hill. "From the distance, we thought they were snow piles at first," Phil remembered. "They were stacked like cord wood—it was gruesome." He saw the pits from which the bodies were exhumed and he saw the human bones, skulls, and charred torsos on the pyres. The ghastly nature of what Phil Antonelli saw that day at Ohrdruf made a lasting impression on him.

The nature of the witness of Eisenhower, Patton, and Phil Antonelli changed dramatically almost immediately after the war's conclusion, however. The Cold War quickly reconstructed the memory of the American encounter with Germans, and the history of the war was given a different narrative. Because the West Germans were now needed to defend Europe against the erstwhile Soviet ally, the once vigorous denazification campaign stopped and a joint American/German production of remembering commenced that fostered a myth of the German Wehrmacht and its behavior in WWII. The evil enemy capable of genocide had become an important ally, and what was seen at Ohrdruf receded into the distance.

This so-called Myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht originated in Germany immediately after the war ended.<sup>2</sup> It told the tale of a highly professional army that kept out of politics, never wanted the war, and generally resisted Hitler’s genocidal war of annihilation waged on the Eastern Front.<sup>3</sup> But the Germans were good soldiers, and like good soldiers everywhere, they obeyed orders.<sup>4</sup> The protagonist in the myth was the common German soldier, the Landser, who was courageous, disciplined, skilled, and, more essentially, devoted to his comrades and family. He was represented as the antithesis of the SS ideologue that enthusiastically carried out Hitler’s policy of extermination directed at Jews and other civilians. This was a memory that every German could live with after the war.

The myth was necessitated by death in war and offered consolation to millions of German families. The total number of German war dead and missing in WWII was 5.3 million out of a total mobilization of close to thirteen million (Rüdiger Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, 2004). This was a scale of carnage surpassed only by soldier dead in the Soviet Union. But unlike the Soviet Union, and unlike the United States, where profound grief could be assuaged by the belief that the sacrifice was sanctified by a just war fought in a righteous cause,<sup>5</sup> deriving this kind of “spiritual” meaning from their war dead was much more problematic for Germans. Given Nazi Germany’s undeniable guilt in bringing on the greatest single catastrophe in the history of humankind, and in waging a war of genocide against entire civilian populations, how could the enormous German sacrifice be justified? In what experiences of the war could Germans take any consolation? Did five million die in vain? Even more unbearable to contemplate, did five million deserve to die? The construction of the myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht answered these questions in the manner of a German morality play in which suffering had to be endured before redemption was possible.

Like the “Good War” in the United States, the myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht became embedded in the collective memory of the war. An important reason for its currency and staying power was the fact that the myth was based on lived experience and certainly contained many true stories about the Alltag of the average German soldier during WWII. But like all historical myths, it simplified a very complex history, privileged certain events and personalities over others, and exaggerated virtuous conduct, thereby distorting the “truth” of the experience. However, it is certainly true enough that there were many, maybe most, German soldiers who fought with honor and integrity and whose swords were indeed clean. But it is also true that there were many Wehrmacht officers and many soldiers, too, who did obey orders and committed war crimes. There are multiple truths to war experience.

There is a synergistic relationship between this narrative of German history and the construction of the American myth of the “Good War.” For example, when the remembering of WWII is located in the dark days of the classic Cold War period, 1947-1962, the representation of the American war experience in the European Theater of Operation includes a rehabilitated German soldier who was an honorable enemy. Nowhere is this more evident than in the pages of *Life’s Picture History of WWII* (1950), the enormously popular best-selling big picture book that was frequently cited by Americans as one of the two or three most important sources of their remembering WWII (Philip Beidler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits*, 66). *Life’s* historical representation of the war, in combination with dramatic geo-political events happening at the time, created the visual imaging and political sub-text for the construction of the memory of the German enemy as soldiers, just like us.

The picture book thoroughly whitewashed out of the memory of the war the leading contribution made by the Red Army to the defeat of Germany as well as the German war of extermination on the Eastern Front. The photographs told the saga of a largely American enterprise of arms and machines fought as a moral crusade with the fate of the earth at stake. In this most consequential and greatest war ever waged, the United States emerged triumphant. We now stood ready to defend the “free” world against the Soviet Union and the international communist movement, which intended to “fill every nook and cranny in the basin of world power,” in the prophecy of George Kennan sent in his “Long Telegram” from Moscow in 1946. By the time the picture book appeared, the Soviet Union had its own atomic bomb, Mao’s communist brigades had won the civil war in China, the Berlin Airlift had saved the heroic West Berliners, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) had come into existence, and the NATO Treaty had been signed. The Cold War was in full swing, and so was the understanding of WWII as the Good War.

Henry R. Luce’s preface to *Life’s Picture History of WWII* saluted the Americans fallen in combat as well as “those millions of enemy combatants who however wickedly misled, fought courageously and who found wounds and death and all the miseries of war no less bitter on their side than on ours. To all who fought and died, we say: God rest them and God forgive us all” (page v). The editors wrote, “We believe that our victory in WWII was essential in order to keep open the possibility of decent civilization on this earth...It was the greatest feat of arms ever accomplished on this planet...In large sweep or in fine detail, it is a ghastly, grisly story, but also one of high inspiration, of vast self-sacrifice, of a will-to-die for freedom” (Preface, v). Bad things certainly happened in this war, but it was a matter of being killed or killing first, with no holds barred.

Tellingly, each of the sections on “Convoy Duty,” “Tunisia,” and “Aleutians” received more coverage than Stalingrad, to which the editors devoted three pages in the 368 page book (123-125). The Russian war against Germany was marginalized generally. For example, whereas the editors dedicated an entire chapter and forty pages, 225-264, to “The Invasion,” D-Day, June 6, 1944 and the battle for Normandy, the Russian war against Germany in 1942/43 was limited to six pages, 164-169. The Battle of Kursk in July 1943 was captured in one 1/8 page photo with the caption, “This battle, involving 1500 tanks, brought Hitler his worst defeat in the Russian offensive” (168). In fact, Kursk involved more than 7500 tanks, making it the largest tank battle in history and by most accounts the turning point of the war in Europe. Moreover, in the forty-page chapter on “Victory in Europe,” the Russian contribution was covered in four pages, 313-316.

*Life* similarly limited the view of German atrocities committed during the war, both in the west and on the Eastern Front. The picture book did include a photograph of the frozen corpses of three of the American prisoners massacred at Malmedy during the Bulge, but it is revealing that the crime was attributed to the “Nazis” and not German soldiers per se (“The Bulge,” 295). It is remarkable, moreover, that the editors assigned only a few lines of text to the concentration camp crimes Americans bore witness to in Germany. “In overrunning Germany, they uncovered the results of Nazism’s hideous inhumanity—gas chambers, scheduled starvation, human vivisection: every conceivable atrocity for millions of people **Hitler** (emphasis added) didn’t like. The names of these concentration camps—Dachau, Buchenwald, Belsen—will live as long as the memory of WWII itself.” The text is accompanied by a page of grisly photographs depicting what the editors identified as “slave laborers” (“Prisoners,” 310). Two egregious omissions stand out in this telling of the story: There is absolutely no mention made of Jews, and apparently Hitler alone was responsible for these crimes.

The war of extermination the German Army waged on the Eastern Front also was removed from the memory of the war. Here again, only two small photos evidenced the crimes. One showed “partisans” hanging grotesquely from the gallows and the other a young child clinging to her dead mother’s body. The caption reads, “The Russian people in Nazi areas were dealt with ruthlessly by the Gestapo” (169). Here again, we need to pay attention to the words chosen by the editors. To identify victims as “partisans,” without any further explanation, implied that they were not innocent civilians, but members of armed bands actively engaged in the fight against German troops. In a kill or be killed situation under the terms of the laws of war, did the Germans have much choice in the matter? Likewise, to attribute

heinous crimes to the “Gestapo” in effect exonerated German soldiers. Hitler, the Gestapo, and Nazis perpetrated war crimes, according to *Life*, but the German Army remained unsullied. In this representation of the war, *Life’s Picture History of WWII* helped foster the myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht in American popular memory.

U.S. Cold War imperatives legitimated this myth, and by adding the obsessive fear of communism to the mix, the new memory of German soldiers deepened in the American psyche and became hard-wired. In the post-war world, we didn’t care much about Russian suffering during the war. What we found appealing were the particular stories of average German soldiers who survived a living hell against extraordinary odds; they were seen as victims of the war, not as its agents.<sup>6</sup> In this narrative, they were soldiers, just like us, who fought for one another and who longed to be home. After the war, with the demarcation line of the Cold War physically located in a divided Germany, the West Germans became indispensable allies and the front-line troops in the most dangerous war ever. The German soldiers were more like us than ever, it appeared.

The 1962 blockbuster hit movie about D-Day (June 6, 1944), *The Longest Day*, was an exemplar of the American-German co-production of remembering WWII and a paean to the respective myths of the “Good War” and the “Clean” Wehrmacht. German film director Bernhard Wicki directed the German scenes in the film, for example, which featured prominent German actors Curd Jurgens, Paul Hartmann, Hans Christian Blech, Peter Van Eyck, and Werner Hinz portraying senior Wehrmacht officers commanding the German forces on the Western Front in France in 1944. In fact, several of these former German officers served as military consultants to the film, including General Gunther Blumentritt, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt’s Chief of Operations in France at the time of the invasion; Major Werner Pluskat, officer in the 352<sup>nd</sup> Artillery battalion and the first German to see the Allied invasion fleet on June 6 as he peered out through his binoculars and the fog lifted over the beach early that morning; General Max Pemsel, Chief of Staff of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army who coordinated the first German response to Operation Overlord; and Vice Admiral Friedrich Ruge, Field Marshal Rommel’s Naval Advisor at the time. Manfred Rommel’s wife, Frau Lucie Marie Rommel, also consulted on the film. It would be Field Marshal Rommel’s remarks made shortly before the actual invasion began, interestingly, that inspired the title to Cornelius Ryan’s book and the movie. Rommel, the brilliant Desert Fox of North Africa fame and anti-Hitler conspirator, said prophetically, “The first twenty-four hours of the invasion will be decisive. For the Allies and the Germans it will be the longest day.”

These men personified the highly professional German officer and patriot who fought a good fight courageously and honorably, albeit in a bad cause—a worthy enemy if ever there was one. Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief of German forces in Western Europe in 1944, was famously disdainful of Hitler and Nazism. In a key scene in the movie, von Rundstedt, played by Paul Hartmann, has just heard from his disbelieving adjutant General Blumentritt (Curd Jurgens) that Blumentritt wasn't able to reach Hitler by phone to tell the Führer that the invasion had begun, because Hitler had given orders not to be awakened under any circumstances. Only on Hitler's personal authority could two panzer divisions be activated that were being held in reserve in western France in anticipation of the assault. Von Rundstedt says, "We are at a historic moment. We are going to lose the war, because our glorious Führer has taken a sleeping pill." He then adds with deep sarcasm and bitterness, "and he is NOT to be awakened." Blumentritt implores his boss, "But if you, Sir, if you'd call the Führer—he'd respect your views." Von Rundstedt responds angrily, "Call that Bohemian corporal. Get down on my knees to him. Never!" At other times in the film the script has German officers refer to the German High Command as a bunch of "idiots" and "bumbling fools." In this reshaped narrative of the war, senior Wehrmacht commanding officers were victimized by Hitler's hubris and strategic follies.

The remembering of WWII as the "Good War" that included a recast German soldier was interrupted in the early sixties shortly after *The Longest Day* screened, as a consequence of the iconoclasm of the sixties and the Vietnam War. But it re-emerged on the other side of Vietnam in the nostalgia of the late 70s and 80s. From 1977-83, *Time/Life Books* produced a 39 volume series on WWII that was advertised as the complete chronicle of the war. In this series, the Wehrmacht remained unsullied, and a clear distinction again was drawn between the SS and the regular Army troops. According to the Time/Life editors, the Wehrmacht, in fact, had been "enslaved" by the Nazi state. In the volume, "Russia Besieged," one page described Hitler's war of extermination waged against civilians, but it was represented as the actions of Himmler and the SS exclusively. The editors highlighted Hitler's infamous "Commissar Decree" as well as his order that forbade the prosecution of German soldiers who killed or mistreated Soviet civilians. However, they indicated that "Many German officers were shocked by these directives and objected to them on moral grounds..." (26). In fact, the editors included a salute to Colonel General Heinz Guderian, "The Man Behind the Panzers," in a long, flattering pictorial essay on the "brilliant" tank commander. Using the General's memoirs published in 1953 as their only source, *Time/Life* claimed that Guderian vigorously opposed Hitler's

directives to wage a war of extermination against civilians, leaving their readers with the impression that these orders were widely ignored by the Wehrmacht (48-61). The civilians the Wehrmacht killed were identified as “partisans.”

International politics at the time also added to the memory of the “Clean Wehrmacht.” On May 5, 1985, President Ronald Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl paid a joint visit to the military cemetery in Bitburg, a town in southwest Germany, where the leaders laid a wreath to Germany’s fallen WWII soldiers in commemoration of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the war in Europe. The cemetery also contained the graves of Waffen-SS troops. During the ceremony, Reagan remembered the German soldiers as victims, too, of Hitler’s regime. Kohl intoned that the day the German armed forces surrendered to the Allies, May 8, 1945, was for Germans a “Day of Liberation.” In the Federal Republic’s official memory of the war, all Germany was victimized by the Nazi regime. Reagan’s visit to Bitburg came under severe criticism in the United States, particularly among the American Jewish community.

After the Cold War ended, however, the myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht was challenged in Germany by a photographic exhibit that captured the attention of millions of Germans who flocked to its showings all across Germany after it first opened in Hamburg in March 1995. The exhibit of more than 300 photographs was staged by historians at the highly regarded Hamburg Institute for Social Research and entitled “Vernichtungskrieg—Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944” (War of Extermination—Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941 to 1944). The photographs bore witness to the fact that members of the regular German Army willingly carried out Hitler’s orders and participated in genocide on a large scale during Operation Barbarossa, in Serbia, in Poland, and in vast areas of the Soviet Union. Jews were specifically targeted for special treatment.

A detailed curriculum guide, “Hamburger Materialien” was published by the Hamburg State Education Association in 1999 to help prepare educators and students for visits to the exhibit. In the preface, Chairwoman of the Hamburg State Education Association Anna Ammann and State School Councilor Peter Daschner said,

*...We knew that the war on the Eastern Front was not the ‘normal’ war that many people after 1945 wanted to make it out to be. The historical facts have long been on the table. The exhibit broke with the taboo of questioning the “Clean” Wehrmacht and provoked a necessary public debate. It is a proven fact that*

*units of the Wehrmacht actively participated in the genocide committed against Jews in the East, that the Wehrmacht on all levels was jointly responsible for the murder of millions of Soviet prisoners of war, for the pillage and destruction of the occupied territories—that they provided support for the deportation of hundreds of thousands, and disguised as a war against partisans, participated in the systematic murder of the Soviet civilian population. The exhibit reveals these crimes once again.<sup>7</sup>*

In the introduction to their curriculum guide, authors Jorg Berlin, Tilo Hoffmann, Bernhard Nette, and Stefan Romey argue that

*...public reaction to the exhibit shows that the special character of the Second World War in the Balkans and the East as a war of extermination, enslavement, and conquest remained largely unknown or was suppressed in the collective memory. The facts were presented in numerous volumes of documents by the prosecution at Nuremberg and later in detail by German history scholars. But in school text-books the war of extermination was almost exclusively associated with the crimes of the SS. This brochure is designed to help teachers present this matter fairly through the use of different perspectives...opponents of the Exhibit maintain that it labels as criminals all German soldiers of WWII. That's not true. ..Neither with the source materials published herein nor with the photographs is a direct claim made to present a single "truth." It would make just as little sense to judge the events of the war solely according to the moral standards of the present...*

The authors supplemented the evidence of the crimes and the photographs from the Exhibit with additional source materials that presented the voices of the “other German soldiers,” those who, for example, reported on crimes they witnessed personally, and those who refused to participate in the crimes against civilians and POWs. On the other hand, there is the voice of the loyal, dutiful, obedient soldier who fought for his comrades and for his Fatherland and who believed that he remained honorable throughout the war.

The exhibit provoked bitter battles over memory wherever it appeared. It was universally condemned by veterans' groups and conservatives on the right in German politics in the CDU/CSU who rejected the attribution of collective guilt that they read into the public indictment of the Wehrmacht. The politics of remembering WWII had always been controversial in Germany, of course, and there was much at stake in this attack on the Myth of the Wehrmacht, not least national honor. Not surprisingly, attacks on the myth of the Good War in the United States would elicit similar responses from veterans and conservatives, as I have pointed out elsewhere (WLA, Volume 23, 2011, "Remembering WWII at Regis University"). Throughout 1994/95 in the United States, for example, the controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian produced similarly heated battles over memory along virtually the same political lines. In this case, the American Legion mustered up the "Greatest Generation" and forced the exhibit to close because it highlighted the war of annihilation waged against Japan.

The German Parliament ( Bundestag) debate about the exhibit held on March 13, 1997 was angry and emotional. In his remarks, Alfred Dregger (CDU), who represented the wartime generation, said,

*This is not about individuals—it's about all of us. How a people treat its soldiers after a lost war says much about its moral substance, about its inner worth, its strengths and weaknesses. The critical decisions were not made by soldiers, but by the High Command...Most German soldiers who risked life and limb for their country and suffered unbelievable misery can with absolute right say that they did not participate in Hitler's war crimes and weren't guilty of any other war crimes. Most of them—but this is not the case for all. In speaking about the soldiers of the Second World War and their families, you're not talking about a small group, but an entire generation of people. Almost every male was drafted—and mothers, sisters, daughters, girlfriends, and wives were directly impacted. In the matter at hand, we're talking about a whole generation of our people...whoever attempts, and there are these attempts, to paint the entire war generation as members and accomplices of a criminal gang—cuts all of Germany to the quick. We defend ourselves against this attack. Nothing good can come from such self-hate...The Exhibit doesn't heal, it divides. Through the form of its presentation, it outrages*

*the generation of grandfathers and fathers and bewilders the generation of sons and grandsons...* (Hamburg Materials).

SPD representative Otto Schily who openly cried during his remarks said, “If we’re honest about this, each of us would have to ask ourselves what we would have done in this situation. Would we have been brave enough to refuse an order to kill civilians and be killed along with them?” He then told about his uncle, a Colonel in the Luftwaffe who committed suicide in despair over the crimes of the Nazi regime. His oldest brother refused to join the Hitler youth, Schily went on, but volunteered for the Front and lost an eye and the use of an arm. Schily reminded his colleagues that his own father was an acknowledged opponent of the Hitler regime. He mentioned his father-in-law, a Jew who fought as a partisan against the Wehrmacht in Russia and who lost his entire family. “He fought against a German army that lowered itself to being the executioner of the racial madness and inhumanity of the Hitler regime and thereby lost its honor” (Hamburg Materials).

Christa Nickels of the Green Party spoke about the Reagan/Kohl scene at Bitburg and expressed heartbreak over the memory of her father. It occurred to her for the first time “that her father, in the only picture of him from the wartime, wears a uniform that is black and carries the skull and crossbones, the Death’s Head insignia of the SS. At that time, I was already in the Bundestag and didn’t ‘dare’ ask my father about it. I just couldn’t bring myself to do it—I just couldn’t.” In 1989 she visited Warsaw with the Green Alliance Party. Fifty years after the attack on Poland, she was at the Majdanek Concentration Camp.

*I completely broke down one night, because I was so terribly upset about what had happened there, but just as upset about what one did to these men—my father among them—men who loved life and their children. It is terrible what these men became in this criminal war. Most of them didn’t have the strength to extricate themselves from the situation. All of them placed endless and horrifying guilt on themselves. The men, women, and children—I am the daughter of such a soldier—are to this day traumatized by this. This debate has affected me. I really thought twice about whether I should say all of this, because perhaps someone could ask: “How can you do such a thing? He was your father!” But I don’t feel that what I have said denigrates my family, because everyone who knows me knows how very much I*

*love and have always loved my parents, and, of course, my father*  
(Hamburg Materials).

In Christa Nickels' mind, her father was both victim and perpetrator.

All the while the controversy over the Hamburg exhibit swirled, former Wehrmacht soldier Max Villringer and his wife, Gustel, kept me informed about the reaction of a large number of German WWII veterans to the matter of how the war should be remembered. Max served with the 101<sup>st</sup> Jäger Division on the Ostfront, from the launch of Operation Barbarossa on June 21, 1941 until he was evacuated out of the Krasnodar region in southeastern Russia with a severe case of diphtheria in February 1944. Reassigned later that year to the 999<sup>th</sup> Straf Battalion in the Eifel, the rugged highlands above the Rhine in far western Germany, Villringer stood in the direct fire of the advancing Americans until he was captured on the left-bank of the Rhine near Remagen on March 9, 1945.

In addition to his two-volume wartime memoir,<sup>8</sup> Max donated twelve issues of the 101<sup>st</sup> Jäger Division's biennial reunion publications to the Regis Center for the Study of War Experience; they date from 1953, the first of the reunions, to 1991, when the last General Division Assembly took place. The booklets contain reports on the reunion proceedings, detail the organization's various social relief activities directed toward the widows and families of fallen comrades, and feature short histories of the division's various campaigns on the Eastern Front. In the earliest issues, they also provide information on the on-going efforts to clarify the whereabouts of former Jäger soldiers still considered 'missing in action.' The booklets routinely include excerpts from the keynote speeches delivered by former commanding officers and chaplains at the reunion gatherings; each meeting ceremoniously ends with the singing of the famous German marching song "Old Comrades." Local meetings continued to be held after 1991, and Max gave the Center several issues of the *Jäger Zeitung*, a twice-yearly newsletter that reported on the activities of these smaller groups up to 1999. The meetings themselves and the publications, including content and programs, are similar to those organized by any number of American WWII division reunion associations. These sources are a window into the remembering process of old comrades getting together to tell their war stories; they indicate that the veterans themselves were complicit in propagating the myth of the "Clean" Wehrmacht.

These materials revealed the efforts of the former Wehrmacht soldiers to elucidate the "truth" of their war in response to accusations of criminal behavior leveled by their fellow countrymen, both before and after the Hamburg exhibit. In 1953, for

example, former Commanding General Irwin Vogel expressed essential elements of the Myth of the “Clean” Wehrmacht in his keynote address to the assembled veterans and their families. He reminded them of the enormous sacrifices the German soldiers made in defending their country and their loved ones. They were good soldiers who did their duty and who fought honorably. Vogel said, “My dear comrades, we know each other too well to have any doubt about the high moral character of our soldiers, in the consciousness of which they sacrificed their precious lives...each had parents, a wife and children, or a beloved fiancé, for whom he wanted to live and care for.

In what would become a familiar litany, Vogel maintained that “None of us could have changed or prevented the course of events. We had to accept it, whether ordained by God or man... We fought to save and preserve our beloved Fatherland, regardless of how history would one day judge the state’s leadership. None of us wanted this war, least of all we soldiers, because we had the most to suffer, and the least to gain. But it happened, and none of us—none—could do anything but give his total effort to the war.” The General emphasized that the German soldiers behaved like the other soldiers who fought. He continued, “And if tomorrow there are again German soldiers, they wouldn’t handle themselves any differently as we and the soldiers of other nations did and would do again—they will do their duty.” Vogel concluded his remarks by stressing that “the ultimate goal of the German soldier was to save his loved ones and the Homeland from unspeakable suffering. The soldiers died with faith in this cause, and this belief gave their death meaning.”<sup>9</sup>

Former Colonel Dr. Hofert added to the construction of the myth in his keynote speech given at the 1959 reunion, which was, he said, a “response to the contemporary criticism of the German soldier and the talk about the war’s meaninglessness.” He found the meaning of the war for the front-line German soldier in “fighting for the western world, for Volk and Vaterland,<sup>10</sup> but most of all in the experience of comradeship, the deepest meaning of which comes in the very worst times of war. You’ve shared an experience whose meaning can only be understood by those who participated...” For comrades at the front, he stressed, this experience was our “education” for life, the “time” of our lives. Like any soldier in any army of the world, the Colonel argued, “the front-line soldier fighting at the edge of life and death was beyond reproach. He remained faithful to his God and to his family, in contrast to the godlessness of others who had forsaken Him...” Front-line soldiers were “not responsible for the acts of those units which followed them...The shield of the front soldiers was clean” (*Das Schild des Frontsoldaten aber sei sauber*) (quoted in the 1972 reunion booklet, 26, 27).

Hofert made it clear for what noble ends the German soldiers fought during WWII. He said, “We former soldiers didn’t go to war because we liked war, but rather because we knew that it was a question of the fate of all Germans and the struggle for freedom against the tyranny of Bolshevism” (38). This high-minded sentiment can be read as an example of a Cold War rendering of WWII very much in keeping with the heightened state of tensions at the time of the speech. In 1958, for example, Khrushchev’s Berlin ultimatum initiated a prolonged crisis that would result in the building of the Berlin Wall in August 1961.

A recurring theme in Hofert’s subsequent review of the division’s campaigns on the Eastern Front, and a key element of the Myth of the Wehrmacht, was “the incredible valor of the Division in circumstances which might easily have led to total disaster and annihilation...” This didn’t happen, Hofert maintained, because of the “very best German soldiering skills” (45). “It is not the fault of the German soldiers that this heroic struggle ended so sadly,” he said. “We front soldiers carried on with our sacrifice in good conscience. It is not our fault that we were misled...we soldiers paid for the sins of the politicians.” In recalling the division’s seven month-long retreat out of the Caucasus and southern Russia, his narrative emphasized the “magnificent achievement of the German troops...and superior leadership and courageous actions under the most difficult circumstances” (158,159). What was stressed repeatedly was the German soldiers’ skill, genius even, in avoiding the “ultimate catastrophe” of being encircled and destroyed, like at Stalingrad where Hitler’s “monumental blunders” led to the destruction of von Paulus’s 6<sup>th</sup> Army. Hofert claimed, “It is thanks only to the outstanding achievements of the German troops and to magnificent leadership that both armies, the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 1<sup>st</sup> Panzer, were led out of the encirclement” (160-161).

The language used throughout these volumes tells us much about how these former German soldiers, and civilians, too, came to remember WWII on the Eastern Front. In the case of the 101<sup>st</sup> Jäger Division, what might reasonably have been characterized as ignominious retreat or inglorious defeat was scripted, rather, not only as heroic and brave soldiering, but as superior German military skill. It sounds almost like a victory. This epic of front-line combat fought day after day for months on end, over vast expanses of forbidding landscape in unforgiving weather, against overwhelming odds is a paean to the indomitable German spirit. It is a narrative of their war in which German soldiers could take pride.

But more than soldierly skill, the ultimate “truth” of the German war experience, at least for the men of the 101<sup>st</sup> Jäger Division, was comradeship and the sanctity of sacrifice. In his address at the ecumenical religious service held at the reunion

in 1972, former Catholic Chaplain Father Hermann Neuhauser spoke to the “unimaginable pain and grief suffered by those who had to leave their fallen comrades behind in cemeteries in foreign lands all throughout the Eastern Front.” He told the men that they could find some consolation, some solace in the new memorial to the fallen erected in Offenburg, “a final resting place in the homeland.” They fought and died for each other, Neuhauser reminded them, and they could take comfort in knowing that “no-one has a greater love than he who gives his life for his friends...” He asked rhetorically, what brings you men together today? What keeps you bonded to one another forever? It was, he said, “that every one of you found a piece of the homeland in each other, that every comrade in the field was literally a part of the other...this consciousness remained alive in you throughout the war and after” (33,34,35).

Following closely on the famous Historikerstreit (Battle of the Historians) that raised the question of the Germans’ responsibility for Hitler’s crimes to the level of mainstream public discourse, the 1989 reunion booklet included several comments made by Jäger veterans during the General Assembly’s discussion of the “guilt and responsibility” question. One spoke for most when he argued, “With regard to all questions of responsibility and guilt, the central question needs to be asked, ‘was there ever any real possibility for the individual to oppose or escape the fate imposed on us...It was our particular tragedy that a regime seized and exercised unlimited power—does that mean that all who died, died in vain—that their deaths were meaningless?...What kind of monster must one be who is capable of denying such sacrifice and such selfless devotion ” (Reunion publication, 1989, 31,32)?

Eight hundred former Jäger veterans attended the 14<sup>th</sup> and last General Division Meeting held on June 15 and 16, 1991 in Offenburg. At this reunion, the comrades were reminded of the contributions they made to their country’s well-being after the war. “No one in Germany today can surpass our devotion to the cause of peace. For those of us who experienced the horrors of war our highest priority is the maintenance of peaceful relations among all nations...The recovery after 1945, the creation of free and democratic conditions and prosperity is to be attributed predominately to the energy and hard work of the wartime generation...No one can serve peace more effectively than those of us who have learned the truth about war” (Reunion publication, 1991, pages 46 and 47 of the Epilogue).

As detailed in the issues of the *Jäger Zeitung*, once the possibility of travel opened up to the lands of the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the communist state in 1991, several of the Jäger veterans’ groups turned their attention to finding their war dead and to “reconciliation efforts” (Versöhnungsbemühungen) with the

former enemy. To this end, they began the sad project of identifying the sites of graves of fallen comrades along the route of their war on the Eastern Front. From 1994-2001, these German veterans made several trips to the Caucasus where they met with former veterans of the Soviet armies they had fought against, visited the graves of fallen comrades, held memorial services at former battlefield cemeteries, and laid wreaths at the monuments to Russia's fallen soldiers. Max Villringer went on these trips to the Caucasus in 1999 and again in 2001 when a former battlefield cemetery located in a village schoolyard near Krasnodar was consecrated with a large metal cross. Max and the other Jäger soldiers could grieve and mourn their comrades at the sites where they all fought and where many died.

It is ironic that these efforts at peace and reconciliation with the former enemy took place during the time when the debate over the Hamburg exhibit was in full-swing. The reaction of the former Jäger soldiers to the exhibit was predictable. The lead article in the *Jäger Zeitung* of December 1995, ten months after the exhibit first opened in March 1995, included a letter from Heinrich Schutz who wanted to thank his former company, which he led from the middle of 1942 until he was severely wounded on January 26, 1944, for their devotion to duty "...before it's too late. All my men thought they were doing the right thing in performing their duty for the Fatherland. It wasn't until after the war that we learned that our sacrifice was for a reprehensible political system. Perhaps I was especially lucky to have had only conscientious soldiers in my company who took their responsibilities as soldiers seriously." Schutz described the awful fighting in the mud and bitter cold and what his men did to save him when he was wounded. "It's on the basis of this behavior that they should be judged. This is what we did, at least this group of men. Discipline, duty, honor, and comradeship are words that are disparaged today." He lamented, "I'd like to point out that I don't know any nation on earth that has as many people who run down their country as we do. Even statesmen from other countries acknowledge the fact that the Wehrmacht fought fairly and cleanly." This last statement is reasonably accurate. High-level government ministers from France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States, attended ceremonies in Berlin on May 8, 1995 commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe and celebrating Germany's "Day of Liberation."

In a notice about a spring 1996 meeting of 50 comrades and their wives at the Burg Estate in Beutelsbach, an issue of the *Jäger Zeitung* reported that "after a brief review of the past year...the current smear and defamation campaign against the former Wehrmacht was discussed." In what would become the mantra of the 101<sup>st</sup>'s reaction to the "derzeitige Diffamierung der ehemaligen Soldaten" (the current

defamation of former soldiers), the final word was “We don’t consider ourselves affected and we strongly defend ourselves against this smear campaign.” (Wir fühlen uns nicht betroffen and wehren uns kraftig dagegen.)

That the Wehrmacht fought “fairly and cleanly” is certainly the memory we heard in the personal war narratives of several former GIs we began listening to at Regis University in October 1995, at the inaugural **Stories From Wartime** public speakers’ program. Given what these men had endured at the hands of the Germans during the war, I found their memories of the enemy hard to believe, however. Certainly the timing of the story-telling was significant. We began our memory work with WWII veterans when the Good War, and its companion piece the Clean Wehrmacht, became enshrined as fact in the popular imagination, both in the United States and Germany, as we’ve seen. In the hoopla attendant to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations of the war’s end, the veneration of the WWII GIs was at its height. They were hometown heroes again, the “Greatest Generation” indeed. As Stephen Ambrose told us in *Citizen Soldiers*, the riveting account of the American soldiers’ experience in Europe from Normandy to the end of the war in Germany—my father’s and Phil Antonelli’s war—, the GIs were “the children of democracy and they did more to help spread democracy around the world than any generation in history. At the core they knew the difference between right and wrong, and they did not want to live in a world in which wrong prevailed. So they fought, and won, and we all of us, living and yet to be born, must be forever profoundly grateful” (473). Ambrose wrote the last book he published before his death for a younger audience. He dedicated *The Good Fight: How WWII Was Won* “To the grandchildren of the men and women who served in the U.S. Armed Forces in WWII.” Ambrose emphasized to his young readers that “America sent her young men halfway around the world, in both directions, not to conquer, not to pillage, not to loot, not to rape, but to liberate.”

Phil Antonelli enlisted in the Army shortly after graduating from high school in 1942. He served with the 282<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion attached to Patton’s Third Army and fought in every campaign in northern Europe from the Battle of Normandy to the end of the war in Germany. Phil also witnessed the atrocities at Ohrdruf. All his adult life, Antonelli suffered recurring nightmares of incoming artillery in a counter-battery exchange. He’d grab his wife in the middle of the night and press her under the covers with him, crying out to “Get down. Get down!! Phil wasn’t diagnosed with PTSD until 2002, but it is likely that his case was a reactivation of the disorder that manifested itself on and off throughout his life, beginning shortly after the war ended. In talking about the German enemy,

Phil told me on several occasions that he held nothing against the Germans; they were soldiers who did their duty (Clayton interviews with Phil Antonelli).

Bob Ball was a Kansas farm-boy attending Kansas State University when the war broke out. He immediately enlisted in the Army Air Corps, and while serving as a bombardier aboard a B-17, Bob's plane was shot down on a mission over France in early September 1943. He spent the next nineteen months as a POW in Stalag Luft 3 in Lower Silesia. As the Americans advanced toward the camp on April 12, Bob and several hundred other airmen were forced marched to Moosburg near Munich where the POWs were liberated on April 29, 1945; Bob, an athletic six-footer weighed 90 pounds. During our "POW Experience" class in February 2008, we asked Bob how he had been treated in a German POW camp. He told us, "Well, as well as they treat any enemy. They weren't nice people about it particularly, but they actually tried to be as military as possible. The German people as a whole are really not bad types. You may think that's strange of me to say that, but they really aren't. They're badly misled, but if you can get one of them aside to talk to, they weren't such bad guys. They were soldiers just doing their job, same as we would have been."

One of our country's most decorated WWII combat soldiers was Felix Sparks, who spoke to our class several times, beginning in 1995, and with whom we conducted several long interviews over the course of five years. Author Alex Kershaw used these interviews to research and to write his excellent book on Sparks, *The Liberator*, published in 2012. As a young officer in the 157<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 45<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, Sparks rose in rank from 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant to Lt. Colonel during the course of 511 days in combat. Along the very bloody way, Sparks fought in 8 campaigns against the Germans, earning 2 silver stars, 2 purple hearts and the Croix de Guerre (Kershaw, 339). As Kershaw tells us, "The graves of his men stretched across Europe, over two thousand miles. They had died in Sicily, in France, at the dark heart of Nazi Germany. There had been several hundred killed under his command, half of them buried in Europe" (2). At Anzio, the Thunderbirds were decimated. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion suffered 75% casualties and Captain Sparks lost his entire company, but they held the line and prevented a German victory (111, 112).

In the Vosges campaign at Reipertswiller in January 1945, some of Sparks' men got caught behind enemy lines in the cross hairs of a SS regiment. Kershaw describes how Sparks risked his life to save two trapped men, dragging one across the icy ground while SS Corporal Voss watched. The German told his men to hold their fire. "There was no honor to be gained, recalled Voss, by drilling a brave officer....as he tried to help his wounded men. Indeed, there was a silent understanding among

the SS watching Sparks killing him would be wrong...never had he witnessed such an act of courage by the enemy” (204,205). It is important to mention here that Voss remembered this scene long after the fact in his book, *Black Edelweiss*, published in 2002 and quoted by Kershaw. In the event Sparks is defeated by the SS at Reipertswiller.

At the end of April when now Lt. Colonel Sparks got to Dachau and witnessed the bestiality that took place there, he vomited. Some of his men went berserk and started to slaughter SS guards who hadn't been able to escape. In a famous photograph from the time, Sparks is shown firing his pistol in the air and ordering the men to stop (273). This is one of very many examples one could draw on from the war to demonstrate that German soldiers were not just like us. What we witness here is hatred at its most personal. Yet, according to Kershaw, based on an interview we did with Sparks at Regis, when Sparks entered Nuremberg and worried about the SS hiding in the skeletons of apartment buildings there, he felt this sentiment about the enemy who wanted to kill him: “But still he could not despise them. Unlike his supreme commander, Dwight Eisenhower, he felt no hatred for the men trying to kill him, even the hawk-faced diehards of the SS, despite losing his battalion to them. In fact, he respected some of them. They were very good soldiers. There were sons of bitches to be sure. But most were just following orders. Like their American foe, the Germans had no choice but to fight. They were caught in the Nazi machine. They were told to fight, so they fought” (253).

I do not believe that Antonelli, Ball, Sparks, Voss, or the Jäger veterans remembered the “truth” about the war they fought and the feelings they had for the enemy they faced. It seems to me that Sparks' troops behaved in a predictable way for men under fire. They were horrified and terrified and went berserk; they became beasts and experienced hate and rage and the lust to kill. It is highly improbable that during the war these men felt that the Germans, or in Voss's case, the Americans, were soldiers, just like us. This more sentimental and sanitized version of events was constructed from events and experiences the soldiers had after the war. To be clear, I don't believe the men were lying about their feelings, but I do believe that their memories had changed.

What accounts for the memory change and the mythologizing of the German enemy? There are two fundamental reasons, it seems to me, both involving the processes of memory formation. On the one hand, there is the distinct possibility that false memory is at work. In her article “The Reality of Repressed Memories” scholar Elizabeth Loftus claimed that “It is certainly possible that one borrows episodes from movies and popular literature and misremembers them as actual

events” (526). She also cited a study of a WWII veteran’s recollections that found that individuals absorb inaccurate information into memories of the war. Loftus claimed that these memories were “honestly believed, but false memories” (526)

The minds of WWII veterans were particularly open to the power of suggestion. Combat soldiers’ perspectives of war were very limited. They experienced war in bits and pieces and only saw what was immediately around them. Their memories of the war, consequently, were also very fragmented. Much like American civilians who didn’t see the real war, even the combat veterans’ “big picture” of WWII came by way of the media productions discussed above, in films, novels, TV documentaries, Life’s picture books, etc. The major Cold War events also may have contributed to the memory of the erstwhile enemy. These included, for example, images of heroic West Berliners during the Berlin Airlift in 1948; the face-off of American and Russian tanks on August 12, 1961 when the construction of the Berlin Wall began; the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962; Kennedy’s Berlin speech in 1963, et al. Moreover, images of Americans and West Germans working together as friends and allies may have affected how Americans remembered Germans in WWII. Reagan’s visit to Bitburg in 1985 was a spectacle to behold, signifying a common American-German devotion to what George Mosse referred to as the Cult of the Fallen Soldier. The “honoring” of fallen German soldiers as victims of the Nazis, in addition to the “celebrations” in Berlin in 1985 and 1995 that commemorated the war’s end, certainly left a powerful impression on people.

On the other hand, we know that individual memories can be highly selective. An individual can choose what he or she wants to remember and/or forget; memory can be very political in this way. We’ve experienced this first-hand over the eighteen years we’ve presented the **Stories From Wartime** program. For example, we can tell from the reactions of our audience as they listen to our veterans’ stories that many Americans choose to forget that Japanese-Americans were held in concentration camps in the United States during WWII and that race riots were common. We choose to remember a patriotic and united country that did not exist for many of our citizens. The WWII in our minds was entirely a white, middle class picture of the war for a very long time. Remembering the German enemy as “soldiers, just like us,” can be an individual’s conscious act of reconciliation that makes it easier for one to forgive and forget. It is simply easier to forgive a worthy, honorable enemy’s trespasses, and to forget your own, especially when the erstwhile enemies become allies in the struggle against a far more dangerous common enemy armed with nuclear weapons capable of destroying the world.

These two memory processes came together in a mix that made possible and believable the myth that the Germans were “soldiers, just like us.” The fact of the matter is that our veterans probably could no longer remember the Germans as the hated enemy, but perhaps they chose not to. In any event, reconciliation brings peace of mind, and a memory you can live with.

## Epilogue

Ironically, the core truth in the memory of a wartime brotherhood among enemy soldiers was the sanctuary in the midst of war both sides found in the simple, wistful German tune *Lili Marlene*. The love song’s strangely powerful effect was first experienced by Afrika Korps troops fighting the British in the north African desert during the fall of 1941. Every night at 9:57pm, the German Army radio station Radio Belgrade ended its broadcast with Lela Anderson singing *Lili Marlene*. While the song played, the war stopped and the men listened. The lyrics by Hans Leip, with music by Norbert Schultze, told the story of a young woman standing by the lamp post just outside the barracks’ gate, waiting for her soldier boy to return home.

Vor der Kaserne vor dem grossen Tor,  
stand eine Laterne and steht sie noch davor;  
So woll’n wir da uns wieder sehn,  
bei der Laterne, woll’n wir steh’n,  
wie einst, Lili Marlene, wie einst Lili Marlene.

Liel Leibowitz and Matthew Miller tell us in *Lili Marlene: The Soldiers’ Song of WWII* that “exhausted from combat and marching, caked with sand and burnt by the sun, the soldiers of the Afrika Korps gathered to listen whenever they could... the familiar song was a gateway through which they could return to the sweetness of their faraway homes and loosen the war’s rigid grip on their minds, if even for a few minutes” (115). The troops of the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army could also pick up the broadcast and they “soon adopted Lili as their darling as well, seeing in her the epitome of every woman left behind at home to wait and worry...Every night at 3 minutes to ten, as “Lili Marlene” came on the radio in the desert, the fighting men on both sides of the trenches would hold their fire and crane their necks to listen” (106,107). The authors quote Werner Hoffmeister, who recalled the effect, “...and when we sat around in a circle during the evening, everybody listening quietly, there suddenly came from the other side, about eighty meters away, a noise somewhere and we

could hear a voice, 'Comrades, louder, please!' It was the English...during those times not a single shot fell and even right afterwards it was quiet" (107).

As the fighting intensified, the soldiers cried when they listened to *Lili Marlene*. Former Afrika Korps soldier Rudolph Schneider remembered the sentiment the song evoked. According to Leibovitz and Miller,

...Soon after "Lili Marlene" began to play, the sobbing would begin. The collective crying always amazed Schneider: Here were men who had heard the screams of comrades being burned alive in blazing tanks, who had seen friends crushed by these machines or slain by bullets, who had the taste of sand and blood constantly in their mouths, all without betraying a hint of emotion. But when the song came on, the men—-young conscripts, husbands, grown men with children—-wept. This happened often. Here, he thought, was the true power of "Lili Marlene! (121).

For some of the homesick soldiers, the young boys who didn't have girlfriends or wives back home, perhaps, and even for some of those who did, I don't think *Lili Marlene* was interpreted as a siren's song, even when Lela Anderson, or, later, Marlene Dietrich, was doing the singing. I can imagine that when a young soldier, terrified by the war, had the chance to be by himself, closed his eyes, and listened quietly to the sweetness of the melody and felt the quiet pace of the tempo, he was hearing a lullaby and crying for his mother. *Lili Marlene* stood by these boys throughout the war, waiting for her sons, in my mind.

When they arrived in the ETO, American soldiers experienced Lili's mesmerizing effects, too, and she accompanied the GIs on their war's journey. In March 2011, Brian Kealy gave a lecture at London's Imperial War Museum on the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division's war in Italy in 1944/45. He described the battle the Americans fought against the Germans on April 14, 1945 in the Apennines as the "bloodiest day of their combat history." He said, "Men were going down everywhere, yet more came on to blast the enemy out of their strongholds...a day of incredible courage and carnage, of horror and heroism." During the hard fighting on April 14, the division took all its objectives and captured many prisoners, Kealy told his audience. He went on, "As the American and German units settled into defensive positions for the night, another stranger event took place that poignantly illustrates the futility of war. One of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain men carried a guitar with him and another had

a violin. They accompanied the GIs as they sang right into the night, and when they sang “Lili Marlene,” the Germans on the other side of the hill sang along with them....then the next morning, the two sides got up and starting killing each other again.”

Listening to *Lili Marlene* is a memory from the war the GIs can't let go. In March 2008, just before our **Stories From Wartime** program on WWII in Europe began, I urged my students to watch the audience's reaction to something I would do. The Science Amphitheater at Regis University was, as usual, filled to capacity with a large public audience, most of which were of the “Greatest” generation. They came to join the students and to hear the veterans seated at the table on the stage tell their personal war stories of WWII in Europe. I took a microphone and stood up in front of the crowd; they quieted down. I asked them to join me in singing a song from the war. The audience responded in full voice as I knew they would, and together we sang *Lili Marlene*.

*Outside the  
barracks, by the  
corner light,  
I'll always stand  
and wait for you  
at night.  
We will create a  
world for two.  
I'll wait for you  
the whole night  
through,  
For you, Lili  
Marlene, For you,  
Lili Marlene.*

Some of the audience cried. The students were quite taken by this, surprised that everyone seemed to know this “old” song and impressed by the emotion. I asked the folks in the audience why *Lili Marlene* meant so much to them. Pete Peterson, a former P-51 fighter pilot immediately responded for most when he yelled back down to me, “Because it soothed us.”

The next week I had my regular monthly lunch with Mike Quering, a very dear friend and proud former B-17 waist gunner in the “Mighty Eighth” who flew 34 missions over Europe. We met in the parking lot of Gaetano's restaurant in north

Denver, our usual place, so I could steady him across the street. Mike had driven his Land Rover named **Lili Marlene III**, the words inscribed on the decal he had affixed to the driver's side front-right panel. His previous cars were **Lili Marlene II** and **Lili Marlene I**. At lunch we talked about the song and what it meant to him. Mike lost a lot of friends in the war, he reminded me, including an entire bomber crew who shared a Quonset hut with Mike and his crew mates at Lavenham, England. "Half of the guys I knew died in the war—just imagine that—half of them," he lamented. "I became detached, I really did. It was my way to cope with all the death, I guess. I couldn't even cry at my wife's funeral," Mike confessed. "I just loved that song, I really did. It comforted me, you know, and it still does," he said as he looked down and shook his head gently back and forth. Mike looked up at me and became very serious. He took my hand across the table. "I want you to do me a big favor, Dan. I want you to sing *Lili Marlene* at my funeral. I've even put it in the instructions for the service and my family knows this. Promise me, you'll do this." I promised.

## Notes

1. This information comes from casualty numbers reported in John Ellis, *WWII, A Statistical Survey, Facts on File*, NY, 1993.
2. In her study of the politics of memory in Germany, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany*, Maja Zehfuss points to the end of the war as the origin of the myth. On page 248, she tells us that “The Myth of the ‘clean’ Wehrmacht has been exceptionally successful. Heer and Naumann note that the Wehrmacht started ‘spinning’ its story immediately after its defeat in the war.” Heer and Naumann are the editors of the Hamburg edition of the “Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944” and make this point on page 32 of the edition.
3. In fact, the German Army as an institution gave a blood oath of loyalty to Adolf Hitler on August 4, 1934, during an elaborate ceremony just two days after President von Hindenburg’s death. It is noteworthy that this act of fidelity was pledged to Hitler personally and not to the state or government. As is well-known, this act consummated the agreement made between Hitler and the Army High Command earlier that year wherein the Army would pledge loyalty to Hitler in exchange for this recognition of the Wehrmacht as the sole military authority in the Third Reich. This agreement required the elimination of the Nazi Party’s powerful militia, the SA, as a competing armed force to the regular army, and under Hitler’s direct orders Ernest Rohm and the SA leadership were killed in simultaneous attacks carried out in Berlin and Munich on June 30, 1934, the infamous “Night of the Long Knives.”
4. Two orders the Wehrmacht obeyed, to a greater or lesser extent, were Hitler’s Barbarossa Decree and the Commissar Order that laid the ground rules for the war to be fought by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, beginning with the launch of Operation Barbarossa on June 21, 1941. This war against the Soviet Union was to be an ideological and racial war, a “Vernichtungskrieg” (War of Extermination) against Soviet Russia’s political and intellectual elite and anyone suspected of being capable of resistance, with no prosecution of those who killed civilians or POWs. To this end, more than two million Soviet POWs and Jews were, in fact, rounded up by the German Army as it made its way across Russia and handed over to the Einsatzgruppen to be shot. It is also undeniable that units of the Wehrmacht participated in the killing of civilians. Although the Wehrmacht as an institution was not indicted as a criminal organization at the Nuremberg Trials, as was the SS, for example, elements of the Wehrmacht were both complicit and actively involved in committing acts of genocide.
5. This is the essence of George Mosse’s argument in *Fallen Soldiers*. For Mosse, the “Myth of War Experience” represents the death experience in war as “sacrifice and resurrection” in order to console the aggrieved. The need to justify death in war has been omnipresent in a western history defined by war and traumatized by war’s dead. The clarion call to sacrifice willingly for one’s country, for example, can be traced back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC and lyric poet Horace, from whose Odes comes the famous line: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*.

6. Two examples of this storyline are Guy Sajer's *The Forgotten Soldier*, 1967, and Gottlob Bidermann's memoir, *In Deadly Combat*, University Press of Kansas, 2000.

7. I translated into English all the German source materials included in this essay.

8. I am currently working on the translation of these two volumes, which together number more than 250 pages.

9. Vogel's 1953 address was published in the 1978 commemorative 25 year edition of the 101st Jäger Division's reunion booklet, pages 8,9.

10. It bears mentioning that the context for these remarks was the epic struggle of the 101<sup>st</sup> Jäger Division and the 17<sup>th</sup> Army to escape the enveloping maneuvers of the Russian armies after Stalingrad in the German retreat from the Caucasus. What the German front-line soldiers may have been fighting for while they were still on the offensive on the Eastern Front, heading toward the Caspian and the oil fields there and before the ignominious surrender of von Paulus and the 6<sup>th</sup> Army at Stalingrad, remains open to question. Were they opposed to Hitler's objectives when they were winning?

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**DANIEL M. CLAYTON** is Associate Professor of History and Politics at Regis University where he also directs the Regis University Center for the Study of War Experience. His essays on war experience have appeared in WLA and other publications, including the new book on Hemingway, *War and Ink: New Perspectives on Ernest Hemingway's Early Life and Writings* (Kent State University Press, 2013). Dan is the son of a WWII combat veteran.