Excerpts from *On Being Wounded*

Edward W. Wood, Jr.

from CHAPTER 1

THE LAND OF THE WOUNDED: ENTRANCE AND EXIT

> *They had crossed a strange line; they had become wounded men; and everybody realized, including themselves, dimly, that they were now different . . . . They had been initiated into a strange, insane, twilight fraternity where explanation would be forever impossible . . . . Tenderness was all that could be given . . .*
>
> —James Jones, *The Thin Red Line*

SEPTEMBER 1944

To be nineteen years old, to be nineteen and an infantryman, to be nineteen and fight for the liberation of France from the Nazis in the summer of 1944! That time of hot and cloudless blue days when the honeybees buzzed about our heads and we shouted strange phrases in words we did not understand to men and women who cheered us as if we were gods. That summer, that strangely glorious summer when we rushed across France, the Nazis fleeing just ahead of us. *Drive east*, *drive east*. South of Paris the day it was liberated, across the Marne to Chateau-Thierry (battlefields of the war in which my father and uncle had fought), then Reims with its cathedral, the most beautiful structure I had ever seen in my life, its magical flying buttresses brilliant against the August sky. Each village we entered started another party for us, as we shared bottles of wine hoarded since 1940 and kisses from wet-mustached men and smooth-cheeked women while we hurled cigarettes and chocolate from our armored half-track

and got drunk together and laughed and cried and screamed, for we had freed them from evil. For that glorious moment, the dream of freedom lived and we were ten feet tall.

The essence of that dream and that liberation culminated for me in one day and one night just as the Third Army neared Germany, September 6 and 7, 1944, three months after the invasion. Early that morning, after a predawn firefight in the dense forests along the ridges falling toward the Moselle River, my platoon of the Forty-eighth Armored Infantry Battalion, Seventh Armored Division, XX Corps, freed a small town in Lorraine on our final drive toward the German border. In the dark we drove in column down a long circling road through the steeply pitched mountains. The town lay in a valley above the Moselle, center of a slave labor camp crowded with men and women and children who had been shipped from all countries of Europe to work the region's iron mines for the Nazis.

When we reached the center of the town, the joy of those just liberated bordered on insanity, for, truly, these men and women were mad from their newfound sense of freedom. These people, these French, these Dutch, Belgians, Poles, Italians, had been living in conditions beyond our imagination. Our armored half-track was engulfed by them as they clambered over its steel sides, grabbed us, kissed us. Our eyes were smothered with the gazes of women screaming to make love, to give us their bodies since they had nothing else to give, offering even to bathe us; they touched us, caressed us, stroked our muscles for their size, stared in wonder at the weapons we held, nodded in delight at our strength.

At dawn I had stood on the back of the track with the rest of the squad, the terror of the night, my first experience of combat, still shocking my emotions *the explosion of that firefight*, *men trying to kill each other with M-1 rifles and machine pistols*, *blue and yellow holes punching into the night*. But now the faces beneath me were screaming of their freedom and, suddenly, like

the rest of my squad, I hurled cigarettes and Hershey bars into the crowd as if to disperse the images of my fear.

The lieutenant came over and ordered us to mount up; we were to drive to the town square through still crowded streets. We parked near an old iron fountain. The square lay open on all sides, a yellow stucco government building dominating one end.

We heard a roar, a confused jumble of shouts and thudding feet out of sight, around the corner. A few young men broke into view, running backwards, staring intently at someone we could not see. A Frenchwoman, no older than I, stumbled into view. The man behind her slammed his fist into her shoulder. She almost fell. The men jeered at her; they continued to hit her shoulders so she could not regain her balance.

The women lining her path toward the center of the square did not give her solace. An old, gray-haired woman, dressed like my Grandma Green in a black smock reaching below her knees, pursed her wrinkled lips and spat. Another reached out and yanked at the woman's arm. A third pulled at the bodice of her flowered dress, exposing the cleft of her breasts.

The men laughed.

Two men behind her pushed the woman through the mob. She stumbled. A small boy ran in front of her and kicked at her feet. She fell. She skidded on the cobblestones. Her extended arm crumpled under her body. She shook her wrist with pain as she clambered to her feet. The men pushed her down again. They grabbed her legs so that her dress blew above her waist. The woman tried to hold it over her white thighs with her hands. The men dragged her over the cobblestones. Her back and buttocks thudded on their rough surface.

The men lifted her twisting body to the top of a small platform hastily erected by the fountain. One man reached inside her dress. There was a particular intensity in his eyes as he

pulled out one of her breasts. He stroked it sensuously, his fingers moving over her nipple. Suddenly, his features hardened. His fingernails pinched down into her brown nipple. The woman bit her tongue. She did not cry. Blood reddened her lips and breast simultaneously.

The man ripped away the rest of her dress. She hid her face with clenched hands, her body obscenely white in the early morning sun. She tried to cross her legs to hide the small patch of brown hair at the crotch. Each time she moved, the man who mocked her made a great show of lifting the offending leg and putting it beside the other, even spreading her legs so that the lips of her vagina were open to the crowd. He reached down and lifted her with his arms. He forced her to pirouette before them as if she were a model.

"Jesus H. Christ!" the sergeant muttered.

The crowd shouted its approval. All eyes centered on the naked figure now slumped before them on the platform. Her body still, her head bowed, the seated woman cried quietly, tears wetting her face.

The man over her took a straightedge razor from his pocket. He opened it, thumbed the blade. With his free hand he reached down and curled her thick, blond hair into strands. He slowly, almost like a lover, coiled a braid around his fingers. Suddenly, he yanked it so tight her head moved. He lifted the braid high above her head, raised the razor, swung the gleaming blade so close to her scalp it nicked her skin.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Each time, with slow methodical movements, the razor flashed toward her head, like a scythe swinging over a field of rippling wheat.

Blood dripped down the woman's scalp. She licked it from her face with her lips, salt tears and salt blood the bitter elixir of her flesh.

When the man finished cropping her head, he took a bowl of water and a bar of soap. He made a great flourish of soaping his hands until they were lathered white. He rubbed the soap briskly into her blood-streaming scalp.

She winced.

A man in the crowd yelled his objection. He had seen enough.

But the barber continued shaving the woman's head.

He scraped his razor expertly over her lathered scalp. He shaved it until she was completely bald. When he finished, he grabbed her chin and twisted her face toward his. He glared down at her for a long, long moment, and it was odd, for I thought I saw his eyes moisten with sudden tears.

Then he held a mirror to her features. She grimaced, almost a comical expression. Her lips puckered, She spat. *La femme scalpée* spat up into his face.

He swung his arm. Her head snapped back. He started to swing again.

Someone in our squad screamed: "STOP IT! STOP IT, YA SONSABITCHES!" He fired a long burst into the air from the .50-caliber machine gun at the front of the half-track.

The crowd swung toward it. The woman slipped from the platform to the cobblestones and disappeared into a store on the square. The sergeant shrugged his shoulders.

The lieutenant came over to the track. He told us to mount up. We were moving out.

We had liberated the town from the Nazis.

from CHAPTER 2

THE RIFLES OF MY FATHERS

> *The shadows are lengthening for me. The twilight is here. My days of old have vanished, tone and tint; they have gone glimmering through the dreams of things that were. Their memory is one of wonderous beauty, watered by tears, and coaxed and caressed by the smiles of yesterday. I listen vainly, but with thirsty ear, from the witching melody of faint bugles blowing reveille, of far drums beating the long roll. In my dreams I hear again the crash of guns, the rattle of musketry, the strange, mournful mutter of the battlefield. But in the evening in my memory, I always come back to West Point. Always there echoes and re-echoes in my ears—Duty, Honor, Country. Today marks my final roll call with you. But I want you to know that when I cross the river my last conscious thoughts will be of the Corps; and the Corps; and the Corps. I bid you farewell.*
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> —General Douglas MacArthur, Farewell Speech to West Point

In September 1972, almost thirty years after I was wounded, my father died. His death marked the end of an era in my life, symbolized by my inheritance, memorabilia of three hundred years of an American family. The most important item in all that vast estate was his rifle, the .30-06 Winchester rifle I had admired so much as a boy. The day after his funeral I found it in the back of his closet, tucked behind his old hunting jacket. I reached around his tweed coats, hefted the rifle's burnished stock and slipped it from the darkness. Its blue steel barrel gleamed dully in the late afternoon light. Its solid weight sagged heavily in my hand. Grief I had repressed during the airplane flight from Boston to the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, through the funeral and the condolences of those half-remembered relatives, exploded in my mind.

I saw Dad again, alive and vital and dominating as he stood by our garage on a cold morning in deer season, his rumpled canvas jacket slung over his shoulders. He slid his rifle from its leather case and lovingly caressed its stock. The walnut surface gleamed beneath his brown-spotted fingers. He winked at me, shook his heavy belly a little, then stepped into his new Oldsmobile and started the four-hundred-mile drive to West Texas, where he and my uncle would hunt for deer on those scrubby and waterless plains.

I did not sleep much until he returned.

Then in the darkness outside my bedroom window (I can remember how cold the glass was to my nose), the flashlights piercing the pitch-black night over the driveway below seemed like beams held in the hands of giants. The two deer, sprawled on top of the car, blood still red-stained upon their nostrils, were both great dragons slain by more than mortal men and soft furry animals I loved for their liquid eyes and supple flesh.

Later that night he and his friends, their bodies still sweaty from the four-day hunt, sat in the kitchen with the door closed against my mother's contempt for their drinking. They shouted, boasted, bragged (and later some would puke) as they recalled their youth, when the deer were much larger and their shots far more precise. I sat in the corner and watched Dad dominate the group-his stories outrageous, his voice raucous, his laughter contagious, his glass filled with what must have been bootleg gin-as he told of the time he had once killed two wild turkeys with one shot, his exploits as a pilot in World War I, how he flew the mail in 1919.

The memory of those days and nights, long forgotten, deeply buried for over thirty years, slammed into my subconscious like the shrapnel of my wounding; those repressed years of love for my father cut into my mind instead of pain and blood the hunting trips before the war when he taught me to shoot, first rabbits, then quail; winter weekends fishing for largemouth bass

among the hyacinths on the St. John's River in Florida; summer canoe trips in Canada north of Ely, Minnesota, where we cast into the rocky shoals for small- mouth bass, northern pike and walleye; August months on the Gulf Coast of Alabama and Mississippi, where we fished for specks and red snappers, always more oysters and shrimp than one could eat. And Dad spending money as if it were water, the finest hotels, the best food, the most powerful cars, hand-tailored suits and ties, the latest gadgets, no end to incessant acquisition, his home a sprawl of furniture, antiques, rifles, shotguns, shells, shelf after shelf of Meissen and Spode and Haviland, fishing rods (twenty-two at his death), family papers of three hundred years mixed with canceled checks a month old. Dad roared in and out of that mess like a great tornado, bringing, on sudden impulse, ten and twelve and twenty people for dinner, stirring up the debris of conversation, his great laugh booming irrepressibly.

* * *

I remember him in this world so alien to all he had been, as if his rifle held so tightly in my hands, its blue steel barrel, its walnut stock, contained the best memories of the past. Manhood: symbolized by this weapon, so heavy, so solid in my hands, shimmering with symbols of that lost childhood, this rifle of my fathers, my inheritance, the form and content of who I was and who I was meant to be . . .

Our home was always full of guns and weapons: slingshots, BB guns, pellet guns, .22-caliber rifles, .30-06 rifles, 10- and 12- and 20-gauge shotguns, sawed-off shotguns, pistols-the arsenal of most southern homes. I was fascinated by all the memorabilia Dad had collected during his years as an Air Service pilot in World War I: his uniform, his campaign hat, his cavalry boots with spurs (airplanes then had the same romantic quality as horses), an old French

75-millimeter shell my uncle brought home from Europe after World War I, pictures of Dad's airplane in flight, and the tip of the propeller of that plane, sawed off after he cracked up in 1918.

When I was very young, in the early 1930s, an air circus visited those towns throughout the South in which we lived. Dad knew everyone who flew then; it remained that small a fraternity. He introduced me to men who one day would be famous: Wiley Post, he of the eye patch, killed with Will Rogers in Alaska in 1936; Eddie Stinson, builder of the best airplanes then, who gave me my first ride in a Stinson monoplane in 1929 or so. It was at the air circus that I saw my first crash, as a plane spun out of control and slammed into the ground a hundred yards from the grandstand where we sat. The pilot crawled from the wreckage and everyone cheered wildly. That night, a cast on his broken arm, he came to our home with all the other pilots and their lady friends. I crept from my upstairs bed, seated myself on the top of the stairs, heard raucous shouts, cries, tipsy laughter, boasting, Dad's voice always overwhelming the others as he poured out his bootleg gin.

My mother sat in the corner alone, knitting, her lips pursed with disdain.

When my father saw me through the railing, he pushed his way through the mass of friends and took me in his arms. He lifted me high above his head, his ruby lips glistening mouth half-open, as he spun me around the room, a dance of his own, his laughter joyous in my ears.

"My son!" he cried. "My son! Someday he'll fly. He . . . why he'll fly to the moon. Better'n any of us . . . Eddie! Eddie! Eddie!"

He spun me out of doors when we heard the buzz of an airplane motor. Others followed. We listened intently. Out of the distance, out of the night, out of those fervid stars pressed deep into velvet southern sky, air warm with a tropical breeze, out of that night came another Stinson monoplane, like the one we had flown earlier in the day. It dropped toward our house. Lower. Lower. Its wings wagged drunkenly. A figure leaned out of the plane's window. Waved. Waved

again. The plane dipped low, almost out of control, then lurched around in a huge circle, swinging about the second story of the house.

"That's Stinson," a voice murmured. "Drunk as a skunk again . . . "

"He'll kill himself one day . . . "

The plane buzzed lower, shot up into the night.

My father hugged me closer to his broad chest.

This, then, my father's legacy: his rifle, his romantic tales of life as a pilot in World War I, his love of nature expressed in hunting and fishing, his success in business-all evidence of his vibrant masculinity, the masculinity he demanded of me and in which he gave me early training.

* * *

Dad's .30-06 Winchester rifle symbolized his masculine mystique, a silent language speaking of what a man must be. A man must be able to use a rifle to defend himself, those he loved, those weak and dependent, women and children, those who sought liberty. Killing one's enemies was the path to freedom.

With the system of masculine beliefs that Dad willed me came an enormous and complex pattern of individual and social activities, ranging from the fellowship of the rifle—the men with whom one hunted—to respect for its technology and killing power: cleaning it properly, caring for it, "zeroing" it in for accuracy. These activities formed my passage to maturity. The Winchester is threaded through my childhood memories as if being a man could not be separated from owning and using a weapon.

When Dad was a child in Moss Point, Mississippi, in the 1890s, the Civil War was only thirty years away, both slavery and the frontier still a vibrant family memory. His father had been born in 1869 in Marshall, Illinois, on my grandparents' migration from Massachusetts to Mississippi. In

that time and place, owning and using a rifle was essential to survival. Squirrels and rabbits, deer and possum, quail and turkeys were shot for food, animal meat salted away for the winter. In fact, Dad once told me that in the winter of 1904 or 1905 his people even shot robins so the family wouldn't starve. "Mighty good eating, Eddie," he said with a grin.

Dad was a tenth-generation male born into that pioneer world. Ten generations of his male ancestors had successfully dominated the dark and primitive killing grounds of the American frontier, beginning with the first settler, Thomas Lumbert, who moved to Cape Cod from Dorchester and Scituate in 1637, opening the first tavern, or "ordinary," in Barnstable on the Cape. Ten generations of men carried their weapons as they overwhelmed their enemies in this dark and unknown land-my inheritance of rifles and violence buried deep in the American past.

It was my family history of wars and woundings that led me to volunteer for the infantry in France. There was tradition in the rifles of all those male ancestors, the weapons each generation used in the conquest of the land: the seventeenth-century wheel-lock and matchlock muskets that Thomas Lumbert carried as he fled England and the repression of Charles I; the same weapons used by the Puritans in their destruction of the Pequot Indians on the banks of the Mystic River in 1637, when Cotton Mather exclaimed: "On this day we have sent six hundred heathens to hell"; the "Brown Bess" that Solomon Lombard, Thomas Lumbert's great-grandson, took as a pioneer to Gorham, Maine, in his radical rebellion against another English king (aiming this weapon at a British warship, his son fired the first shot in Maine's revolution); the flintlock musket that Consider Tiffany, my ancestor eight generations back, used in the French and Indian War in 1756, on patrol against the Indians 180 years to the month before I was wounded; the eighteenth-century Kentucky long rifle that Peter Zachary, my mother's ancestor, carried when he migrated from Virginia to Burnt Corn, Alabama, where marauding Cherokees burned the crop in 1808 or 1809;

the nineteenth-century plains rifle and Colt repeating pistol of Solomon's grandsons, Stephen and James, the weapons that protected them on their migrations to Mississippi and Texas just before the Mexican-American War of 1846; the .58-caliber Minié-ball weapon of the Civil War, used by my great-great- uncle, wounded for the North, and my great-grandfather, wounded for the South; the Winchester repeating rifle that won the West in the last half of the nineteenth century, cherished by my forebears on their migration from Massachusetts to Mississippi, the weapon they used to teach my father and my uncles how to hunt.

This three-century inheritance of weapons, wars and woundings is far stronger and far deeper than we dare to think in our modern time, when computers and high technology have abolished the fact of hand-to-hand combat. This inheritance lies beneath the sophistication of our machines, linking us today, as it did for me when I was a boy, to more primitive definitions of war and masculinity and honor. This inheritance was passed from generation to generation of men by little gestures, head nods, values communicated without speaking, contests on the sporting field, all deep blood memories of what a man was supposed to be, memories of a past almost beyond conscious recall, long before there were written histories. The battles of Marathon and Salamis, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Alexander's conquests, the Peloponnesian War; the Caesars' wars, the invasions of the Goths, the Norman conquests, the Crusades for Christian honor; Agincourt, Henry V, Cromwell and the Roundheads. And, oh, the pioneers' dominance of the American landscape, wars of those ten generations of my American ancestors: Pequot, King Philip's bloody death, seventy years of conflicts between the English and the French, each side with its Indian allies. Then the Revolution (those tough Scotch-Irish who fought the English, having fled a failed revolt of their own against the king), when American victory was won through terrorism. The Sons of the American Revolution were tough sonsabitches, adept in the application

of lash and tar and feather, riding the Tories out of town on a rail. All those wars when we fought for territory against red and yellow men, expelling the Cherokees into the Trail of Tears, pursuing Osceola into the Everglades, conquering the Southwest in the Mexican-American War. The bloody conflict over slavery and states' rights, our Civil War the first of modern, industrialized wars, fought by those lean and hard men, my ancestors.

Edward W. Wood, Jr. was severely wounded in World War II. He has published three books stemming from his experience in combat: *On Being Wounded*, *Beyond the Weapons of Our Fathers*, and *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*. His articles, essays, and poetry have appeared in publications ranging from *Parabola*, *Friends Journal*, *Many Mountains Moving*, *Western Friend*, and *Flaunt*. He died on April 12, 2021. Learn more about Wood at www.authoredwood.com.

The excerpts from *On Being Wounded* come from Chapters 1 and 2. Excerpts from Chapter 1 are from pages 5-9. Chapter 2 excerpts are from pages 27-29, 31-33 and 35-37. Each page was scanned and OCR-processed. The book's original justified paragraph formatting was maintained, along with two- and three-line drop caps. Line length, font type, and size were altered to correspond to WLA's publication standards. Details: Fulcrum Publishing, September 1991, First Edition, 192 pages.