

scrapbook

STORIES OF THE DEAD

GENERATIONS LATER, MY FAMILY'S PHOTOGRAPHS STILL CAPTURE THE HAUNTING STORIES OF WARS PAST

BY PAUL H. HEBNER



I grew up on war stories. I loved them. I couldn't get enough of them. My Great-Grandfather was a Civil War veteran, My Grandfather served in the First World War, my stepfather served in the Second World War, my father was in the Korea conflict, and I missed being drafted for Vietnam by only a few months. War has defined the generations of my family and I'm sure it's the same for many other American families. That's one of the truths that I have come to know about war: It's a family affair.

Unfortunately, today's war stories aren't really stories at all. They are the real-time,

twenty-four-hour-per day broadcasts of every bomb dropped and every shot fired. Today's war stories are called news.

For months we have been expected to give our consent and support for a war in Iraq and expected to believe that the war will be just, lawful, and for the good of all people, especially Americans and Iraqis. But the wars that have shaped my family and the war stories that have shaped my very consciousness have taught me what war is and why there can be no good or just wars, even if some have been necessary. I know how all wars end. I've been shown and I have pictures to prove it.

Everything I know about war I learned from family stories and the photographs that went with them. The earliest stories were about the Civil War. My connection to the Civil War is much more direct and personal than that of other Americans of my generation. My great grandfather and his brothers were veterans of the Great Rebellion, as their generation preferred to call it. He married very late in life and was an old man when my grandfather was born in 1898. So, while there's a generation missing in my family, that fact makes my connection to that war much more real than it would be otherwise. I knew and

could talk to people, my grandfather in this case, who knew and could talk to people who lived through that war.

My great grandfather's name was Herbert Griggs and he was one of six children. The oldest was Charles D. Griggs, Uncle Charlie, a giant of a man who stood 6'4" tall, according to family legend. Next in line among the boys of the family were Herbert and his identical twin, Albert. And this is where the story becomes both complicated, interesting, and—since we are talking about war—tragic. The Griggs family originated in Boston, but settled in Ohio in the decades preceding the conflict. When the southern states seceded and war consumed the nation like a plague, most Ohioans sided with the union, as did Herbert and Charles. Albert, though, was a rebel in thought, word, and deed. He joined the Confederacy and died in battle.

Herbert was just seventeen years old when he enlisted with the Ohio Volunteers. He was not yet nineteen when the war ended and in those few short months he witnessed thousands of deaths—not the quick, clean, ready-for-prime-time deaths that we see on CNN and MSNBC, but the slow, agonizing, and bloody deaths of men and boys whose bodies had been torn apart by bullets and bayonets.

I've often wondered if Herbert and Albert ever faced each other in battle and if, in the end, Herbert was the Union soldier who killed his brother. No one will ever know for certain, but the possibility is so strong that the idea has taken on a life of its own in my family.

Battlefield deaths are only one measure of the horror of war and, one can argue, the smallest measure.

Charles attained the rank of Captain during the war and suffered a bullet wound that left one leg shorter than the other. Considering his unusual stature and the easy target that made him, it's amazing he was shot

only once. Both brothers received veteran's benefits for the rest of their lives of less than \$3.00 per month. Small compensation indeed for surviving such horror.

During the Second World War, my stepfather, Ferdinand L. Hebner, enlisted in the U. S. Army and served with the 12th Armored Division, earning the rank of Sergeant and participating in combat operations in Europe from December 1944 until the end of the war.

He went to war with the training of a soldier, the skills of a cartographer and translator, and a small Kodak camera with twelve rolls of color film—very rare for the time. Make no mistake, my stepfather and his fellow soldiers saved the world. His was indeed the "greatest generation" and his photographs bear witness to both the devastation of war and the immeasurable sacrifice of those who fought.

Those pictures were my entertainment and my education growing up. They were more riveting than any war movie (even John Wayne movies) and more informative than any history book. Their narratives were immediate and real, not abstract or distant. I would examine each and every print and slide for hours, trying to absorb them, trying to transport myself into them.

Some pictures were easy to deal with: the victorious soldiers and military technology. Others though, have haunted me since the first moment I saw them. Those photographs were taken during the liberation of a death camp at Landsberg Germany in April 1945, one of several that made up the Dachau concentration camp complex.

My stepfather's camera spared nothing. The Nazi jailers tried to destroy evidence of their crimes by burning bodies in huge piles. They failed. On photo showed the camp commandant, who was captured by U.S. soldiers

while trying to escape, disguised as a civilian. He failed, too.

The photos also showed that, at war's end, there is nothing left but piles of dead to be mourned and buried, and tired soldiers—both victors and vanquished—who want only to go home.

When I was young, we had our own war. We could watch it on TV. But it was a small war, as wars go, not the same scale as either of the World Wars—the wars of my father and grandfather. However, the peace we knew following it was large and general. With the exception of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the United States and the Soviet Union managed to keep most of the world in order. All that has changed.

This new war may be over very quickly. At least that's what the generals and politicians will tell us. But this war in Iraq may turn out to be nothing more than a skirmish, an opening salvo in a greater conflict that is bound to pull the entire world into it.

We can say we won the last world war, and for the generals and politicians, that may be true. But for the rest of us, for all of us, it can only be said that we survived and prevailed. War never really grants anyone victory. The double scourge of Nazi Germany and the Empire of Japan were crushed, but the cost of 60 million dead and two continents in ruins left a joyless victory.

There is only one end to this war or any other global war and my stepfather took pictures of it fifty-eight years ago. Look at the pictures, and if you can stand it, study them. They will show you what to expect from war. All wars have the same end. There are no winners, only corpses, and the claims of those who tell us that war will make us safe, that war is just, that war is legal, are all lies.

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Griggs family portrait, circa 1854. From left to right, Emily, Albert (who was killed in the Civil War), "Father" Griggs, Frank (the youngest), "Mother" Griggs, Herbert (my Great-Grandfather and Albert's identical twin), Charles (the oldest), and Annie.



Portrait of Charles D. Griggs. This photo was taken at a photo studio in Boston, where the family started out, so it would appear that he joined a Massachusetts regiment.



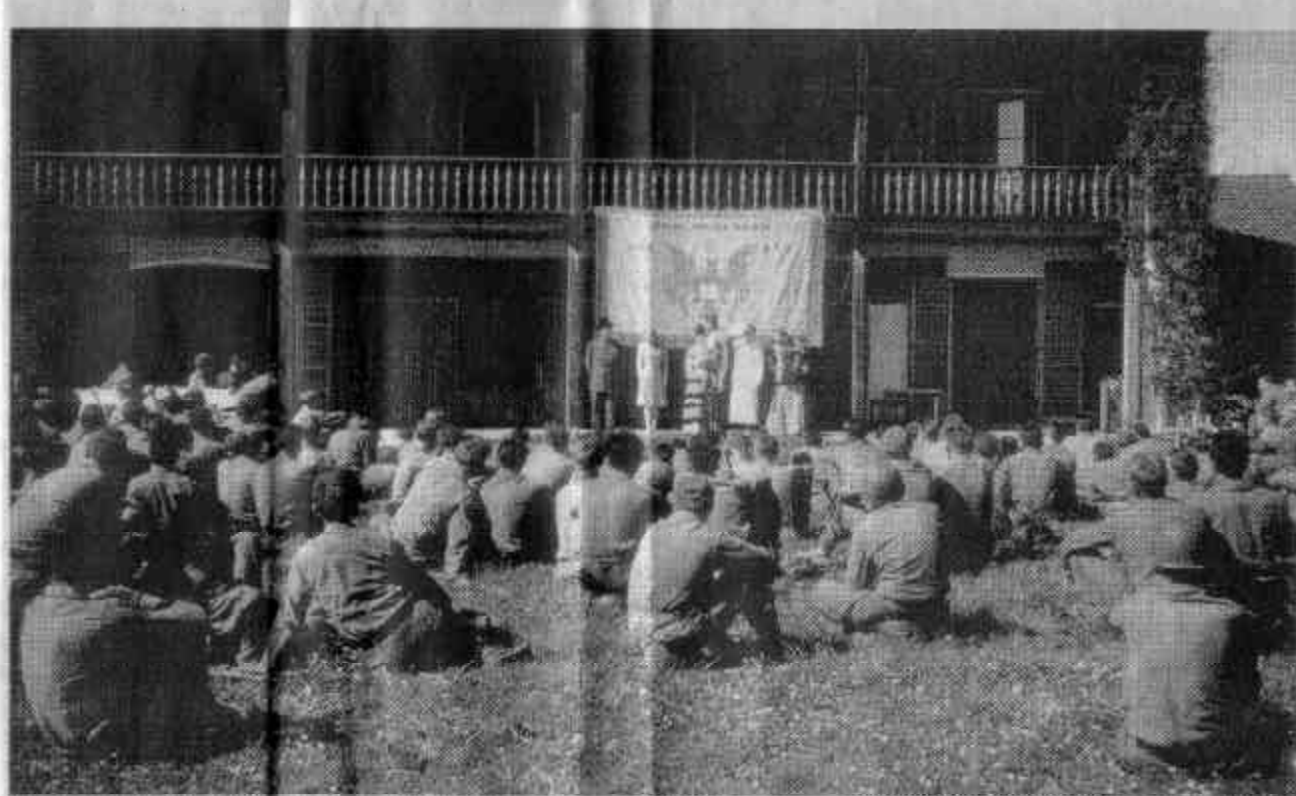
May 1944. The 12th Armored Division in training exercises in Texas. The vehicle pictured is an M7, self-propelled artillery.



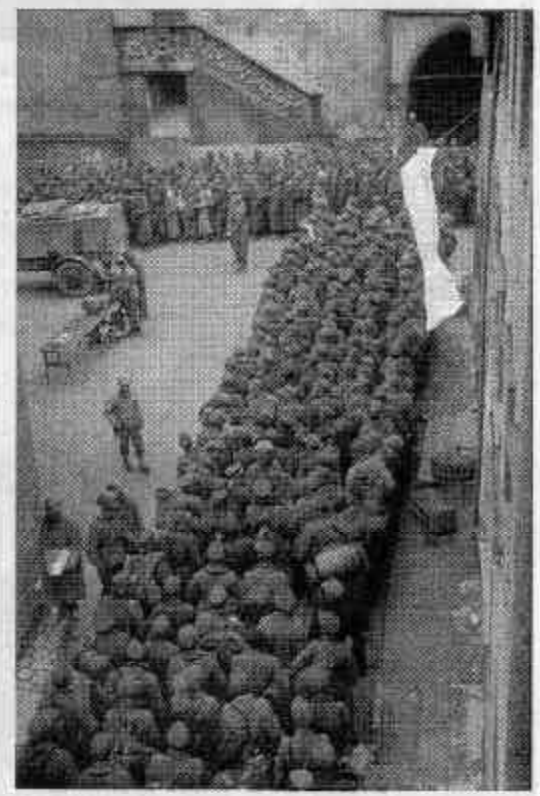
April 1945. These three photographs were taken during the liberation of a death camp at Landsberg Germany, one of several that made up the Dachau concentration camp complex. The first photo shows the camp commandant, who was captured by soldiers of the U.S. 12th Armored Division while trying to escape, disguised as a civilian.



March 18, 1945. The 12th Armored Division in Nazi Germany, moving rapidly toward the Rhine River, sixty miles away. The destruction visible in the town is the result of Allied artillery and aerial bombardment.



June 1945. The war in Europe is over. The men of the 12th Armored Division watch their first USO show.



April 1945. Thousands upon thousands of German soldiers surrendered in one day. These are just a few of them.