

## **A DARKLING PLAIN: STORIES OF CONFLICT AND HUMANITY DURING WAR**

How do people maintain their humanity during wars? Despite its importance, this question receives scant scholarly attention, perhaps because of the overwhelming aspect of war. “The enormity of it all tended to reduce everything else in life to a kind of footnote,” one soldier said of World War II. The generally accepted wisdom is that wars bring out the worst in us, pitting us against one another. “War is hell,” William Tecumseh Sherman famously noted, and even wars clearly designated “just” nonetheless inflict massive destruction and cruelty. Since ethics is concerned with discovering what takes us to a morally superior place, one conducive to human flourishing and happiness, studying what helps people survive wartime trauma becomes an extremely valuable enterprise. *A Darkling Plain* thus fills an important scholarly void, analyzing wartime stories that reveal much about our capacity to process trauma, heal wounds, reclaim lost spirits, and derive meaning and purpose from the most horrific of personal events.

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# A DARKLING PLAIN

## *Stories of Conflict and Humanity during War*

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*The sea is calm to-night.  
The tide is full, the moon lies fair  
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light  
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand;  
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.  
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!*

*Only, from the long line of spray  
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,  
Listen! you hear the grating roar  
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,  
At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.*

*Sophocles long ago  
Heard it on the Agæan, and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.*

*The Sea of Faith  
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.*

*Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," 1867

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## PREFACE

*It's not glamorous. It was a very messy thing.*

Frank was at Stanford when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. An Irish Catholic with a father in the Navy, Frank enlisted and spent two years in the Pacific in the Army Air Corps, assigned to the Navy. Frank took part in the invasion of the Marianas, Iwo Jima, and Palau,<sup>1</sup> and was scheduled to go in as part of the home island invasion of Japan. Frequently in battle areas as a support soldier dealing with technical aspects that drew on his engineering background, Frank quickly learned the “terrible impact of war.”

*It's not glamorous. You've got to realize there was a lot of propaganda in World War II to develop patriotism and support. You found out that was an awful lot of baloney! It was a very messy thing. . . . When you think in terms of the destruction . . . you learn to hate. The tendency for all of us in the Pacific was to hate the Japanese. We hated them for [what] they did on the Bataan Death March.<sup>2</sup> To them, if you were willing to become a prisoner then you ceased to be a human. You were no better than an animal, maybe not even that good. . . . The samurai code caused them to be very brutal. If you look at the history of the Japanese in China and what they did to American prisoners, that leads to the ability to hate. It led to the view that the only good Japanese was a dead one. Ask and give no quarter. . . . I get a bit cynical when I hear all these things about the Geneva Convention. You fought the war the same way the enemy fought it. . . . Like for like. You only go to war to win. It's not a game, and you don't win by scoring a certain amount of points.*

After the war, Frank simply closed a door.

*We just didn't talk about it. It was one of those things you repress. That's how you cope with things. . . . I never talked about the war. I've probably*

*talked about it more tonight than I ever have. To me it was a chapter and when the chapter was over, you closed it and put it behind you.*

Frank came home and returned to Stanford, where he met and married his wife – college roommate to Sandra Day O'Connor – and made a life as a successful engineer in the aerospace industry, settling in Southern California and becoming President and Chief Operating Officer of the Northrop Corporation. After Frank retired, he went back to school.

*I didn't have any problems leaving that [business] world completely. I just went off and felt like doing different things. That's what got me to UCI. Most of my friends, they retire, they golf. Travel a lot. Stuff retired folks do. My reaction was that it was not very satisfying to do that. I came back to school.*

Frank ended up in one of my courses at the University of California, Irvine, and our conversations after class in time led to a friendship. We were an unlikely pair in many ways. Frank was a Republican who ranked Calvin Coolidge our greatest president. I argued for Franklin Roosevelt. He supported John McCain and bought von Hayek's arguments on government as the enemy of freedom. I was a Hillary (Clinton) girl who distrusted politicians but thought government could be a tool for good if used wisely. We debated politics, frequently differing but always respecting the other's arguments even when we disagreed vehemently with the conclusions.

Over the fifteen-some years of our friendship, I came to respect Frank as a sensitive, thoughtful individual, a decent man of integrity and honesty. I recognized him as a humane person, even if I could not define that term precisely. As we discussed Frank's wartime participation, I asked Frank how he managed to survive the war emotionally unscathed.

*It's an attitude you develop. Everybody, to maintain their sensibilities in such a situation, that's generally the way they cope with it. It was fatalism. It was, "If something's going to get you, it'll get you. If it's not, it'll not." That was the basic thing. A lot of men in the war thought that way. They used to joke about who's going to get it next, that type of thing. I guess I still am fatalistic. That is to say, I don't believe I have a predestined direction or that somebody has got a plan for me, that I am fulfilling this plan. My reaction is that you live in a world where all sorts of things are happening. Events occur, and it's how you react to them. But you don't control events. You don't control the world around you.*

Was this the answer? Were Frank's experiences and his reaction to World War II typical of others' experiences with wars? What made Frank the



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way he was? What kept him from continuing to hate the Japanese, an enemy Frank openly acknowledged he once detested but whose country he later visited frequently, whom he did business with successfully, and whose language he even mastered? What factors helped Frank – and many people like him – lay to rest the negative feelings, to keep and maintain humanity during a bloody war, and what helped these people create a life afterwards that was meaningful and ethical in its treatment of others?

Answering these questions is the topic of this book.

## NOTES

1. Iwo Jima is perhaps the most famous of the battles in which Frank participated. Fought from February 19th to March 26th, 1945, the Battle of Iwo Jima is memorialized in Joe Rosenthal's photograph of five marines and one navy corpsman raising the U.S. flag on the fifth day of the 35-day battle. Frank's description of the Japanese desire to never surrender seems justified by the facts of Iwo Jima. The Japanese army was heavily fortified and fought stubbornly to rebuff what was the first American attack on the Japanese home islands. Out of an estimated 18,000+ Japanese soldiers at the beginning of the battle of Iwo Jima, only 216 remained alive to be taken prisoner. This statistic is all the more remarkable since an American victory seemed assured from the start, given American superiority in arms and numbers and the impossibility of a Japanese retreat or reinforcement.

The battle of the Marianas that Frank refers to – also called the Battle of the Philippine Sea – was a decisive naval battle, involving the largest aircraft carrier battle in history. Between June 19th and 20th, 1944, the United States Navy's Fifth Fleet and the Imperial Japanese Navy's Combined Fleet fought near the Mariana Islands, in a battle in which superior American air power and skilled carrier aircrew were decisive. The Mariana and Palau Islands campaign was a U.S. offensive against Imperial Japanese forces in the Mariana Islands and Palau between June and November 1944, under the command of Admiral Chester Nimitz. The campaign was designed to neutralize Japanese bases and support the Allied drive to retake the Philippines, deemed critical to the Allied advance because the Philippines would provide bases for the strategic bombing of Japan. In all three of these important campaigns, air power and support of the kind provided by Frank would prove crucial.

2. The Bataan Death March refers to the Japanese Army's forcible transfer of 75,000 American and Filipino prisoners of war. Coming immediately after the three-month Battle of Bataan in the Philippines in 1942, this 60-mile march included extensive killing, starvation, and physical abuse of thousands of American POWs and civilians. An Allied military commission later judged the Bataan Death March a Japanese war crime. All quotes from Frank's interview come from Chapter 2. I have condensed the conversation for clarity of presentation. Full transcripts are available at [www.ethicscenter.uci.edu](http://www.ethicscenter.uci.edu).