

A VICTIM OF WORLD WAR II

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[Assignment: Our examination of war and its influence on social values has relied primarily on fiction and non-fiction prose statements. Other responses to war, of course, also suggest useful ways of looking at reality. Photographs from World War II not only recorded historic events, but implied certain beliefs about what was valuable and provocative. Less subtly, government posters offered public instruction to all citizens on how to support the war effort. The photographs and propaganda posters provide different messages for us perhaps than they did for observers fifty years ago, but they are worth close consideration nonetheless. In this essay: 1. Select any one photograph or poster or cartoon as your subject. Identify a theme that the picture suggests. 2. Imagine a reader who has not seen your subject and must rely on your representation of it. 3. Describe the picture in such a manner that its essential details are specifically represented. 4. Explain how the picture treats the theme (for instance, love, hope, despair) and how that treatment is informative to you and your audience.]

The fact is that people die as a result of war. Civilians and soldiers alike die, and neither are really prepared for death. Death is frightening for everyone, especially when bombs are dropping nearby and bullets tear through the air close enough to be heard. Such occurrences became common for soldiers in World War II and, combined with the knowledge that once wounded one might not be found to be taken care of properly, made life hell and the thought of death even more hellish.

Some feelings, emotions, and living conditions soldiers endured were photographed. Upon examination, the photos can reveal much about a setting, a group, or an individual. One particular individual, a soldier, was photographed as he lay wounded and frightened, a casualty of war.

In the black and white photograph, a wounded soldier is lying on a white stretcher on the rough, rocky ground. He is visible from head to knees and is clad in a dirty, rumpled pair of army pants and shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his forearms. There is a second man kneeling a few feet away from the soldier--the only parts of him visible in the photograph are his tired-looking, dirty hands which are resting upon his knees at the wrists like a catcher in baseball who squats down on his haunches with his hands hanging down between his knees, waiting for the pitcher to throw the ball. This man is wearing a ring on his third finger; possibly it is a wedding band. He is kneeling in a position adjacent to the belt line of the soldier. He is angled so as to see the wounded man's face, although it is unknown exactly what the man is looking at. His position suggests that he is observing the soldier--not too closely, though, as if the man is powerless to comfort or help the soldier.

Oftentimes, the wounded were so badly injured that there was no way to help them unless it was just to numb the pain while life slowly slipped away. The injury that the soldier in the photograph has sustained is a head wound. A thick white bandage covers the top half of his head and eyes. Only his nose, mouth, and unshaven jaw are exposed. It is frightening enough to be in

pain and not know if recovery is possible or if it will be complete, but even more frightening would it be to lose the ability to see what is happening and who is present. The loss of sight (and possibly the loss of hearing, which might also have happened to the soldier) makes a person vulnerable and dependent on others--a state most adults are not used to experiencing.

His condition evokes empathy from whomever sees the photograph, but the photo is also affecting because the wounded soldier appears to be praying. His hands are upon his chest, the fingertips lightly touching, in the gesture of prayer. The image arouses certain emotions such as pity, sorrow, and fear because people are usually asking for something from God when they pray, and, in the case of the soldier, he is probably begging for his life to be spared. He may also be asking for the pain to be alleviated, which is disturbing for most because people are generally upset by the sight of a fellow human being in pain (or any other creature, for that matter). From the photograph, it is impossible to determine what the wounded soldier might be praying for, or if he is praying at all. It is possible that he is delirious or incoherent as a result of his wound. The limpness of his hands and the passionless way he holds them on his chest leaves the possibility open that he may have his hands held in prayer fashion just because he has been told to, like a child in Sunday school class who does not know why he or she is praying, but only knows to press the hands together and look like everyone else because he or she has been told to do that.

The entire scene creates an image of a desperate situation: a faceless, injured man lying helplessly in an unknown land (unknown at least to the person looking at the photo) with only the limited aid of another faceless man and a faceless god. Like the theme found in other pieces of work about World War II, these men could be anyone. It is a disturbing thought, but even more disturbing is the thought that to many people they are no one.