

Those Who Will Do the Fighting

As war in the Gulf approaches, much is made of the fact that the American soldiers who will do the fighting are all volunteers. To the extent that they "knew" when they enlisted that armies are for fighting wars, it is said that they should have no objection to being on station now—and most do not object. But how many of them will still want to be in combat when casualties become heavy? History and experience say, almost none. How we act on this knowledge determines what kind of country we are.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel on this. In April of 1945 in Italy, U.S. Army researchers asked enlisted infantrymen in line companies: "How do you feel about a soldier who tries to get out of combat by going on sick call when he doesn't 'really need to'?" The more months in combat, the more likely the respondent was to give the answer: "It's okay with me, if he can get away with it."

Bill King, a Washington training consultant who was a Special Forces officer in Vietnam, recalls that "once casualties reach 20 percent killed or seriously wounded within six months, no one thinks of it as an adventure, and everyone wants out."

This is not hard to understand. Imagine being in a train wreck a couple of times a week with a plane crash thrown in every month or so. That's what it's like being an infantryman in sustained ground combat. In November of 1943, the Army Research Branch surveyed combat veterans in 10 rifle companies of the 1st Division just arrived in England after successful campaigns in North Africa and Sicily. The study showed the soldiers to be embittered. Most felt that they had done their share, and only a handful expressed any zeal for further combat. Men who had been decorated for bravery with the

Distinguished Service Cross or the Silver Star were just as bitter as the rest.

Wall Street Journal reporter David Rogers, a conscientious objector who served as a combat medic with the 1st Infantry Division in Vietnam, recently interviewed 10 members of Congress with combat experience. Sen. Warren Rudman (R-N.H.) recalled his own naivete when he arrived in Korea as he

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watched television interviews of U.S. troops in the Mideast. "They want to get the job done—and I'm sure they mean it—but they don't understand the hell of what happens when people start dropping around you. I had no idea what combat was like. The second night all hell broke loose, and I tell you it was like being transplanted to Mars."

Paul Fussell, a distinguished author and a scholar of 18th century English literature, has spent much of the past 45 years coming to terms with his experience as an Army infantry lieutenant in Europe in World War II. His 1989 book "Wartime" debunks the sanitized version of the war that reached the United States. In his quiet, erudite way, Fussell rails against the inability "of a pap-fed mass public to face unpleasant facts," particularly facts about "the bizarre damage suffered by the human body in modern war."

What to do with such awareness? Fussell believes it should move men to conscientious objection (presumably

not, like David Rogers, as combat medics) or to other evasions. Fussell has come by his opinions honestly, but we would be foolish to share them. You can't hold a country together that way, much less fight a war. It is the "pap-fed mass public," after all, that raises and supports armies and on whose behalf they fight. Short of a national embrace of pacifism and unilateral disarmament, we must use Fussell's insights differently while facing the grim realities he rightly insists we keep in mind.

The distribution of risk and suffering will never be fair in modern war, but we should try to make it as fair as possible. It is not fair to use people in combat until they are used up. This means spreading the burden much wider than it is spread now. This means activating the draft law.

By the time the Persian Gulf buildup is complete, we will have almost as many people there as we had in Vietnam at peak—out of a much smaller military. If war comes, no one knows how long it will last, but most agree that Americans will become casualties at a rate far higher than in Vietnam. There's no way to replace them or to relieve the emotionally battered survivors without conscription. It takes about seven months before a recruit becomes more of a danger to the enemy than to his comrades. There are not now enough enlistees in the pipeline.

Opponents of the draft make a fetish of individual choice, but wars are fought according to the choices countries make. No matter how idealistic an individual's decision to join the military might have been, when casualties get heavy his fondest wish is for a wound bad enough to keep him out of combat but not bad enough to maim him for life. Some choice.

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