

# **Memoirs of The Four Wars**

## **Abstract**

The below paper attempts to analyze the four war memoirs: *A Rumor of War*, *Goodbye, Darkness*, *The Road to Richmond* and *Ordinary Courage: The Life of Joseph Plumb Martin*. The four books narrate about 4 different wars in the US history, yet all 4 authors portrait war as something very evil, inhumane and mostly pointless.

## **Outline**

I. Introduction

II. Body

a. *A Rumor of War*

b. *Goodbye, Darkness*

c. *The Road to Richmond*

d. *Ordinary Courage: The Life of Joseph Plumb Martin*

III. Conclusion

“SEMPER FIDELIS” –

“ALWAYS FAITHFUL” (Latin)

History can be learnt from history books, classes, film chronicles, etc. The best way to learn history, however, is to listen to the people who saw it happening, participated in it or even influenced its course. This can be done through reading first-person memoirs. The memoirs might not always be objective as to the numbers, events, or conditions. Their value is more in the real human view on the event, emotions, thoughts and feedbacks that no dry history chronicle can give. Even though *A Rumor of War*, *Goodbye, Darkness*, *The Road to Richmond* and *Ordinary Courage: The Life of Joseph Plumb Martin* are memoirs about different wars, they all resemble each other, as well as the current war in Iraq that the US is engaged in. The below research will argue that it is not important what armor the war used, which time and place it took place at, and what the motives of it have been. The authors of the four memoirs proved by their personal experiences that the war is always about death, destruction and breaking people's destinies.

Philip Caputo is the author, the narrator and the main character of *A Rumor of War*. Coming from a small mid-western suburban town of Westchester, Illinois, Caputo enlists in the US Marine Corps hoping that will change his life. Before he goes to Vietnam, he is sure the war will be over within a short period of time. He fantasizes about his return home being a hero for his fellow countrymen, taking part in patriotic parades, where everybody will ask for heroic poems. Reality of the war, however, turns out to be completely different. He finds himself in the middle of jungle with Viet Cong. This new reality refuses to follow and rules from “before the war” life.

Throughout the novel, Caputo struggles to find out what he really is. The readers

feels as if Philip needs to feel that danger of death that he never felt living in a safe country, in a safe neighborhood. The author also shows great deals of patriotism by stating numerous times that Americans need to fight to save their country and Vietnam from communism, that he personally is at war because it is his duty as an American citizen. The young boy in the novel is in constant search of his own identity, trying to prove to the world that he is a real man, a real Marine. Yet during hand-to-hand combat the young man finds that neither of these two really answers who he is. Philip is determined to be brave and honorable even though all of this ethical and moral beliefs crash around him.

Through rising deaths numbers, illnesses, endless days of waiting, frustration Caputo discovers that even though all men that serve with him came from different backgrounds, there is a mutual side they all have. Those young boys know that if they do not kill the enemy, the enemy will kill them. They are all cruel, angry, sad, and mad now, even if they have not been like that before the war.

As the novel progresses, Caputo grows beyond his previous romantic understandings of war, seeing what it really is about. The author understands how pointless fighting really is, that all those lives have been wasted for nothing because no idea is worth so many human lives. All those thoughts drive Caputo to temporary insanity: he orders the capture of two VC, hoping they will be executed. He cannot resist this pressure he is under - to kill in return for the killing.

The military courts tried Philip for five months for this infraction of what war is about. Caputo has come to see what his mistake was. It turned out that it was not in ordering the capture of the VC, it was not in thinking it was okay to kill them. It was not in being filled with anger or rage from a war. Rather, Caputo realizes his mistake was in believing that American men should go to war for a country that did not understand what that war really meant.

As result of this understanding, Caputo is able to return to Vietnam ten years later. He comes back and takes one final look at the destruction of Vietnam. Countless numbers have died or wounded people, countless civilians who lost their homes. The fighting continues, but nothing has changed and no hope it would. This final deep look at Vietnam gives Caputo a sad understanding that he and thousands of Americans and Vietnamese simply played a part in a chess game of conflicting governments and regimes.

“Goodbye Darkness” by William Manchester portrays the Americans fighting the WWII in the Pacific region. The title of the book was inspired by Joseph Conrad's famous short story, “The Heart of Darkness”. Manchester, describing the island jungles says: “Conrad, writing of Africa, put it well. It is the heart of darkness, the lividity at the core of the most magnetic light”. There is a “then and now” format in *Goodbye, Darkens*, which enforces the feeling that this is a memoir of one man and that events described in this memoir is a very traumatic episode in his life and the life of USA.

William Manchester was a Marine Corps Sergeant in an unorthodox front-line Intelligence unit during WW II, he was also a prominent journalist and story-teller. His baptism of fire was in Okinawa where he was wounded twice during two months of combat. Most of the men in his squad were killed. Manchester proves that US Marines in World War II were among the finest combat soldiers that ever existed.

Manchester takes readers back in time, giving them a wonderful image of his early years and personality, then shares what it was like being a new Marine Corps recruit engaged in island-hopping campaigns in the exotic South Pacific, terminating in one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of WWII – Okinawa. He describes the Marine fight in muddy foxholes, 5 yards from Japanese foxholes, and attacks and counterattacks, day after day, that often involved reciprocal taking and then losing, and taking again, the same piece of bloody ground, often in hand to hand combat. Manchester tells the readers that the Marines were not

fighting for their country, or flag, or even their families – they were fighting for themselves and for each other.

“No infantryman fought on all, or even many, of the Pacific islands. Deployment of troops, casualty figures, and tropical diseases laid down impossible odds against that” describes very well the living and death in the jungles and battlefields of the Pacific. There is no definite timeline in the book, dates and battles move around as the author travels island to island recalling or retelling events that happened.

There is lot of death - countless stories of friends and other Marines who met their end. One might think he/she knows what the war is like, but if they have not been to the war, they are undoubtedly wrong. Manchester gives his readers the gritty and awful scope of a battlefield. For example: 250 Men charge up a hill and two come back. Manchester has the skill and the insight to express events and emotions far beyond that of the ordinary soldier describing his experiences.

In the final pages of the book, Manchester gives his insight about the reasons the Marines were always doing more than humans are capable of. First, they had been raised by the hardships of the depression. Secondly, in WWII the whole country was in the war together - most of the Marines in his squad were Ivy League college graduates, Presidents' sons were also in uniform, and the sons of important politicians were being killed together with the sons of farmers. Thirdly, it was nationalism, “the absolute conviction that the United States was the envy of all other nations, a country which had never done anything infamous.”

Some thirty-five years after the end of the war, Manchester embarked on a journey to retrace the Pacific War and, in a sense, find something he lost there as a Marine who witnessed some of the war's fiercest fighting and shed the darkness that has remained after all those years. He visited all the islands, from New Guinea and Guadalcanal, north to Tarawa, Saipan, Tinian, and Guam, onto Iwo Jima and Okinawa. In the process, he not only describes

his travels but also chronicles his own wartime experiences and gives a bit of the history with generous attention given to MacArthur. Manchester also concludes that the war was extremely ugly and inhumane.

*The Road to Richmond* by Arbner R. Small is not one of those boring, slow-reading books about Civil War. In fact, the book really fascinates at times and keeps reader's interest till the very end. The book has been written nearly a generation after the war ended. It is based on the notes of Arbner R. Small together with an official history of the 16th Maine. Small's complete prison diary is attached to the book. The facts and opinions recorded by the author have been edited by his son.

Arbner R. Small joined the 3rd Maine as a corporal at the beginning of the war and saw action at First Bull Run. After being sent back to Maine on recruiting duty, Small was appointed lieutenant and adjutant of the new Sixteenth Maine Volunteers. He served in this unit till the end of the war. Even though Small missed the battles of Second Bull Run and Antietam, he received his baptism of fire at Fredericksburg. In reserve at Chancellorsville, the 16th saw its greatest moment at Gettysburg. The 16<sup>th</sup> Maine held the extreme right of the First Corps line long enough to permit the withdrawal of most of the rest of the corps on its first day of battles. After this battle, only 4 officers, including Small, and 40 soldiers survived, almost all of them wounded, or captured.

The 16<sup>th</sup> Maine continued into the Overland Campaign fighting with the Fifth Corps in The Wilderness and Spotsylvania, on to the outskirts of Richmond and then into the Petersburg trenches. During the Fourth Offensive at Petersburg, Small has been captured and sent first to Libby Prison, then to Salisbury and, finally, to Danville. Held until practically the end of the war, Small finally rejoins his regiment after Appomattox and was promoted to major.

Small's descriptions of combat and battles are very clear and objective. Even better

he writes about his observations of camp life, the march, and personal dealings with other soldiers. He came into contact with a number of higher-ranking officers as well. The description of prison life shows that officers were not really more cared for than the enlisted men. As Editor Small points out in his preface, "Union prisoners were no more resentful of short rations and hard prison floors than of selfishness in their own ranks". The prisoner's diary also reveals that only those who had money had good, all others have been forced to starve.

One of the memorable moments in the book is about the spring of 1864, when Small and a captain of the 16th signal a station overlooking the Confederate camps. They can observe the Rebels through a telescope. Watching them lounge and play ball the captain says to Small, "My God Adjutant, they're human beings just like us."

The book's conclusion deserves a special notion. Instead of being overly patriotic or sentimental, Small explains what the war meant to him and his comrades. He admits that many times he only saw what was directly in front of him. For example: in a battle - smoke, noise and confusion. Small writes that during combat there was no time to analyze the situation, and people often did not remember much of what happened. He also states that battles were going so fast that no courage was needed during them, people needed courage awaiting those battles.

Many people think that soldiers at war are prepared for the possibility of death, and they are ready to sacrifice themselves for the cause. Small, however, claims that everyone thinks they are immune and someone else would make that sacrifice, not them. The author sums up his story with a saying: "Sometimes I wish I could forget it all, and again I rejoice that it is indelibly stamped into my head." This quotation proves that a normal person who has gone through the war will always have its print in his/her mind, an ugly print of war.

Joseph Plumb Martin, the author of the autobiography *Ordinary Courage: The*

*Revolutionary War Adventures of Joseph Plumb Martin*, presents a story of a young boy, who shares what his vision of War for Independence was. Martin, being a sixteen year-old young man was recruited to the army. It is interesting how Martin's personality development parallels the development of the American nation - both of them have been formed and toughened in the process of the war. There are no romantic or idealistic descriptions of the war and the founding of the nation in the book. The book is the reflection of what an average citizen thought and felt during the war.

The American Revolutionary War has been provoked desire of the American people to be independent from the Great Britain. The British government decided to make the American colonies pay a significant share of the war debt from the French and Indian War. Through the Sugar Act, Stamp Act, and other taxes, the British attempted to collect taxes that the Americans considered too harsh. They also wanted to send their representatives to the British Parliament and vote for the parliamentarians. The combination of the severe taxation and the lack representation gave rise to the famous phrase "taxation without representation." Americans started stockpiling guns and armor despite the British prohibition to do so. This defense of such a stock led to the shots fired at Lexington and Concord and the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

Being a soldier in the Continental army, Plumb Martin wrote down about his experiences in a diary, which he kept for 7 years. This memoir is a first-person report of the Revolutionary War that perfectly demonstrates the life of a continental soldier. In his book, Joseph Plumb attempts to point out the differences between the colonists from the North and the South. He describes the time when he was put in prison by "half New Englanders and half Pennsylvanians". He also states that he "would rather be combating with a tribe of Indians than with the Southerners", who in turn call him a "damn Yankee", as the author notes. He had many reasons not to like them, besides they were foreigners who did not know

language well enough and who spoke English very bad.

Martin portrays the war itself, as well as the birth of the American nation in a very a realistic and detailed way. He shows all the hardships of the war and gives his own subjective opinions of the officers, their ethnicity, geographical location and gender. The author describes in great detail the war events, the officers' courage and bravery. Martin shows the acts of ordinary men who fought for freedom of their motherland and did everything they could to protect their families from the enemy.

During the War for Independence, just like during any other war, the life of a common soldier was a tough one. Soldiers served relatively short periods in state militias or longer periods in the Continental Army, raised by Congress – around 200,000 men in total enlisted for one period or another. Militias supplied the greatest number of soldiers, who were farmers, artisans, and some professionals. The Continental Congress recruited young men and those with fewer resources, such as apprentices or laborers. Some men enlisted voluntarily, but most have been drafted. The wealthier ones hired paid substitutes to go to the army instead of them. All were equal, however, in facing war hardships, such as horrible food shortages, diseases, low morale, and danger.

The war is the most disgusting form of human collective behavior. This aggression aimed at the individuals does not have any prohibitions. People always swear that “this war will be the last one”. However, the war is a natural feature of the mankind. We draw such pessimistic conclusion due to different reasons. Such point of view became unpopular during the Age of Enlightenment and humanism. Wars can be considered as the total triumph of destructive instincts. The wounds that the all wars US participate in had inflicted on American soldiers have been as painful as the wounds that the war had inflicted on American society.

All four books discussed above really open the eyes of their readers. Even though the

American War for Independence, American Civil, WWII and the Vietnam War used different types of armor, were different in casualties and results they all were about killing and destruction. *A Rumor Of War* probably can be most associated to the current war in Iraq that the US is engaged in. Many people consider both wars to be mistakes, which could have been avoided. The US have been forced to participate in WWII after the Pearl Harbor, the US had to fight for its independence from the Great Britain and for the unity of the North and South during the Civil War. There was no reason, except the political will of the US government to take its troops half way across the world to fight in Vietnam, and now in Iraq.

Officially, the War in Iraq is and was justified by the “humanitarian intervention”. The United States have already “humanitarianly intervened” into Vietnam in 1961 and did not win anything in that conflict except thousands of lives of American soldiers. The same has happened in Iraq: no declaration of war, the enemy that is in a far away country, the enemy that did not in fact pose an imminent threat to the US, justifications given for fighting a war, thousands are dead and injured.

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