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Supervisor Dr. M.L. Thompson
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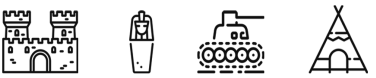

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WAR IS HELL, BUT DAMNED EXCITING

SEBASTIAAN VONK, MA

AMERICAN GUESTS ON A BATTLEFIELD TOUR TRY TO FOLD A PARACHUTE RECOVERED FROM A NEARBY DROPZONE IN THE NETHERLANDS

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DIMITRIOS BOUZOUKAS
SGT 22 INF 4 DIV
NEW YORK NOV 28 1944

1.
INTRODUCTION

LEST WE FORGET

Two months after the U.S. had invaded Iraq, President Bush was visibly touched by his visit to "a monument to the darkest impulses of man": the Nazi-German camps of Auschwitz in Poland. Later on that day in May 2003, Bush remarked that "the death camps still bear witness. They remind us that evil is real and must be called by name and opposed" (pars. 33-34). Like Bush, many governments, organizations, individuals and site managers often invoke the necessity to draw lessons from the past as a justification for continuous remembrance and preservation of historical sites. Although European countries each remember World War II differently, the focus in remembering war has clearly shifted from its glory to the suffering. As Gregory Ashworth and Rudi Hartmann write on the remembrance of atrocities, "the motto 'lest we forget' has been extended 'to never again'" (14). Remembrance actors believe that remembrance fulfills a public education function that should enhance historical consciousness and democratic citizenship among their enormous audience (Van Huiden et al. 1). Although the war almost is outside of living memory, former war sites continue to attract a large number of visitors. Bush is one of the over a million visitors that continue to visit the Auschwitz camp sites annually; war heritage in Normandy, France attracts over five million visitors every year ("Normandië van het Noorden" 7). Even seventy-five years after the war's end, the war has not been forgot-

ten.

Indeed, unlike any other war that the U.S. has engaged in, WWII still is omnipresent in U.S. collective memory. After several decades of relatively little interest, it has been especially since the late 1980s and 1990s that the war found its way back into U.S. consciousness. High-profile anniversaries like the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day in 1994, have not only led to a greater visibility, but also added to the awareness that veterans increasingly started to pass away (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 3-5; Edwards 218-20). Their stories were captured in bestselling books like Stephen Ambrose's D-Day (1994). Hollywood further fueled the interest starting with movies like The Thin Red Line and Saving Private Ryan (both 1998). Today, Hollywood continues the produce a number of movies set in WWII that is by far unmatched in number by any other war. Sam Edwards calls it a "Post-Vietnam reconstruction of Victory Culture" that coincided with the end of the Cold War (242). Tom Brokaw's bestselling, quintessential book The Greatest Generation (1998) elevated the wartime generation to "the greatest generation any society has produced" (xxxviii). Over the time, Michael Adams notes, WWII has been simplified into "a good war, The Good War, the best war the country had" and is represented as "a golden-age, an idyllic period when everything was simpler and a can-do generation of Americans solved the world's problems" (xiii). The prominent position of the National WWII Memorial, which was dedicated in 2004, on the National Mall in Washington D.C. is an even greater testimony to the war's status in U.S. collective memory as a defining moment for the character of the nation.

However, despite the public educational function, it remains ambivalent what people take away from engaging with the history and heritage of WWII. Underlying the public education function are the assumptions that "that there are scientific truths, that these should be communicated to the public for its own good, and that this public was waiting eagerly to recall them" (Tunbridge and Ashworth 38). Alison Landsberg has coined the term "prosthetic memory" to substantiate claims about the potential political power of mass media and experiential sites like museums. She has argued that a "person does not simply apprehend a historical narrative, but takes on a more personal, deeply felt memory of a past event through which he or she did not live." This influences a person's subjectivity and even politics, as one becomes more empathic to the traumatic experiences of others. Ultimately, this may lead to "unexpected alliances across chasms of difference" (2-3). However, Landsberg does not research whether this actually occurs. This echoes David Uzzell's criticism of the lack of concern among heritage tourism researchers with the actual effects of interpretation on changing attitudes and behavior, while millions are spent on interpretation for that reason (12-13). While heritage, and specifically battlefield, tourism research specifically provides useful deeper insights in visitors' motivations and on-site consumption, battlefield tourism studies' concern ends as soon as the visitor leaves the site.[1] By looking into the underlying hypotheses of the public educational function, this thesis will inquire whether visitation of these sites has any long-term impact on thinking and behavior.

1 See for example the work on battlefield tourism by Dunkley et al. (2011), Bird (2011), and Iles (2008).

First of all, one needs to accept the hypothesis that war can be accurately represented. Especially in relation to the Holocaust there is a broad consensus that it "represents something unspeakable, unrepresentable, and beyond rational understanding" (Krijnen 10). Moreover, veterans and others have indicated the gap that exists between their prior perceptions and their actual wartime experiences. Veteran Frank Perconte noted that he "got to think that enlisting was an adventure, too. We had all grown up watching cowboy and Indian movies. They never shot back. So we were going to go over there and the enemy was going to run away, just like in the movies. Well, they sure didn't in real life" (qtd. in Brotherton "We Who Are Alive" 44). Babe Heffron "thought it was all glory and you win lots of medals. You think you're going to be the guy. Then you find out that the cost is very great" (Guarnere, Heffron, and Post XXIII). It is the reason why veterans like Heffron have said that they did not talk about their experiences to anyone, "even though not a day went by that it wasn't on my mind" (Guarnere, Heffron, and Post XXI). Former war correspondent Chris Hedges describes that this is a shift from the sterile mythic reality of war images to the sensory reality of war.

> **We are safe. We do not smell rotting flesh, hear the cries of agony, or see before us blood and entrails seeping out of bodies. We view, from a distance, the rush, the excitement, but feel none of the awful gut-wrenching anxiety and humiliation that come with mortal danger. It takes the experience of fear and the chaos of battle, the deafening and disturbing noise, to wake us up**. (83-84)

Only then we realize, Hedges concludes, "that war as displayed by the entertainment industry might, in most cases, as well be ballet" (84). Do today's representations offer a better understanding?

Secondly, we would also need to believe that the public engages with war history and heritage out of an educational interest or at least would be receptive to its educational component. For the first generation "mourning is an essential part of remembrance, partly for healing" and thus to work through grief (Winters and Sivan 32). However, as this generation has largely passed away, we now are in a "post-veteran era" in which mediated representations replace first-hand accounts (Bird 28). This fundamentally alters the balance between cultural and private memory. Subsequent generations delve into "artistic creation" to represent and understand that generation's experiences, but are unhindered by survivors' efforts to close-guardedly "preserve the inviolable truth of witnessing" (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper 46-47). This has opened up space for new forms and to appropriate the memory for, for example, political and entertainment purposes. The field of remembrance, albeit sometimes reluctantly, embraces this shift to prevent memory from falling into oblivion as it fears that WWII will become a distanced past. Nevertheless, battlefield tourism also remains a solemn act of remembrance and a way of acquiring knowledge, while also having a social and reflective dimension to it for other visitors (Baldwin and Sharpley 192-200). It highlights that different functions interact with each other.

Thirdly, we have to accept the hypothesis that the knowledge of a past war can effectively prevent new conflicts. However, as Mal-