

# Another Look at the Enduring Appeals of Battle

**David C. Hsiung**

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David Hsiung is the Charles and Shirley Knox Professor of History at Juniata College.

This is the fourth event connected to the 2013 summer reading, J. Glenn Gray's *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*. For their work in choosing the book and arranging these events, I'd like to thank Sarah Clarkson, Jack Barlow, Wade Roberts, Jim Tuten, Jim Skelly, the Provost's Office, the President's Office, and lots of other folks I don't have time to name.

In the first of these events, Dr. John Nagl connected Gray's ideas to his experiences in Kuwait and Iraq. The second event brought us five navy officers (and Jim Skelly) who became conscientious objectors during the Vietnam War. Last week, Dr. Mike Neiberg took Gray's ideas back to World War I (and some students wanted him to leap forward to Syria). Today I'm not going to make links to any other wars, but will focus on how Gray's position in the army during World War II gave him a specific perspective on the combat experience, a perspective that the more typical infantry soldier did not fully share. You know that Gray talks about the numbing fatigue that some soldiers felt, and I bet you're feeling some Summer Reading Fatigue right now. Thanks for pushing through that exhaustion and coming this afternoon.

*The Warriors* is a remarkable book, and one of its most provocative chapters addresses what J. Glenn Gray called the "secret attractions of war." He identified these "enduring appeals of battle" as (1) the delight in seeing, "what the Bible calls 'the lust of the eye;'" (2) the delight in comradeship, "the feeling of belonging together that men in battle often find a cementing force;" and (3) the delight in destruction, where soldiers became "[b]linded by the rage to destroy and supremely careless of consequences."<sup>1</sup> Because some of you may not have read the book, please allow me to give some examples of these appeals, ones drawn not from *The Warriors* but from other sources.

Soldiers experienced the delight in seeing in different ways. Many took pleasure in natural beauty. For example, Marine Robert Leckie landed unopposed on Guadalcanal and noted, "The boat struck the shore, lurched, came to a halt. Instantly I was up and over. The blue sky seemed to swing in a giant arc. I had a glimpse of palm fronds swaying gently above, the most delicate and exquisite sight I have ever seen."<sup>2</sup> Soldiers also gazed in wonder at the epic scale the war could attain. E.B. Sledge, a marine, wrote about the eve of the Okinawa invasion:

We lined the rails of our transport and looked out over the vast fleet in amazement. We saw ships of every description: huge new battleships, cruisers, sleek destroyers, and a host of fast escort craft. Aircraft carriers were there in greater numbers than any of us had ever seen before. Every conceivable type of amphibious vessel was arrayed. It was the biggest invasion fleet ever assembled in the Pacific, and we were awed by the sight of it.<sup>3</sup>

On the other side of the globe, the D-Day invasion amassed nearly 6500 ships, aircraft flew 15,000 sorties, and by the end of June 6, over 100,000 soldiers had landed.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1: *Bird's-eye view of landing craft, barrage balloons, and allied troops landing in Normandy, France on D-Day, 1944.* New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

John Ciardi experienced the delight in comradeship as a gunner on a B-29 at Saipan, in the Pacific. He noted that an airman who tired of flying could ground himself, and the squadron's commanding officer would place that person on permanent garbage detail. During the year in which he served in the squadron, however, only two men chose this option.

I don't think it was patriotism. I think it was a certain amount of pride. The unit was the crew. You belonged to eleven men. You're trained together, you're bound together. I was once ordered to fly in the place of a gunner who had received a shrapnel wound. I dreaded that mission. I wanted to fly with my own crew. I didn't know those other people. I didn't want to run the risk of dying with strangers.<sup>5</sup>

Comradeship helped soldiers in ways both practical (it made them more motivated and more likely to stay alive) and emotional (it protected against feelings of isolation and despair, and provided intimacy and love).

As for the delight in destruction, Ernie Pyle, the most widely-read American correspondent of the war, reported on some fighter pilots in North Africa.

The highest spirits I've seen in that room were displayed one evening after they came back from a strafing mission. That's what they like to do best, but they get little of it. It's a great holiday from escorting bombers, which they hate to do. Going out free-lancing to shoot up whatever they see, and going in enough force to be pretty sure they'll be superior to the enemy—that's Utopia. That's what they had done that day. And they really had a field day. They ran onto a German truck convoy and blew it to pieces. They laughed and got excited as they told about it. The trucks were all full of men, and [they said] "they flew out like firecrackers." Motorcyclists got hit and dived forty feet before they stopped skidding.<sup>6</sup>

Imagine you are walking down an unpaved road in winter, with frozen puddles left and right. Can you resist stomping on the ice? If not, then you have tasted the delight in destruction.

What evidence did Gray use to formulate these appeals? His personal experiences as recorded in journals and letters, the writings of other soldiers, and works of literature . . . and sometimes he just made claims with no supporting evidence. Hey, he was a philosopher! But I would like to focus on his personal experiences. First, we need to understand the context for those experiences. Born in 1913, Gray grew up on a farm in Mifflintown, Pennsylvania, and graduated from this very institution, Juniata College, in 1936. At that time, only 7.6 percent of Americans age eighteen to twenty-four were enrolled in institutions of higher education. Gray further separated himself from the average American in terms of education by continuing on to graduate school, first at the University of Pittsburgh and then at Columbia University. He wrote, "I was inducted into the Army as a private on May 8, 1941, having received my 'greetings from the President' [his draft notice] in the same mail that brought word from Columbia University that my doctorate in philosophy was conferred." For 1941-42, only 3497 doctorates were awarded in the entire United States. Through this education Gray had developed habits of thinking and writing that distinguished him from the average infantryman. As the historian Gerald Linderman has written, "Combat soldiers did not often issue from those sectors of society given to the habit of recording experience."<sup>7</sup>

Linderman followed up that observation with the insight that "those who bore the most extended combat did not often write, and those who wrote seldom sustained prolonged combat." This points to another key element in Gray's personal experience. He served for four and one-half years, with nearly a year in an armored division, over a year in Washington D.C. in the Counter Intelligence Corps, and almost two years in Europe. While in a counter-intelligence unit, he was attached to infantry divisions in

Italy, France, and Germany, responsible for protecting the men “against spies and saboteurs which the enemy might send across the front or leave behind among the civilian population. The nature of our task demanded an unusual amount of freedom and mobility.”<sup>8</sup>

How might this context have differed from that of a regular soldier or infantryman? First, that year in D.C. broke up Gray’s service. He did not experience one long continuous slog, month after month, away from American soil. Furthermore, by serving in counter-intelligence, Gray and his unit came along after the front line had moved on. He dealt mostly with civilians and POWs, not armed enemy soldiers. These special circumstances shaped Gray’s combat experience—he enjoyed a critical bit of separation from the most extreme elements of combat—and they almost certainly skewed his analysis of the general soldier’s experiences. Journalists such as Ernie Pyle, quoted before, also took advantage of opportunities to leave the front. Today we would call Pyle an embedded correspondent, someone who lived alongside the soldiers, but he also went home for a rest when he needed to.

If we look at those soldiers who, to use Linderman’s phrase, “sustained prolonged combat,” the enduring appeals take on a different character. They become less “enduring,” less “appealing,” and therefore less fundamental to the combat experience.

Consider again the delight in seeing. The attraction fades in the presence of danger. B-17 pilot Joe Slavik noted that flak explosions “make colorful bursts of smoke all around you. Even the rockets [the Germans] fired at us were awesome. But you got over that fascination pretty quickly,” he admitted, “when you realized that they were trying to shoot you down, to kill you. Then you learned to be afraid of those bursts. They weren’t pretty anymore.” Fatigue and combat’s monotonous repetition also drained the delight from seeing. William Manchester participated in the invasion of Okinawa and later wrote that, “I was exhausted and once inside my [cave] . . . I lay on my side . . . watching the kamikazes diving and



Figure 2: *Kamikaze hits USS New Mexico off Okinawa, 12 May 1945.* Photo #: 80-G-328653, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy

exploding on our warships. It was one of the war's most extraordinary spectacles, but I was too weary to keep my eyes open."<sup>9</sup>

Many soldiers tasted the delight in destruction, but the wise ones realized that drinking too deeply could prove fatal. Private John Bassett, fighting in northern Italy, was targeted by a sniper.

"Christ!" I yelled back. "Where is he?" Then I became enraged: there was no explaining it. I forgot fear temporarily. . . . I turned around and tried to locate that sniper. I stood up and ran along the densely wooded hill, disregarding all caution. As I dived towards another bush, several shots whistled over my head. I curled up in the bush and [then I] knew I'd made a mistake. My anger faded. Oh-oh, boy, I thought, you went too far—you're alone out here—better get out of here and get back to the others—fast!<sup>10</sup>

Other soldiers who felt the delight in destruction took no delight from it. Infantryman Audie Murphy saw his closest friend get shot down by Germans who falsely surrendered. Enraged, Murphy then killed two Germans with a grenade, picked up their machine gun, and started forward. "I did not think of danger to myself. My whole being is concentrated on killing. As the lacerated bodies flop and squirm, I rake them again; and I do not stop firing while there is a quiver in them." But Murphy felt none of the high spirits and excitement that can come with the delight in destruction. "I remember the experience as I do a nightmare. A demon seems to have entered my body."<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the delights in seeing and destruction, soldiers tended to describe comradeship in more positive terms. That being said, however, a darker shadow to those relationships escaped Gray's analysis. Consider the effects of prolonged battle, where a soldier loses more and more comrades. The pervasiveness of such death shifts the focus from one's comrades to one's self. John Ciardi, the B-29 gunner I mentioned earlier, once saw an airplane near him get hit by fire. The gunner in that plane sat "in the big bubble at the very top. He was right there beside us in plain sight, beginning to go down. He just waved his hand goodbye." Ciardi then saw the plane break up and catch fire, with two parachutes floating nearby, one of them burning. "Whatever it was, the truth is—the dark truth—you were secretly glad. It could have been you. . . . There were a certain number of blackballs to be passed out. Every time another plane went down, it was taken out of play. Somebody had to catch it, and somebody else caught it for you. . . . That's a dirty, dark thing to say."<sup>12</sup>

Others felt deep pain when they lost a comrade. So what might a soldier do to avoid feeling that pain again in the future? Hold back from forming the bonds of comradeship in the first place. After one mission, John Muirhead recalled:

When we were back at our base, I didn't inquire about the plane that hadn't returned, except to verify that I didn't know the pilot or any of the crew. I sought to isolate myself from such things, which was a hopeless posture of evasion I persisted in trying to maintain. If I didn't know them, I would not grieve. If I didn't speak to them, I would not remember . . . whether they were fair or dark, or whether I liked them or disliked them.<sup>13</sup>

Recall that comradeship helped soldiers in practical ways—by making them better soldiers, more motivated, and more likely to stay alive—so the costs of giving up on comradeship could be very high indeed.

J. Glenn Gray identified a fundamental part of the combat experience when he described the enduring appeals of battle. We should understand, however, that the power of those appeals was felt more strongly and for a longer time by those who enjoyed a critical distance from combat. The enduring appeals give war the appearance of love, beauty, and excitement, and perhaps that provides one reason why we have such difficulty preventing or stopping wars. Appearances, however, can deceive, as we well know. John Ciardi, Audie Murphy, and many others remind us that war is horror and ugliness and death. This year’s summer reading has allowed us to talk about the enduring appeals, so perhaps we will be better prepared to face their allure and attractions.

## NOTES

1. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 28, 29, 40, 51.
2. Gerald F. Linderman, *The World Within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), p. 248. For facts and direct quotations contained in this essay, I will provide citations; for the interpretations, I learned almost everything from Dr. Linderman, first as his student in, and later as his teaching assistant for, History 366 at the University of Michigan. This book, especially in chapters 6 and 7, develops those ideas in greater extent and depth.
3. E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 178.
4. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 721-722.
5. Studs Terkel, *“The Good War”: An Oral History of World War Two* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 194-95.
6. David Nichols, ed., *Ernie’s War: The Best of Ernie Pyle’s World War II Dispatches* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), pp. 76-77.
7. Martin Woessner, “J. Glenn Gray: Philosopher, Translator (of Heidegger), and Warrior,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 40 (2004): 488; “Juniata Creates Events Based on Alumnus’ ‘The Warriors’ Book,” *Juniata College Campus News*, 26 Aug. 2013, <http://www.juniata.edu/services/news/?action=SHOWARTICLE&id=5702>; Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), pp. 76 (Table 24) and 83 (Table 28); Gray, *The Warriors*, p. xxiii; Linderman, *The World Within War*, p. 247.
8. Linderman, *The World Within War*, p. 247; Gray, *The Warriors*, p. xxiii.
9. Linderman, *The World Within War*, pp. 253, 256.
10. Linderman, *The World Within War*, pp. 260-61.
11. Linderman, *The World Within War*, p. 262.
12. Terkel, *“The Good War,”* pp. 197-98.
13. Linderman, *The World Within War*, pp. 297-98.