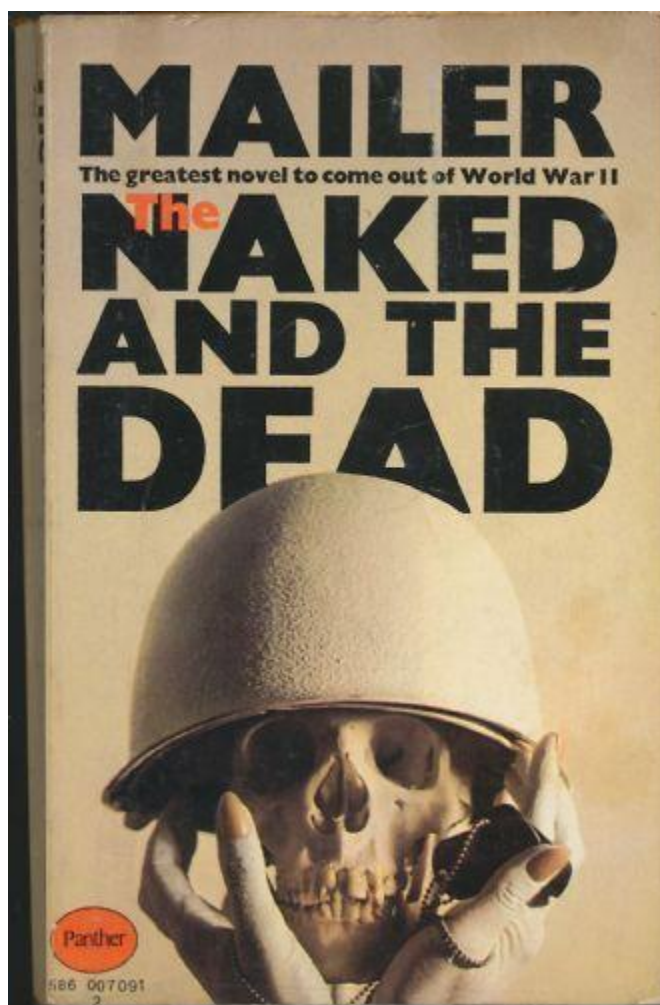


*Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead*



*An Essay by Garry Victor Hill*

Although American writers depict the Second World War's horrors and the authoritarianism of military rule, no matter how critical they were of the American military or war's horrors, none among them said that World War II should not be fought. This realisation, combined with depictions of the massive strength of the war machine and its pervasiveness in all aspects of life, gave a fatalistic cast to the genre. War's horrors were described, but frequently seemed unavoidable if the false peace that came with a fascist victory was not to be a greater horror. Even so, there was much to expose, criticize and fear and many American writers deserved credit for their honesty and courage in telling the truth rather than creating rosy propaganda.

This attitude was more than common, it was the norm. Even when Audie Murphy's war memoirs were published in 1955 they were aptly entitled *To Hell and Back*: even the viewpoint of America's most decorated veteran of the 1940s was that of the alienated loner who would not glorify war or shrink from describing its horrors. After 1945 this once unorthodox depiction of war rapidly became common, almost standard.

In World War Two the massive size of the American war machine which numbered personnel by the million, the global spread of the war, its prolonged duration and its enormous and pervasive effects across the globe let alone home front America, all created a sense for the individual of being an anonymous, almost powerless cog in a machine. It could be argued that this was nothing new. Natty Bumppo in Cooper's tales of the French and Indian War was also located in a global war (the world's

first) between the Western World's superpowers France and England, as land battles were fought between them and their allies in locales as far apart as Western Europe, India and North America, while sea battles occurred in even more diverse locales. However the powers of eighteenth century authorities were much less ubiquitous and pervasive. Natty could and did escape to the wilderness, and he could escape as if the conflict never existed. Even when he was involved in that conflict he could play an important part. How could any American escape their nation's involvement in the Second World War without leaving America? While it could be argued they could escape to the nearest national park, for how long could they exist there without being caught or without wilderness survival skills? The wilderness Natty escaped to was seemingly boundless, abundant with life's necessities and home to a frontier society. For those who did not escape, how many individuals could play a heroic or important part something like Natty managed to do in this global conflict? Attempts to depict such individuals in American post war literature reveal problems. In James Hilton's *Nothing So Strange* (1948) Mark Bradley, an atomic scientist, does play a crucial part in stopping the Nazis building an atomic bomb, but a less heroic, less colourful individual would be hard to find.

In Herman Wouk's *The Winds of War* (1971) the author uses his hero, Naval Commander Victor Henry, an advisor to President Roosevelt, and then an American attaché at Berlin, as an observer to events from just before the invasion of Poland up to the aftermath of the Pearl Harbour attack. Henry's rank, connections and position obviously makes him a powerful figure, one who appears as that great rarity in American literature concerned with the fighting man, an *orthodox* hero.

Wouk deserves and has got credit for taking on the task of describing the Second World War in *The Winds of War* and its sequel *War and Remembrance* (1978) which was left unread by this writer after getting through the first. Wouk also gets justified credit for his originality in doing this mammoth task and for his creation of another observer, a Nazi war criminal who gives the other side's sometimes startling and unsettling perceptions. Many of Wouk's observations are sharp, but another less successful side to this effort becomes apparent. Wouk's scenes are frequently didactic, with dropped names, characters with the depth of cardboard cut-outs and vulgar passages. Wouk, an entertaining writer, simply lacked the ability to carry off his set task: but who possibly could succeed at it? For anybody such a story sinks under its own weight.

This novel reveals a problem inbuilt into the genre, when creating a Second World War hero a dilemma emerges, to focus on powerful figures involved in an overview like Victor Henry and therefore grand themes makes for a remote, often stilted depiction, one limited by the realities of history. To focus on the lesser figures is to focus on the cogs in the war machine, who are frequently unheroic. How can a cog be anything else? They are frequently destroyed or betrayed in their attempts to be heroic and at best win only little victories.

This dilemma did not lead to the death of the hero in literature. The individual American warrior was still be portrayed in popular American fiction from 1945 onwards by diverse American writers, but many of their narratives would be historical, science fiction or fantasies. Such writers would set their contemporary adventures in the colonies, the dominions or the Third World, locales where the power of

technology was weaker and surviving in the wilderness or supposedly uncivilised lands was the challenge.

Warrior-heroes could still appear in World War Two scenarios, such works had a ready market; over two hundred and fifty American World War Two novels appeared between 1946 and the late 1962.<sup>1</sup> Between fifteen and sixteen million Americans had served in the armed forces during the war.<sup>2</sup> Not only those in uniform, but their families and friends shared their hunger for stories about the war. This popularity was not a hunger for images of lone heroes; the emphasis was usually now more on groups than on individuals.<sup>3</sup> Many of those in uniform had served under alienating men who saw the war as an opportunity to be heroes. While the “good” gallant idealistic, officer does appear, (often to show that such heroism no longer works) the obnoxious, ambitious, blindly conceited-to-the-point-of-insanity commander bent on being a hero no matter what the cost to others, became almost a fixture in post war stories. Instead heroism now often centred less on showy leadership and victories and more on stoicism, group loyalty and common sense. It seems that while many ordinary service people felt that while they despised the would-be hero, they and their compatriots had some heroic qualities worth depicting.

Many writers would find traditional heroism by focusing on field officers who would have at least some control over events. This was

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Aichinger, *The American Soldier in Fiction 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment*. Ames; 1975. p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Archinger, p. 80; William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-1972*. London; 1975. p. 305.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

often combined with a subgenre, the secret mission. With such missions involving separation from the big war machine and a smaller task than winning a global war or even a campaign, individual heroism could be depicted believably and be successful.

Most campaign novels outside the secret mission sub-genre shared other qualities. They frequently examine not only the American military, but civilian life and find it hollow, pretentious and repressive. The lone hero also gives way to protagonists or a gallery of characters who now share not only his importance, but his heroic qualities.

One of the most memorable, complex and successful post war novels which displays the themes raised in three different genres, the home front, the secret mission and also campaign novels is Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. Focused on winning an American invasion of the fictional Japanese held island of Anopopei in 1944, it combines large themes and astute observations of common military life. It is unusual not only in combining three sub genres, but also in its cynical examination concerning what the Second World War was about. Like several other works, it shows that several characters attempt to be heroic, but all fail in different ways.

The first failure in heroism applies to the unquestioning, simple and patriotic type who wants to be a hero, represented by Privates Hennessey and Wyman and Corporal Toglio. Hennessey imagines himself standing, fighting off advancing Japanese. Hiding in his foxhole he shits himself and has nervous giggles while under bombardment. A mortar shell kills him when he tries to run away to get fresh unsoiled trousers. Wyman is the dreamer and the confabulator. He dreamt of being a battlefield hero, returning home with medals which would

impress the woman in his life. He wakes up to war's reality when with others he has to drag a cannon up a muddy hill and exhausted, lets go. When Croft interrogates the team about why this cannon was dropped Wyman summons up what little courage and honesty he has and tries to make a confession, but it sounds weak and insincere and when Goldstein gets the blame Wyman says nothing. Confabulating, he soon cannot recall his part in this. He does not even have the virtue of being a gentle innocent in the pecking order, later pathetically going in for torturing one of the lowest on the food chain, a caterpillar. Togliolo, thinks General Cummings is a swell guy and reprimands Red Valsen for ridiculing George Washington. Such views and his confidence in military planning make him considered an overgrown boy scout by many in his platoon. Ironically Togliolo gets what many of them they crave; what they call a million dollar wound. That phrase refers to an injury serious enough to get an honourable discharge and a trip home, but not serious enough to incapacitate. Private Minnetta turns a slight wound which gets gets him briefly hospitalised into a longer stay and even tries to extend that by faking paranoia. Later he happily dreams in his sleep of blowing off his foot. The irony of their fates shows the randomness of war. It also shows that schoolboy heroism will not have any reality in the unfolding campaign, such concepts remain on the landing beach with the debris or in the mud with the lost artillery piece.

Others amongst the ensemble cast possess remnants of some traditional heroic characteristics, but they are more knowing than Togliolo, Wyman and Hennessey. These men are Robert Hearn, General Cummings, Sergeant Croft, and Privates Red Valsen, Ridges, and Goldstein. Each one tries to do something heroic, but fails. Character,

beliefs, stoicism, intentions and actions count for little or nothing in a complex web of factors too nebulous for comprehension. Mailer shows all ideologies as unreliable and a threat to their adherents. With Lieutenant Hearn trying to be a heroic liberal leads to his death. The sufferings of the religious men Goldstein and Ridges for their squad member Wilson achieve nothing. In order to survive in their positions as warrior-leaders Croft and Cummings learn to modify their Nietzschean ambitions and behaviour and conceal their militaristic fascism. Private Red Valsen must abandon his rugged individualism, which also has a misanthropic edge, albeit without the combination of sadism and hunger for control over others that Cummings and Croft possess. As Richard Poirier argues, *The Naked and the Dead* shows the death of heroism and the rise of mediocrity in the post war world typified by Major Dalleson.<sup>4</sup>

Oddly the roles of Cummings and Dalleson bear some resemblance to the roles of Generals MacArthur and Eisenhower. In the middle of the 1930s when McArthur commanded American forces in the Philippines Major Eisenhower was one of his staff.<sup>5</sup> Like Cummings, MacArthur tried to be a Republican presidential candidate in the 1940s. He strove for this in 1944 and again in 1948, but it was Eisenhower who was more popular then and who won that candidature and ultimately the presidency. Eisenhower with his somewhat faked, easy-going folksy manner, platitudes and record as a football coach was more the team

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Poirier, *Mailer*. London; 1972. p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Korda, *Ike: An American Hero*. New York; 2007. p. 468 p. 587 pp. 606-607.



player in all situations and therefore, more popular. In strong contrast, MacArthur, being aristocratic, vain and with little understanding of human motivations, was a very divisive figure, deeply unpopular with many, both within the establishment and the electorate. Even one of MacArthur's most sympathetic biographers, William Manchester in his *American Caesar Douglas MacArthur 1880-1964*. (1978) frequently noted these tendencies.

This is not to say that Cummings and Dalleson are MacArthur and Eisenhower fictionalised. *The Naked and the Dead* was published in 1948 when several aspects of the MacArthur - Eisenhower rivalries were still unfolding and even what had happened was usually unknown. It would be 1978 before documents revealed that Eisenhower, far from being easy-going and simple like Dalleson, frequently worked eighteen hours a day on complex problems. Eisenhower's real personality was very different to Dalleson's and fools of Dalleson's calibre do not successfully wage a world war against as dangerous and successful an enemy as the Wehrmacht. Cummings in his "Time Machine" segment also revealed a hostile father and latent homosexuality. MacArthur had very good relations with his father and not even anyone amongst his many enemies accused MacArthur of homosexuality. Unless fiction coincidentally followed reality what Mailer was probably doing was taking only highly selective fragments from reality to put into his mosaic.

Mailer permeates his novel with disillusionment and cynicism: heroism's collapse becomes only one aspect of the loss of belief in the old order, good causes the hero fought for are also gone. In this novel the Pacific war is not really a noble crusade against fascism, but a

struggle between America and Japan for imperial control of Asia and the Pacific. When General Cummings asks his aide Lieutenant Hearn why they are fighting, Hearn replies that he supposes that in the fight against the Nazis right remains on the American side but in the Pacific two imperialist powers are fighting for a takeover and either winner will cause chaos in Asia.

General Cummings agrees, but unlike Hearn, he approves. Cummings admired Hitler in the 1930s and actively supported Franco. He looks forward to America emerging from the war as a fascist power, but unlike other fascist powers America will be properly organised, being systematic and those doing this will not cloak their intentions. Cummings's explanation reveals that he does not really understand fascism, which by its very nature has to be excessive. By 1944 there was ample evidence that fascism was an unsound, disastrous political theory. Although Cummings misunderstands this, he does see the potential for the military industrial complex to be the basis for that development. He also knows that once it has been established to win the war it will not be disassembled or wither away.

However foolish these political ideas are, others such as Major Dalleson and Sergeant Croft would probably agree with him. The depiction of the American army on Anopopei shows a force permeated by fascist values. Cummings sees the army as a hierarchical structure based on fear, which he identifies as "the fear ladder." He delights in making it clear to Hearn that the army operates on a pecking order. Hearn sees that the fear ladder, based as it is in suppressing enlisted men while gaining privilege for officers, must lead to conflict. When he asks how he fits into this system, Cummings accurately replies that he

does not, yet. Hearn remains an individualist in conflict with a system he despises, and like so many other post war protagonists, he will ultimately be destroyed by it.

He also lacks the traditional hero's luck and protective aura. No special treatment or glamour appears in his representation because he tries to be heroic. He even lacks the heroes' placing as being the single most dominant character, as he does not appear for the first tenth or the last sixth of the story. General Cummings, Red Valsen and Sergeant Croft appear for approximately as long and are their lives and personalities are presented in approximately as much depth. Mailer presents the civilian backgrounds of Hearn, General Cummings, Red Valsen, Sergeant Croft and six other soldiers in sections called 'The Time Machine,' so Mailer dissects a segment of the army, showing a cross section of American society. Mailer shows the lives of all these men; so Robert Hearn becomes one character among many. In the novel's second half Hearn appears as just one alienated man in Croft's alienated group, even if he is nominally in charge.

Throughout both his 'The Time Machine,' section which retells his life before enlistment and his life on Anopopei, he retains the good intentions and dislike for villainy which characterise the traditional hero. He also strives for the courage and integrity they have, but cannot develop the heroic ability to inspire, invigorate or successfully lead the group. He lacks the needed decisiveness, confidence and charisma for that task. This attitude links to his childhood. He feels alienated from his parents and their traditional belief in the family. They are depicted as rich, greedy, shallow conformists and he can see this. At college he strives for independence, rejecting his parents' money and opinions. He

briefly joins a Communist Party front organisation, but after defending the Spanish anarchists and anarco-syndicalists Al, the leader asks him to leave. Mailer does not make clear that in Spain's 1930s Civil War the communists murdered individual anarchists and used military force to suppress their communes. Mailer also does not mention that Communist Parties were structured hierarchically and on an essentially military pattern of fighting enemies and being obedient. Mailer implies that they too have a fear ladder. Even before enlisting in the American army Hearn is in a conflict on the edges of a war. Hearn and the local party leader Al have a revealing conversation. Al tells him that although he has reacted against capitalism's lies, his rebellion is nebulous and idealistic; this makes him undependable. Al then makes comments indicating that the heroism and individuality Hearn displays are because he has the confidence and freedom from economic worries which block his understanding of how the world works. He has not intended it but Al has linked heroism to a fortunate environment; the workers who do not have any money beyond the next pay packet are habituated to a fear of penury. Hearn has experienced neither.

Al understands several other important aspects of Robert Hearn's character. Despite his way of outwardly conforming to social pressures and seemingly belonging to various groups, he remains an individualist. He keeps his distance, refusing to blinker himself for the sake of beliefs. He argues against Communist Party policy and he also fights the union leadership when he is an organiser. He dislikes both leftist dogmatists, and his facile and boring publishing jobs. He considers joining the Spanish Republicans, then after the Second World War starts he tries to serve with the Canadians. When this fails, he considers joining the

Communist Party - and finally ends up enlisting in the American Army six weeks before Pearl Harbour. Although he searches for something to join and believe in, he lacks direction and commitment. Ultimately this realisation does not worry him.

This misanthropy, apathy, lack of direction and self-knowledge can only be the antithesis of the traditional hero's attitude. Hearn professes radical politics and defends humanistic ideals against his father and General Cummings, but his usual attitudes are unmistakably misanthropic and contemptuous and people see this, telling him that he only likes people as abstractions, not in reality. Such an attitude appears common in assorted utopians and humanitarians, but few American writers wrote that about heroes before the twentieth century and fewer gave justifications for such an attitude. Hearn acknowledges his failing and can see good reasons for it. Crass and mediocre men around him on Anopopei dislike him intensely because of these attitudes, which lead him into trouble as he was one of those people others enjoy humiliating.

Cummings, who feels but represses a latent homosexual attraction towards Hearn, enjoys debating and discrediting his ideas and humiliating him. Perhaps as a vain reflection of his own views or for a surrogate for sexual involvement, or perhaps as a part of the seduction process. There are also political motives in his games. The powerful, dictatorial superior has a devouring sadistic need to crush all decent and humanist beliefs held by the victim.

Hearn sounds weak when defending his liberal views, unable to disprove the general's arguments, but he refuses to concede. For the novel's first half Hearn fights a prolonged mind game with Cummings,

who is also a misanthropic intellectual, albeit of the right, while Hearn remains on the left.

Despite all his intellectual talk of the army being a machine he controls, Cummings cannot break the enemy Toyaku Line. After the American successful beach landing the Japanese establish this strong defence line between the mountains and the sea and the American force begins to lose strength, enthusiasm and energy as their campaign stalls. Cummings finds not only victory elusive, but his control of his army to be disintegrating. This comes as a deep, unbelievable shock to his confidence. He feels that his war machine directs itself where it desires while he as the driver becomes unable to exert any control. For a general this must be their worst nightmare: for Cummings it becomes a reality. For a military hero the loyalty, admiration, obedience, and self-sacrifice of his command are essential. These qualities reflect the hero's own, combined with his ability to inspire. Cummings's realization of his failure to command shows that the repressive society in *The Naked and the Dead* cannot always be invincible and its devotees cannot always control it. The seemingly invulnerable Nietzschean leader is not a godlike hero, even if this is what he strives to be. For a hero failure can only be redeemed by noble self-sacrifice and this does not emerge as one of the general's traits. When his campaign stalls his insecurities emerge, revealing him as weak, insecure, and immature. Even diarrhoea strongly affects his mood, making him more petulant and vindictive and even less the would-be hero-leader. Unlike Hearn, he proves to lack fortitude, stoicism and grace under pressure, sweating in his bed, flexing his hands in vexation and burning with rage.

Although Cummings makes others suffer by enforcing strict, petty regulations, Hearn becomes his main target. He humiliates him through a series of sly mind games that make him a contemptible object for enlisted men and other officers. Cummings does not appear as the only one exposed as unheroic and unsuccessful in this campaign. Hearn acts as Cummings's glorified errand boy. The General manoeuvres him into dealing with and therefore caring about silly points of protocol, just like the soldiers Hearn has to deal with. They are concerned with materialistic trifles and maintaining their place in the pecking order. Like Cummings, they focus on petty things because they cannot win with what has to be important: integrity, individuality and courage are alien to them.

Mailer presents the soldier's role as unheroic in much of *The Naked and the Dead*. When Cummings orders Hearn to pick up a cigarette butt or get five years imprisonment, the General is trying to break Hearn, now placed in a situation where neither his parent's money nor his self-confidence can help. The system will crush him. Cummings may be vexed, pathetic and silly, but he embodies law on Anopopei and can punish without justice at will. As Cummings tells Hearn, he functions as a modern day embodiment of Ancient draconian power, which he fits into his fear ladder. He then explains that the way to get his own way and inspire awe will be through power which has to be immense, disproportionate and similar to that of Old Testament prophets. We can only wonder if those twenty-first century politicians and commentators who talk of inflicting shock and awe have read *The Naked and the Dead*.

Hearn has enough courage left to point out to General Cummings that while he might control him with threats about cigarette butts, he

cannot control the whole division that way. Hearn soon realises that General Cummings has left him broken, spiritually poisoned and disorientated. Cummings has also recreated within Hearn the same sense of shattered confidence, vexation and physical sickness that the campaign gave him.

After Hearn begins a childish campaign of dumb insolence, Cummings concludes that he threatens his authority, but court martialling him would be awkward and dangerous for his career, so he designs a dangerous mission for Hearn. He will check if Japanese troops occupy the pass before Mount Anaka. If Hearn returns with news that it is not he will send troops through the pass in a flanking attack and so the secret mission will lead to a campaign victory. Ironically the mission has many qualities of the hero journey apart from its importance in bringing about a decisive victory. Hearn must take a select group through dangerous, unknown, exotic and hostile territory. The initial presentation of the landscape appears as very similar to that in traditional stories and Mailer makes the comparisons. When the soldiers first see the wilderness they must traverse, the sight conjures up thoughts of magic, danger, adventure, beauty, sensuality and desire. Being sensual and resembling Biblical lands with its ruby wines, beaches of golden sands and indigo trees, it initially seems like something out of traditional tales. This sight becomes a vision of heaven that they long for, made achingly desirable after their months of torment in the jungle. That part of the island looks like a paradise, a heavenly reward for heroes, but a menace waits there. That menace is not only the Japanese, but a fear of the unknown and of death, which a totally black seascape soon reinforces that night. They then can read no other meanings into its



total absence of movement, of colour or of any life. For three in the platoon the description of this deathly black vision foretells their immediate future.

This contrast also shows the reality of another cultural stereotype; the tropical paradise. Just as Mailer exposes the reality behind glorious images of army life he experienced in the Pacific War, he exposes another also experienced reality there, the locale. Seen from the sea many a tropical locale can initially seem wonderful, lands of ruby coloured fruit, golden sanded beaches and indigo trees indeed, usually with gloriously bright blue skies and swaying palms in a light breeze. Such depictions written up by Melville, Maugham, Michener, Nordoff and Hall and Stevenson and made much of by Hollywood, are facile. Behind such settings the jungle awaits with many entwined threats; fetid air, humidity, sweltering heat, pestilential mosquitoes and reptiles, ubiquitous insects, entangling slashing vines, rashes, malaria, festering insect bites and vermin and claustrophobic undergrowth. It will prove to be as much of an enemy as the Japanese and fuel the personal weaknesses and enmities at work within the patrol.

To conquer the land Hearn must overcome these dangers and the dread they cause. If Hearn succeeds he may help turn a defeat into a victory and so prove his courage and skill, albeit to himself, if not to others.

Despite these similarities to the traditional hero journey, Mailer frequently replaces many of its aspects with its opposite, which he describes in an ironic, cynical tone. Hearn has no loyal followers. Instead his group are grubby, fatigued individuals who are either reluctant, hostile or apathetic about the mission and the war, dreaming of million

dollar wounds and getting home and indulging in mind games which show their superiority over their target. To Hearn they are inherently if coldly hostile and he uneasily senses this.

Croft's platoon are not the frequently glorified common folk of so much populist, patriotic, traditional and Marxist fiction. Hearn even thinks the usual aristocratic complaint about the lower classes, the soldiers are supposedly dirty, diseased and ugly. With sallow skins, jungle sores and sloppy unkempt clothing.

Their behaviour during the mission reveals that the platoon is not really a team of people's protectors, but a group of alienated, atomised individuals; each of them being primarily concerned with his own survival. Their secondary concerns are also personal and have nothing to do with winning the war. Like Wyman, Hennessey and Toglio, Goldstein, Ridges, and Sergeant Martinez who try to stand by the old values and be good soldiers, are often despised by many of the others. Even those platoon leaders seemingly concerned with being good soldiers, Sergeant Croft and his non-commissioned officers Brown and Stanley, resemble Cummings and Dalleson in being self-serving calculating careerists. On the mission Brown and Stanley give up on this when the pressure builds up and nobody can see their failures and their shirking. Even Hearn, who tries to be a fair-minded, successful leader, for a time becomes muddled and half-hearted in his ideas. During the mission, on the day before his death, he does make a clear and brave decision to renounce privilege and exploitation: he will resign his commission and be an enlisted man. He makes this choice without any romanticised views about the common person or his future: He knows that it will be painful and he will fit into the fear ladder. Hearn then sees

himself as an anarchist in a repressive era and the acts of defiance he dreams of are adolescent. He clearly has fallen into deep trouble and heading for more even before he walks into the ambush. Others are also well-intentioned, but even those who show some altruism are ineffectual. Privates Goldstein and Ridges go on a testing journey when they carry the mortally wounded Private Wilson through ten miles of rainforest to the base. It is a hellish journey. Heavily built Wilson almost incessantly and loudly whines, being ungratefully abusive. The humid climate hangs over a harsh terrain and the men have little rest, being already nearly exhausted when they started carrying the mortally wounded G.I. Then Brown and Stanley, the ones who already hold some rank, leave them. Ridges and Goldstein show extraordinary stoicism, loyalty and endurance and succeed in returning, but their unselfish efforts were useless. Wilson dies at the river's edge, just as they can transport him more easily and not long before they reach the base. Exhausted into near somnolence, they float the dead Wilson down the river, only to lose his body to the current just before they reach the haven of the beach. When that happens the symbolism of carrying Wilson openly emerges and Ridges and Goldstein both interpret this as being an expression of life's ultimate nihilism: they read a larger pattern into this incident through their different backgrounds and religious beliefs.

After exposing illusions concerning the American military world, the American Communist Party, America itself as the land of freedom and plenty, and then patriotism, capitalism, fascism, anti-Semites, traditional ideas of heroism, the average G.I. and his general, right -

wing extremists, Japanese imperialism and the myth of the tropical paradise, Mailer then attacks one of the last targets left – God.

Ridges, an uneducated, devout Baptist farmer, carried Wilson because he believes that leaving Wilson would be sinful, it would be murder. He believes God watches and that sin will leave a permanent black stain on his white soul. When Wilson floats away and cannot have the Christian burial Ridges felt was important his faith begins to ebb and latent resentments about his family's life as sharecroppers who work hard and never get anywhere surface. He then feels left with only bitterness. Ridges then has a moment of total nihilism, the pensive feeling of emptiness they experienced on the arrival on the beach returns now, unfolding in a realisation that God if he existed was a cruel joker and so nothing matters.

Goldstein has a similar moment of despair. Being motivated by his belief that being Jewish meant that he must defend compassionate values as Israel exists as a heart for all nations, he believes in striving for justice and being compassionate. His experiences on the mission lead him to believing that the heart can die and the body still live. He subconsciously equates the burden of carrying Wilson with the burden of being Jewish in the 1940s. Realising that he survives without success in either effort, his feelings are numbed and he has only a dull despair. For Ridges and Goldstein the numbing night blackness at the beach has touched them and adumbrated their loss of belief; although unlike Wilson, Hearn and Roth who were also witness to the blackness and ultimately went into blackness, they are still alive.

Despite their despair and loss of belief, these two men have gained something for their efforts. Unlike Brown who feels shame and a sense

of worthlessness for opting out, they feel no guilt. On the beach they share the water after Goldstein finds that the water's taste changes from delightful to brackish when he realises Ridges has none. They also have the confidence to face being alone without food on the jungle's edge with a smile and an assurance that they will get by. If they have lost religious belief they have gained self-assurance and comradery. The virtues of Goldstein and Ridges, like the virtues of the others who try to be heroic, are mere traces of the old heroism. The traditional hero has no place here.

No confident, defending community leaders uphold goodness in *The Naked and the Dead*. Like many villains, Cummings plays this role as a charade to lure the hero into failure and danger. He sends the young hero on his journey, but instead of sharing wisdom he imparts cynicism. Instead of warning, he sets traps. Instead of encouraging what is good in the young hero he tries to corrupt him. Instead of defending and leading the community he tries to manipulate it into serving his ambitions.

Sergeant Croft also does these things, helping doom Hearn. Located where the donor figure should be, beside the hero on the journey, he becomes a nemesis, not a donor. Like that archetype, he is an unmarried older loner, shrewd, courageous, knowledgeable and experienced. He also comes from the pioneer tradition which emphasizes self-reliance, stoicism, patience, efficiency, strength and energy. He displays these characteristics, but despite his frontier heritage many of his other personality traits are villainous. This villainy can also come from the west for he is a hunter, a killer who loves nothing but satisfying his own desires and proving his superiority to others, whom he holds in contempt. He compares all other males to dogs, women as whores who

are deer to track. Sadism, conceit and meanness dominates his character. In an attitude of total narcissism he hates everything that is not himself.

Who or what he kills does not matter to Croft. As a child he started with deer, then in the 1930s he gleefully shot a unionist striker dead. Croft's acts are the opposite of those of the traditional adviser. He despises Hearn, gives him no help, wrecks the mission and causes Hearn's death when he misleads him over the Japanese in the pass.

When Martinez finds the Japanese defences the mission has failed, but under Sergeant Croft it becomes a fiasco. By taking over the platoon and the mission after Hearn's death he positions himself as the warrior-leader, albeit unsuccessfully. Like Hearn he breaks military discipline and fails to be a successful hero: his attempt to reshape the mission into an attempt on Mount Anaka shows that trying to be a hero can be dangerous for his army. If Hearn under-reaches his rank by deciding to be a private, Croft over-reaches his by becoming a defacto officer, deciding what the mission should now be. He ignores Hearn's instructions, by extending the mission when they should return with news. Succeeding in climbing Mount Anaka becomes a personal, almost mystical challenge removed from both their set task and a military justification.

This challenging hero journey weakens, rather than strengthens Croft's strong characteristics. His confidence had taken a blow when he nearly died during an earlier Japanese attack, an experience which established a fear of death and a sense of his vulnerability, apparently for the first time in his life. His betrayal of Hearn has also confused and unsettled him, as it goes against military values that are part of himself. By pitting himself and the platoon against the wilderness and Mount

Anaka he has placed himself in a conflict that must be impossible to really win as he is disobeying orders. Threatening and pushing the exhausted and resentful platoon drains his physical and mental strength, until like Ridges and Goldstein, he continues by willpower alone, being physically weakened by the energy required in the nightmarish terrain and climate and drained mentally by anxiety.

When he tries to get the platoon to climb the mountain, he reaches his breaking point. The hornets are a comparatively weak cause for his breaking after the horrors and hardships they have endured, but Mount Anaka drains his last strength. The hornet attack also reveals that fate goes against him. He lacks the hero's luck, so essential to success in military narratives. Subconsciously he wanted an excuse to weaken. His role as the iron warrior was not only destroying his control over the exhausted platoon and isolating him, but was threatening his existence: if exhaustion or the Japanese did not kill him his remaining soldiers might. With this depiction of Croft Mailer indicates that the would-be hero can be a menace to his own side for two reasons: on the campaign level Croft has destroyed the purpose of the mission by not reporting that the pass was occupied. On the platoon's level Croft, rather than the unseen Japanese, is their enemy. Even Sergeant Croft senses the self-destructive element within being a hero and realises that he wants to survive and limit his desire to conquer. Ultimately he finds rest in failure and an acceptance of limitations.

On the voyage back he sees the mountain, initially yearning to conquer it, but he reconsiders. He sees the limits of his individualism, and that although there may be no perfection elsewhere, living in that way cannot guarantee success. Now he is a team member and needs

company, having taken a vital hurt and getting a sense of possessing only eroded courage. Yet he also feels the cost of failure, the cost of being excluded both from the target of the quest and from the exhilarating self-revelation granted to the successful hero.

Along with the heroic potential of Hearn and Croft, the journey also destroys worthwhile qualities within Red Valsen. He resembles Sergeant Croft in that he too emerged as a tough individualist from the West, but Red hates the military life. His literary ancestor is Huckleberry Finn, the prototype of many American wanderers in twentieth century American fiction.

Despite their similar desires and way of life, Red also reveals differences from Huck. Red lacks his audacity, wit, compassion, innocence and naiveté. Red thoughts and words reveals usually sullen, cynical and pessimistic viewpoints.

Differing levels of maturity are only one reason for this outlook. For Red, there are no unsettled Western territories to light out to anymore. Ironically Red comes from Montana, where Huck settled down: Red wants to escape from there. He lived until he was eighteen in a drab mining town, where his family scraped to stay out of poverty. At thirteen he saw his father killed in a mining accident and did what his society thought was decent and moral, he began work as a miner, providing for his family. The cost of such decency can only be wage slavery. He knows this could be a lifelong trap, so he leaves his family and girlfriend and wanders off with undefined longings for freedom. He drifts into life as a hobo, subsisting in a world of brothels, all night cafes and freight cars. He has no religion or ideology, no support system. These are for people who want the emotional or intellectual security that



comes with fixed beliefs, peer group support, stability and material success - and Red wants none of that. When he hears arguments about socialist and fascist revolutions he remains apathetic and laconic. Like Hearn he finds work and relationships easily, but he always leaves because settling down leads to numbing death. His nihilism becomes so extreme that he cannot be content, even as a hobo. Again, like Hearn, he finds himself frequently trapped between alternatives he dislikes and he also volunteers for the army, despite knowing that his individualistic outlook will lead to confrontations. His shrewdness and ability to stay out of trouble only delay them.

When Red gets into trouble, no one supports him. He alone defies Croft's order to climb Mount Anaka. When Croft threatens to shoot him, he realises that he cannot defeat Croft alone. If the others supported him he could, but they do not and facing Croft's rifle arouses the survival instincts that have kept him going for years, so he backs down, humiliated. Red's years of military service, isolation, and continual resistance have worn him down, physically and mentally. They have sapped his will to live in continual rebellion. He feels the tired leanness of his body and a permanently aching back leaves him weak and lethargic. He resembles Croft in that when he does give in there some relief comes with the humiliation; he faces up to that. After Croft destroys Red's old personality, a new repulsive personality emerges, one that resembles that of Stanley and sneaky calculating servile Pollack. He knowingly becomes a sneak: after being told by Croft not to spit in the patrol boat he surreptitiously spits and wipes it on his bunk. He joins in a seemingly mindless, lusty sing-a-long in which the confabulating platoon take on the words of manipulating triumphant aggressors. At

last he seems to be one of the boys. Or is he? Unlike several of the other privates, he knows what the experiences on Mount Anaka have made him become and does not confabulate. His assimilation into the military machine would seem to be superficially complete as he realises he has run out of personal strength and that he resembles a squealing little bolt in a machine, making his noise because the machine goes too fast.

The confabulatory process others take part in centres on the outcome of the mission. Wyman looks at Mount Anaka and incredulously asks did they really climb it, confabulating again by forgetting that they did not. They suddenly develop pride in themselves and consider how they will retell the story, now being pleased with themselves as they have their celebratory sing-a-long. This glorifying cultural fragment indicates much about culture that glorifies war. Here it hides the useless deaths, failures, suffering and degradation, the sadism, the breaking of willpower and loss of personality, the cowardice malingering and failed good intentions both on this mission. Beyond this example it raises the question of does this sing-a-long provide an example applying to culture dealing with war? Like this example, how much of culture glorifying war or military heroism is fakery or confabulating with misunderstandings?

The platoon also misunderstands its mission. Unlike traditional journeys that are important and successful, the mission became not only unsuccessful, but irrelevant: the exhausted Japanese force on the Toyaku line has collapsed while they were away and so their holding of the pass was of no importance. General Cummings overestimated Japanese stamina. As Cummings was also away when the Toyaku Line disintegrated, Major Dalleson, a colourless, mediocre careerist takes

charge. He makes all the right, obvious decisions and Cummings must congratulate and perhaps promote him, although Cummings remains aware that for the Americans virtually anybody could have won the campaign. This outcome forces General Cummings to see that this victory and indeed any victories do not rely on individuals, but on good luck and random factors which are too vague and too much interwoven into other events for him to comprehend,

General Cummings ponders on Hearn's death, facing his sadism and yet on learning of Hearn's death, Cummings comes close to grieving for Hearn but instead of facing his motives he covers over something else, something more complex, factors which mingle pain with satisfaction. He can face that he set up Hearn to be killed, but he cannot face why.

Seeing inside General Cummings's mind reveals no omnipotent villain, or a Napoleonic dictator, but a fearful, frequently deluded social climber. To survive in his current position or climb higher on the fear ladder he realises that he must modify his political opinions. Like Croft he comes to see that survival involves modification, persons are not infinitely malleable, mediocrities thrive and confrontationist tactics fail. Such realizations led him to planning on a change of professions, tactics and ideologies. For Cummings they are all devices to gain what really counts for people like him: personal advancement and power. He even dreams of the Presidency as he has many enemies in the army, so he will not get another star on his shoulder strap before this war ended. If he wanted advancement before the war with Russia began conservative liberalism was the safest masquerade in the state department as extremists do not flourish there and time presses on him.

While Cummings modifies his plans so as to succeed, the novel concludes with Dalleson, who happily dreams of arranging parades and inspections and corny ways to jazz up” military classes. Alone among the characters, he has succeeded, and seemed a hero, merely by fortuitously being in the right place at the right time.

Cummings, Hearn, Croft. Valsen, Toglio, Wyman, Ridges and Goldstein all tried to do something heroic and they all failed in ironic ways, and all sink to some level of suffering and degradation because they try to be heroic: human effort has the unseen effects discussed. All six and the fortunate Dalleson have made their history, but not as they planned. Despite the different ways they try to embody heroism, the campaign makes them all different men to what they expected to be. Hearn the staff officer wanted to find meaning in his life was killed leading a futile patrol. For most of the narrative Cummings and Croft never considered modifying their behaviour but ultimately were forced to. Valsen the rebel and loner never expected to be a servile rat, a team member. Wyman wanted to be a hero and ended up a coward. Toglio wanted to serve and was discharged. Ridges and Goldstein, both so sincere in the beliefs which were part of them, never expected to be disillusioned into religious unbelief. Dalleson’s interests were in staff matters, not winning the victory.

Even the great strength and power of the army could not be harnessed the way Cummings wanted: if it will be changed it will be to fit the crass ideas of Dalleson. Unlike Cummings, he considers if his ideas will be popular, and they probably will be, as he is vulgar.

Many post war writers such as Mailer saw that when the common man’s values became preeminent that mediocrity, materialism, philistine

values and a pervasive conformity would also be preeminent.<sup>6</sup> The hero figure would be increasingly alienated from these values and the society that upheld them, becoming sardonic enemies of society.

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Norman Mailer in 1948, the Year *The Naked and the Dead* was published. Photographed by Carl Van Vechten / Public domain/ Library of Congress/ Wikipedia.

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<sup>6</sup> Chester E. Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties*. Chicago; 1963. p. 17; Dwight MacDonal, “Masscult and Midcult” pp. 3-79.

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