A sickness of the soul: remembering Adam and Tim Davis

Correction submitted by Delta Company paratrooper: five, not four, paratroopers died from the IED. "Matthew Taylor died September 27th, 2007 from wounds suffered from the IED. Rogers was killed along with Davis, Rogers, Johnson, and 1SG Curry in the D11 vehicle."

Not every man has a positive relationship with his brother. Tim Davis did; he loved his younger brother Adam, and looked up to him. Tim was shy, but Adam was gregarious and outgoing. The two brothers grew up in Idaho, had the same History teacher in high school, and attended the same Basic Training class in 2006. They dreamt of joining the same unit. Things didn't work out the way they planned, though. And when Adam deployed to Afghanistan in May of 2007 with the 173rd, Tim wasn't there—he was in Fort Hood, Texas. That July, driving down a dusty road in Sarobi District, Paktika Province, Adam died in an IED blast that killed his First Sergeant and two other soldiers. He was 19 years old.

A part of Tim died, too—a hole opened up in him that he attempted to fill with alcohol to no avail. After being discharged from the Army, he grew suicidal.

"Everything he did from the time he failed Airborne School was affected by what he perceived as letting Adam down," said Tim's father, Tim Davis, via Facebook. "His job, as far as he was concerned, was to keep Adam safe."

Life is filled with connections and causes that seem obscure

at the time. One of the reasons war holds such fascination for its participants
is that causal relationships all become clear in retrospect. A man dies,
another man lives. A brother or son or daughter dies, a brother or sister or
father or mother lives. One can trace grief back to a particular choice, a
moment in time. Grief is knowable. Loss is comprehensible. Guilt is something a
person can carry with them like a boulder, like alcoholism, drug abuse,
despair, and suicide.

This memorial is for Adam Davis, a Charlie Company and then Delta

Company paratrooper and Sky Soldier of the 173rd Airborne Brigade
Combat Team. It is also to his brother Tim Davis, a National Guardsman who
never got over Adam's death, or the pain of separation that preceded that
death. It's the story of two men from America's heartland who wanted to serve
their country together, neither of whom are alive today.

Adam Davis

Adam Davis was born on July 27, 1987 in Twin Falls, Idaho to Tracy Carrico. His grandfather served in the Navy during WWII. In his obituary,
Adam's described as a fan of science fiction and fantasy novels. The obituary
describes him as having enjoyed spending time with his horse, hiking, and
listening to music.

Photo of Adam Davis in Vicenza, Italy, taken by his roommate, Phillip A. Massey. Circa 2007.

Jerome, Idaho, the town in which Adam is buried, has been growing steadily since 2000. Since the census placed the population at 7,780, it has expanded to over 11,000 people, driven in part by expanded employment opportunities, and partly by the spillover from those opportunities (15% of the population lives below the poverty line, a bit above average for the U.S.).

Located a few km northwest of Twin Falls, it's also a few kilometers north of the Snake River. The entire area was nicknamed "Magic Valley" at the turn of last century, when two industrial dams "magically" tamed the Snake River, transforming previously uninhabitable territory into beautiful land, ideal for human habitation.

Nearly 12% of Idaho resides in the "Magic Valley," or about 185,000 people. Adam was the first from the area to be killed during Operation Enduring Freedom.

Long way home

Adam dropped out of high school, but finished his GED at a local community college. When he joined the military, he had a plan: qualify for the GI Bill, go to college, get a degree, and become a professor of English. When he finished training, he received a piece of unexpected news:

rather than going to the 82nd Airborne with his brother Tim, Adam

was to be sent to the 173rd Airborne, in Italy.

His introduction to the 173rd was rocky, as it often is with elite units. When assigned to 1-503rd's Charlie "March or Die" Company, the first thing he did was walk up to the hardest sergeant in the unit, Sergeant Berkowski (a mountain of a man and a great non-commissioned officer to everyone who knew him), wearing a Weezer tee-shirt with his hands in his pockets and said "I'm supposed to be in Charlie Company." One of the squad leaders in first platoon, Adam Alexander, remembered this episode and the 'smoke session' (a physical reminder of the importance of discipline) that followed via email, and described Davis as a competent soldier who "had a lot of heart."

Adam's first roommate at the 173rd was Phil Massey, a soldier who'd arrived in Charlie Company's 1st Platoon (to which Adam was assigned) a week before. Davis was plugged into Weapons Company as an ammo bearer for the 240B medium machinegun, and stood out among the other paratroopers for his size (he was shorter than most) and his tenacity (he made up for his height with his determination never to quit or be last). Massey developed great affection for his small roommate, writing via email that Davis "in PT would sometimes take on the task of bigger guys and lead the way… he

would clean his weapon as fast as anyone else in the squad, and was always there when needed. He was a soldier and a paratrooper, and nothing stopped the little guy's spirit."

Davis's platoon leader, Matt Svensson, had similar things to say about the Idaho native's resolve, discipline and professionalism.

First Platoon's Platoon Sergeant at the time, then-SSG promotable Steven Voline, highlighted Adam Davis's professionalism while discussing his value as a soldier, and went out of his way to describe why Davis was ultimately moved from Charlie Company to Delta Company, the mounted heavy weapons platoon: "Everyone loved having him around because he kept the mood light and always had a smile," Voline said. "Even when times were tough and training was rigorous, he continued to keep a positive outlook."

Voline described evidence of the young paratrooper's resolve. "I remember being at a range somewhere in Italy and we were doing CQB (close quarters battle) qualification tables and his magazine changes were too slow. If I'm not mistaken, he stayed awake doing magazine changes through the entire night iteration training for each Platoon. It ended up being an extra 3-4 hours with his Squad Leader (Sergeant Berkowski) just dropping a mag and inserting the follow on."

As every soldier knows, maintaining a sunny disposition and positive outlook under those circumstances is trying for the best tempered soldier. Having a paratrooper like Adam around was a boon for his fellow

soldiers, and Voline said that’s why he sent Davis to another Company when the tasking came down from higher to send Charlie Co soldiers to Delta Company:
“Adam was the type of soldier who’d succeed anywhere,” wrote his former Platoon Sergeant.

Delta Company

When Adam moved to Delta Company, he was quick to make friends there, and developed a reputation as an easygoing, good-natured and dependable soldier.

“Davis was a lot like me,” wrote Matthew Frye via email. Then a First Lieutenant, Frye was Delta Company’s Fire Support Officer, and remembered the last time he saw Adam. “He was a funny kid who kept his platoon on its toes with his shenanigans.” Days before Davis’s fateful final patrol in Afghanistan, he was talking with Lieutenant Frye about a soon-to-be-released video game, Medal of Duty: Airborne.

“Occasionally the officers would square off with the enlisted in a video game where we could bond with them in a somewhat professional manner,” wrote Frye. “Some smack talking would be involved and a few pushups for the losers would be owed at the end. I had ordered the video game a couple of days prior and told him when he got back from patrol it would be game time.”

That game time would never arrive.

Tim Davis

Tim Davis died, some say, of heartbreak over the loss of his younger brother Adam. Things started going badly for him when he went AWOL from Basic training in order to be closer to Adam—the two believed they had signed up for an Army program that guaranteed they'd both be assigned to the same unit. While Adam was assigned to the 173rd, though, Tim came down on orders for the 82nd Airborne.

"Adam was so happy he came down on orders for Italy until Tim told him that he got Bragg, then everything went sour," said Anthony Roszell, who went to Basic training with the brothers. Roszell, who ended up in C Company's first platoon with Adam, described the brothers as especially close, "pretty much attached at the hip," he wrote via Facebook. They always hung out together, with Tim staying on at Fort Benning to keep his brother company, even though he'd gone AWOL and missed his chance at the 82nd Airborne on Fort Bragg.

We are the product of our backgrounds, and especially so the network of relationships we build during childhood. Tim and Adam built up a very powerful bond, so powerful, in fact, that they joined the military together. When Adam was assigned to the 173rd Airborne in Italy, it came as a shock and a great disappointment to Tim.

Profile picture from Tim Davis' Facebook page. The photo appears to have been posted in 2012.

The outrage of what Tim saw as the military's betrayal impacted his performance at Airborne School, and he failed

out. He was sent to Fort Hood, where he served with the Army until Adam's death. After that, it was a sequence of bad choices or plans that didn't amount to much. He was never able to reverse the string of disappointments; a successful stint as an Army National Guard recruiter was not enough to permit Tim a combat deployment, as he hoped, in 2010; following that, he was discharged, and worked toward a career in cabinetry. None of that made up for the dashed hopes of serving with his brother. While life had never been easy for Tim, when Adam died, something in Tim's life stopped, too.

"Tim had a very hard time in life," said Amber Watson, Tim and Adam's sister. "He was always worried about something, or thought something
was wrong."

A phenomenon of the Social Media age, Tim's Facebook page is still active, here.
This means one can read his wall, and see his struggle unfold in real
time—anger with life, struggles with faith, sadness at having lost his brother.
Frustration with a senseless world where relationships and events *don't* have meaning, necessarily. Where
things don't work out. At one point, he mentions running into his high school
crush, who's named. This person exists on Facebook. From her profile, she's
married, with children—happily employed.

"I'm sure [Tim] felt like he let Adam down," wrote their father, Tim Davis. "He said Adam wanted them to be together. Tim was glad to
return to Fort Hood."

A mission south

Paktika Province is a sparsely-populated area about 33%

larger than the U.S. state of Delaware that includes desert, mountains, and intermittently-fertile valleys. Those valleys where rain falls in sufficient amount to sustain life hold most of the people. The remainder of the areas hold scattered tribes who make do the best they can in a harsh and uncompromising climate. The elevation varies from 6,000 to over 9,000 feet on some mountains.

In 2007 the Army was pursuing Counter-Insurgency (or COIN) Doctrine. The purpose of COIN is to defeat insurgency by refusing the enemy military or propaganda victories, while allowing the government to provide people with more and better assistance than the insurgents. The common term for COIN was “winning hearts and minds.”

At the time, units would “own” battle space—be responsible for defeating enemy activity there, and also for spreading goodwill among the populace. Adam’s company, Delta, was a bit smaller than the other units. Geographically, they were responsible for a larger space than some of the other units, but in terms of population, their area was the least populated. Afghans were spread out in villages of some dozens or hundreds of people, depending on their proximity to water, roads, or the riverbeds (*wadis* in the local tongue) that served as roads in many areas.

According to Matthew Frye, Delta Company had been training Afghan National Police (ANP) in far-flung district centers when the unit

arrived in May of 2007. By July, it had become clear that the distances required to travel were exposing the unit to risk, and making it more difficult to accomplish a key tenant of COIN: living with the population one was attempting to protect or train. When the unit had arrived in theater, there was no obvious place to quarter an entire unit's worth of paratroopers, so Delta began evaluating suitable locations for a permanent Company base as part of their training missions. On July 23rd, during a mission south from the Battalion base in Orgun, a Delta convoy struck an IED in Sarobi District. Adam J. Davis, Michael S. Curry, Jr., and Travon T. Johnson were killed immediately. Jesse S. Rogers expired later from his wounds.

The IED

Improvised Explosive Devices or "IEDs" were becoming more sophisticated and prevalent in Afghanistan in 2006-07. For years, the U.S. military hadn't needed to worry about roadside bombs in Afghanistan, encountering ambushes and sometimes large enemy attacks in the mountains, instead. But trans-national insurgents or terrorists would take successful strategies from one place—in the case of IEDs, Iraq—and bring them elsewhere. IEDs began making their way into Afghan roads, and then, became increasingly deadly.

As is often the case with weapons, the Army found itself in

an arms race with the Taliban and Al Qaeda, in which the Army would develop a way to defeat IEDs, and then the bomb-makers would develop a new method or procedure to overcome the military's technological advantage. In the beginning of the conflict, the most popular type of roadside bomb in Afghanistan had been pressure-plate or pressure detonated IEDs, where the weight of the vehicle would set off the bomb, blowing anything above it to pieces. This had the undesirable (from insurgents' point of view) effect of killing civilians as often as it did Americans. By 2006-07, they were relying increasingly on "remote detonated" IEDs, triggered by someone with a walkie-talkie or cell phone, who could ensure that the correct target (US forces) were being struck.
As a result, US forces equipped their vehicles with signal-jamming devices that prevented signal-initiated devices from detonating. Delta Company had such devices installed in their vehicles.

The IED that struck Adam's vehicle, on which he was turret gunner, was a large pressure plate IED. The electronic jamming system was useless.

A sickness of the soul

The deaths of Adam and the other paratroopers—especially Michael Curry, who was nearing retirement and had a great reputation among his peer NCOs—struck Delta Company hard, but also took a toll on the Battalion.

July of 2007 was a difficult month for the 173rd Airborne Brigade, with Major Tom Bostick of the Brigade's cavalry unit (another beloved paratrooper, and former Bravo or "Legion" Company commander in Adam's Battalion) dying in combat in Nuristan, and Juan Restrepo of 2nd Battalion dying in Kunar Province (a documentary named after an outpost named in Restrepo's honor is one of the finest of its type to describe fighting in Afghanistan).

The paratroopers who died that day are still remembered by the people they served with, and by their families. But the memory of Adam was too much for Tim.

"TJ and I became close as we got older," said Watson, Davis' sister. "I was the one he'd call when he wanted to talk… the night before [Adam's] funeral he went and had the coroner open the casket, and it made him very unhappy."

Watson wrote that Tim struggled with suicidal thoughts, and even attempted to act on those impulses. "I went to see him in rehab a couple times," she wrote. On January 18, 2016, he passed away. His obituary reads "the most we can tell is that he succumbed to a sickness of the soul which had been with him since his brother Adam passed away nine years ago in Afghanistan."

The Italian Front in WWI: Bad Tactics, Worse Leadership, and Pointless Sacrifice

During this ongoing centenary of the First World War, interest in "The War to End All Wars" has returned, especially in the form of articles and essays. In the English-speaking world, this is almost always focused on the Western Front and the battles featuring Britain or the USA (I contributed to this phenomenon with my essay discussing Robert Graves, Goodbye to Christmas Truces). The contributions of nations on other fronts are largely forgotten in this context. How many people even know which side Romania or Bulgaria fought on, or where Galicia is? The Italian Front is also largely unknown in the Anglosphere, except perhaps to note that it is the setting for Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. After reading Mark Thompson's *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front 1915-1919* (Basic Books, 2010), I learned a great deal about this important historical chapter, and strongly recommend this book to all readers of history.

The Charnel-house of Pasubio, towering over the Venetian plain

I have lived in Italy for 10 years, during which time my passion for history and mountains has served me well. I have hiked up dozens of alpine peaks still crisscrossed with trenches, tunnels, and artillery positions. The World War I front is ubiquitous in northeast Italy, stretching over 400 miles across the Dolomites and Julian Alps from Lake Garda to the Isonzo River in Slovenia. When I was in the U.S. Army I

participated in a battalion staff ride to the Asiago plateau north of Vicenza to study the battlefield. As an artillery officer myself I was responsible for researching and giving a presentation to the group about the nature of indirect fire during the war. There are many enormous, Fascist-era war memorials and charnel-houses along the front holding the mortal remains of tens of thousands or more of fallen soldiers. I have visited these monumental tombs at Asiago, Pasubio, Monte Grappa, and Caporetto several times each, and it is always a sobering experience. Every town in Italy displays a plaque in the public square with the names of those native sons who died in the wars, a dozen or less in the case of the smallest villages. Unlike America, which has not seen war on its own soil since the 1865, the memories of the two world wars live on in a much more profound way in Italy and all the countries of Europe. In Italy's case, the ostensible "victory" of the First World War make it the source of a continuing myth of heroism. Here's the truth: Italy's participation and conduct in that war was a total disaster that led directly to its two decades of Fascist rule, and subsequent defeat in the next world war.

Bad Tactics

- Alpini, Italian mountain soldiers still revered today, climbing up steep slopes to their mountain-top positions

One notable recent exception to the general lack of English-language recognition of the Italian front is this fantastic journalism by Brian Mockenhaupt in Smithsonian Magazine. In

this article the author mainly discusses the extreme winter hardships of the high mountain fighting in the Dolomites and the feats of engineering by both the Italians and Austrians. Despite repeated offensives, almost all by the Italian side, the front throughout the war stayed remarkably stable in something resembling an even more inept version of the trench warfare of the Western Front. The two main sectors were the high mountainous border between the Trentino and Veneto, especially around the Asiago plateau down to Monte Grappa, and the line of the Isonzo (now Soča) River which nearly aligns with the current border of Italy and Slovenia and is characterized by a plateau called the Carso. The first sector is rightly famous for the unprecedented extremes I mentioned before. Indeed, Mark Thompson says in *The White War*: "The mountain units had to endure fantastically severe conditions. War had never been fought at such heights before, up to 3,500 metres. Fighting in the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and more recently in Kashmir occurred at even greater altitudes, but the soldiers' experience on the Alpine front remains unmatched." As for the feats of engineering, this was probably the single strong point of the Italian war effort from 1915-1918, and one has left traces all over the mountains today from the 52 tunnels carved up into Mt. Pasubio, to the cable cars, *vie ferrate*, trenches, and explosive mining under enemy positions. Otherwise, both sectors of the front still suffered from the same massive errors of strategic and tactical planning and execution that doomed both belligerent sides to such a brutal and dismal struggle.

The blue-green waters of the Soča (Isonzo) as it flows peacefully today through a verdant valley near Kobarid (Caporetto)

For anyone who has never been in close proximity to artillery shells landing or machine-guns firing, it is hard to imagine

the destruction these modern weapons can cause on unsuspecting or unprepared human beings. Imagine men moving up exposed and difficult terrain into unbreachable barbed wire entanglements, then you will have an idea of the fundamental tactical problem of World War One that led to the stalemate of trench warfare. On the Isonzo Front, the Italians fought 12 large battles along the exact same lines over the course of over two years, involving over a couple million soldiers, a million casualties, and absolutely no change of tactics to face the artillery, machine-guns, and barbed wire. The Austro-Hungarians defended this front extremely well for over two years, very undermanned and under-equipped, giving up very little territory, and inflicting more casualties on their enemy than they received most of the time. In *The White War*, Thompson writes: "The Italians kept coming, wave after wave, across open ground in close-order formation, shoulder to shoulder, against field guns and machine guns. To one Austrian artillery officer, 'it looked like an attempt at mass suicide'. Those who reached the deserted Austrian line met flame-throwers, tear gas, and machine-gun and rifle fire emanating from hollows and outcrops on the crumpled Carso. When dusk fell, their only significant gain was a hilltop, wrested from the Polish infantry of the 16th Division."

The 12th Battle of the Isonzo of October 1917, often called the Battle of Caporetto, was the first and only offensive by the Austrians on this front during the war. It was also a massive and unexpected defeat for the Italians that took back a part of the territory ceded to Italy in 1866 and nearly succeeded in forcing Italy to sue for a separate peace treaty. Superior German forces participated and led the way in this victory, including a vanguard company led by a young Lieutenant Erwin Rommel whose initiative caught much larger Italian forces unawares and helped break the poorly defended Italian lines west of the Isonzo. Thompson writes: "Caporetto was the outcome when innovative tactics were expertly used against an army that was, in doctrine and organization, one of

the most hidebound in Europe. The Twelfth Battle was a Blitzkrieg before the concept existed."

The disaster of Caporetto for the Italians led to the long overdue replacement of the inept Supreme Commander Luigi Cadorna, and the consolidation of Italian forces along a much more compact and well-defended line of the Piave River north of Venice. This allowed the Italians to bide their time and build up forces for one last offensive against the by-then completely exhausted and hopeless Austrians. This last battle, with the auspicious name of Vittorio Veneto, supposedly washed away forever the stain of Caporetto and the Isonzo (which seem to have been traumatically erased from Italian memory immediately after the war).

Even for someone who spent two years in combat and is well-versed in military history, the stupidity and callousness of the Italian generals is enraging. Sending millions of courageous young men into uphill attacks without effective artillery backup, aerial support, intelligence, or even wire-cutters for the barbed wire is a way to earn the absolute contempt of your own soldiers, as well as the enemy, as well as posterity. Thompson described the front in this way: "Italian losses were increased by sheer carelessness, born of inexperience and also ideology. Many officers disdained to organize their defenses properly because they thought the Austrians did not deserve the compliment. Only tragic experience would expunge this prejudice."

And again here: "The troops were unprepared, in every sense, for the conditions they faced. Lacking weapons, ordered to attack barbed wire, struck down by typhoid and cholera, poorly clothed and fed, sleeping on wet hay or mud, the men began to realize that they were 'going to be massacred, not to fight'. Hardly Garibaldian warriors, rather cannon fodder in a new kind of war."

On the living conditions at the front that never improved in

nearly three years: “Sweat, dust, mud, rain and sun turned the men’s woolen uniforms into something like parchment. Their boots often had cardboard uppers and wooden soles. Lacking better remedies, the men rubbed tallow into their cracked feet. Helmets were in very short supply. The wooden water bottles were unhygienic. The tents – when they had them – leaked. The wire-cutters were almost useless, and unusable under fire: ‘mere garden secateurs’, as a Sardinian officer wrote disgustedly in his diary. Ration parties were often delayed by enemy fire. The only hot meal was in the morning, and so poor that soldiers often rejected most of it. The pervasive stench could, anyway, make eating impossible. The effects of such poor nutrition were evident after three or four days in the trenches, and some units sent out raiding parties for food and clothing in trenches that the enemy had abandoned. The soldiers slept on straw pallets, but there were not enough to go around. Even in the rear, before proper hutments were built, the men lived in tents that quickly became waterlogged and filthy. Abysmal medical care led to ‘a good number of avoidable deaths due to inhuman treatment’. Wounded men were routinely ‘shipped on 20 or 30 km ambulance runs on vile roads and then kept waiting for hours outside hospital’.”

Worse Leadership

How did things get so miserable for the Italian side? The answer is an utter lack of political and military leadership. The only person of leadership during this war who comes out well in reading *The White War* is General Armando Diaz, who replaced Luigi Cadorna after Caporetto and injected basic competence and caution into the war. I cannot recall in any historical period a supreme commander who combined such unchallenged authority and staying power with such complete incompetence. In any other situation, a leader such as Cadorna would have been quickly killed, replaced, or forced into surrender. The less said about this character, who somehow

still has streets named after him in Italy, the better.

Luigi Cadorna

I'll leave him with two succinct descriptions from Thompson's book: "Worst of all, Cadorna had discovered a knack for abandoning offensives when Boroević [the very capable Croatian general of the Austrian Isonzo forces] had committed his last reserves. The steely exterior concealed a vacillating spirit."

"Cadorna's and Capello's [another inept general] actions in the Eleventh Battle were so careless and self-destructive that historians have struggled to account for them. In truth, the two men acted fully in character. Cadorna's battle plans always tended to incoherence, his command often slackened fatally in the course of offensives."

The other, more complex side of the leadership vacuum was political. Cadorna was only able to consolidate such unchallenged power for so long because he answered only to the monarch, still a position of great power in Italy at that time. The monarch was a figure known as Vittorio Emmanuele III, the grandson of the first king of unified Italy, and a weak-willed and morally suspect character. This king nevertheless enjoyed a long reign from 1900, when his father Umberto was assassinated, to 1946, when he finally abdicated in a quixotic bid to save the institution of the monarchy for his son and for Italy. Fortunately, Italy voted in a referendum to abolish the monarchy and establish a republic, and finally vindicating the true fathers of Italy, Garibaldi and Mazzini. Victor Emanuel was so short (4'11") that he could not wear a real sword, and so his nickname was "Little Sabre". Italy engaged in at least five foolish wars during his reign, and he was instrumental in allowing Mussolini's Fascist regime to violently take control of the government and hold it for 22 years.

Mussolini and D’Annunzio in 1925: architects of the reactionary “anti-Risorgimento”. Mussolini paid the poet a yearly stipend from 1922 to his death in 1938 for not interfering in politics.

Before Mussolini, there was the fascinating and nauseating character of Gabriele D’Annunzio, a Decadent poet, for a long time the most famous person in Italy, and a bloodthirsty proto-Fascist. Thompson spends an early chapter explaining the importance of D’Annunzio in making the blustery rhetorical case for Italy’s involvement in a war most Italians did not care about. The poet at least backed up his words with actions, as he was given an army commission and entered himself into many battles on his own authority, seemingly getting a rise out of the abundant bloodshed falling for Italy’s sake. This disturbing character does not come out well in Thompson’s account, and rightfully so, I think.

The last aspect of failed political leadership that needs mentioning is the shameful way Italy’s representatives behaved both before and after the war. The Prime Minister and Foreign Minister before and during most of the war, Salandra and Sonnino respectively, ensured that neither its allies nor its enemies respected Italy’s shameful conduct. Italy was actually a member of a secret defensive alliance with Germany and Austria before the war. Italy did not support its allies at the outbreak of war because Austria’s declaration of war against Serbia was not defensive in nature. The Italians stood on the sidelines for almost the first year of the war, playing both sides to get a better deal for its aggressive territorial claims. Everything about the beginning of World War One was tragically absurd, but Italy ended up being the most unnecessarily and nakedly opportunistic of all the

belligerents. It wanted Austria to give up large parts of its territory in Trentino, South Tyrol, and Friuli (including Trieste) in return for Italy's honoring its alliance. When Austria (who was still Italy's historical nemesis despite this dubious alliance) balked, Italy obtained a secret deal with the England and France called the Treaty of London that guaranteed it would get all the territory it wanted after the war. In the end, Italy's disastrous human cost of participation in this war can be placed fully in the hands of just three people, according to Thompson—Salandra, Sonnino, and D'Annunzio.

Pointless Sacrifice

Italy's total number killed was 689,000, the total number of wounded was nearly 1,000,000, and prisoners and missing in action was also 600,000. A huge majority of them occurred on the 55-mile Isonzo front, and Italy, almost uniquely in this war, was only fighting one enemy. The total casualties of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were over three times higher than Italy's, but that includes the much larger front against Russia as well as Serbia and Romania. For further comparison, Italy suffered more casualties during 3 1/2 years along its only front than *both* sides of the entire U.S. Civil War, which was the bloodiest in American history.

The War Memorial of Asiago holds the remains of 55,000 soldiers

Again and again, the numbers of men slaughtered in each and every battle was much higher than it should have been given even modest improvements of tactics or basic respect for human life by the officers. At one hilltop near Gorizia, whose importance was only symbolic, Thompson writes: "The conquest of San Michele had cost at least 110,000 Italian casualties over 14 months, including 19,000 dead, on a sector only eight

kilometers long.” At one outcropping defended by the Austrians in the Dolomites, wave after wave of Italians were sent into machine-gun fire and “more than 6000 Italians had died on Col di Lana for precisely nothing.” After one of the endless offensives on the Isonzo, Thompson writes of Cadorna: “As for his actual gains on the Carso, they amounted to several villages and a couple kilometers of limestone, won at a cost of 80,000 casualties.” In another nameless struggle: “Five regiments were launched against the lone Habsburg battalion on Hill 383. Outnumbered by 15 to 1, the Austrians still inflicted 50% casualties on the attackers before succumbing.” All of this bloodshed was obviously mind and soul-numbing, not only to the millions of soldiers who were called up, but also for the entire nation, most of whom did not want or care about this war and did not even know why it was being fought.

After the war, Italian politicians once again played disgraceful diplomacy to the abhorrence of allies and enemies alike. Prime Minister Orlando and Foreign Minister Sonnino made absurd claims to places like Rijeka, the Dalmatian coast, Albania, and even Turkey, in order to justify their sacrifice, apparently forgetting that every other country “sacrificed” at least as much, and that Italy’s position on the “winning” side of the war still did not exactly give it the moral high ground. As Thompson writes: “Orlando’s and Sonnino’s zero-sum strategy in Paris dealt a fatal wound to Italy’s liberal system, already battered by the serial assaults of wartime. By stoking the appetite for unattainable demands, they encouraged Italians to despise their victory unless it led to the annexation of a small port on the other side of the Adriatic, with no historic connection to the motherland. Fiume [Rijeka in Croatian] became the first neuralgic point created by the Paris conference. Like the Sudetenland for Hitler’s Germany and Transylvania for Hungary, it was a symbol of burning injustice. A sense of jeopardized identity and wounded pride fused with a toponym to produce an explosive compound.”

D’Annunzio’s thirst for violence and aggressive nationalism was not quenched at the end of the war, and he laid the blueprint for the next several decades of fascist dictators by seizing the port of Rijeka with a small militia and declaring it an independent Italian Regency. After he declared war on Italy itself the Italian navy placed a well-aimed shell in D’Annunzio’s palace, which led to the poet’s quick surrender and flight from the city. Furthermore, the combination of a destructive war and the economic hardships it imposed laid the foundation for future political upheaval. “This enduring sense of bitterness, betrayal, and loss was an essential ingredient in the rise of Mussolini and his Blackshirts.” Thompson further comments: “For many veterans, Mussolini’s myth gave a positive meaning to terrible experience. This is the story of how the Italians began to lose the peace when their laurels were still green.”

An outside observer such as Hemingway, barely 19 years old and on the front for only one month, was able to see the war as “the most colossal, murderous, mismanaged butchery.” Somewhat incredibly, from my experience and what I’ve read, the general opinion about the First World War in Italy is either of forgetfulness or buying into the heroic myth-making of the Fascist regime that wrote the history books in Italy for over a generation. Even if that regime is mostly discredited now (pictures of Il Duce still adorn the mantelpieces of at least a few rustic houses around the peninsula—I have even seen it with my own eyes twice!), the history involved before and during the world wars is too tragic to be accepted. The heroism of the Alpini, rugged mountain soldiers, lingers in the national consciousness more than anything else. Thompson comments that, for all the destruction, World War One was Italy’s “first true collective national experience”, one whose exorbitant cost only led its victims to embrace it even further. It may be that every symbolic “birth of a nation” always only truly comes about through a horrific spasm of violence.

I think this is where the history of one front of one particular war becomes something more universal in the human experience. War is the worst thing humans do. Based on our biological and social development, it is also one of the most complex and psychologically conflicted. The lessons of history always point to the folly of war, but that has rarely stopped opportunistic politicians and greedy businessmen from precipitating the next one, even against the wishes of the majority. In Italy, as Thompson meditates: “The Risorgimento [the national unification movement led by Garibaldi and Mazzini] was libertarian, patriotic, democratic, enlightened, and still unfinished, forever wrestling with its antithetical twin: authoritarian, manipulative, nationalistic, conspiratorial, and aggressive. From 1915-1944, the anti-Risorgimento had the upper hand. Perhaps the two still contend for mastery of Italy’s dark heart.” I would venture to say that in all countries at all times, these two antithetical notions always vie for control of political power, using emotional calls to arms, for the purpose of either the enlightened betterment of all, or the greedy enrichment of a few. We must always heed these two irreconcilable ideas, and always come out on the side that seeks to end whatever war we are in, and oppose the next war.

Curzio Malaparte: Great & Anonymous WWII Writer

How World War II gets remembered isn’t accurate, and for Curzio Malaparte, it's not even true. Not the American version, not the Russian, not anywhere, really. At best, our memory of WWII has become a lie founded on emotional connections to people barely known in life. A series of well-

intentioned miscommunications and words spoken (or not) in German, Italian, Russian, Japanese or English across untranslatable generational gaps. The product of the optimistic if misplaced belief that one human could ever be said to understand another without dreaming some part of one's own self and aspirations into them. Less good, our memory of WWII is a thoughtless generalization, and ultimately, a stand-in for racism, nationalism, and all the worst stereotypes that made anyone feel good about going to the War in the first place. Worst case scenario, it's a deliberate deception – the product of malicious individuals or concerns eager to portray the narrative in ways that advantage themselves and their interests.

In the version of WWII I grew up with – the one popular here in America – here's how it happened. This comes from my grandfathers, one of whom was an enlisted man in Europe with the U.S. Army, and the other of whom was in the U.S. Army Air Corps, an officer (Lieutenant) in a B-24 Liberator. Nazi Germany declared war on Europe and beat them, save for Italy, which was Germany's comically inept ally that was good mostly for humorous tension-relief. Then they turned on their sort-of-ally (more like Frenemy), the Soviet Union. Germany and the Soviet Union were slugging it out, and England was on the ropes, when in jumped America. D-Day, Battle of the Bulge, game over – America: 1, Nazi Germany: 0. The Soviet Union wanted Europe for themselves, but America said, "nope, not gonna happen fellas, hang on while we beat Japan with our other hand," then we got the atomic bomb. Communists and peaceniks stole our secrets and sold them to the Soviets because they hated America, and the rest is history. Bottom line: Britain? Weak. France? Super weak. Italy? Worse than France! Japan? Sneaky, mostly. Russia? Strong, but sneaky. Germany? Strong, but not as strong as America!

And America? Strongest of all. Just, and right, and boy did we take it to the Germans.

One of the other editors of this intellectual initiative, Mr. Carson, gave me a book for Christmas: *Kaputt*, by Curzio Malaparte, *nee* Kurt Erich Suckert, a northern Italian. While as a "memoir" it falls under biography / autobiography, it's the sort of memoir that can only be produced during a time of catastrophe. *Kaputt* describes Malaparte's time as an Italian Army officer / journalist on the Eastern Front – an absurd account of the violence that is so far as I can tell, both largely inaccurate and unique. Malaparte visits Romania, Ukraine, Poland and Finland and through almost-unbelievable access, bears witness to the horrors of war and governance of the Nazis. That in and of itself is remarkable, because access breeds familiarity, but in this case, it grants the author (and the reader) a perspective on the occupiers that is simultaneously individual and universal. Witness the scene (one of many) with Hans Frank, the Nazi Governor-General of Poland, when Frank attempts to convince Malaparte that the Axis mission is just by invoking his wife and her friends knitting in their parlor:

Frank's hand on my shoulder, though it was not heavy, oppressed me. Little by little, disentangling and considering each feeling that Frank aroused in me and attempting to understand and define the meaning, the pretexts and the reason for his every word and gesture, and trying to piece together a moral portrait of him out of the scraps that I had picked up about his character in the past few days, I became convinced that he was not to be judged summarily.

The uneasiness that I felt within me in his presence was born precisely because of the complexity of his character – a peculiar mixture of cruel intelligence, refinement, vulgarity, brutal cynicism and polished sensitiveness. There had to be a deep zone of darkness within him that I was still unable to explore – a dark region, an inaccessible hell from which dull, fleeting glows flashed unexpectedly, lighting his forbidding face – that disturbing and fascinating mysterious face.

The opinion I had formed of Frank long ago was, unquestionably, negative. I knew enough of him to detest him, but I felt honor-bound not to stop there. Of all the elements that I was conscious of in Frank, some a result of the experience of others and some of my own, something, I could not say what, was lacking – something the very nature of which was not known to me but which I expected would suddenly be revealed to me at any moment.

I hoped to catch a gesture, a word, an involuntary action that might reveal to me Frank's real face, his inner face, that would suddenly break away from the dark, deep region of his mind where, I instinctively felt, the roots of his cruel intelligence and musical sensitiveness were anchored in a morbid and, in a certain sense, criminal subsoil of character.

"*This is Poland – an honest German home,*" *repeated Frank, embracing in a single glance that middle-class scene of domestic simplicity.*

Readers receive the usual evaluation of a prominent Nazi leader – that of the thug, the brute – but that is only the jumping-off point for a more careful and scathing indictment, which is to say, the suggestion that the thing that makes Nazi Germany spectacular and special is its specifically middle-class sensibility. In other words – to the British, German, or American reader – the Nazis are like us.

It's an astonishing book by an extraordinary man, who has been largely ignored by American history, likely for the reason stated above. Malaparte seems to have gotten a bad reputation for his involvement in the Italian fascist party, and, as a human, seems also to have been both a fanatical social climber, as well as a flamboyant intellectual. For all his political and moral failings, though, it's important to recognize that he spent 5 years in exile for publishing defamatory remarks public statements about Mussolini and Hitler, then was imprisoned for similar anti-fascist/Nazi

activity in 1938, 39, 41, and 43. He was a valorously decorated combat veteran of World War I, which means something, especially considering his service with Italy's premiere infantry unit of the time, the Alpini.

Kaputt details the final destruction of a dying world order. We remember World War I as having swept away much of Europe's prevailing social climate, and shows like Downton Abbey catalogue how that played out in Great Britain. There's some truth to that recollection of history – the aftermath of WWI saw the beginning of Soviet (not Communist) Russia, and there were greater "rights" enunciated to women, as well as expanded economic opportunities for the lower and middle-class in non-communist societies (mostly through human space created by war casualties and the Spanish Influenza rather than human altruism) – but the events that were set in motion during World War I accelerated after the fall of Tsarist Russia and the ascension of the Soviet Union. By the time the Nazis swept into power and through Poland and France, the old social order had been almost entirely eviscerated. Malaparte bears witness to this destruction on landscapes that are unfamiliar to most Western readers, and many Eastern European readers as well. *Kaputt* is full of surreal images of the horrors of war – it is a read unlike anything else one will encounter on the subject of World War II. Two quick examples:

Mad with terror, the horses of the Soviet artillery – there were almost a thousand of them – hurled themselves into the furnace and broke through the besieging flames and machine guns. Many perished within the flames, but most of them succeeded in reaching the shores of the lake and threw themselves into the water…while still madly struggling, the ice gripped them. The north wind swooped down during the night… Suddenly, with the peculiar vibrating noise of breaking glass, the water froze. The heat balance was broken, and the sea, the lakes, the rivers froze. In such instances, even sea waves are gripped in mid-air and become rounded ice waves

suspended in the void. On the following day, when the first [Finnish] Ranger patrols, their hair singed, their faces blackened by smoke, cautiously stepped over the warm ashes in the charred forest and reached the lakeshore, a horrible and amazing sight met their eyes. The lake looked like a vast sheet of white marble on which rested hundreds upon hundreds of horses' heads. They appeared to have been chopped off cleanly with an ax. Only the heads stuck out of the crust of ice. And they were all facing the shore. The white flame of terror still burnt in their wide-open eyes. Close to the shore a tangle of wildly rearing horses rose from the prison of ice.

and this account of what a German Lieutenant Colonel did upon taking a Ukrainian boy-partisan prisoner, as told to a German princess and one of her aristocratic friends:

Finally the officer stopped before the boy, stared at him for a long time in silence, then said in a slow tired voice full of boredom: "Listen, I don't want to hurt you. You are a child, and I am not waging war against children. You have fired at my men, but I am not waging war on children. Lieber Gott, I am not the one who invented war." The officer broke off, then went on in a strangely gentle voice: "Listen, I have one glass eye. It is difficult to tell which is the real one. If you can tell me at once, without thinking about it, which of the two is the glass eye, I will let you go free." "The left eye," replied the boy promptly. "How did you know?" "Because it is the one that has something human in it." …

"I met that officer again later at Soroca on the Dniester – a very serious man, a good father, but a true Prussian, a true Piffke as the Viennese say. He talked to me about his family, about his work. He was an electrical engineer. He also spoke about his son Rudolf, a boy ten years old. It was really difficult to tell the glass eye. He told me that the best glass eyes are made in Germany." "Stop it!" said Louise. "Every German has a glass eye," I said.

and a third, as though two weren't enough – in this, a very different view of German soldiers (circa 1941) from that of the typical "they were all fanatical criminals" so popular in literature, cinema, and plays (a canard that Malaparte disputes):

The German soldiers returning from the front line, when they reached the village squares, dropped their rifles on the ground in silence. They were coated from head to foot in black mud, their beards were long, their hollow eyes looked like the eyes of the sunflowers, blank and dull. The officers gazed at the soldiers and at the rifles lying on the ground, and kept silent. By then the lightning war, the "Blitzkrieg," was over, the "Dreizigjahrigerblitzkrieg," the thirty-year lighting war, had begun. The winning war was over, the losing war had begun. I saw the white stain of fear growing in the dull eyes of German officers and soldiers. I saw it spreading little by little, gnawing at the pupils, singeing the roots of the eyelashes and making the eyelashes drop one by one, like the long yellow eyelashes of the sunflowers. When Germans become afraid, when that mysterious German fear begins to creep into their bones, they always arouse a special horror and pity. Their appearance is miserable, their cruelty sad, their courage silent and hopeless. That is when the Germans become wicked. I repented being a Christian. I felt ashamed of being a Christian.

Malaparte had unfettered access as an Italian journalist to the Eastern Front (when he wasn’t in prison for mouthing off), and describes the events from the persective of someone who knows the war effort is doomed – far more interestingly though, are the ways in which he frames these stories, telling them, as it were, in a series of country clubs and aristocratic estates to the intellectual and social inheritors of the West’s cultural legacy. Swedish, Spanish, German, Italian, and French aristocrats and diplomats. Polish princesses. The wealthy and powerful of another age, now, no

longer so – some of whom, bound for the death camps. Malaparte catalogues an amazing history of loss, a way of life swept away forever. The British are largely absent, and come across when they are described as fairly pragmatic if not necessarily "good," and the Americans seem, if anything, to be parvenues – in this sense, *Kaputt* could almost be a companion piece for Henry James's earlier work – the reflection of American ambition for social weight in Europe, viewed through the prism of a massive class war.

Malaparte's writing is powerful and moving, and despite his politics, it's difficult to see how this book would not have had a stronger and more sympathetic reception in the West, save for its fundamental conceit: wealth and strength cannot keep you safe during times of war and true social tempest. There is no shelter from that storm, nothing counts in the end save the raw instinct for survival. This sort of morality tale is unwelcome in the capitalist West – this is not the sort of book anyone with property in the Hamptons would like to read, though I would argue that it is the clearest depiction of the horror of war that I have read, cleaner even than Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and certainly far better than any of the "realist" portrayals of wartime (O'Brien, Marlantes, etc) who end up sentimentalizing and therefore implicitly endorsing war, which means they couldn't have thought very well about the experience even if they wrote effectively about it.

Malaparte becomes increasingly more sympathetic to the Soviets over the course of the book, an emotional and sentimental desire to see them as better or more than the Germans in part because they have beaten the Germans, and in part because of the horror the Germans have themselves inflicted, a fact that Malaparte observes firsthand on several occasions. This is interesting as well because the natural evolution of thinking for most in the West is a growing concern that the Soviets will simply replace Nazi Germany – in fact, in terms of history, the Soviets ultimately eclipsed the Nazis as a totem

of fear when they acquired the atomic bomb, and became the first non-Western country with the ability to destroy the world. Despite the recent example of the war or perhaps because of it, many German and Italian intellectuals made up their minds to stick with moderates and capitalism after the collapse of Nazi Germany – more of them sided with the Totalitarian Soviets based on a sense that there was something in Communism, and to this day, European communism retains a small but important political presence, often derided in England and America. Malaparte's viewpoint is, therefore, especially interesting considering his various positions before and during World War II.