

Seventy years since the war ended—and continued

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“In the decades after the war ended,” the late Lee Sandlin wrote in [the unforgettable essay “Losing the War,”](#)

there probably wasn't a single night in which thousands of men across America didn't wake up sweating in terror—the patrol was about to set out again, the first alarms were arriving from the sentinels, the barrage was about to resume. The war was still being fought in a thousand glimpses of torment, in a million flickers of horror.

One of those men still fighting the war by night was my grandfather. That he was a war hero—twice shot down in a B-17 bomber, taken prisoner in Germany, awarded a Purple Heart and two Air Medals—I knew as long as I could remember. That he slept poorly I learned a little later, as I sat around his kitchen table, pre-dawn, while I ate pastries and he smoked. That he suffered from nightmares about the war I learned later still.

The current issue of the *Century* features [a remembrance by my mother of my grandfather's terrifying war experience and its unfolding consequences](#). Tomorrow the world marks the 70th anniversary of V-E Day, when the world-shaping trauma of the war halted in Europe. My grandfather's story is only a tiny fragment of the war, his decades of agony only a ripple in its billowing aftershocks. But it is the kind of story that is easily lost as the war recedes from living memory.

“If you knew the things I've done, you wouldn't have a thing to do with me,” he told my mother after a brief and unhappy visit to the National Prisoner of War Museum in Georgia. “You would not cross the street to spit on me.”

The things he did [are detailed in her article](#). After 70 years and an unending stream of war movies, they still have the power to shock. But there is something ordinary even about that. It was a time in which unimaginable things became routine. Those of us who are heirs to the world the war made tended to realize only too late how

much we asked of its survivors. We know better now what it does to people when they are exposed to random bursts of extreme danger. We know better now—though we could always have guessed—what it does to people when they kill. The stoicism America imposed on the people we needed to think of as quiet heroes came at a cost that most of us can only guess at.

Seventy years after the European war ended, its late-night rehearsals are falling silent, too. My grandfather's war ended in 2002. I miss him more than I ever thought possible when I knew him as a loud and easily angered man partially redeemed by his war heroism. The task of remembrance increasingly shifts to one of honoring those stories by refusing to let the war become a cheap moral fable—a template for every war we want to wage without facing. The passing of the World War II generation is an occasion for sadness and real loss. But I am grateful in a sense that the war is not being fought in as many people's nights as it once was.