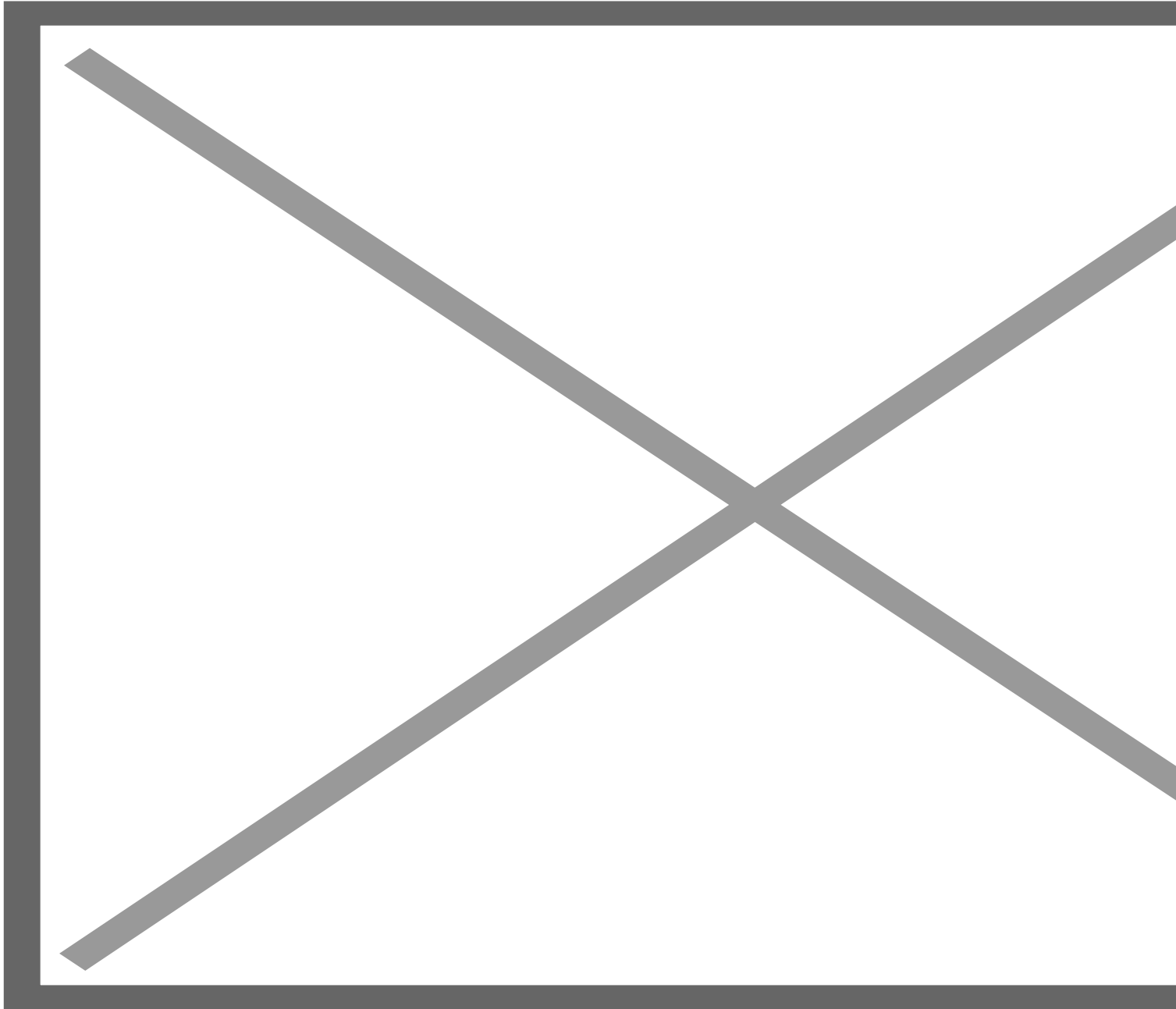


The great and terrible meaning of war

War is symbolic of humanity's failure to live in the peaceable kingdom. Yet where there are humans there will always be a search for meaning.

by [Rachel Mann](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue
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Century photo

“Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected.” Paul Fussell’s line has been living rent-free in my subconscious for decades. It rises to the surface whenever the United States, Britain, or one of their allies gets into a hot war. Fussell knew what he was talking about. A World War II frontline vet and a literature professor, he also said that “every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.” He had many examples. The one I have never forgotten is this claim: “In the Great War eight million people were destroyed because two persons, the Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his Consort, had been shot.”

Jesus said to his disciples, “The poor you will always have with you.” He might also have said the same about war. What is there to be said about its cruelties, other than well-rehearsed lines on pacifism or just war theory? “War is simply one of the side effects of human error, a sign that humans’ separation from their true nature has not been overcome,” said Sue Mansfield, writing about early Christianity. The psychologist and historian went on: “Once God is understood as love, war ceases to have any mythological meaning or transcendent imperative, since it imitates no divine gesture.”

This is powerful stuff. However, as Mansfield would also acknowledge, Christianity has long been tangled up with state power. I am a priest in the state church of England. Even in the US, with its long-established separation between state and religion, politicians of every stripe have sent Jesus into battle on the nation’s behalf. The ignominious death of Christ may be a condemnation of state-sanctioned violence, including war. Indeed, progressive theology typically says that God is not on the side of imperial violence and power. Nonetheless, Jesus repeatedly finds himself on the front line.

Like the early Christians, I want to say war has no mythological meaning. Ultimately, it signals humanity’s failure to embrace what God reveals in the cross and resurrection: the emptiness of violence. The Easter event inaugurates a clear revelation of the shape and nature of God’s kingdom. Rather than swearing revenge and renewing the cycle of hate and violence, the risen Christ comes forth offering reconciliation and forgiveness. In God’s economy, the spear that the soldier used to pierce Christ’s side should never be used for violence again. War is what happens when we fail to lay it down.

Fussell suggests that war “abridges” hope. It foreshortens the shade offered in love’s promise; it exposes us to hate’s glare, its convinced certainties. He also reminds me that war is not simply a theological matter. If it is symbolic of humanity’s failure to live in the peaceable kingdom, nonetheless it cannot simply be treated as a void. Why? Because people, ordinary people, are caught up in it. War’s victims, perpetrators, and survivors are not merely statistics or the playthings of the powerful. Where there are humans there will always be a search for sense and meaning.

Perhaps this is why war always produces literature. Its poetry, fiction, and memoir signal that humans have dwelled there. From Homer to Vera Brittain to Bao Ninh, there has been an urge to make sense of hell. I will never forget the character of Dai Greatcoat, who appears in World War I poet David Jones’s novel-poem *In Parenthesis*. Greatcoat claims he has fought in all wars and in none. He says he was there when Cain killed Abel and at the gates of Troy and with Arthur at the Battle of Badon Hill. In essence, he boasts that he cannot die and suggests that war’s genesis lies in Satan’s revolt against God.

Greatcoat claims that war has always been with us—from the mythic violence of the Bible and of Greece and of every nation through to the present day. And if war is inscribed in the structure of living, we cannot claim that it simply voids meaning or is the absence of meaning. Not quite. It is part of our human economy. For Greatcoat, it is as if our unwillingness to interrogate the meaning and place of war in the run of human affairs leaves him, the eternal soldier, prosecuting the fight forever, unable to get purchase on peace enough to understand his own fate.

Jones's great novel-poem makes a case for war as part of a tradition. The way it claims biblical, classical, and mythic references indicates that in humanity's endless history of violence, meaning cannot fully be erased. War demands that we wrestle with meaning. It asks us to be like Jacob and the angel, struggling in the midst of violence in the hope of blessing. The Bible itself models that wrestling. Indeed, does the Divine, as the ultimate locus of meaning, deliver hope in the midst of and sometimes through violence? By the end of the book of Exodus, the Egyptian firstborn sons lie dead and a new covenant is asserted. Destruction is wrought and a new story begins. It is a structure that repeats itself in myriad forms throughout the text.

Yet, equally, I want to discount macho and unthinking claims to war's significance, unavoidability, and value. I want to write against it. I want to conclude, as I think the best war literature does, that despite war's terror and the way it shatters human lives, meaning still abides. It is found in the courage, faithfulness, and goodness under pressure displayed by the ordinary people caught up in it. Even in the monstrous cruelties every war produces, humans lived. If hope is abridged or decency flees, there remains the possibility of hope, the promise of mercy and decency. I think I am fascinated by war because I am enamored with the search for the human, a desire never to lose sight of the traces and rumor of God even in the most desperate places.