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The Reality of COMBAT!: An Analysis of Historical Memory in Broadcast Television

Kaleb Q. Wentz

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The Reality of *COMBAT!*: An Analysis of Historical Memory in Broadcast Television

By

Kaleb Quinn Wentz

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Midway Honors Scholars Program
Honors College

Dr. Stephen Fritz, Thesis Mentor	Date
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Dr. John Rankin, Reader	Date
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Dr. Henry Antkiewicz, Reader	Date
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an analysis of the World War II television drama *COMBAT!*, which ran from 1962 to 1967, and how this program dealt with and addressed the national memory of the Second World War. Memories are fluid; they shift and adapt as time goes on. The way in which the “Good War” is remembered is subject to this same process. In the years of the conflict and immediately following its conclusion, there was a sense of zealous patriotism surrounding the war, but as time progressed and our culture changed, a more critical approach was taken.

This paper examines the way in which the show deals with its two main subjects – the American forces and the Germans which opposed them. This depiction is analyzed and deconstructed through the lens of historical or collective memory, a concept which deals with how a group of people view their past. *COMBAT!* was a work of popular culture, and, as such, it reflects, to an extent, the mindset and views of the populace that created it. Particularly, there is an air of complexity and nuance in how the combatants are treated that was not found in many earlier depictions of the war.

It is important for the reader to understand the thinking behind the way in which this program deals with the memory of World War II. To that end, this thesis dissects the intended and implied messages that arise from the show’s portrayal of this conflict. The paper concludes with an examination of how this more critical view can be applied to the portions of the war outside of *COMBAT!*’s scope. Attention is also paid to the way in which this attitude of remembrance has continued on into future works that deal with both World War II and the wars that followed. Through understanding how these programs and, through them, our nation deal with the memory of war, we afford ourselves a better understanding of our current ideals and actions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though I may have been the one to actually type the words which make up this thesis, I cannot take the credit for them or the process which brought me to write them. I would not have reached this stage of this work or my education without the help of a multitude of people. I do not have the time nor the space to name them all, but I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge some of the individuals who have played a particularly important role in bringing me to this point.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	6
HISTORICAL MEMORY.....	12
<i>COMBAT</i> AND THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS.....	16
GERMAN SOLDIERS.....	26
AMERICAN WORLD WAR II NARRATIVE.....	31
FUTURE RAMIFICATIONS.....	35
CONCLUSION.....	37
WORKS CITED.....	39

INTRODUCTION

It is in the throes of combat that we often find ourselves. Like metal tempered in the furnace, conflict in our lives strengthens our resolve and clarifies our purpose. Just as this holds true for the individual, the same process can be found occurring in the formation of nations. Though the scale of the conflict and the combatants involved may be significantly grander and larger than those we face as individuals, national conflicts play a pivotal role in shaping the character and nature of the countries involved. Perhaps more important than the actual conflict, in terms of national identity, is the way in which that conflict is remembered. War leaves an indelible mark upon a people, and the larger the war, the larger its impact on the current generation and those which follow.

America, as a nation, has long been shaped and influenced by its wars. Our very creation is tied with conflict. The Revolutionary War, or at least the idea of it, is integral to our identity and how we perceive ourselves as a people. Our spirit of freedom, our commitment to the ideals of the individual, and the understood right of equality for all stem from this struggle for independence from the motherland. “Of the people, by the people, for the people” – this concept defines the foundation upon which our nation was laid.

Though later studies would come to show complexity and nuance in the reasons for which people fought in this war, the national narrative which endures is simplistic and moral in nature. We, as beleaguered and oppressed colonists, fought back against the tyrannical tendencies of an overbearing British rule. The story which would come out of the conflict would be almost binary in nature – us vs them. More importantly, though, would be the ideological concept that would spawn from this war and would continue throughout our nation’s history.

This concept is the ideal that is foundational to our national identity – the concept of freedom vs. oppression.

This narrative continues into the next major war found in our history. The Civil War that raged between the North and the South exhibits the same ideological and moral structuring. In our modern day, there is much debate as to why the war was fought. This is spurred by the racial issues and divisions that still persist in our country even today which cause us to revisit this conflict. Some would argue that the South fought for state's rights. Others would claim that it was for economic reasons. In the majority of Americans' minds though, the Civil War was fought for one reason – slavery.

The truth of the matter is that while the principal reason for fighting was indeed the nation's disagreement over the issue of slavery, the other factors that people claim to be the causes also played a role. There was also complexity within the ranks of the men on both sides. Those who fought to keep slavery were not all vehemently racist individuals seeking to oppress their fellow man, and the men who fought to abolish the concept were not all righteous proclaimers of equality. History is rarely so black and white. Yet, when we teach and present the Civil War, it is again often presented as this sort of binary struggle, as yet another example of oppression versus freedom.

Nearly fifty years after that war's close, the world found itself experiencing the first horrors of a conflict like it had never seen. Though this would later come to be known as World War I, at this point it was not simply relegated as the first in a series which would later be eclipsed and surpassed by its sequel. In 1914 and the tumultuous years until its close, this grand theatre of war was regarded with near mythical status. It accrued such titles as “The Great War” or “The War to End All Wars”.

The size of this engagement was of a scale that had never been seen before, and the United States did not actually enter the conflict until only a year and a half before its end. Nevertheless, there was still that tried and true theme at the heart of our reasoning behind joining the fight. The logic behind our entrance stems from the fact that we harbored “a hatred of autocracy and a desire to make the world a freer and better place.”¹ Amid a war whose massive size was unlike any that we, or the rest of the world for that matter, had ever encountered, we held true to that principle struggle which has been our rallying cry throughout our history – the struggle for freedom against the evils of oppression.

Though the First and Second World Wars are distinctly separate events, they are undeniably intertwined and connected. The closing moments of the first set the stage in such a way that a second global conflict was not only possible but probable. The Allied victory set the United States in a prime position amongst the pantheon of nations. Particularly, the Treaty of Versailles, with its harsh punishments and condemnatory nature, put Germany in such a position that they would be ready and willing to strike back two decades later.

This brings our discussion to the most prominent and referenced war in American history – World War II. It could be argued that the Second World War has reached a level in our national collective mindset on par with the War for Independence. Of all the conflicts in which the United States has found itself engaged, it enjoys a revered status in our current society. This hallowed standing can be attributed to many factors, but most prominently, this can be attributed to the supposed morality of the war. The pervasive historical ideal of freedom versus oppression is clearly portrayed in World War II. Faced by the raging, aggressive armies of Nazism, fascism,

¹ “The War That Launched the American Century,” *The Telegraph*, accessed March 21, 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/world-war-one/inside-first-world-war/part-nine/10801898/why-america-joined-first-world-war.html>

and militarism, and spurred into action by the unprovoked attack upon Pearl Harbor, the “greatest generation” bravely engaged in the fight against tyranny and halted the murderous expanse of its enemies.

The Second World War is memorable for its size and scale, but that is not the sole reason for its entrenched position within the American psyche. The large number of media productions depicting this conflict, both at the time and afterward, have also played a role in its popular perception. Largely responsible for this is the preponderance of productions which have been created on this conflict during its run and after peace had been achieved. More has been published and produced commemorating and analyzing this particular war than any which came before, or after.

Much of this stems from the time in which the war was fought, but there has been a continuing flood of products which either directly deal with or reference the war in some form or fashion. Technological advances are one of the main factors responsible for this. Compared to other wars, technology has allowed the American public, to a much greater extent, than previously, to experience a variety of viewpoints concerning the war. Starting with the technology of the 1940s and continuing on with each new advancement, people of both military and civilian backgrounds have seen their memories and experiences of the war, conveyed in both a positive and negative light.

These memories have been solidified and concreted in the American consciousness by a multitude of plays, movies, books, and television shows. This impressive number of remembrances has served to guarantee that the stories of World War II are carried on from generation to generation. They serve as markers to what has come before and ensure that the stories of the war will not be forgotten.

Coming out of World War II, the television genre was relatively new and rapidly growing. Of course, like everything else, it devoted a lot of attention to the war. Many of these television shows are well known in the history of pop culture. Shows like *Hogan's Heroes* and *The Rat Patrol* garner instant name recognition from fans of television and history alike. This multitude of shows deals with different aspects of the war, from different regions in which the war was fought to various levels of command and structure. These programs also enjoyed a varying degree of historical accuracy. Despite whatever errors they may have contained, several still enjoyed great critical success and served to influence how the war would be remembered in the U.S.

One of the programs which shown forth in both popularity and accuracy was the war drama appropriately entitled *COMBAT!*. *COMBAT* aired from 1962-1967 on ABC. The show proudly holds the title of "television's longest-running World War II drama."² The plot followed the actions of the 2nd platoon of Company K throughout the latter portions of the war. The squad is shown entering the European conflict during the D-Day invasion, and they never reach German soil.³ Therefore, even though the show rarely gave exact dates, it can be determined that the events shown took place between June 1944 and March 1945.

The show featured by the performances of Rick Jason as Lieutenant Hanley and Vic Morrow as Sergeant Saunders. Hanley acted as the platoon's leader and commander, but Saunders often was the one in charge as the men ventured off into the field of combat while the Lieutenant held back to organize and coordinate their efforts with the rest of the battalion. This is not to suggest that the Lieutenant did not get his hands dirty when necessary. The exact opposite

² "COMBAT!" <http://www.jodavidsmeyer.com/combat/main.html>, accessed 3/20/16

³ "A Day in June", *COMBAT!*, directed by Boris Sagal, Youtube video, posted by WorldWar 8, June 4, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QvFVGfVMM>

is true. Several episodes, such as “A Distant Drum”⁴ and “The Quiet Warrior”⁵, show Hanley on his own facing off against enemy forces. Saunders, too, has his fair share of solo episodes, such as “The Duel”.⁶ Jason and Morrow would take turns alternating as the leads, and they would join on many episodes as well.

The show was not strictly relegated to Morrow and Jason, however. Filling out the rest of the squad were Pierre Jalbert as Cajé, Jack Hogan as Kirby, Dick Peabody as Little John, and Conlan Carter as Doc. The members of the squad are mostly tasked with playing back-up to the lead actors, but there are times when they are allowed to come to the forefront and feature more prominently in the action. Cajé gets his moment in the spotlight in “No Trumpets, No Drums”⁷, Doc takes a larger role in “Cry for Help”⁸, and Kirby and the rest of the squad features heavily in such episodes as “Hills Are for Heroes: Parts 1 & 2”⁹ Other episodes highlight the squad’s dynamics and relationships, such as in “The Party”.¹⁰

The purpose of this thesis is to examine this show and the specific approach that it takes with the memory of America’s involvement in the war. First, we must examine the philosophical approaches and concepts that are used to discuss how nations deal with their past. This is instrumental to understanding *COMBAT*’s position within the memory of World War 2 and the

⁴ “A Distant Drum”, *COMBAT!*, directed by John Peyser, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, July 17, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcAedxLSedY>

⁵ “The Quiet Warrior”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Jus Addiss, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, June 15, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzLWQkv6YaE>

⁶ “The Duel”, *COMBAT!*, directed by John Peyser, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, May 3, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jfkFnhPKE8>

⁷ “No Trumpets, No Drums”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Richard Donner, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, July 19, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJCS8tgtkXY>

⁸ “Cry for Help”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Richard Benedict, Youtube video, posted by VariousVideos2012, March 1, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0i0AJS0Bbqw>

⁹ “Hills Are for Heroes”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Vic Morrow, Youtube video, posted by Surau Ubudiah Taman Sri Gombak, March 26, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JDfHxzARU4>

¹⁰ “The Party”, *COMBAT!*, directed by John Peyser, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, July 17, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2umDujcvHE>

conversation that derives from it. The bulk of the paper shall deal with the how the program portrays both the American and the German forces. These two opposing forces are the focal point of the show and what it spends most of its time depicting, and they also shape the bulk of America's idea of the war. Finally, we shall examine the other minor aspects of the show's depiction of the war and inspect how this narrative of American war memory has persisted on into the present day.

HISTORICAL MEMORY

When discussing how the war is remembered in our culture, we employ a concept known as collective memory. This concept was first introduced by the philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in the mid-1920s, but did not gain widespread attention until published in 1950, five years after his death. The first American translation was not until 1980.¹¹ Relatively speaking, it is a fairly new theory and, as such, is still full of fresh and interesting new possibilities in which it can be applied to different fields and studies. The theory allows us to analyze the way that memory affects and influences a group of people as opposed to just one individual.

Collective memory can also be referred to as historical memory. In our lives as individuals, memory shapes who we are. It is through the power of our memories that we identify ourselves and establish our personalities. The same holds true for nations. A nation is defined by its past, but that definition is not always based strictly upon the facts. Oftentimes how a nation's people form their self-identity is based more upon the national narrative that has been propagated rather than upon the truth derived from historical accounts and studies.

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980)

The national memory can be continued and strengthened by several means. Oral tradition has played a major role in the form of traditions and folk tales, but this form has its limits. The main restriction upon oral history is “its limited temporal horizon” which fails to “extend more than eighty to (at the very most) one hundred years into the past.”¹² There comes a certain point where the meager means of oral transmission, despite its obvious value, simply fails to have the continued ability to perpetuate and prolong the shared narrative of a people.

Given that oral history has its limits, other methods must be employed if there is a desire amongst a people to prolong the life of a collective, historical memory for their posterity. These other methods are much more concrete in nature. They are maintained and continued “through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance).¹³ In other words, the temporary limitations of the oral tradition are abandoned in favor of more long-lasting, durable forms of remembrance. It is in regards to this that we see our study come into effect. There are plenty of tales and legends surrounding the Second World War, but what really persists and forms the national memory of this conflict are those aspects which have been preserved in tangible form after the battle’s end.

The United States is saturated with these concrete remembrances of the war. In numerous productions and events, the American public is repeatedly reminded of their nation’s involvement on a regular basis. Holidays such as Veterans Day or Memorial Day predictably pay reverence to the sacrifices made and the lives lost in the conflict. Monuments like the World War II memorial in Washington D.C. commemorate the fallen. Plays (*Mister Roberts*, *South Pacific*, *The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*), movies (*The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Saving Private Ryan*,

¹² Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 1995, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, *New German Critique*, no. 65. 127. doi:10.2307/488538.

¹³ Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, 129

Schindler's List, Casablanca), and television shows (*Hogan's Heroes, Rat Patrol, Band of Brothers, COMBAT*) chronicle the lives and adventures of the brave men who fought in this global engagement. Countless classic novels (*The Longest Day, Catch 22, The Naked and the Dead*) dive into the thoughts and minds of the combatants, and many would be made into movies themselves years after they were originally published.

This multitude of productions serves as a concrete reminder of America's efforts in the Second World War. A collective memory of this sort is more than just a way in which our nation can interpret its past, however. Rather, it can have significant effects upon its present as well. In his analysis of Halbwach's theory, Jan Assmann states that "a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge and derives formative and normative impulses from it."¹⁴ Assmann's analysis states that the unified consciousness of the nation, which is derived from the memory shared amongst its citizens, is the basis from which it pulls from and builds off of in order to make its decisions.

The evidences of this can be seen in our modern society. One of the most potent examples can be found in our most recent war, the War on Terror. The comparisons can be seen from the beginning in that America was drawn into the conflict by a foreign attack upon its soil. President George W. Bush and his speechwriters, in their effort to rally the nation's support for their cause, found "countless opportunities to summon the legacy of World War II as the sanctifying touch for his global campaign against terrorism."¹⁵ Admittedly, many of the comparisons that they attempted to draw between the two conflicts were strenuous at best, such as "the liberation of Kabul or Baghdad...to the liberation of Paris or the capture of Berlin," but

¹⁴ Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", 128

¹⁵ David Hoogland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy: World War II, the War on Terror, and the Uses of Historical Memory," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 7, no. 3 (2004): 339, <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 21, 2016)

the fact of the matter remains that the President and his advisors found ample amounts of material that they could pull from in order to construct and justify their policies in the war in the Middle East.¹⁶

This is not the first time this has occurred. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor at the inception of America's entrance to the conflict, President Roosevelt and his associates began to stir up public memory to the works of Abraham Lincoln. "Images and stories of the sixteenth president appeared everywhere as a symbol of national strength and purpose and as a sign that citizens had a deep faith in the ideas of equality and democracy."¹⁷ Roosevelt was intent on selling the people on the idea that the war they were preparing to wage was a struggle to ensure the Four Freedoms for the world. America was thought to have the moral high ground in the war, and the president's remembrance of Lincoln helped to galvanize the public behind that fact.

In short, different aspects of the national historical or collective memory have been used throughout our nation's history in order to bring about a desired goal in the populace. It has shaped policy and national propaganda, and it has influenced the conversation of the nation, especially in times of intense debate, worry, or conflict. When we are unsure of how to proceed or of the best way in which to handle a current crisis, we often look to the annals of the past in an effort to try to find the answers. The question of the matter is whether the past we draw from is actually factual and supported, or whether it is the construct of our memory and tradition passed down from generation to generation that has been cemented by the multitude of productions on the matter.

¹⁶ David Hoogland Noon, "Operation Enduring Analogy", 339

¹⁷ John E Bodnar, *The "Good War" in American Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 13

Philip D. Beidler describes this concept as a continuous action.¹⁸ This implies that this idea of our national memory is not a static one but rather an adaptive and evolving ideal. This can be seen in *COMBAT*. Though the show definitely perpetuates a positive image of the war and the Americans which fought in it, it also shows a nuance in its portrayal. It is not afraid to delve into the less popular aspects of the war.

This complex depiction may be attributed to the fact that *COMBAT* was created over fifteen years after the war had ended. This distance allows it to have more of a free hand in dealing with the different facets of the conflict. While it is not anti-war, it also does not match the pro-war heights that were seen during the years in which the war actually raged.

COMBAT AND THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS

War is hell, or so the saying goes. In the Second World War, millions of men left their homes, journeyed to a land most had never been to before, and risked their lives. This struggle would not be easy and would cost many of these men a great deal.

As the title *COMBAT!* would suggest, the actual fighting and battles of World War 2 feature extremely heavily into the show's plotlines. Nearly every episode centers on some sort of conflict between the opposing sides. Remarkably, the effects managers and directors were able to produce some impressive visual depictions of the horrors of war. This is somewhat surprising given the program's status as a television show instead of a movie and the fact that it was created during the 1960s. The budgetary restraints and the restrictions on what is actually allowed to be

¹⁸ Philip D. Beidler, *The Good War's Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998)

shown on television often stand in the way of truly showing how brutal war can be, but *COMBAT* was able to, in spite of these hindrances, convey the terrors these men faced.

There is perhaps no greater example of how *COMBAT!* portrays the violence of war than the two-part episode found in season four – “Hills Are for Heroes”¹⁹. In this episode, Hanley, Saunders, the rest of the series regulars, and several new additions to the platoon have been instructed to advance through German lines as part of a large, coordinated strike on the enemy’s territory. As they begin to advance up a hill, however, they are fired upon by Germans fortified in two pillboxes both on top of their hill and the one behind them.

Fleeing to the relative safety of a bunker below, the platoon is raked with fire from the two German machine guns, and several men are struck down. Not deterred by this setback, Lieutenant Hanley orders the men to go up yet again, this time with Kirby covering them with a machine gun of their own. Despite this, their advance is still quickly negated and several of their men mowed down in the rapid hail of bullets. After retreating, the soldiers begin to question whether the hill can be taken, but Lieutenant Hanley, in keeping with his orders from S2 intelligence officer, gets the men ready to head up the hill once more. Despite hand grenade throws and cover fire from Cajé and other members of the squad, time and time again they fail to make any headway on either of the German positions.

To assist them in their efforts, Hanley calls for any support that the battalion command can give them. After an array of mortar fire and even a tank has little to no effect, the men retreat

¹⁹ “Hills Are for Heroes,” *COMBAT!*, directed by Vic Morrow, Youtube video, posted by Surau Ubudiah Taman Sri Gombak, March 26, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JDfHxzARU4>

back to their bunker. They are battered, wounded, and exhausted. More than half of the platoon has been wiped out. To their disbelief, Hanley tells them to prepare to mount the hill yet again.

Finally, in one last desperate push up the hillside, Caje fires a bazooka from behind the carcass of their defeated tank and successfully manages to take out the Germans. The men are ecstatic and delirious at the fact that they have overcome this impossible nightmare of a situation and have taken the seemingly unconquerable hill. In the midst of their joyous celebration, however, the Lieutenant orders them to come down; they're pulling back. They had spent hours and had sacrificed the lives of half their men, only to give up the hill as soon as it was within their grasp.

Throughout the course of this episode, the viewer is never left with a sense of an underwhelming depiction of war. Explosions cause dirt to rain down upon Hanley and his men, bullets ricochet all around them as they scurry down the hill, and the tank roars into the battle, even though it is destroyed only moments later. Though the program was restricted as to how much gore it could show, it did not shy away from showing blood seeping through the uniforms and men writhing in agony as their lives were taken from them by a bullet.

Much of the pain that the show depicts stems not from the combat going on around them but rather from the conflict going on within their own minds. This leads directly into the next phase of our analysis of *COMBAT!*, which is its portrayal of the American soldiers themselves. As much as the program focused on the physical struggles that these men endured, there is ample attention paid to the despair and exhaustion that war can place on the combatants, especially, as was the case in this episode, when the sacrifice seemed to be pointless.

Like “Hills Are for Heroes”, several *COMBAT!* episodes depict the apparent futility of the war effort. In the episode entitled “Cat and Mouse”²⁰, Sergeant Saunders is ordered to join a squad under the command of another sergeant for a scouting mission into German held territory. Unfortunately, the two sergeants cannot see eye to eye, and they differ greatly in their opinions on how the mission should be run. As the members of the squad are picked off by the Germans, Saunders and his counterpart, Sergeant Jenkins, are forced to work together and thus gain a grudging respect for each other. Yet, for the mission to succeed, Sergeant Jenkins sacrifices his life. Upon returning to base, a beleaguered Saunders is informed that the information which he and the Jenkins so diligently fought for is no longer required. Army intelligence was able to break the German code that very morning, thereby rendering their information obsolete and unneeded. This naturally infuriates and frustrates Saunders. Despite the apparent negation of their sacrifice, the episode does not necessarily cast the armed forces as calloused or insensitive to their efforts. This is the reality of war, however, and they are portrayed as simply doing as best they can with the information they have at hand.

In the season two episode entitled “Bridgehead”²¹, we find another potent example of the seeming futility and exasperation that often accompanied the efforts of the ground troops to fulfill the orders of those at the top. This time the squad is tasked with capturing a German held bridge, but they run into trouble when they discover that the house next to the river is being occupied by a team of fortified German soldiers. Luckily, Saunders and his men have a tank to back them up. Unluckily, the Germans have an anti-tank rocket launcher.

²⁰ “Cat and Mouse,” *COMBAT!*, directed by Robert Altman, Youtube video, posted by WorldWar 8, April 7, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8PjFtd86f8>

²¹ “Bridgehead”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Bernard McEveety, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, July 24, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6fXDYZ-0c8>

After seeing the tank, their best chance of taking the house and the bridge, destroyed before their very eyes, Saunders remarks, “We can’t take that house without a tank, Lieutenant.” To which Hanley replies, “We have to.”²² Though the rest of the episode deals with their subsequent struggles and efforts to take out the fortified enemy position, the emotional crux of the story can be found in that simple exchange between the lieutenant and the sergeant. Despite overwhelming odds and faced with a seemingly impossible objective, Saunders and his men must press on.

Instances such as these and the one found in “Hills Are for Heroes” are at the core of what makes *COMBAT* such an enjoyable and engaging show to watch and enjoy. For all of the visceral action and bombastic visuals that can be found in many of the episodes, there is a real, relatable heart to the characters and their struggles. These men fight bravely onward, not only for their country, but also for each other. They fight, risking their own life and limb, not only for the men of their squad but for the sake of their allied soldiers across Europe. The second platoon of Company K is merely a cog in a much larger machine. The viewer may become attached to these men, but they are consistently reminded that, in many ways, they are almost expendable for the greater war effort being waged.

The “boots on the ground” are depicted as pawns in a larger game being waged, but this does not necessarily mean that the higher-ups are shown to be cruel and heartless. Often, when battles and wars are converted to the screen, they are accompanied by a vehemently anti-war sentiment from the creators, producers, and actors that can be felt through their portrayals. To its credit, *COMBAT* never reaches that level of disdain for the structure of the armed forces. The

²² “Bridgehead”, 2:08

widely-regarded classic novel *Catch 22* came out at nearly the same time as *COMBAT*. The book itself was published originally in 1961, and it was converted to movie form in the year 1970, meaning that the film production was influenced by the same anti-war mindset prevalent during the years of the Vietnam War as *COMBAT*. Despite this, *Catch 22* is overtly critical and anti-war in its depiction of the soldiers' experiences in the Mediterranean conflict.

The other option in depictions of World War II is to go with a decidedly pro-war approach, which promotes and aggrandizes the value of war and the glory of combat. In popular movies such as *Patton* and *The Longest Day* the war effort is shown in a much more favorable light.

COMBAT does its fair share of showing the positive aspects of war. Amongst all of the horrid and terrible conditions which the men find themselves in, the resolute character of the soldiers – and through them the entire army – shines through. In many regards, Hanley and Saunders are essentially John Wayne in army slacks. They convey that archetypal American hero who is imbued with the righteousness of the nation's core values. The sergeant and the lieutenant always stand true and right even when faced with insurmountable odds or the temptation to compromise their positions.

In "Barrage"²³, Sergeant Saunders finds himself at the mercy of a German soldier. In an attempt to find the locations of the enemy artillery, he is wounded in the leg during the scouting mission. While crawling to safety, he seeks shelter in an abandoned mine that, unbeknownst to him, is also occupied by a German deserter. Towards the end of the episode, he and the deserter find themselves held captive by two iron-fisted German soldiers. Saunders tells his unwilling

²³ "Barrage", *COMBAT!*, directed by Sutton Roley, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, June 2, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2umDujcvHE>

companion, “Men like that exist ‘cause men like you don’t stand for what you believe in.”²⁴ This spurs the man into action, and they escape the clutches of their Germans captors.

In this one line from Saunders, the whole justification for America’s involvement in the war can be found. Though we were attacked by Japan in an unprovoked action, the main reasoning behind our effort was not one of vengeance but one of defense. America stood in defense of freedom; it stood to stop the spread of Nazism, fascism, and Japanese militarism. The “greatest generation” stood in defense of the principles which it held so dear so that it could ensure their safe passage to those that would follow.

To this end, there was much promotion during the war of the supposed moral high ground which the allies enjoyed. In the U.S., numerous posters stressed the notion that Americans were fighting for fundamental freedoms. In addition to the famous “Four Freedoms” posters, shown below, other posters featured similar themes. One, “Americans Will Always Fight for Liberty,” stressed this bluntly, while “United We Win” was a more subtle attack on racial discrimination. Finally, both “The Sowers” and “We’re Fighting to Prevent This” clearly depict what Americans were fighting against.

²⁴ “Barrage”, 30:44

SAVE FREEDOM OF SPEECH



BUY WAR BONDS

25

SAVE FREEDOM OF WORSHIP

EACH ACCORDING TO THE DICTATES OF HIS OWN CONSCIENCE



BUY WAR BONDS

26

OURS... to fight for



FREEDOM FROM WANT

27

OURS... to fight for



FREEDOM FROM FEAR

28

25

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedom/images_html/save_freedom_speech.html, accessed April 8, 2016

26

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedom/images_html/save_freedom_worship.html, accessed April 8, 2016

27

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedom/images_html/freedom_from_want.html, accessed April 8, 2016

28

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/four_freedom/images_html/freedom_from_fear.html, accessed April 8, 2016



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²⁹ http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/united_we_win/images_html/united_we_win.html, accessed April 8, 2016

³⁰ http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/warning/images_html/fighting_to_prevent.html, accessed April 8, 2016

³¹ http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/powers_of_persuasion/this_is_nazi_brutality/images_html/the_sowers.html, accessed April 8, 2016

³² <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm/ref/collection/p16062coll10/id/71>, accessed April 8, 2016

Posters such as these were used all across the United States to promote support and cooperation with the war effort. Some of them, such as those featuring Uncle Sam and Rosie the Riveter, called upon American's patriotism and determination to aid the soldiers in any way they can. Particularly, the materials which invoked the memory of Pearl Harbor strike a definite moral and sentimental code. The war was being waged so that tragedies such as that attack need not happen again, and by taking part in whatever way they could, citizens could honor the memory of the fallen.

Not all of the promotional strategies from the war resonated on such a positive note, however. Several employed blatant racist tactics when showing the enemy forces. Japanese soldiers were depicted with rat-like features and could be seen hauling away naked women under a banner reading "THIS IS THE ENEMY."³³ Germans and Italians are likewise depicted in demeaning and dehumanizing ways. This belittling of the enemies made it easier for the public to support the killing of them on the battlefield.

The promotion of the war in the United States both during and then after the wars conclusion underwent a process of mythologization. To mythologize something is "to make (someone or something) seem great or heroic."³⁴ Yet this gilded version of the war was not readily received by many of the returning veterans. John Bodnar deals with this mixed reception in his book *The "Good War" in American Memory*.

Some soldiers started to fashion memories of the war soon after it ended by writing extensive accounts of what they saw and felt. Less accepting of Roosevelt's optimism about creating a better world, and deeply suspicious of the sentimental language of the war years that characterized the motivations and attitudes of men like themselves, these literary-minded veterans were ultimately responsible for producing the most critical remembrance of the American

³³ <http://www.toptenz.net/top-10-wwii-propaganda-posters.php/this-is-the-enemy>, accessed 3/11/16

³⁴ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mythologize>, accessed 3/11/16

experience in World War II ever offered to the public. The writings and recollections of these soldiers were not always explicit antiwar statements, and at times they supported traditional perspectives on the conflict. Overall, however, they provided substantial testimony that was designed to refute the widespread layer of patriotic virtue that had marked their times – or what soldier/author Paul Fussell called “moral simplification” – and insisted that many of the men who served their nation now felt more like victims than heroes.³⁵

It is on the backs of testimonies such as these that the show *COMBAT!* was built. While having elements of both pro-war and anti-war sentiments, the program manages to tread a line between the two of them. It successfully portrays the strengths of the armed forces character and values, but it does not shy away from exploring the darker elements of futility, exasperation, and desperation that are inherently imbedded with any war.

What results is a portrayal of both the combat itself and the soldiers’ experiences within it that rings with an aura of truth and realism. While it is obvious that many aspects of the show are dramatized and that each episode has certain formulaic and predictable patterns, the heart of *COMBAT*’s portrayal of the American fighting men retains that essential complexity and nuance which reality requires.

GERMAN SOLDIERS

Any good conflict must, by its very definition, has two sides. We have discussed the protagonists, the American forces of Sergeant Saunders and his men. Just as integral to the plot, however, are the antagonists of *COMBAT* – the Germans. Like much of the rest of the show’s portrayal of World War II, it is able to find a somewhat measured approach to its portrayal of these aggressors.

³⁵ John Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory*, 34

Typically, in the television and movie productions of the time and into our modern day, the German soldiers of World War II can be found to be portrayed in one of two ways. They are either depicted as incompetent, and oftentimes comedic, fools, such as in *Hogan's Heroes*, or they are depicted as sinister villains in films like *Casablanca*. *COMBAT* is able to establish itself somewhere in the middle of these two opposing sides. The Germans in *COMBAT* are nuanced in their portrayal and more realistic because of it.

The easiest and most efficient way to understand the show's approach to the German forces in France in 1944 is to literally examine episodes which show the multi-faceted depiction to their forces. In the episode entitled "The Pillbox"³⁶, the German soldiers are portrayed as normal men engaged in combat simply struggling to survive. Contrary to this, however, in the episode entitled "Gideon's Army"³⁷, which aired the week before "The Pillbox", they are shown to be the cruel masters of a slave labor camp full of Polish forced laborers. In order to fully grasp the depiction of these men, a further examination of these episodes and their plots is warranted.

In "Gideon's Army", the darkest side of the German forces are on display, for *COMBAT* deals briefly with the brutality of the Nazi prison camps. Given the fact that this was a basic cable television show in the 1960s, it is not surprising that little mention of this is made, for the conditions found in these camps are widely known to be horrendous and not fit for the faint of heart. The show never reaches anywhere near the level of *Schindler's List* or any other such depiction, but it does manage to fairly effectively address the issue.

³⁶ "The Pillbox", *COMBAT!*, directed by Vic Morrow, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, May 3, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YS_QHpEKg44

³⁷ "Gideon's Army", *COMBAT!*, directed by John Peyser, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, May 3, 2012, accessed March 18, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYuy0xRDZgk>

“Gideon’s Army” opens up with the squad coming upon a deserted German prison camp.³⁸ The camp has been evacuated to avoid the advance of the Allied forces, but in their haste to leave, the prisoners which were too sickly or weak to travel have been left behind. These men are little more than skin and bones, even coming so far as to lunge with animalistic ferocity when one of the squad tries to distribute rations. Little is shown in the way of actual injuries or disfigurements; the horrors inflicted upon these men are more implied than exhibited. Nevertheless, the feeling of depravity and the depth of inhumanity with which they have been treated is effectively conveyed. This is particularly evident when the prisoners are given a chance to address a German soldier that the squad manages to capture.

In “The Pillbox”, the episode opens with Lieutenant Hanley and his squad being hammered by enemy artillery. When it is clear that there is no immediate way forward, he orders them to fall back to safer ground. Several of the men do not survive this process though. One is wounded and therefore immobilized, but he survives barely. Hanley stops to help him, and unable to make the trip back to their own lines, he and the wounded man seek shelter in a nearby pillbox. The real meat of the episode begins, however, when a patrol of three Germans investigates the seemingly abandoned building, at which point Hanley takes them prisoner.

What is particularly interesting about this depiction of these German men is that they are not shown as moustache-twirling villains, comic relief, or incompetent fools. Rather, they are displayed as real, frightened men. One of the Germans speaks English and even offers to assist

³⁸ Interestingly, this episode aired directly before “The Pillbox”, which was discussed earlier in the paper. While it is never actually addressed in the narrative of either episode, it is easy for the viewer to understand the distrust and disdain with which Hanley treats his German captives. After viewing such sights as the prison camps, he would naturally be unwilling to trust any of their forces.

the injured American soldier by taking him to an aid station down the road if Hanley will allow it.

Naturally, though, given his past experiences with the enemies, Hanley refuses to allow the German to assist his companion. In frustration, the German man fires back a retort pleading with the lieutenant.

It's the same in our army. Officers are always the same. A rank and file soldier can bleed his life into the ground as long as the proud officer does not surrender. I'm speaking like a human being, Lieutenant.... Oh yes, of course, I am the enemy. I have no feelings. I am not to be trusted. I know. I'll tell you the kind of human being I really am, Lieutenant. I'm a man who resents anyone trying to be a hero at the expense of somebody else's life!³⁹

Despite the man's pleading, it is later revealed that the aid station to which he was referring did not exist. In the end, he begs the lieutenant to show him mercy, and Hanley grants him that request. He attempted to deceive, but the episode makes it clear to the viewer that this was not necessarily done out of ill will. Instead, it was done to save himself from being killed by his enemies. It may have not been the most honorable path, but it was a definitively human response. Given the dire situation, it is understandable that he would react in such a way.

The humanity of the Germans can be seen in "Just for the Record"⁴⁰ as well. In this episode, Saunders has sought refuge in the apartment of a French woman in German occupied Paris after an attempt to transport him and a few other men over enemy lines has fallen through. He successfully remains hidden throughout most of the episode by staying in her guest room. Unbeknownst to him, the French lady with whom he is staying has a German lover.

³⁹ "The Pillbox", 22:00

⁴⁰ "Just for the Record", *COMBAT!*, directed by Laslo Benedek, Youtube video, posted by WorldWar 8, June 23, 2012, accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKSAYbWCqzI>

Eavesdropping on their conversations, Saunders hears the soldier remark about the weakness of the German army.

We will be defeated. The end will come very soon now. I've known it for some time. Berlin lies to us! The communique talk about reinforcements; they say that the Luftwaffe plans a major counterattack. They talk about bombers by the thousands. It's all talk. There are no planes. No mighty regiments. Nothing but talk! Talk! Talk! Talk! Talk!...My mother writes that they've taken my younger brother into the army. He is fourteen. Soon I expect we will be evacuating Paris, and I will have to leave you.⁴¹

Evident in the soldier's speech is his uncertainty and fear regarding the state of his nation's forces. He sees that their situation is growing increasingly dire, and the war that is raging puts both his family and his newfound love in danger. As committed as he is to his nation, he is torn by his love for those close to him. Juxtaposed next to the racial discrimination that, as has been shown, was often prevalent in promotional materials for the war, this humanity within a German combatant is particularly interesting.

Other episodes, such as "Cry for Help", continue to show forth this more relatable side to the German forces. In that episode, an enemy medic is captured and bonds with Doc. The two men share a mutual care for the men all around them who are injured, and they express frustration at the fact that they often cannot do more to help in the war effort. It is episodes like this which show a complexity and depth of character in the German ranks and distinguishes *COMBAT*'s portrayal from that which is often shown.

This is not to say that the Germans are always shown to be sympathetic characters. In fact, this is far from the truth. In many episodes, they are relegated to the role of targets for

⁴¹ "Just for the Record", 27:16

Saunders and his men to shoot at or obstacles for them to get past. They are not portrayed as inherently evil or vile, but they are the enemy and therefore must be dealt with.

However, there are some instances in which the more deplorable and detestable aspects of the Nazi forces are shown forth. A large portion of the time, the normal rank and file German soldiers are not shown to be that bad. This differs when the SS troops are portrayed. In the two-parter entitled “The Long Way Home”, Saunders and his men are captured by a brutal SS commander. They, along with some other Allied soldiers, are held prisoner in unpleasant conditions and are tortured for information. Only after fighting for their freedom are they able to make their escape.⁴²

In short, the portrayal of the Germans in *COMBAT* is, like the rest of the show, well done and avoids the stereotypical approach of belittling those men who fought on that side. It does not reduce these men to one-dimensional villains in every instance, but the show’s portrayal cannot be described as a flattering one. The Germans are the enemies; there is no doubt about that. While there are instances in which they are shown to be relatable or understandable, as a whole they are depicted as the oppressive aggressors who started the war. Compared with the rightness of the Americans, *COMBAT*’s Germans are clearly designed to incur the ire of the viewers rather than their support.

AMERICAN WORLD WAR II NARRATIVE

COMBAT covers a lot of material. It spanned 152 hour-long episodes total, which means it comprises roughly six days of actual footage dealing with the war. The American combatants

⁴² “The Long Way Home”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Ted Post, Youtube video, posted by Canal de mona0825, December 24, 2011, accessed March 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mvOdoit9f8

and the challenges they faced, the troubling conditions which the ravaged French had to endure, and the large numbers of German forces the Allies encountered were all covered during the show's run. Despite all of this, there are still several aspects of the war that the show did not touch upon.

World War II was massive in scale. Even more so than the First World War, it truly encompassed the breadth of the world from east to west. *COMBAT*, however, is based only in France and only for a short span of time from mid-1944 to early 1945. This means that there are several aspects of the conflict which simply do not get addressed in the show. This is understandable due to the show's narrow focus, but several of the same aspects which fail to be mentioned in *COMBAT* often get overlooked in the larger discussion of World War II as well. This deserves further examination.

COMBAT makes no mention of the fight in the Pacific, and in the American imagination, the fight against the Japanese often falls short of the fascination with the war in Europe. This can be largely attributed to the fact that the war in the Pacific lacked many of the moral qualities which made the war in the west so appealing for consumption by the American public. Despite being initiated by the egregious attack on Pearl Harbor, much of the war against Japan can be stated in terms of material dominance rather than moral righteousness. In his discussion of Norman Mailer's classic, *The Naked and the Dead*, Bodnar analyzes this perspective.

He saw the American show of force not as a temporary regression into a savage state but as a true reflection of an antidemocratic streak within the American soul. The fact that the story was set on a Pacific island was also important, because Mailer believed that, unlike the fight against Fascism in Europe, the struggle in the Pacific was basically an "imperialist" struggle on the part of the United States.

Guided by the long symbolic arm of MacArthur," it was more about the recovery of the Philippines than about the Four Freedoms.⁴³

The draw of the Pacific conflict features heavily on its beginning and its end. Much has been made of Pearl Harbor due to its shock and surprise. Also, there is much attention paid to the bombs dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima and their raw destructive power. The rest of the engagement does not seem to resonate with the American public in the same way as the conflict in Europe though. So much has been made about the evil of the German Nazis that our other enemies in the war are often overshadowed.

A particularly interesting aspect of the memory of World War II is how little acknowledgement is given to the contribution of the Soviets. For most, a college level course is at least needed in order for the part which they played to be mentioned. Again this can be traced back to a concept of morality. One of the keys to the Allied success was their ability to rally their troops behind the idea that they were in the right. As Richard Overy explains in his book *Why the Allies Won*:

Whatever the rights or wrongs of the case, the Allies were successful in winning the moral high ground throughout the war. There are clear advantages in moral certainty and moral superiority. The Allied populations fought what they saw as a just war against aggression. They were able to appeal to neutral states to collaborate in a good cause; enthusiasm for war was straightforward; much was justified in the name of a higher ideal, such as the bombing, which provoked a real heart-searching only after the conflict was over.⁴⁴

Allying with the Soviet Union cast a shadow over this perceived righteousness in their cause. Before the rise of the Nazis, the Soviet communists were considered the biggest enemy of the

⁴³ Bodnar, *The "Good War" in American Memory*, 35-36

⁴⁴ Richard J. Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 22

United States. Even during the early parts of the war, many still viewed Stalin as a worse threat than Hitler. After the wars completion, we find ourselves engaged in the drawn-out conflict of the Cold War.

The animosity between the U.S. and the Soviet Empire was a very real and tangible force, and it was not without reason. Stalin is regarded as the biggest mass-murderer in history, and he ruled his land with terror and oppression. Without the assistance of the Soviets, though, it is unsure whether the Allies would have won. Even if they had, it would have been a much longer and drawn out conflict.

The distinct absence of any mention of the Soviet efforts and forces in *COMBAT* is not surprising, though, when considered in the light of the American narrative. At the time of *COMBAT*'s airing, the war in Vietnam was just beginning to intensify. The war against Communism was at the forefront of the American mind. If the program had given tribute to the Russian contribution, it would have been an insult to the American public.

COMBAT also deals somewhat with the other Allied powers, but their presence is relatively small or relegated to merely a supporting role. The British forces make appearances in a few episodes, such as “What Are the Bugles Blowing For?”⁴⁵ and “Any Second Now”⁴⁶, but they are largely ignored otherwise. The French resistance and the citizens now held under Nazi subjection feature in many episodes, but they are often played for comedic value or as victims waiting for the help of the American army, as can be seen in “I Swear by Apollo”⁴⁷, “The Party”,

⁴⁵ “What Are the Bugles Blowing For?”, *COMBAT!*, directed by John Peyser, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, June 23, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=No7sl2tyPu8>

⁴⁶ “Any Second Now”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Robert Altman, Youtube video, posted by WorldWar 8, February 28, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FV6z-zsjKzw>

⁴⁷ “I Swear by Apollo”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Robert Altman, Youtube video, posted by WorldWar 8, April 15, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7k8PIgi5Ok>

and “The General and the Sergeant”⁴⁸. While there is more shown of these nations’ participation in the war, there is no mistaking that they are distant secondary focus points. This is America’s show first and foremost.

FUTURE RAMIFICATIONS

This conversation of American war memory continues even into our present day. Right after the end of the Second World War, we found ourselves embroiled in a conflict in Korea. Directly off the back of that conflict, we had the lengthy Vietnam War, which spanned multiple decades. The engagement in Vietnam was ongoing, in some form or fashion, during the entirety of *COMBAT*’s production run on television. Both this and the struggle in Korea are not remembered particularly fondly in our society, particularly when compared to the fervor which surrounds and continues to emanate from World War II.

More modern wars also continue to play a major role in our culture. The recent wars in the Middle East are particularly potent focal points as the trouble and turmoil continues to persist and, in some cases, escalate. Operation Desert Storm, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the current conflict against ISIS in Syria – these stories feature heavily in our current national dialogue. Stories regarding and involving these conflicts saturate the twenty-four-hour news cycle, and they are often the cause of much debate and argument. This is true from the civilian level all the way to the governmental.

It will be interesting to note, in the coming years, how these wars – especially those most current – continue their transition from the stage of current discussion into the halls of historical

⁴⁸ “The General and the Sergeant”, *COMBAT!*, directed by Bernard McEveety, Youtube video, posted by GR160289, June 9, 2012, accessed March 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7k8PIgi5Ok>

memory. How will the opinions regarding them change? Will they trend more negative or positive? Only time will tell.

It is appropriate here to address in somewhat more detail the actual role which the factor of time plays in the perception of historical memory. As has been shown, *COMBAT* enjoys a much more nuanced portrayal and depiction of the Second World War than would have been found in the nation even just fifteen years before the show began. Other shows and productions, removed from the war by an expanse of time, also show this change.

This is not necessarily in regards to the actual factual details of the war. Barring new discoveries, the facts have mostly remained static and relatively unchanging. What has altered over time, however, is the conversation concerning the plights and experiences of those individuals involved in the war itself. As the patriotic fervor needed to garner support for the war began to die down, a more critical approach to the war – often born out of the accounts of returning veterans – arose. These intimate and up-close accounts oftentimes conflicted with the previous national narrative, and it is out of this conflict that the nuances of *COMBAT* and its contemporaries were born.

It is interesting to note that, in support of one of the themes of this paper, this phenomenon can be examined in ever increasing amounts as the years have progressed. As ever-advancing technology has allowed us to see more and more of the day to day happenings of war, our perception of war has changed. No war since “The Good War” has been viewed in a particularly fond light. This could be attributed to the lack of a definite moral reasoning behind the wars since, but it must also be acknowledged that the government has less and less control over the national narrative as technology grants more and more power to the news media and private citizens.

Despite this shift in perception, World War II still enjoys a reputable standing in our culture. New books, documentaries, and other such productions continue to draw upon it and further dissect the wealth of stories contained therein. It has even been brought back in a major way to the front of pop culture in such movies as *The First Avenger* and *The Winter Soldier*. In these films, the superhero Captain American fights an organization called Hydra, which is an organization “tied directly to surviving fugitive members of governments of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.”⁴⁹ Though the conflict has been over for over seventy years, World War II is still affecting our society today.

CONCLUSION

As Philip Beidler states in *The Good War's Greatest Hits*, America undergoes an active process of remembering. It is an ongoing and evolving idea. The memory of our past is affected by how we address and convey it in the future, and this remembrance, in turn, affects our actions going forward.

The allure of the Second World War was solidified by its very nature. The sheer scale, the spectacle of the combat, and the immense ramifications of what transpired ensure that the stories of the war found an eager audience both while it was transpiring and in the years after its conclusion. This cemented its position in the American consciousness, and it warranted an intense popularization of the conflict in the national dialogue.

This led to a “moral simplification” of the war. It was simplified for consumption into a narrative of our good, brave men versus the evil of the Nazis – freedom vs. oppression. Veterans returning from the fields of battle took some issue with this, however. While they did not take

⁴⁹ “Hydra”, Marvel Database, accessed March 20, 2016, [http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Hydra_\(Earth-616\)](http://marvel.wikia.com/wiki/Hydra_(Earth-616))

issue with all of the portrayal of the war, they believed it was missing the critical nuances that typified their experiences.

To correct this, the veterans took to writing and creating, adding their complex accounts to the national discussion. It is on the backs of these sorts of depictions that *COMBAT* is built. The program attempts to and succeeds in its efforts to depict a more realistic, less propagandized version of the war and its combatants.

The soldiers, on both sides, are shown to be more relatable individuals than the archetypes which had preceded them. The Americans retained that sense of rightness and pride in the cause, but they were shown to be fallible and to grow disillusioned by the seemingly senseless violence and brutality of the war. The Germans were still shown to be the villains, but the program manages to pepper in enough instances of actual humanity in their depictions to show that they were not all monsters.

COMBAT continues the American war narrative of freedom triumphing over oppression. It perpetuates the idea that our cause in the Second World War was a just and righteous one. The program clearly states that we had the moral high ground over our enemies, but it offers some caveats. That is the importance of *COMBAT*. In being true and honest about the complexities and nuances of the war, it is not only the longest-running World War II drama, but it is also one of the most realistic.

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