

Sledge, M. (2005). *Soldier Dead: How We Recover Identify, Bury, and Honor Our Military Fallen*. New York: Columbia University Press.

DOI: 10.1177/0095327X06288740

Michael Sledge, the author of *Soldier Dead*, was embedded with the Army's 54<sup>th</sup> Quartermaster Company (Mortuary Affairs) during the early phase of the Iraq War. Based on his firsthand knowledge and research, he presents the history and practice of mortuary affairs in the military (primarily the U.S. Army) from its beginnings to the present.

The biological characteristics of the remains are only occasionally touched upon as the psychological and sociological are the focus of *Soldier Dead*. Psychological connotations are the effects upon those who handle the remains and the bereaved. The social (or sociological) connotations refer to the role that the dead play in society. One of the most interesting aspects of Sledge's presentation of *Soldier Dead* is the notion of the *social identity* of the dead. This concept is derived from the observation that there is a physical identity and a social identity of the individual. In life, these may be hard to separate. In death, however, they diverge. The body is buried and will decay. However, the individual lives on socially, at least for a time. This social identity after death is subject to change due to memory and the actions and statements of others. It can be drastically affected by the way the death and the remains are treated. An anecdote describes the actions and feelings of a French woman who daily tended the gravesite in her garden of an American soldier killed in World War I. When he was repatriated, she was very disturbed and asked, "Is it, Monsieur, that by some chance you may know where they have taken him?" (p. 195).

Sledge describes the care that is taken in forensic examination and identification. Sometimes the public appears to be filled with suspicion and mistrust of the government and the military. There are stories of errors, disrespectful treatment, and conflicting information. There can also be complications in the notification of the death of a soldier to the next of kin due to secrecy required by the mission, clandestine operations, missions gone awry, political considerations (such as when the U.S. military personnel were not supposed to be in neighboring countries during the Vietnam War), ineptitude, and misinformation. The notification can also be hindered by new technology. Beginning in the 1990s, a wide variety of means of communication previously unknown in war became available to soldiers.<sup>1</sup> Instant communication has often led to soldiers informing people back home, sometimes incorrectly, about casualties prior to official notification to the family. Rumors so generated are an enormous stress on the family. A pamphlet with a particularly touching title, "Tell Me About My Boy," published during World War II, answered many common questions about the mortuary affairs process and warned the public to pay attention only to official sources of information. This is still good advice. However, problems such as these are not the norm

and distort the thousands of cases when things went right. Errors are the exception rather than the rule.

My work with the Army mortuary affairs community over the past twenty years or so has left no doubt in my mind of the sincerity, caring, and professionalism of this small group of military and civilian personnel who perform their jobs well and with respect and reverence to the dead service member. Sledge's description of the service of mortuary affairs personnel indicates to me that he has reached the same conclusion.

The stress of the handling of personal effects is well described. Often, it is one of the most difficult aspects of remains handling. Personal effects are the possessions of the individual that humanize the remains. For some people, it is relatively easy to distance oneself from decayed and mutilated remains. They smell bad, are hard to handle, and may not have much resemblance to a living human.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, anything that personalizes the dead has the potential to create the emotional involvement of the remains handler.<sup>3</sup> Among these are facts about the individual's life such as the hometown, age, marital status, and status of the surviving family. Pictures, letters, and many other objects and concepts make the life of the individual real for the otherwise potentially detached remains handler.

In military command, there is often reluctance to discuss plans to handle dead soldiers in war for fear of loss of morale. This reluctance can lead to poor training, misinformation and rumors among soldiers, and improper procedures when they are required to handle remains. Better knowledge of mortuary affairs procedures can inform those going into battle that, should they fall, they will be recovered and given respectful treatment.

Sledge finds that commanders worry that decaying remains might cause disease. Usually, the psychological effect of seeing dead comrades is more harmful than the risk of the remains causing disease. Nevertheless, it is frequently heard in connection with disasters that the dead cause disease. While generally not true, it is not always an easy question to answer. A recent review of scientific literature and observations from disasters concluded that dead bodies do not cause disease or pose a health threat unless a very specific set of criteria are met.<sup>4</sup> For bodies (human or animal) to cause disease, they must be hosts for a disease endemic to the area; microorganisms (from the endemic disease) must be able to live in the host or the environment after the death; and the environmental conditions, such as degraded infrastructure, must facilitate the spread of disease (e.g., poor sanitation, poor waste disposal, overcrowding).

Commanders often ask the mental health community and chaplains to *do something* to help the mortuary affairs soldiers with the stress of their work. At present, there is no protocol that will ensure that attempts to help will be beneficial. We know that having a mental health provider or a chaplain at the elbow of every mortuary affairs soldier is not helpful and may actually be harmful by stigmatizing them and by interfering with their work. In general, the best day-to-day help comes from knowledgeable and sensitive commanders and noncommissioned officers. Mental health providers and chaplains are important in providing support. However, it is

essential that they be known to the soldiers, relatively available on an informal basis, and trusted. A relationship with a known provider will make it more likely that a soldier will talk to that person than to a provider to whom the soldier has been referred and with whom the soldier has no relationship. Soldiers can also help each other by talking together.<sup>5</sup> For those soldiers whose negative feelings and thoughts do not go away in a reasonable period of time, formal professional assistance may be helpful.

How does one deal with the difficult job of remains handling? Sledge finds that the wherewithal to do mortuary affairs work comes from four factors: feelings of care, commitment to duty, ability to obtain emotional distance, and threat of force. My experience of working with nonmortuary affairs volunteers who help handle remains has found the following three reasons: 1) for mastery (e.g., "If I can do this, I can go to combat"); 2) upholding the traditions of the military; and 3) one that involves a bit of magical thinking, "If I do this for someone else, someone will do it for me."

The handling of the dead may be beyond the imagination of most people. However, Sledge recognizes that this work can turn into an almost sacred obligation. We know that there is benefit to the individual who serves where others will not or cannot go. There may be more people than we know whose lives are strengthened by their mortuary-affairs-related experiences. We also know that soldiers and their families have the capacity to feel good and bad at the same time about the same events.<sup>6</sup>

Sledge reminds us that the cost of war in lives must be continually evaluated. There is always a calculus of whether benefits achieved by war, if any, are worth the deaths and desolation they produce.<sup>7</sup> Sledge notes that the nation as well as the individual can also suffer grief for the dead. There can be national pride as well as national shame over how the remains are treated. The story of *Soldier Dead* belongs to all of us, but especially to those who have died for their country and to those who have served the dead.

James E. McCarroll

*Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress and Department of Psychiatry  
Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences*

## Notes

1. Walter R. Schumm, D. Bruce Bell, Morten G. Ender, and Rose E. Rice, "Expectations, Use, and Evaluation of Communication Media Among Deployed Peacekeepers," *Armed Forces & Society* 30 (2004): 649-62.

2. Robert J. Ursano, James E. McCarroll, and Carol S. Fullerton, "Traumatic Death in Terrorism and Disasters: The Effects on Posttraumatic Stress and Behavior," in *Terrorism and Disaster*, ed. Robert J. Ursano, Carol S. Fullerton, and Ann E. Norwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 305-32.

3. Robert J. Ursano, Carol S. Fullerton, Kelly Vance, and Tzu-Cheg Kao, "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Identification in Disaster Worker," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 156 (1999): 353-59.

4. Pan American Health Organization Area on Disaster Preparedness and World Health Organization Department for Health Action in Crisis, "Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situations," in *Disaster Manuals and Guidelines Series No. 5*. Washington, DC, 2004.

5. Robert J. Ursano, Carol S. Fullerton, Kelly Vance, and Leming Wang. "Debriefing and Its Role in the Spectrum of Prevention and Acute Management of Psychological Trauma," In *Psychological Debriefing*, B. Raphael (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 32-42.

6. John H. Newby, James E. McCarroll, Robert J. Ursano, Zizhong Fan, Jun Shigamura, and Yvonne Tucker-Harris. "Positive and Negative Consequences of a Military Deployment." *Military Medicine*, 170 (2005): 815-19.

7. See the *Armed Forces & Society* Special Issue, Considering Casualties, especially Elizabeth D. Samet, "Leaving No Warriors Behind: The Ancient Roots of a Modern Sensibility," *Armed Forces & Society* 31 (4): 624-49; and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Epilogue: A 'Good' Military Death." *Armed Forces & Society* 31 (4): 651-64.

---

Neiberg, M. S., *Fighting the Great War: A Global History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 395 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

DOI: 10.1177/0095327X06288741

Tackling a topic such as the First World War in a multivolume history is a major achievement; doing it justice in a single book is exceptional. Michael S. Neiberg's *Fighting the Great War* is just that kind of a book. On 364 pages, divided into thirteen chapters, the author narrates the momentous events and battles on all fronts—the Western in France and Belgium; the Eastern in Russia and Austria-Hungary; the Middle Eastern in Turkey, Mesopotamia, and Palestine; and the African in South Africa and German South West Africa.

The sheer scope of the topic and comparative brevity of the study determined the author's choice of a mostly strategic perspective on the major campaigns and political developments. At times, however, he leaves the commanders' headquarters or governments' cabinet rooms and takes his readers right up to the front lines to give them a glimpse of life in the trenches. Frontline soldiers' reminiscences, which Neiberg unearthed during his archival research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, enliven his battle descriptions and make them personal.

This personalization of those fighting the battles is important because of the millions of soldiers killed or wounded during the war. Neiberg's use of contemporary journal entries and letters keeps his clear and concise accounts of battles and his tallies of war casualties from becoming just meaningless statistics. Through them, the reader gains a good impression of the horrendous bloodletting that cost the three major combatants, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, nearly a whole generation of young men.

While two-thirds of *Fighting the Great War* deals with the fighting on the Western front, the other third covers the East, Middle East, Africa, and the high seas. Throughout the book, Neiberg "toggles" back and forth between theaters, carrying his readers' attention from the Western front to the fighting in Russia, back to France, and then to the landings in Gallipoli. While this geographical approach is very effective in illustrating the global nature of the war, it also leads to some confusion about the chronology of events—making the timeline of major events, which he provides