



Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II

Thomas Childers

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One of our most enduring national myths surrounds the men and women who fought in the so-called "Good War." The Greatest Generation, we're told by Tom Brokaw and others, fought heroically, then returned to America happy, healthy and well-adjusted. They quickly and cheerfully went on with the business of rebuilding their lives.

In this shocking and hauntingly beautiful book, historian Thomas Childers shatters that myth. He interweaves the intimate story of three families—including his own—with a decades' worth of research to paint an entirely new picture of the war's aftermath. Drawing on government documents, interviews, oral histories and diaries, he reveals that 10,000 veterans a month were being diagnosed with psycho-neurotic disorder (now known as PTSD). Alcoholism, homelessness, and unemployment were rampant, leading to a skyrocketing divorce rate. Many veterans bounced back, but their struggle has been lost in a wave of nostalgia that threatens to undermine a new generation of returning soldiers.

Novelistic in its telling and impeccably researched, Childers's book is a stark reminder that the price of war is unimaginably high. The consequences are human, not just political, and the toll can stretch across generations.

Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II Details

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Marie says

I was intrigued by this book mainly because all you ever hear is how soldiers from WWII came home and had great lives, but there were so many that dealt with effects of the war the rest of thier lives and it tore apart families. I was always told that my grandfather had a hard time when he came back from the war and as I read the book I wondered if he could have identified with these soldiers. Maybe someone could have helped him.

A.L. Sowards says

This was a very readable account focusing on the lives of three men and their families, and how WWII changed and affected them not only during the war, but for the rest of their lives. It follows a navigator who was shot down and spent time in a German POW camp, an army man who lost both legs in an explosion in Italy, and a man who served on an air base in England and lost his brother-in-law (an airman stationed at a nearby base) in the final weeks of the war.

This was a worthwhile book, because it's important to see the true cost of the war—and that includes more than statistics on those killed or wounded. It also includes the changed personalities, the broken marriages, and the nightmares that lasted decades into peacetime. Having said that, it was also a sad book to read, because I find stories about families disintegrating among the most depressing topics out there.

I liked the author's approach. He wove in big picture descriptions and statistics with quotes he found in archives, but the focus was on three men and their families, and that gave the narrative greater impact. On the other hand, the focus on just three men made me wonder if some of the men might have had problems anyway. Two of the couples reminded me a lot of the dysfunctional families in *Hillbilly Elegy*. So was the war completely to blame, or would those marriages have been troubled regardless? It's hard to know. But it's worth remembering that the effects of war are both long reaching and far reaching.

Carol says

We Baby Boomers grew up among the WWII veterans; many of our fathers were vets. We have been led to believe that the Greatest Generation returned to cheering crowds and good jobs. From my own father's experience and conversations we had, I know that the period of adjustment after they returned wasn't easy. Childers examines the experience of three veterans, their wives, and the decades after the War. As I finished the book I wondered about the men of my small town youth. How many of those men who were so 'normal' in public wrestled with terrible demons left from the War? How many of their families became victims of the men's memories? This is a chapter of popular WWII history that we need to know.

Charlie says

Very interesting story on 3 WW2 soldiers that survived the war but had great difficulty surviving their lives after the war. There are many details in this book that you usually do NOT get to read in other WW2 stories. I hate to say this but after finishing the book I realize that it was more like a soap opera. Family struggles, life struggles, and emotional struggles. It just - for me - got too long-winded.

Sally says

A detailed examination of three soldiers: their wartime experiences in WWII, how they adjusted or failed to adjust to civilian life, and the effects their wartime service had on their families and throughout their lives. It is a history based on extensive interviews and documents, but deliberately written to read like a novel or character study rather than an academic study. The author succeeds in presenting the profound influence war has on those taking part in it, and the problems which have tended to be glossed over in relation to WWII veterans and which so many military personnel are facing today.

ambyr says

I'm a little torn on this one. On the one hand, it was meticulously assembled and provided a lot of detail into something that I rarely see examined in history: not the great, not the oppressed, but the ordinary middle. Not joyous success, not total despair, but lives of quiet desperation. Not the war, not the peace, but the uneasy gap between the two.

And, specifically, not the trauma of WWI, not the trauma of Vietnam, but the trauma of WWII--which I feel we often elide in America, because that was our unarguably Just War. Our undisputed Victory. Our men, fighting for a cause they and we believed in. So surely they came out of it feeling triumphant, and surely the nation rose to fete them? Surely our failures to treat veterans from other conflicts fairly is a result of specific issues with those conflicts, and not a deeper society flaw? Only, as Childers shows, not so much. The numerous articles he quotes from period newspapers and magazines about the "problem" of veterans are particularly damning.

(A side note: when I was interning at my local congressperson's office in college, as you do, we had a local gentleman who had served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during WWII. He used to come around the office regularly to inquire, terribly politely, what could be done to get him a pension--because the merchant mariners, for political reasons, were never given one. And the answer [though we never told him this] was that if every congressional office in America had just such a gentleman making inquiries on just such a regular basis, a bill to retroactively grant them pensions would pass in a heartbeat. But they didn't. Most merchant mariners were dead of old age. There was no political capital to be gained from the issue. And so Congress was never going to give him and the thousands of men he served with the benefits they deserved. They still haven't. The last proposed bill to address the issue was introduced in 2011 and quietly died in committee for lack of support.)

So why torn? One, the scientist in me wants a control group. Childers draws exquisite portraits of men trying

to hold themselves together and failing, but it's rarely clear how much of what they struggling with is a direct result of their military experience. I wanted to look at men with purely civilian backgrounds, too, to help separate issues of the era as a whole from PTSD.

Two, I find Childers's choice to write about his father and a family friend as though they were strangers baffling. The patina of objectivity does nothing for me. If he is biased--and how can you *not* be biased when writing about your own family?--I want him to admit it up front, to pick apart his blindspots, his desires to create a meaning for the mysteries of his childhood. There's no shame in bias, but I am deeply suspicious of efforts to hide it. It makes me distrusting--probably undeservedly so--of the rest of the book.

Liz says

Although PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) is normally attributed to veterans of the Vietnam War, this is a false assumption. Childers entwines the stories of three American GIs and their families—including his own—in this grim portrait of the Greatest Generation's return from World War II. The violence of battle inflicted both physical and psychological wounds, leaving many veterans to struggle with PTSD, nightmares, and survivor's guilt, while their bewildered wives found that the men they welcomed home were irrevocably changed from the men they had married. This account of PTSD, broken families and stormy marriages is dark and depressing, but informative and well worth the read.

Melissa LeVine says

This book surprised me, but only because of our collective idealization of World War II and "The Greatest Generation." In following in-depth 3 ordinary soldiers and the impact of WWII on their lives and those of their families, Childers paints a horrifying picture of PTSD that we've come to expect in Vietnam War vets, but not in WWII vets.

This is the 3rd of 4 books on the untold history of that war, by a history professor who's a darned good writer! I bought it because its title reminded me of more recent works on the moral casualties of war by Rita Nakashima Brock. (I couldn't find Childers' 4th book in the series.)

One of the soldiers in this book was Childers' own father; another (the amputee) was the father of a childhood friend. He conducted extensive interviews of each veteran and family, and used lots of primary documents and popular literature of the time.

Barbara Marincel says

A well-written, thoroughly researched book that vividly demonstrates the emotional and psychological scars combat left on "The Greatest Generation". My dad was one of those vets, and after reading Childers' work so much of his behavior--insomnia, occasional emotional distance, anxiety, nightmares, etc., all made sense. I wish he was still alive so I could say, I get it, daddy. I understand, a little, the price you paid. And that sometimes the worst scars are the ones no one can see.

Timothy says

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296 pages

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Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II is about the lives of a couple soldiers from World War II during the war, and after the war ends. The author briefly describes the soldiers' experiences in war which range from being a prisoner of war to a person who is shot in the leg. After we are given the description of the soldier's background, the author gives us a picture of what returning home looked like.

I think that this book was interesting because the author gave us some information that I did not know before. I found out that there were many divorces during the World War II because of the lack of trust between couples, and because many soldiers died. A Marine private wrote to the father of one of the soldiers "...Of course, I'm not insane. But I've been living the life of a savage and haven't quite got used to a world of laws and new responsibilities. So many of my platoon were wiped out... that it's hard to sleep without seeing them die all over again." This quotation explains the reasons why many soldiers had a very difficult time living in a civilized place after war. I liked how the author gave a chance to describe each soldier's situation because we can see how they dealt with the problems that they experienced at home even though their problems may be similar.

I would recommend this book to people who are interested in soldiers in war because almost any soldier who goes off to war will experience what these soldiers experienced. Living in a battlefield is a lot different from living in home because of the complete difference constant action in war zone, and the peacefulness back at home.

Dinochunks01 says

Just witnessed the loss of the last surviving combat veteran of WWI, the so called Great War, which so closely followed the "Splendid Little War" in the 1894. It is important to remember that our WWII vets are leaving us and our Viet Nam vets are reaching retirement age. Anyone I've ever talked to who's been in a shooting war has been generally reticent about their experience. That we were compelled to participate in the war of 1939-1945 was of little comfort to the veterans who witnessed events no one should have to experience. I think it was generous and gutsy of the vets profiled in this book to share their lives. Their stories should be required reading for the chickenhawks who are draining our blood and treasure in several scattered, incoherent, open ended conflicts. That last WWI combat veteran (who served in both WWI and WWII in hazardous duty) was quoted as saying "Wars are started by old men sending in young men to fight. If young men tried to send in old men to war, maybe we wouldn't have any more wars".

Darcy says

I thought this was an interesting book. So much has been written about the war and so much of it has been romanticized, but this was a very frank look about the aftermath of war, something not written about often.

You can not talk about Vietnam and not hear about bad things when the soldiers came home, but for some reason WWII doesn't have that stigma. Those soldiers had the same problems but it seems like this is the dirty little secret of WWII. It makes a person wonder if these stoic men could have talked about their experiences things would have been different for them.

I liked how these 3 men had vastly different experiences while in the war, but at the heart of the story their problems were the same when they came home.

Overall when done with this book I found myself feeling sad for these men, and all like them. They have given a lot by "going to war" and when they come home it should end, but it is hard for those horrors to be wished away.

Melissa says

If you're a student of WW2 history, reading this book is absolutely a must. I started it on a Friday morning and finished it in the early, wee hours of Saturday. That's rare for me, but it shows just how good this book really was.

We often tend to think the Greatest Generation didn't have many problems when they came back from the war, but the effects of the war continued to ripple in these mens lives years afterward.

It almost reads like a novel, and tells the story of three men, their experiences during the war, and after. Not one of them came away from this conflict emotionally unscarred.

A compelling, incredibly important read.

Elle Mill says

A great addition to World War II history. It peeks into the private lives of returning American veterans and their families to reveal that things weren't as relentlessly positive as we have been led to believe. Their war never ended. It followed these men home and settled in with them in the forms of infidelity, substance abuse, domestic violence, and quiet emotional absenteeism.

It was unsettling when the author talked in third person about his own birth and instances of childhood heartache as a result of his father's PTSD. However, I suppose it was necessary to keep the flow and story telling mechanisms of the book consistent.

Tommccoy26 says

This might just be the best book on the "Greatest Generation" that I have ever read. So many historical accounts view the immediate postwar period with rose-colored glasses that it is easy to assume that all WW2 veterans had a joyous homecoming and an easy transition back to civilian life. This book shows that all was

not as it may seem, and that even veterans who showed every outward sign of being well-adjusted and successful could be haunted by post-traumatic stress. Ultimately, many veterans and their families paid a high price.

Childers' book has given me fresh insight into the Greatest Generation, so much so that I feel I have a new understanding of my late grandfathers, who both served during the war. The stories Childers tells are congruent with things I have seen and heard, but never understood, within my own family.
