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A poignant look at what happens to the injured 'After War'

By William Endicott -- Special To The Bee
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It is one of those photographs that will lock itself in your memory. The scene is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. A Marine sergeant in his dress blue tunic, rows of combat ribbons over his left breast pocket, watches a ceremony unfold. He is in a wheelchair. He is legless, victim of a North Vietnamese land mine.

The Marine, Tim Lee, recalls when it happened. "One last step. ... My boot landed squarely on what felt like a miniature volcano. A deafening blast rammed through my body. A cloud of black smoke shot into the sky, and hot fire surged through what remained of my legs."

Such are the images and words captured by photojournalist Lori Grinker in "After War: Veterans From a World in Conflict," a disturbing but moving collection of photos and interviews with former combatants from World War I to the civil war in Sri Lanka.

The book unmaskes both the physical damage and the psychological impact on those who found themselves in conflicts not of their making but whose lives were unalterably changed - never for the better - by what they saw and experienced.

Chris Hedges, a former New York Times war correspondent and now a professor of journalism at Princeton, wrote an introduction in which he capsulizes the book's powerful message:

"It looks beyond the nationalist rants that are used to justify war: it looks beyond the seduction of the weapons and the pornography of violence. If focuses on the evil of war. ... And before you agree to wage war, any war, look closely at this book."

Arranged in reverse chronological order, "After War" begins with a photo of a young Sri Lankan girl who had been been kidnapped by rebel forces and pressed into service. It ends with photos and interviews of two World War I veterans, one French, the other British.

In a comment that reflects the feelings of virtually all of Grinker's subjects, Pierre Saunier, the Frenchman, tells her in a 1991 interview: "The war was the worst thing that ever happened to me."

The book covers 24 major conflicts, but aside from two photos in the introduction, one of a wounded American and one of a wounded Iraqi, the war in Iraq is a noticeable omission. Grinker explains: "The book/project is really about 20th century war. I had to stop somewhere. ... Most of the people in the book have had time to reflect on their war experience, to have some perspective on war and how it affects/affected their lives."

She describes her work as "a portrait, documenting the human toll of war, rather than a catalog of scars and lost limbs. ... My challenge wasn't just to make a portrait of a person, but to make a photograph that would transcend their personal tragedy to become something universally symbolic and understood."

With exceptional skill as both a photographer and an interviewer, she has most assuredly met that challenge.

After War: Veterans From a World in Conflict

Lori Grinker

de.MO

248 pages; \$47.50

About the writer:

- William Endicott is a former deputy managing editor of The Bee.

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