



JOHN
STEINBECK
ONCE THERE
WAS A WAR

Once There Was a War

John Steinbeck was born in Salinas, California, in 1902. After studying science at Stanford University he worked successively as labourer, druggist, caretaker, fruit-picker and surveyor. His first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929), was about Morgan the pirate. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), his most popular book, tells of a migratory family seeking work in California; it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, and has been compared in its influence to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. His other novels include *East of Eden*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Pearl*, *Sweet Thursday* and *Cannery Row*, all published by Pan Books. Also available in Pan are several collections of his short stories, and *Journal of a Novel*, his notes made while writing *East of Eden*. In 1962 Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in 1968.

Also by John Steinbeck in Pan Books

Of Mice and Men

Cannery Row

East of Eden

The Pearl

Burning Bright

The Log from the Sea of Cortez

Sweet Thursday

The Winter of Our Discontent

The Moon is Down

The Grapes of Wrath

Tortilla Flat

To a God Unknown

The Long Valley

Journal of a Novel

Travels with Charley

John Steinbeck

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Pan Books in association with
William Heinemann

First published in Great Britain 1959 by
William Heinemann Ltd
This edition published 1975 by Pan Books Ltd,
Cavaye Place, London SW10 9PG,
in association with William Heinemann Ltd
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ISBN 0 330 24578 3

Made and printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk

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Contents

Introduction 7

England 17

Africa 103

Italy 121

**The dispatches in this book first appeared
in the *New York Tribune* and other newspapers**

Introduction

Once upon a time there was a war, but so long ago and so shouldered out of the way by other wars and other kinds of wars that even people who were there are apt to forget. This war that I speak of came after the plate armor and longbows of Crécy and Agincourt and just before the little spitting experimental atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I attended a part of that war, you might say visited it, since I went in the costume of a war correspondent and certainly did not fight, and it is interesting to me that I do not remember very much about it. Reading these old reports sent in with excitement at the time brings back images and emotions completely lost.

Perhaps it is right or even necessary to forget accidents, and wars are surely accidents to which our species seems prone. If we could learn from our accidents it might be well to keep the memories alive, but we do not learn. In ancient Greece it was said that there had to be a war at least every twenty years because every generation of men had to know what it was like. With us, we must forget, or we could never indulge in the murderous nonsense again.

The war I speak of, however, may be memorable because it was the last of its kind. Our Civil War has been called the last of the 'gentlemen's wars,' and the so-called Second World War was surely the last of the long global wars. The next war, if we are so stupid as to let it happen, will be the last of any kind. There will be no one left to remember anything. And if that is how stupid we are, we do not, in a biological sense, deserve survival. Many other species have disappeared from the earth through errors in mutational judgment. There is no reason to suppose that we are immune from the immutable law of nature which says that over-armament, over-ornamentation, and, in most cases, over-integration are symptoms of coming extinction. Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee* uses the horrifying

and possible paradox of the victor's being killed by the weight of the vanquished dead.

But all this is conjecture, no matter how possible it may be. The strange thing is that my dim-remembered war has become as hazy as conjecture. My friend Jack Wagner was in the First World War. His brother Max was in the Second World War. Jack, in possessive defense of the war he knew, always referred to it as the Big War, to his brother's disgust. And of course the Big War is the war you knew.

But do you know it, do you remember it, the drives, the attitudes, the terrors, and, yes, the joys? I wonder how many men who were there remember very much.

I have not seen these accounts and stories since they were written in haste and telephoned across the sea to appear as immediacies in the *New York Herald Tribune* and a great many other papers. That was the day of the Book by the War Correspondent, but I resisted that impulse, believing or saying I believed that unless the stories had validity twenty years in the future they should stay on the yellowing pages of dead newspaper files. That I have got them out now is not for my first reason given at all. Reading them over after all these years, I realize not only how much I have forgotten but that they are period pieces, the attitudes archaic, the impulses romantic, and, in the light of everything that has happened since, perhaps the whole body of work untrue and warped and one-sided.

The events set down here did happen. But on rereading this reportage, my memory becomes alive to the other things, which also did happen and were not reported. That they were not reported was partly a matter of orders, partly traditional, and largely because there was a huge and gassy thing called the War Effort. Anything which interfered with or ran counter to the War Effort was automatically bad. To a large extent judgment about this was in the hands of the correspondent himself, but if he forgot himself and broke any of the rules, there were the Censors, the Military Command, the Newspapers, and finally, most strong of all in discipline, there were the war-minded civilians, the Noncombatant Commandos of the Stork Club, of *Time Magazine* and *The New Yorker*, to jerk a correspondent

into line or suggest that he be removed from the area as a danger to the War Effort. There were citizens' groups helping with tactics and logistics; there were organizations of mothers to oversee morals, and by morals I mean not only sexual morals but also such things as gambling and helling around in general. Secrecy was a whole field in itself. Perhaps our whole miasmatic hysteria about secrecy for the last twenty years had its birth during this period. Our obsession with secrecy had a perfectly legitimate beginning in a fear that knowledge of troop-ship sailings would and often did attract the wolf packs of submarines. But from there it got out of hand until finally facts available in any library in the world came to be carefully guarded secrets, and the most carefully guarded secrets were known by everyone.

I do not mean to indicate that the correspondent was harried and pushed into these rules of conduct. Most often he carried his rule book in his head and even invented restrictions for himself in the interest of the War Effort. When The Viking Press decided to print these reports in book form, it was suggested that, now that all restrictions were off, I should take out the 'Somewhere in So-and-So' dateline and put in the places where the events occurred. This is impossible. I was so secret that I don't remember where they happened.

The rules, some imposed and some self-imposed, are amusing twenty years later. I shall try to remember a few of them. There were no cowards in the American Army, and of all the brave men the private in the infantry was the bravest and noblest. The reason for this in terms of the War Effort is obvious. The infantry private had the dirtiest, weariest, least rewarding job in the whole war. In addition to being dangerous and dirty, a great many of the things he had to do were stupid. He must therefore be reassured that these things he knew to be stupid were actually necessary and wise, and that he was a hero for doing them. Of course no one even casually inspected the fact that the infantry private had no choice. If he exercised a choice, he was either executed immediately or sent to prison for life.

A second convention was that we had no cruel or ambitious

or ignorant commanders. If the disorganized insanity we were a part of came a cropper, it was not only foreseen but a part of a grander strategy out of which victory would emerge.

A third sternly held rule was that five million perfectly normal, young, energetic, and concupiscent men and boys had for the period of the War Effort put aside their habitual preoccupation with girls. The fact that they carried pictures of nude girls, called pin-ups, did not occur to anyone as a paradox. The convention was the law. When Army Supply ordered X millions of rubber contraceptive and disease-preventing items, it had to be explained that they were used to keep moisture out of machine-gun barrels – and perhaps they did.

Since our Army and Navy, like all armies and navies, were composed of the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the cruel, the gentle, the brutal, the kindly, the strong, and the weak, this convention of general nobility might seem to have been a little hard to maintain, but it was not. We were all a part of the War Effort. We went along with it, and not only that, we abetted it. Gradually it became a part of all of us that the truth about anything was automatically secret and that to trifle with it was to interfere with the War Effort. By this I don't mean that the correspondents were liars. They were not. In the pieces in this book everything set down happened. It is in the things not mentioned that the untruth lies.

When General Patton slapped a sick soldier in a hospital and when our Navy at Gela shot down fifty-nine of our own troop carriers, General Eisenhower personally asked the war correspondents not to send the stories because they would be bad for morale at home. And the correspondents did not file the stories. Of course the War Department leaked to a local newsman and the stories got printed anyway, but no one in the field contributed to that bit of treason to the War Effort.

Meanwhile strange conventional stories were born and duly reported. One of the oddest concerned the colonel or general in the Air Force whose duty required that he stay in reluctant comfort on the ground and who ate his heart out to be with his 'boys' out on mission over Germany among the red flak. It was hard, stern duty that kept him grounded, and much harder

than flying missions. I don't know where this one started, but it doesn't sound as though it came from enlisted personnel. I never met a bomber crew which wouldn't have taken on this sterner duty at the drop of a hat. They may have been a little wild, but they weren't that crazy.

Reading over these old reports, I see that again and again sentences were removed by censor. I have no idea what it was that was removed. Correspondents had no quarrels with censors. They had a tough job. They didn't know what might be brought up against them. No one could discipline them for eliminating, and so in self-preservation they eliminated pretty deeply. Navy censors were particularly sensitive to names of places, whether they had any military importance or not. It was the safest way. Once when I felt a little bruised by censorship I sent through Herodotus's account of the battle of Salamis fought between the Greeks and Persians in 480 B.C., and since there were place names involved, albeit classical ones, the Navy censors killed the whole story.

We really tried to observe the censorship rules, even knowing that a lot of them were nonsense, but it was very hard to know what the rules were. They had a way of changing with the commanding officer. Just when you thought you knew what you could send, the command changed and you couldn't send that at all.

The correspondents were a curious, crazy, and yet responsible crew. Armies by their nature, size, complication, and command are bound to make mistakes, mistakes which can be explained or transmuted in official reports. It follows that military commanders are a little nervous about reporters. They are restive about people breathing down their necks, particularly experts. And it was true that many of the professional war correspondents had seen more wars and more kinds of wars than anybody in the Army or Navy. Capa, for example, had been through the Spanish War, the Ethiopian War, the Pacific War. Clark Lee had been at Corregidor and before that in Japan. If the regular Army and Navy didn't much like the war correspondents, there was nothing they could do about it, because these men were the liaison with the public. Furthermore many of

them had become very well known and had enormous followings. They were syndicated from one end of the nation to the other. Many of them had established their methods and their styles. A few had become prima donnas, but not many. Ernie Pyle was so popular and so depended on by readers at home that in importance he much outranked most general officers.

To this hard-bitten bunch of professionals I arrived as a Johnny-come-lately, a sacred cow, a kind of tourist. I think they felt that I was muscling in on their hard-gained territory. When, however, they found that I was not duplicating their work, was not reporting straight news, they were very kind to me and went out of their way to help me and to instruct me in the things I didn't know. For example, it was Capa who gave me the best combat advice I ever heard. It was, 'Stay where you are. If they haven't hit you, they haven't seen you.' And then Capa had to go and step on a land mine in Viet-Nam, just when he was about to retire from the whole terrible, futile business. And Ernie Pyle got it between the eyes from a sniper on the trip he planned as his weary last.

All of us developed our coy little tricks with copy. Reading these old pieces, I recognize one of mine. I never admitted having seen anything myself. In describing a scene I invariably put it in the mouth of someone else. I forget why I did this. Perhaps I felt that it would be more believable told by someone else. Or it is possible that I felt an interloper, an eavesdropper on the war, and was a little bit ashamed of being there at all. Maybe I was ashamed that I could go home and soldiers couldn't. But it was often neither safe nor comfortable being a correspondent. A great part of the services were in supply and transport and office work. Even combat units got some rest after a mission was completed. But the war correspondents found that their papers got restive if they weren't near where things were happening. The result was that the correspondents had a very high casualty rate. If you stayed a correspondent long enough and went to the things that were happening, the chances were that you would get it. In reading these reports I am appalled at how many of the reporters are dead. Only a handful of the blithe

spirits who made the nights horrible and filled the days with complaints, remain living.

But to get back to the conventions. It was the style to indicate that you were afraid all the time. I guess I was really afraid, but the style was there too. I think this was also designed to prove how brave the soldiers were. And the soldiers were just exactly as brave and as cowardly as anyone else.

We edited ourselves much more than we were edited. We felt responsible to what was called the home front. There was a general feeling that unless the home front was carefully protected from the whole account of what war was like, it might panic. Also we felt we had to protect the armed services from criticism, or they might retire to their tents to sulk like Achilles.

The self-discipline, self-censorship among the war correspondents was surely moral and patriotic but it was also practical in a sense of self-preservation. Some subjects were taboo. Certain people could not be criticized or even questioned. The foolish reporter who broke the rules would not be printed at home and in addition would be put out of the theater by the command, and a correspondent with no theater has no job.

We knew, for instance, that a certain very famous general officer constantly changed press agents because he felt he didn't get enough headlines. We knew the commander who broke a Signal Corps sergeant for photographing his wrong profile. Several fine field officers were removed from their commands by the jealousy of their superiors because they aroused too much enthusiasm in their men and too much admiration from the reporters. There were consistent sick leaves which were gigantic hangovers, spectacular liaisons between Army brass and WAACs, medical discharges for stupidity, brutality, cowardice, and even sex deviation. I don't know a single reporter who made use of any of this information. Apart from wartime morals, it would have been professional suicide to have done it. The one man who jumped the gun and scooped the world on the armistice was ruined in his profession, and his career was terminated.

Yes, we wrote only a part of the war, but at the time we believed, fervently believed, that it was the best thing to do. And perhaps that is why, when the war was over, novels and stories by ex-soldiers, like *The Naked and the Dead*, proved so shocking to a public which had been carefully protected from contact with the crazy hysterical mess.

We had plenty of material anyway. There was a superabundance of heroism, selflessness, intelligence, and kindness to write about. And perhaps we were right in eliminating part of the whole picture. Surely if we had sent all we knew, and couched in the language of the field, the home front would have been even more confused than we managed to make it. Besides, for every screaming egotist there was a Bradley, and for every publicity-mad military ham there were great men like Terry Allen and General Roosevelt, while in the ranks, billeted with the stinking, cheating, foul-mouthed goldbricks, there were true heroes, kindly men, intelligent men who knew or thought they knew what they were fighting for and took all the rest in their stride.

Professionally the war correspondents, I believe, were highly moral and responsible men, many of them very brave men, some of them completely dedicated men, but in the time after the story was filed I guess we were no better and no worse than the officers and enlisted men, only we had more facilities than the services, either commissioned or enlisted. We carried simulated ranks, ranging from captain to lieutenant colonel, which allowed us to eat at officers' mess, where enlisted men could not go, but we also had access to the enlisted men, where officers could not go. I remember an officers' dance in North Africa, a dull, cold little affair with junior officers mechanically dancing with commissioned nurses to old records on a wind-up phonograph, while in nearby barracks one of the finest jazz combos I ever heard was belting out pure ecstasy. Naturally we correspondents happily moved to the better music. Rank surely has its privileges, but with us it sometimes amounted to license. When our duty was done and our stories on the wire, we discovered and exchanged every address where black-market meat, liquor, and women could be procured. We knew the illegal taxis. We

chiseled, stole, malingered, goldbricked, and generally made ourselves as comfortable as we could. I early learned that a pint of whisky to a transportation sergeant would get me on a plane ahead of a general with crash orders from the General Staff. We didn't steal much from the Army. We didn't have to. It was given to us. Besides we were up against experts in the Army. I remember a general in supply morosely reading a report of missing matériel from a supply depot and exploding, 'The American soldier is the worst thief in the world. You know what's going to happen? When they steal everything we've got, they'll start stealing from the Germans, and then God help Hitler.' And I remember on a destroyer at sea when every sidearm of every officer, 45s and carbines, suddenly disappeared, and although the ship was searched from stem to stern, even the fuel and water tanks explored, not one single weapon was ever found. There was a kind of a compulsion to steal. Prisoners were frisked for watches, cameras, and sidearms (the trade goods of the GIs) with professional skill. But the correspondents didn't steal much – first, as I said, because they didn't have to, and second, because we moved about so much that we couldn't take things with us. Heaven knows how many helmets, bedding rolls, and gas masks I was issued. I rarely got them where I was going, and I never got them back. In the cellars of London hotels today there must be trunks of loot left there fifteen years ago by correspondents and never claimed. I personally know of two such caches.

For what they are worth, or for what they may recapture, here they are, period pieces, fairy tales, half-meaningless memories of a time and of attitudes which have gone forever from the world, a sad and jocular recording of a little part of a war I saw and do not believe, unreal with trumped-up pagantry, so that it stands in the mind like the battle pictures of Crécy and Bunker Hill and Gettysburg. And, although all war is a symptom of man's failure as a thinking animal, still there was in these memory-wars some gallantry, some bravery, some kindness. A man got killed, surely, or maimed, but, living, he did not carry crippled seed as a gift to his children.

Now for many years we have suckled on fear and fear alone,

and there is no good product of fear. Its children are cruelty and deceit and suspicion germinating in our darkness. And just as surely as we are poisoning the air with our test bombs, so are we poisoned in our souls by fear, faceless, stupid sarcomic terror.

The pieces in this volume were written under pressure and in tension. My first impulse on rereading them was to correct, to change, to smooth out ragged sentences and remove repetitions, but their very ruggedness is, it seems to me, a parcel of their immediacy. They are as real as the wicked witch and the good fairy, as true and tested and edited as any other myth.

There was a war, long ago – once upon a time.