

# War and Veterans: An Introduction

*Frank Jacob and Stefan Karner*

We, your neighbors, speaking through the Red Cross, welcome your return. You have served us and your country well in the greatest war in history. [...] [W]e are proud of you. [...] Our greatest opportunity to be of service may come while you and your family are getting back to everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

The Home Service of the American Red Cross in 1918 published a booklet called *When You Get Home – Take This Book With You* in and by which, as the above quote highlights, veterans were welcomed back to a peaceful society, whose members, through their dedication within the little booklet, declared their willingness to help the war veterans to reintegrate into a life they had defended for all on the battlefields of Europe. Regardless of such declarations, the reality of many soldiers who returned would be different from the easy transformation process that is implied in the neighborly promise of support. In fact, veterans are people societies tend to ignore, as they represent violence and wars and remind post-war societies of a past that is rather preferred to be forgotten. Although the number has recently dropped,<sup>2</sup> many veterans in the US, as well as other countries, do still struggle on their way back home. Very often, as German-Austrian scholars Michael Daxner and Hannah Neumann emphasized, self-proclaimed peaceful societies tend to ignore the human consequences of foreign military engagements, i.e. the invalids, the veterans, and the fallen.<sup>3</sup> The heroic moments are rather limited for the veterans, who are

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1 Home Service of the American Red Cross, *When You Get Home – Take This Book With You* (n.p. 1918), dedication page.

2 Leo Shane III, “Fewer Veterans Were Homeless in 2018, After a Worrisome Rise Last Year,” *Military Times*, November 1, 2018. Accessed November 1, 2019. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2018/11/01/after-a-worrisome-rise-last-year-the-number-of-homeless-veterans-dropped-in-2018/>.

3 Michael Daxner and Hannah Neumann, “Wie der Einsatz in Afghanistan Deutschland verändert – Einleitung,” in *Heimatsdiskurs: Wie die Auslandseinsätze der Bundeswehr*

celebrated for an instant when the war is over<sup>4</sup> but are then left alone on their “way back” after their return.<sup>5</sup>

Historical developments and a different perception of violent conflicts between nation states changed the perspective on veterans, who are now rather seen as victims of war. Many veterans, as American historian Michael D. Gambone emphasized, “remain living victims of their wars. The wounded, disabled or otherwise, are a continuing testament to the cost of conflict.”<sup>6</sup> The daily suffering of veterans, however, challenges the myth and the peaceful narrative of societies that claim that the world has been living in peace since the end of the Second World War. Veterans consequently often do not match the preferred way of commemoration, which should focus on honor, bravery, and self-sacrifice rather than on suffering and neglect. The veteran, in contrast to the popular image of the war hero, “is a reality that no amount of pomp and circumstance can mitigate and a constant reminder of the human costs of war.”<sup>7</sup> There are consequently discrepancies between the way in which wars, and especially the acts and roles of the veterans, are remembered and what it actually meant and means to have served in a violent conflict and to live with the consequences once these are over.<sup>8</sup> Post-war society constantly has to deal with the psychological problems of the soldiers who returned alive, but physically and/or mentally wounded from the battlefield.<sup>9</sup> Especially those affected by the latter wounds often had to fight for the acceptance of their problems. It is now accepted that each war might cause its own symptoms and mental illnesses,<sup>10</sup> and more attention is being paid to the returning soldiers and their possible issues.

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*Deutschland verändern*, eds. Michael Daxner and Hannah Neumann (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2012), 7.

4 Michael D. Gambone, *Long Journeys Home: American Veterans of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2017), 1.

5 On the efforts necessary to re-integrate US veterans after the Second World War see: Mark D. Van Ells, *“To Hear Only Thunder Again”: America’s World War II Veterans Come Home* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2001).

6 Gambone, *Long Journeys Home*, 2.

7 Ibid.

8 On the commemoration of wars see: Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl, “Introduction: War Memorials and Critical Insights into the Human Past,” in *War and Memorials: The Age of Nationalism and the Great War*, eds. Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019), 1-22.

9 Philipp Rauh and Livia Prüll, “Krank durch den Krieg? Der Umgang mit psychisch kranken Veteranen in Deutschland in der Zeit der Weltkriege,” *Portal Militärgeschichte* (2015). Accessed November 2, 2019. [http://portal-militaergeschichte.de/rauh\\_pruell\\_krank.pdf](http://portal-militaergeschichte.de/rauh_pruell_krank.pdf), 1.

10 Edgar Jones and Simon Wessely, “War Syndromes: The Impact of Culture on Medically Unexplained Symptoms,” *Medical History* 49:1 (2005), 55-78.