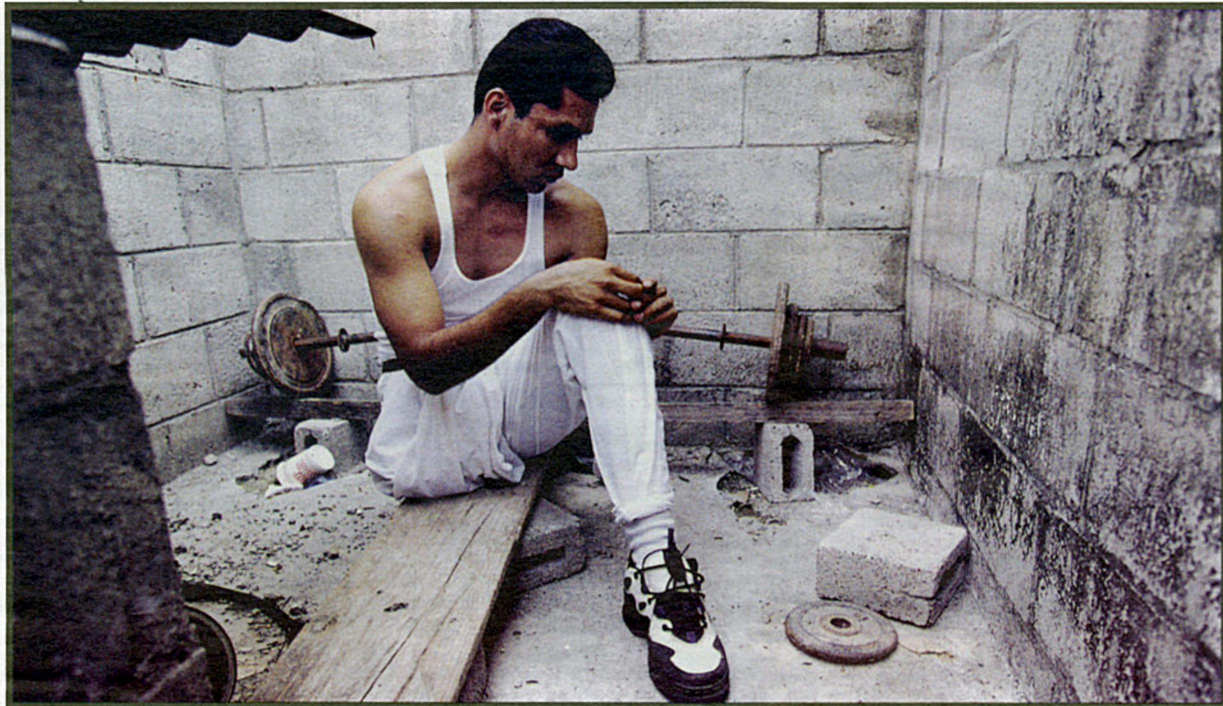

Photographs by Lori Grinker

LOSS: *The civil war in El Salvador left Saul Alfaro a blind amputee. After he was injured he was abandoned by his fiancée. "[W]hen she saw me in the hospital, I don't know exactly what happened, but later they told me when she saw me she began to cry. Afterwards, she ran away and never came back."*

Maimed, betrayed, forgotten

By Chris Hedges

Afterwar

Veterans From a World in Conflict

Photographs and interviews by Lori Grinker

de.MO: 248 pp., $47.50

MY father and three of my uncles fought in World War II. I grew up in the shadow of the war. But it was not the romantic war of movies and books, although this romance infected me, but the war of the emotionally and physically maimed. My father, who had been an Army sergeant in North Africa, went to seminary after the war and became a Presbyterian minister. Years after the war he would speak about his rifle and you could almost see his fingers push the gun away. He loathed the military and the lie of war. When our family visited museums he steered us away from the ordered displays of weapons, the rows of muskets and artillery pieces, which gleamed from within cases or roped-off areas.

He was an early opponent of the Vietnam War. During a Fourth of July parade in the small farm town where I grew up, he turned to me as the paunchy veterans walked past and said acidly, "Always remember most of those guys were fixing the trucks in the rear." He hated the VFW Hall where these men went mostly to drink. He found their periodic attempts to re-create the comradeship of war, something that of course could never be re-created, pathetic and sad. When I was about 12 he told me that if the Vietnam War was still being fought and I was drafted, he would go to prison with me. To this day I have a vision of sitting in a jail cell with my dad.

But it was my Uncle Maurice whom I thought most about as I leafed through the images in Lori Grinker's book "Afterwar." He was in the regular Army in 1939 in the South Pacific and fought there until he was wounded late in the war by a mortar blast. He did not return home with my father's resilience, although he shared my father's anger and sense of betrayal. His life was destroyed by the war. He refused to accept his medals, including his Purple Heart.

Maurice would sit around the stove in my grandmother's home and shake as he struggled to ward off the periodic bouts of malaria. He could not talk about the war. And so he drank. He became an acute embarrassment to our family, who lived in a manse where there was no alcohol. He could not hold down a job. His marriage fell apart. Another uncle hired him to work in his lumber mill, but Maurice would show up late, often drunk, and then disappear on another binge. He drank himself to death in his trailer, but not before borrowing and selling the hunting rifle my grandfather had promised me.

There was only one time he ever spoke to me about the war. It was at my grandmother's kitchen table. He spoke in a flat monotone. His eyes seemed to be looking far away, far across the field outside the house, across the snowy peaks of southern Maine, to a world that he could never hope to explain.

"We filled our canteens up in a stream once," he said. "When we went around the bend there were 25 dead Japanese in the water."

War is always about betrayal. It is about the betrayal of the young by the old, idealists by cynics and finally soldiers by politicians. Those who pay the price, those who are maimed forever by war, are shunted aside, crumpled up and thrown away. They are war's refuse. We do not see them. We do not hear them. They are doomed, like wandering spirits, to float around the edges of our consciousness, ignored, even reviled. The message they bring is too painful for us to hear. We prefer the myth of war, the myth of glory, honor, patriotism and heroism, words that in the terror and brutality of combat are empty and meaningless.

It is a measure of the power of this myth that despite the experience of my father and my uncles in war I was seduced by the siren call of war. I longed for adventure, for a life that would allow me to break free from the confines of a farming community. I read about the American Civil War, the Spanish Civil War and World War II. I wanted an epic battle against evil to define my own life. Of course I would not return a shell of a man, like my uncle, for as I look back on it, I blamed him for the wounds he received. Now I know better. I had to learn this myself, as each generation learns it anew.

I did go to war, not as a soldier, but as a war correspondent, and 20 years later I too battle the demons that defeated my uncle. Perhaps it is hopeless to expect anyone to listen. The myth has a powerful draw. It allows us to be noble, heroic, to rise above our small stations in life.

Most war images meant to denounce war fail. They still impart the thrill of violence and power. War images that show scenes of combat become, despite the intention of those who produce them, war porn. And this is why soldiers who have not been to combat buy cases of beer and sit in front of movies like "Platoon," movies meant to condemn war, and yearn for it. It is almost impossible to produce antiwar films or movies or books that portray images of war. It is like trying to produce movies to denounce pornography and showing erotic love scenes. The prurient fascination with violent death overpowers the message.

The best records of war, of what war is and what war does to us, are those that eschew images of combat. This is the power of this book. Born of Lori Grinker's 15-year odyssey through more than 30 countries — some of them newly formed by violent conflict — it serves no ideology. Her subject is not the flag or the nation or even the victim. Instead, it is the real, unromantic life of the veteran whose body and mind are changed forever when they serve nations and movements that are all too ready to sacrifice them. It forces us to see what the state and the press, the handmaiden of the war makers, work so hard to keep from us. If we really knew war, what war does to young minds and bodies, it would be harder to wage war. This is why the essence of war, which is death, is so carefully hidden from public view. We are not allowed to see dead bodies, at least of our own soldiers, nor do we see the wounds that forever mark a life, the wounds that leave faces and bodies horribly disfigured by burns or shrapnel. War is made palatable. It is sanitized. We are allowed to taste war's perverse and dark thrill, but spared from ever seeing war's consequences. The wounded and the dead are swiftly carted offstage.

War, at least the mythic version, is wonderful entertainment. We saw this with the war in Iraq, where the press gave us a visceral thrill and hid from us the effects of bullets, roadside bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. The war was carefully packaged, the way tobacco or liquor companies package their own poisons. We tasted a bit of war's exhilaration, but were safe, spared from seeing the awful effects of its machines.

Only those works, such as this one, which eschew the fascination with violence to give us a look at what weapons do to human bodies, begin to grapple with war's reality. We can only understand war when we turn our attention away from the weapons my father refused to let us see in museums and look at what those weapons do to those on the receiving end.

In the modern world, war is largely impersonal, mocking the image of individual heroics. Industrial warfare, waged since World War I, means that thousands of people, who never see their attackers, can die in an instant. The power of these industrial weapons is staggering. They can take down apartment blocks in seconds, burying everyone inside. They can demolish tanks and planes and ships in fiery blasts. The wounds, for those who survive them, are horrific, usually resulting in terrible burns, blindness and loss of limbs.

SCARS: *"People who see me see what war really does," says Israeli soldier Yossi Arditi, who receives massage therapy for severe burns.*

"There were three of us inside, and the jeep caught fire," the Israeli soldier Yossi Arditi says of a Molotov cocktail that exploded in his vehicle. "The fuel tank was full and it was about to explode, my skin was hanging from my arms and face, but I didn't lose my head. I knew nobody could get inside to help me, that my only way out was through the fire to the doors. I wanted to take my gun, but I couldn't touch it because my hands were burning."

He spent six months in the hospital. He had surgery every two or three months, about 20 operations, over the next three years.

"People who see me see what war really does," he says.

It is this view of war that most cannot stomach, that makes even those who are close to us flee in horror. Saul Alfaro, who lost his leg in the war in El Salvador, speaks about the first and final visit from his girlfriend as he lay in an army hospital bed.

"She had been my girlfriend in the military and we had planned to be married," he says. "But when she saw me in the hospital, I don't know exactly what happened, but later they told me when she saw me she began to cry. Afterwards, she ran away and never came back."

Those left behind to carry the wounds of war feel, as my uncle did, a sense of abandonment, made all the more painful by the public manifestations of gratitude to veterans. But these are the veterans deemed palatable, those we can look at, those who are willing to go along with the lie that war is about glory and manhood and patriotism. They are trotted out not so much to be honored but to perpetuate the myth.

FALLOUT: *Falklands vet Horacio Javier Benitez says many soldiers he knew have killed themselves.*

Gary Zuspann, who lives in a special enclosed environment in his parents' home in Waco, Texas, suffering from Gulf War syndrome, speaks of feeling like "a prisoner of war" even after the war has ended.

"Basically they put me on the curb and said, OK, fend for yourself," he says. "I was living in a fantasy world where I thought our government cared about us and they take care of their own. I believed it was in my contract, that if you're maimed or wounded during your service in war, you should be taken care of. Now I'm angry."

My family was not unique. We carried the crucible of war. But there were tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of families like ours, families that cared for the human refuse of war. The wounded after war are cloistered away, kept from public view, swept to the sides. I went back to Sarajevo after the war and found that hundreds, perhaps thousands, of war wounded were trapped in rooms in apartment blocks with no elevators and no wheelchairs. Most were young men being cared for by their parents, the glorious heroes left to rot.

When the mask of war falls away, when the intoxication with the cause is spent, we fall into despair. This is why suicide so often plagues war veterans. Indeed, more Vietnam veterans may have committed suicide since the war than were killed during it. The very qualities drilled into soldiers in wartime defeat them in peacetime. This is what Homer taught us in "The Iliad," the great book on war, and "The Odyssey," the great book on the awful journey toward recovery from war.

"They program you to have no emotion, like if somebody sitting next to you gets killed you just have to carry on doing your job and shut off," Steve Annabell, a British veteran from the Falklands War, says. "When you leave the service, when you come back from a situation like that, there's no button they can press to switch your emotions back on. So you walk around like a zombie. They don't deprogram you. If you become a problem they just sweep you under the carpet."

"To get you to join up they do all these advertisements, they show people skiing down mountains and doing great things. But they don't show you getting shot at and people with their legs blown off or burning to death. They don't show you what really happens. . . . And they never prepare you for it. They can give you all the training in the world, but it's never the same as the real thing."

Those you have most in common with when the war is over are those you fought.

"Nobody comes back from war the same," says Horacio Javier Benitez, who fought the British in the Falklands. "The person, Horacio, who went to war, doesn't exist anymore. It's hard to be enthusiastic about normal life; too much seems inconsequential. You contend with craziness and depression."

"Many who served in the Malvinas," he says, using the Argentine name of the islands, "committed suicide, many of my friends."

And this, finally, is the power of the book. 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. It focuses on the evil of war. War always begins by calling for the annihilation of the others but ends ultimately in self-annihilation. It corrupts our soul and deforms our bodies. It destroys homes and villages. It grinds into the dirt all that is tender and beautiful and sacred. It is a scourge. It is a plague. And before you agree to wage war, any war, look closely at this book. ■

Chris Hedges is the author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning." This essay will appear as the introduction to "Afterwar," to be published next month to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 30th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War.