Hemingway on War and Its Aftermath
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By Thomas Putnam

Researchers come to the Hemingway archives at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library primarily to examine Ernest Hemingway’s original manuscripts and his correspondence with family, friends, and fellow writers. But upon entering, it is hard not to notice the artifacts that ornament the Hemingway Room—including a mounted antelope head from a 1933 safari, an authentic lion-skin rug, and original artwork that Hemingway owned.

Though not as conspicuous, one object on display is far more consequential: a piece of shrapnel from the battlefield where Hemingway was wounded during World War I. Had the enemy mortar attack been more successful that fateful night, the world may never have known one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. Conversely, had Hemingway not been injured in that attack, he not may have fallen in love with his Red Cross nurse, a romance that served as the genesis of *A Farewell to Arms*, one of the century's most read war novels.

Hemingway kept the piece of shrapnel, along with a small handful of other "charms" including a ring set with a bullet fragment, in a small leather change purse. Similarly he held his war experience close to his heart and demonstrated throughout his life a keen interest in war and its effects on those who live through it.

No American writer is more associated with writing about war in the early 20th century than Ernest Hemingway. He experienced it firsthand, wrote dispatches from innumerable frontlines, and used war as a backdrop for many of his most memorable works.

Scholars, including Seán Hemingway, the author’s grandson and editor of the recent anthology, Hemingway on War, continue to use documents and photographs in the Hemingway Collection to educate others about Hemingway and his writings on war. The topic of war has also been central to Hemingway forums and conferences organized by the Kennedy Library, including a recent session entitled "Writers on War." And at the Hemingway centennial, held at the library in 1999, many speakers referenced Hemingway's experience in war and his observations on its aftermath as an abiding element of his literary legacy.

Hemingway and World War I
During the First World War, Ernest Hemingway volunteered to serve in Italy as an ambulance driver with the American Red Cross. In June 1918, while running a mobile canteen dispensing chocolate and cigarettes for soldiers, he was wounded by Austrian mortar fire. "Then there was a flash, as when a blast-furnace door is swung open, and a roar that started white and went red," he recalled in a letter home.

Despite his injuries, Hemingway carried a wounded Italian soldier to safety and was injured again by machine-gun fire. For his bravery, he received the Silver Medal of Valor from the Italian government—one of the first Americans so honored.

Hemingway posed for this 1918 portrait in Milan, Italy. (Ernest Hemingway Photograph Collection, Kennedy Library)

Commenting on this experience years later in Men at War, Hemingway wrote: "When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you. . . . Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you. After being severely wounded two weeks before my nineteenth birthday I had a bad time until I figured out that nothing could happen to me that had not happened to all men before me. Whatever I had to do men had always done. If they had done it then I could do it too and the best thing was not to worry about it."

Recuperating for six months in a Milan hospital, Hemingway fell in love with Agnes von Kurowsky, an American Red Cross nurse. At war's end, he returned to his home in Oak Park, Illinois, a different man. His experience of travel, combat, and love had broadened his outlook. Yet while his war experience had changed him dramatically, the town he returned to remained very much the same.

Two short stories (written years later) offer insights into his homecoming and his understanding of the dilemmas of the returned war veteran. In "Soldier's Home," Howard Krebs returns home from Europe later than many of his peers. Having missed the victory parades, he is unable to reconnect with those he left behind—especially his mother, who cannot understand how her son has been changed by the war.

"Hemingway's great war work deals with aftermath," stated author Tobias Wolff at the Hemingway centennial celebration. "It deals with what happens to the soul in war and how people deal with that afterward. The problem that Hemingway set for himself in stories like 'Soldier's Home' is the difficulty of telling the truth about what one has been through. He knew about his own difficulty in doing that."

After living for months with his parents, during which time he learned from Agnes that she had fallen in love with another man, he decamped with two friends to his family's
Michigan summer cottage, where he had learned to hunt and fish as a young boy. The trip would be the genesis of *Big Two-Hearted River*—a story that follows one of Hemingway's best known fictional characters, Nick Adams, recently returned from war, on a fishing trip in northern Michigan.

Ernest Hemingway at home in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1919. (Ernest Hemingway Photograph Collection, Kennedy Library)

In the story, Hemingway never actually mentions the war and the injuries Nick has sustained in it—they simply loom below the surface. In this and other stories in his first major collection, *In Our Time*, Hemingway does more than advance a narrative; he also debuts a new style of writing fiction.

"The way we write about war or even think about war was affected fundamentally by Hemingway," stated Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., another speaker at the Hemingway centennial. In the early 1920s, in reaction to their experience of world war, Hemingway and other modernists lost faith in the central institutions of Western civilization. One of those institutions was literature itself. Nineteenth-century novelists were prone to a florid and elaborate style of writing. Hemingway, using a distinctly American vernacular, created a new style of fiction "in which meaning is established through dialogue, through action, and silences—a fiction in which nothing crucial—or at least very little—is stated explicitly."

"Hemingway was at the crest of a wave of modernists," noted fellow centennial panelist and book critic Gail Caldwell, "that were rebelling against the excesses and hypocrisy of Victorian prose. The First World War is the watershed event that changes world literature as well as how Hemingway responded to it."