

Consumed by militarism, what are we teaching children?

The fascination with war is truly an incredible thing. It is undoubtedly one of Humankind's most characteristic traits. It is like a subculture, or a mysterious rite that is so secret it is practised (but rarely spoken of) by everyone. It is militarism in a milder form, a militarism that has so consumed our society that we no longer realize it; neither the way it has shaped our thinking nor its consequences on others.

It takes little reflection, I believe, to realize that contrary to the old, well-known adage, it is warfare that is civilization's oldest profession (it is only fitting that this is oxymoronic). For centuries, — no, millennia — it has reaped violence, destruction, suffering and death. When we read our history books, we repeatedly come across the dates and names of wars, battles, and treaties — it is they that become the most important variables in the shaping of our history.

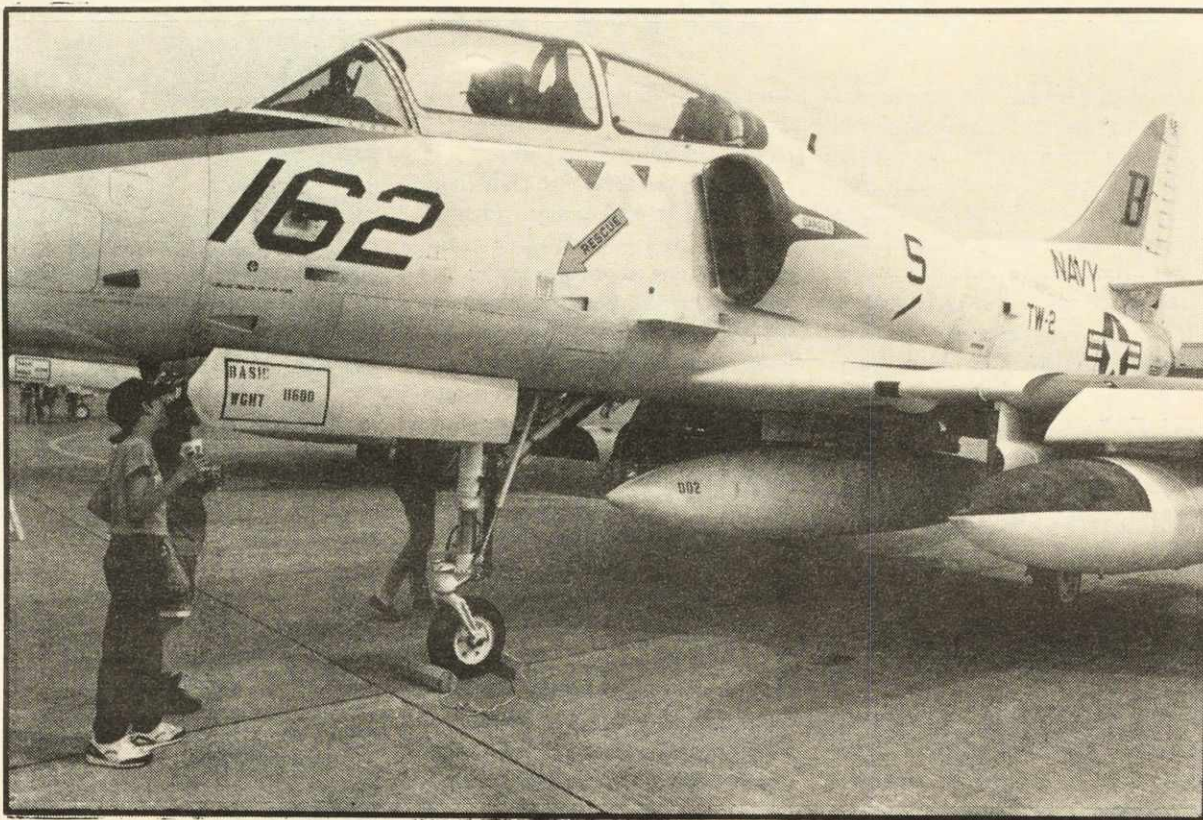
A dozen examples easily come to mind: a reference to *The Iliad*, Hannibal crossing the Alps, the siege of Masada, the Norman Conquest, the Crusades, the Mongol Invasions, the Hundred Years' War, the Napoleonic War, the US Civil War, the Spanish-American-Cuban War, countless wars of independence, the Great War, the Second World War. (There's much more of course, and just to be contemporary, here's an encore: Vietnam, Guatemala, Angola, Afghanistan, East Timor, Lebanon, Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia.)

Amid all those moments in history, an unspeakable number of nameless people have suffered and died; families, cities, and nations have all been destroyed, all while history was being made. Grief, hopelessness, hatred, and a promise for vengeance remains with the survivors, and it starts all over again. Another name, another date, more of the same statistics.

You'd think that after 2,000 years of callous self-annihilation, things would change, that somehow we'd mature, learning from the past to pre-empt the pain. It hasn't been like that however, as history begs to repeat itself. Indeed, as you read this, in a dozen far-flung places, people are dying the world over. Figures shouldn't matter, yet for the sake of effect, the count may be a person a second, or a person per word, dying by gunshot from a soldier, a plane, a tank. It is probably a child.

Meanwhile, the fascination with war rages on.

Every year, thousands upon thousands flock to our local air show at CFB Shearwater. It is like a religious pilgrimage. On display are massive in-



Two young boys peer into the innards of a US fighter jet. They are enjoying a sunny weekend afternoon at the airshow, complete with sodas and hotdogs with lots of neat things to see. What are they learning about war? PHOTO: ANGEL FIGUEROA

sects of steel with enough technology and potential firepower to wipe Halifax off the map. But it's all entertainment, and even a family event: parents take their kids, teenagers go to check out the "hunk pilots" or see the "cool planes." Military enthusiasts get a turn-on, frothing at the mouth and muttering incomprehensible acronyms and jargon.

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Parading the tarmac are two dozen warplanes, all of cold, sleek steel, in dark grays or matte blacks, each quiet and still, as if in patient expectancy of all the attention it is about to receive. Around them gather children, in awe of the size and inertia, the beauty and the mystery of these high-tech machines. Watchful adults push baby carriages, meandering lovers hold hands — all file past, casual and smug, enjoy-

ing the warm sunshine of an autumn Sunday. It is a striking image.

There was one special attraction to this year's air show: the Apache helicopter, and its appearance really couldn't be more timely. Next to the all-too-simple nuclear missile, the Apache is humankind's latest testament to the ultimate killing machine. The thing is skeletal and the colour of charcoal, with large, lean rotor blades that hang leadenly, and a massive gun turret which protrudes from the underbelly of the cockpit. The turret is designed to swivel automatically as the pilot rotates his head, while fiber-optics calculates his eye-focus to point a three-foot gun barrel at the target with the accuracy of a laser beam. It spits an inconceivable amount of bullets per second, each one deadly enough to blow your body apart like a highway bug on the windshield.

As the military-buffs like to put it, the Apache "saw action" in Desert Storm. Indeed, it was the key pincer of US forces as it sped across the desert in the dead of night, mowing down hundreds of soldiers at once from only half a mile away. So effective and illustrious was the Apache that a number of its pilots reportedly went crazy, consumed by memories of what they had unleashed with but the flick of a switch and the blink of an eye.

Here in Halifax, a smiling US serviceman in Ray Bans leaned casually

tackle that is an air show. Later, with the impressive aerial acrobatics of the B-2 bomber, we all get to see what it looks like to be on the receiving end of a real bombing run — that last look up at the sky, spotting the fleeting black silhouette of what has just killed you, half-panicking, half-thinking about your loved ones as you instantaneously get blown to bits by a dozen 500-pound bombs.

The true celebrity of this macabre exhibition of death, however, sat away from the main show. It was in apt isolation, at the end of the tarmac, and it loomed over you as the biggest, darkest thing of all: the B-52 Bomber, probably the most lethal machine that has ever actually been used, save the atom bomb. It is a lumbering wide giant, incredible in its size, and maddeningly awesome in what it was created to do. It is the instrument which slaughtered thousands upon thousands of nameless human beings in the Vietnam War, and then did the same in Iraq in 1991.

A small sign, which gave its vital statistics, was surrounded by children, who seemed to be trying to make sense of what it said:

"Mission: strategic bombing.... Speed: 450 mph.... Ceiling: 50,000 ft.... Range: 600 miles.... Armament: conventional weapons, SRAM, ALCM, nuclear...."

Other children played under its huge belly, running around in the cavity left by the open bomb-bay doors. Meanwhile, parents stood by dreamily. The image is eerie, horrific. Our children, I fear, don't understand.

But neither do we.

Angel Figueroa

Lambert
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IN THE GRAWOOD

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