

These two days are linked.  
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Robert John Andrews  
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"Real Heroes"  
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Victorian London had its opium dens, popular among the literati and aristocracy. We moderns have our multi-media pipe dreams. Smoke-screen yourself into delirium fantasies of mindless oblivion. I'm no fan of either of these pipe dreams, let alone of aristocrats. Effete I do lean, however, toward the literati – I may be dumb about calculus but I'm smart enough to celebrate how literature liberates us. Still, I'm not a complete prude. I can enjoy puffing on mindless mass market media entertainment (excepting reality TV, shock podcasts, or humiliating contest shows). Nevertheless, let's admit how the culture industry conditions us to be "passive receptacles" rather than critical thinkers.

Who remembers the shopping madness over Cabbage Patch dolls? I suggested then about marketing a trampled Walmart shopper as the perfect Christmas Tree ornament.

Passive receptacles? Expect the sitcom's happy ending after 18 minutes, minus commercials. Swallow Steve Bannon's swill. Stream the block-buster and cheer as superheroes bring pipe dream solutions – "here I come to save the day!" The flip side is a spreading dark cynicism from idealizing anti-heroes. Today's culture industry, more addictive than opium dens, stifles creative imagination, turns us into obedient consumers, deflates our 'gung ho' spirit. In everyday reality, happy endings tend to be mixed and rarely come cheaply. In everyday reality, no Captain America, no Superman appears to rescue us when sinister villains threaten truth, justice, and the American way.

Veterans Day comes Sunday. On Veterans Day, let's avoid fawning over glamourized pipe dream Captain Americas. Let's honor Willie and Joe. Who? Willie and Joe, cartoon infantry soldiers popularized during World War II by Bill Mauldin. World War II: One of our nation's few wars of necessity when citizens were called upon to defend civilization against shameless evil. Kristallnacht, remembered today, was evil's jack-boot camp. These two days are linked.

Would you like an example of Mauldin's work? One cartoon caption quotes a patriotic news release: "Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary prisoners." What did Mauldin draw? Three German prisoners slogging through the mud, heads down, miserable. Guarding them is a solitary US infantryman, rifle reversed, head down, muddy, equally miserable. The real soldiers just wanted to go home. They fought because they hated war, lies, and violence used by those to force their wills on others.

General Patton and similar martinet brass squawked and tried to ban Mauldin's cartoons. Willie and Joe are clearing boulders from a road. A nearby general pores over a map. Joe points at him. Willie barks back: "Awright, awright – it's a general. Ya wanna pass in review?"

The men loved Mauldin because he drew it the way it was, also because he hunkered into the next foxhole armed with sketch pad. His unselfish soldiers just wanted to get the dirty job done and go home. These were no parasitic barstool heroes braying, bragging, and blaming while kissing the flag.

Weary Willie and haggard Joe rest on a stoop of a bombed home. A shaven soldier in crisp uniform swaggers toward them. His helmet is cocked jauntily. His eyes glare at Willie and Joe, his hands coiled into fists. Willie, helmet dented, remarks to Joe: "That can't be no combat man. He's lookin' fer a fight."

How is the good fight fought? By the daily slog. By, as Mauldin wrote, being brave because you fight while you are scared to death. By opposing those who encourage bad behavior. By refusing to put your trust in opium saviors to come and deliver what we want. They aren't real. Willie and Joe, however, are real because they are regular us, the only rank that counts.

What can we do to be heroic? Reject caring about being a hero. Fight to make each day better, for we're all veterans wearing a uniform of some kind. Agree to do the dirty job because it needs to get done. Be Willie and Joe, veterans of mud and terror, hope and humanity. When offered the petty pipe dream, breathe in the courage to climb out of your foxhole when you must face what must be faced.

The infantryman dogface -- sad, exhausted, hungry -- prepares to hit the chow line. With mess kit in hand, he looks down at a barefoot shivering little girl, her clothes ragged and soiled. She holds a bucket, hoping. She wears a bow in unkempt hair. Mauldin's caption? The Prince and the Pauper.

So, Veteran's Day: here's to the Willie and Joes, the only heroes.