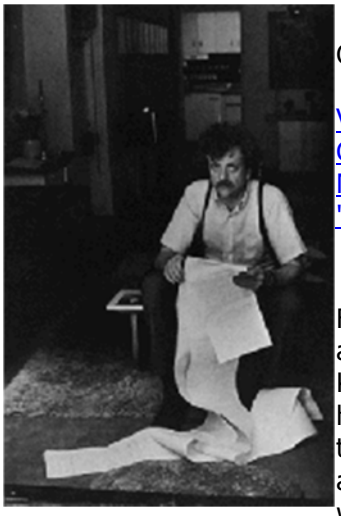
Kurt Vonnegut

424/HQ, 106th Infantry Division
Slaughterhouse Five

From a talk presented by Ray Boomhower , Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History *managing editor, at a series on Indianapolis authors sponsored by the Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library in 1994. A version of this talk appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of* Traces.

On May 29, 1945, twenty-one days after the Germans had surrendered to the victorious Allied armies, a father in Indianapolis received a letter from his son who had been listed as "missing in action" following the Battle of the Bulge. The youngster, an advance scout with the 106th Infantry Division, had been captured by the Germans after wandering behind enemy lines for several days. "Bayonets," as he wrote his father, "aren't much good against tanks." Eventually, the Indianapolis native found himself shipped to a work camp in the open city of Dresden, where he helped produce vitamin supplements for pregnant women. Sheltered in an underground meat storage locker, the Hoosier soldier managed to survive a combined American/British firebombing raid that devastated the city and killed an estimated 135,000 people--more than the number of deaths in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. After the bombing, the soldier wrote his father, "we were put to work carrying corpses from Air-Raid shelters; women, children, old men; dead from concussion, fire or suffocation. Civilians cursed us and threw rocks as we carried bodies to huge funeral pyres in the city."



Other Vonnegut Sites:

Vonnegut Chronology
Chris Huber's Kurt Vonnegut Web
Marek Vit's Kurt Vonnegut's Corner
"To Be a Native Middle-Westerner", by Kurt Vonnegut

Freed from his captivity by the Red Army's final onslaught against Nazi Germany and returned to America, the soldier -- Kurt Vonnegut Jr. -- tried for many years to put into words what he had experienced during that horrific event. At first, it seemed to be a simple task. "I thought it would be easy for me to write about the destruction of Dresden, since all I would have to do would be to report what I had seen," Vonnegut noted. It took him more than twenty years, however, to produce *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade, A Duty-Dance With Death*. The book was worth the wait. Released to an American society struggling to come to grips with its involvement in another war--in a small Asian country called Vietnam--Vonnegut's magnum opus struck a nerve, especially with young people on college campuses across the country. Although its author termed the work a "failure," readers did not agree, as *Slaughterhouse Five* became a best-seller and pushed Vonnegut into the national spotlight for the first time.

His experiences, it seems, have always helped shape what Vonnegut writes. Especially important was his life growing up as a boy in Indianapolis. Revisiting his birthplace in 1986 to deliver the annual McFadden Memorial Lecture, Vonnegut told a North Central

High School audience: "All my jokes are Indianapolis. All my attitudes are Indianapolis. My adenoids are Indianapolis. If I ever severed myself from Indianapolis, I would be out of business. What people like about me is Indianapolis." This connection has not escaped notice by readers. Fellow Hoosier writer Dan Wakefield once observed that in most of Vonnegut's books there is at least one character from Indianapolis and compared it to Alfred Hitchcock's habit of appearing in each of his movies.

The connection between the Vonneguts and Indianapolis stretch back to the 1850s when Clemens Vonnegut Sr., formerly of Westphalia, Germany, settled in the city and became business partners with a fellow German named Vollmer. When Vollmer disappeared on a trip out West, Vonnegut took over a business that grew into the profitable Vonnegut Hardware Company--a company Kurt Vonnegut Jr. worked for during the summers while attending high school at Shortridge.

Kurt's grandfather, Bernard Vonnegut, unlike his grandson, disliked working in the hardware store. Possessing an artistic nature, he studied architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and also received training in Hannover, Germany. After a short stint working in New York, Bernard returned to Indianapolis in 1883 and joined with Arthur Bohn to form the architectural firm of Vonnegut & Bohn. The firm designed such impressive structures as the Das Deutsche Haus (The Athenaeum), the first Chamber of Commerce building, the John Herron Art Museum, Methodist Hospital, the original L.S. Ayres store, and the Fletcher Trust Building.

Kurt Vonnegut's father, Kurt Vonnegut Sr., followed in his father's footsteps and became an Indianapolis architect, taking over his father's firm in 1910. On Nov. 22, 1913, Kurt Senior married Edith Lieber, the daughter of millionaire Indianapolis brewer Albert Lieber. The couple had three children, Bernard, born in 1914; Alice, in 1917; and, Kurt Jr., who came into the world on Nov. 11, 1922.

Fourth-generation Germans, the Vonnegut children were raised with little, if any, knowledge about their German heritage--a legacy, Kurt believed, of the anti-German feelings vented during World War I. With America's entry into the Great War on the side of the Allies, anything associated with Germany became suspect. In Indianapolis, the city orchestra disbanded because its soprano soloist was German; city restaurants renamed kartoffel salade as Liberty cabbage; the Deutche Haus became the Athenaeum; and the board of education stopped the teaching of German in schools. The anti-German feeling so shamed Kurt's parents, he noted, that they resolved to raise him "without acquainting me with the language or the literature or the music or the oral family histories which my ancestors had loved. They volunteered to make me ignorant and rootless as proof of their patriotism." His parents did pass on to their youngest child their love of joke-telling, but, with the world his parents loved shattered by World War I, Vonnegut also learned, as he put it, "a bone-deep sadness from them."

As the offspring of a wealthy family, the two eldest Vonnegut children had been educated at private schools -- Bernard at Park School and Alice at Tudor Hall School for Girls. The Great Depression, however, reduced the elder Vonnegut's commissions to a mere trickle. Hit hard in the pocketbook, the Vonneguts pulled young Kurt from the private Orchard school after the third grade and enrolled him at Public School No. 43, the James Whitcomb Riley School, located just a few blocks from the family's Illinois Street home.

Kurt Jr.'s mother Edith, a refined lady used to comfort and privilege, attempted to reassure her son that when the Depression ended he would resume his proper place in

society -- swim with the children of Indianapolis's leading families at the Athletic Club, play tennis and golf with them at the Woodstock Golf and Country Club. But Kurt thrived in his new surroundings. "She could not understand," he later said, "that to give up my friends at Public School No. 43 . . . would be for me to give up everything." Even today, Vonnegut said, he feels "uneasy about prosperity and associating with members of my parents' class on that account."

Part of that unease may have come from the idealism he learned while a public school student -- an idealism that is often reflected in his writings. To Vonnegut, America in the 1930s was an idealistic, pacifistic nation. While in the sixth grade, he said he was taught "to be proud that we had a standing army of just over a hundred thousand men and that the generals had nothing to say about what was done in Washington. I was taught to be proud of that and to pity Europe for having more than a million men under arms and spending all their money on airplanes and tanks. I simply never unlearned junior civics. I still believe in it."

Along with instilling Vonnegut with a strong sense of ideals and pacifism, his time in Indianapolis's schools started him on the path to a writing career. Attending Shortridge High School from 1936 to 1940, Vonnegut during his junior and senior years edited the Tuesday edition of the school's daily newspaper, *The Shortridge High School Echo*. His duties with the newspaper, then one of the few daily high school newspapers in the country, offered Vonnegut a unique opportunity to write for a large audience -- his fellow students. It was an experience he described as being "fun and easy." "It just turned out," Vonnegut noted, "that I could write better than a lot of other people. Each person has something he can do easily and can't imagine why everybody else has so much trouble doing it." In his case that something was writing.

Looking back on his school days, Vonnegut felt lucky to have been born in Indianapolis. "That city," he writes in his collection *Fates Worse Than Death*, "gave me a free primary and secondary education richer and more humane than anything I would get from any of the five universities I attended." Vonnegut also had high praise for the city's widespread system of free libraries whose attendants seemed, to his young mind, to be "angels of fun and information."

After graduating from Shortridge, Vonnegut went east to college, enrolling at Cornell University. If he had gotten his way, the young man would have become a third-generation Indianapolis architect. His father, however, was so full of sorrow and anger about having had no work as an architect during the Great Depression, that he persuaded his son that he too would be unhappy if he pursued the same trade. Instead of architecture, Vonnegut was urged by his father to study something useful, so he majored in chemistry and biology. In hindsight, Vonnegut believed it was lucky for him as a writer that the studied the physical sciences instead of English. Because he wrote for his own amusement, there were no English professors to tell him for his own good how bad his writing might be or one with the power to order him what to read. Consequently, both reading and writing have been "pure pleasure" for the Hoosier author.

To the young Vonnegut, Cornell itself was a "boozy dream," partly because of the alcohol he imbibed and also because he found himself enrolled in classes for which he had no talent. He did, however, find success outside the classroom by working for the *Cornell Daily Sun*. Before the end of his freshman year, Vonnegut had taken over the "Innocents Abroad" column, which reprinted jokes from other publications. He later moved on to write his own column, called "Well All Right," in which he produced a series of pacifistic

articles. Reminiscing about his days at Cornell at an annual banquet for the *Daily Sun*, Vonnegut recalled that he was happiest at the university when he was all alone late at night "walking up the hill after having helped put the *Sun* to bed."

Vonnegut's days at the eastern university were interrupted by America's entry into World War II. "I was flunking everything by the middle of my junior year," he admitted. "I was delighted to join the army and go to war." In January 1943 he volunteered for military service. Although he was rejected at first for health reasons -- he had caught pneumonia while at Cornell -- the Army later accepted him and placed him in its Specialized Training Program, sending him to study mechanical engineering at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh and at the University of Tennessee.

Some have wondered how Vonnegut, who stresses pacifism in his work, could volunteer so eagerly to go to war. It is a question even Vonnegut has trouble answering. "As for my pacifism," he has said, "it is nothing if not ambivalent." When he asks himself what person in American history he would most like to have been, Vonnegut admits to nominating none other than Joshua Lawrence Chamberlin, college professor and Civil War hero whose valiant bayonet charged helped save the day for the Union at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Although Vonnegut received instruction on the 240-millimeter howitzer, which he later dubbed the ultimate terror weapon of the Franco-Prussian War, he eventually ended up as a battalion intelligence scout with the 106th Infantry Division, which was based at Camp Atterbury, just south of Indianapolis. It was while he was with the 106th that he met and became friends with Bernard V. O'Hare, who joined Vonnegut as a POW in Dresden and would go on to play a large role in the genesis of *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

On Mother's Day in 1944 Vonnegut received leave from his duties and returned home to find that his mother had committed suicide the previous evening. Edith Vonnegut had grown increasingly depressed over her family's lost fortune and her inability to remake that fortune by selling fiction to popular magazines of the day. "She studied magazines," her son recalled, "the way gamblers study racing forms." Although Edith was a good writer, Vonnegut noted that she "had no talent for the vulgarity the slick magazines required." Fortunately, he added, he "was loaded with vulgarity," when he grew up he was able to make her dream come true by writing for such publications as *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *The Ladies' Home Journal*.

Three months after his mother's death, Vonnegut was sent overseas just in time to become engulfed in the last German offensive of the war -- the Battle of the Bulge. Captured by the Germans, Vonnegut and other American prisoners were shipped in boxcars to Dresden -- "the first fancy city" he had ever seen, Vonnegut said. As a POW, he found himself quartered in a slaughterhouse and working in a malt syrup factory. Each day he listened to bombers drone overhead on their way to drop their loads on some other German city. On Feb. 13, 1945, the air raid siren went off in Dresden and Vonnegut, some other POWs and their German guards found refuge in a meat locker located three stories under the slaughterhouse. "It was cool there, with cadavers hanging all around," Vonnegut said. "When we came up the city was gone. They burnt the whole damn town down."

In recalling the aftermath of the bombing, which created a firestorm that killed approximately 135,000 people, for the *Paris Review*, Vonnegut described walking into the city each day to dig into basements to remove the corpses as a sanitary measure:

When we went into them, a typical shelter . . .looked like a streetcar full of people who'd simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting in chairs, all dead. They were loaded on wagons and taken to parks, large open areas in the city which weren't filled with rubble. The Germans got funeral pyres going, burning the bodies to keep them from stinking and from spreading disease. It was a terribly elaborate Easter egg hunt.

Freed from captivity by Russian troops, Vonnegut returned to the United States and married Jane Marie Cox on Sept. 1, 1945. The young couple moved to Chicago where Vonnegut worked on a master's degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago. While going to school, he also worked as a reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau. Failing to have his thesis, "Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales," accepted, Vonnegut left school to become a publicist for General Electric's research laboratories in Schenectaduy, New York. As an aside, in 1971 the University of Chicago finally awarded Vonnegut a master's degree in anthropology for his novel *Cat's Cradle*.

While working for GE, Vonnegut began submitting stories to mass-market magazines. His first published piece "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," appeared in *Collier's* February 11, 1950 issue--an article for which he received $750 (minus, of course, a 10 percent agent's commission). Writing his father of his success, Vonnegut confidently stated: "I think I'm on my way. I've deposited my first check in a savings account and . . . will continue to do so until I have the equivalent of one year's pay at GE. Four more stories will do it nicely. I will then quit this goddamn nightmare job, and never take another one so long as I live, so help me God."

Vonnegut was almost as good as his word. He quit his job at GE in 1951 and moved to Cape Cod to write full time. Although he sold a steady stream of stories to a succession of magazines, the Hoosier writer did have to take other jobs to supplement his income. He worked as an English teacher in a school on Cape Cod, wrote copy for an advertising agency, and opened one of the first Saab dealerships in the United States. With his short stories, and novels like *Player Piano*, published in 1952, and *The Sirens of Titan*, released in 1959, Vonnegut was often typecast by critics as a science fiction writer. "The feeling persists," Vonnegut has said, "that no one can simultaneously be a respectable writer and understand how a refrigerator works, just as no gentleman wears a brown suit in the city." It was also during these years that his father and sister died.

In the novels Vonnegut published leading up to *Slaughterhouse Five*, which also included such works as *Mother Night*, *Cat's Cradle* and *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, themes emerged that would find their full flowering with *Slaughterhouse Five*. There is, according to Vonnegut, an "almost intolerable sentimentality beneath everything" he writes--a sentimentality he might have learned from a black cook employed by the Vonnegut family named Ida Young. Young often read to the young Kurt from a anthology of idealistic poetry about "love which would not die, about faithful dogs and humble cottages where happiness was, about people growing old, about visits to cemeteries, about babies who die." The essence of Vonnegut's work might be best expressed by one of his characters, crazed millionaire Elliot Rosewater, who proclaims: "Goddamn it, you've got to be kind." After all, Vonnegut has reminded us time after time, "pity is like rust to a cruel social machine."

After briefly touching on his World War II experience in other works -- Rosewater, for example, hallucinates that Indianapolis becomes engulfed in a firestorm -- Vonnegut finally, in 1969, delivered to the reading public a book dealing with the Dresden bombing.

Slaughterhouse Five is the story of Billy Pilgrim, like Vonnegut, a young infantry scout captured by the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge and taken to Dresden where he and his other prisoners survive the Feb. 13, 1945 firebombing of the city. Pilgrim copes with his war trauma through time travels to the planet Tralfamadore, whose inhabitants have the ability to see all of time -- past, present, and future -- simultaneously. The book is so short, jumbled and jangled, Vonnegut explained, because "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything ever again."

Vonnegut's strange, yet fascinating, trip through World War II, which one critic called "an inspired mess," did not come easy. He worked on the book on and off for many years. In 1967 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship and returned to Dresden with his fellow POW Bernard O'Hare to gather material for the book. Three years earlier Vonnegut had visited O'Hare at his Pennsylvania home and received, as he recounts in the opening chapter to *Slaughterhouse Five*, a rather chilly reception from his friend's wife, Mary, who believed the Hoosier author would gloss over the soldiers' youth and write something that could be turned into a movie starring Frank Sinatra or John Wayne. "She freed me," Vonnegut reflected, "to write about what infants we really were: 17, 18, 19, 20, 21. We were baby-faced, and as a prisoner of war I don't think I had to shave very often. I don't recall that was a problem."

He promised Mary O'Hare that if he ever finished his Dresden book there would be no parts in it for actors like John Wayne; instead, he'd call it "The Children's Crusade." Vonnegut kept his word. *Slaughterhouse Five, or The Children's Crusade, A Duty Dance with Death*, with its recapitulation of previous themes and characters (such old favorites as Kilgore Trout, Eliot Rosewater and Howard Campbell Jr. appear), brings together in one book all of what Vonnegut had been trying to say about the human condition throughout his career. With wild black humor mixed with his innate pessimism and particular brand of compassion, Vonnegut asks his readers not to give up on their humanity, even when faced with potential disaster -- offering as an example Lot's wife who was turned into a pillar of salt for daring to look back at her former home.

Although Vonnegut considered the book a failure -- it had to be, he said, as it "was written by a pillar of salt" -- the public disagreed. Written during the height of the Vietnam War, *Slaughterhouse Five*'s compassion in the face of terrible slaughter struck a nerve with an American populace trying to come to grips with the war and a society that seemed to be, at best, headed for major changes. After all, Vonnegut's book was released during a year that saw such shocking events as Neil Armstrong taking the first step on the moon, the New York Mets winning the World Series, more than a half a million youngsters gathering on Max Yasgur's dairy farm in New York for a music festival called Woodstock, and the uncovering of a massacre of Vietnamese civilians by American troops in a village named My Lai. *Slaughterhouse Five*'s success, and the release of a feature film based on the book in 1972, gained Vonnegut a position as an American cultural icon. College students, in particular, responded well to Vonnegut's sense of the absurd, his Cassandra-like warnings about the bleak future the planet faced. "I do moralize," Vonnegut has admitted. He added that he tells his readers "not to take more than they need, not to be greedy. I tell them not to kill, even in self defense. I tell them not to pollute water or the atmosphere. I tell them not to raid the public treasury."

For those wondering about the phrase, "So it goes," which appears every time a character dies in Slaughterhouse Five (which happens one hundred and three times, by the way), Vonnegut was inspired to use the phrase after reading French author Celine's

masterpiece, *Journey to the End of the Night*. Using the phrase, Vonnegut noted, exasperated many critics, and seemed fancy and tiresome to him too, but it "somehow had to be said."

Since its publication, *Slaughterhouse Five* has retained its reputation as Vonnegut's greatest, and most controversial, work. It has been used in classrooms across the country, and also been banned by school boards. In 1973 school officials in Drake, North Dakota, went so far as to confiscate and burn the book, an action Vonnegut termed "grotesque and ridiculous." He was glad, he added, that he had "the freedom to make soldiers talk the way they do talk." I, for one, like Vonnegut's idea on how to end book-banning in the United States. Under his plan, every candidate for a school board position should be hooked up to a lie detector and asked: "Have you read a book from start to finish since high school? Or did you even read a book from start to finish in high school?" Those who answer no would not be eligible for service on a school board.

A final thought on *Slaughterhouse Five* from its writer, who today continues to produce quality literature. Asked for his thoughts on the book, Vonnegut responded by claiming that only one person on the entire planet benefited from the bombing. "The raid," Vonnegut said, "didn't shorten the war by half a second, didn't free a single person from a death camp. Only one person benefited--not two or five or ten. Just one." That one person was Vonnegut who, according to his own reckoning, has received over the years about five dollars for every corpse.

http://www.indianahistory.org/pop_hist/people/kv.html

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Born on November 11, 1922.

As a high-schooler at Shortridge High School in Indianapolis, Vonnegut worked on the nation's first and (then) only daily high school newspaper, *The Daily Echo*. He briefly attended Butler University, but dropped out when a professor said that his stories were not good enough.

He attended Cornell University from 1941 to 1943, where he served as an opinions section editor for the student newspaper, the *Cornell Daily Sun*, and majored in chemistry before joining the U.S. Army during World War II.

After the war, Vonnegut attended the University of Chicago as a graduate student in anthropology and also worked as a police reporter at the City News Bureau of Chicago. He left Chicago to work in New York, in public relations for General Electric. He attributes his unadorned writing style to his earlier reporting work.

On the verge of abandoning writing, Vonnegut was offered a teaching job at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. While he was there *Cat's Cradle* became a best-seller, and he began *Slaughterhouse-Five*, now widely regarded as one of the most significant works of American fiction in the 20th century.

Later in his career, he became more interested in artwork. His work as a graphic artist began with his illustrations for *Slaughterhouse-Five* and developed with *Breakfast of Champions*, which included numerous felt-tip pen illustrations.

Important works include *Cat's Cradle* (which in 1971 got him his master's degree), the semi-autobiographical *Slaughterhouse-Five*, and *Breakfast of Champions*.

Vonnegut is known for works blending satire, black comedy, and science fiction.

His experiences as an advance scout with the U.S. 106th Infantry Division during the Battle of the Bulge and as a Prisoner of War earned him a Purple Heart and have influenced much of his work.

While a Prisoner of War, Vonnegut witnessed the aftermath of the 1945 bombing of Dresden, Germany, which destroyed much of the city. Vonnegut was one of just seven American prisoners of war in Dresden to survive, in an underground meatpacking cellar known as Slaughterhouse Five. "Utter destruction," he recalls. "Carnage unfathomable." The Nazis put him to work gathering bodies for mass burial ... Vonnegut explains. "But there were too many corpses to bury. So instead the Nazis sent in guys with flamethrowers. All these civilians' remains were burned to ashes." This experience formed the core of his most famous work, Slaughterhouse-Five and is a theme in at least six other books.

In much of his work Vonnegut's own voice is apparent, often filtered through the character of science fiction author Kilgore Trout (based on real-life science fiction writer Theodore Sturgeon), characterized by wild leaps of imagination and a deep cynicism, tempered by humanism. skyxlines - http://skyxlines.livejournal.com/

Kurt Vonnegut dead at 84

By Dinitia Smith
New York Times

 New York - Kurt Vonnegut, whose dark comic talent and urgent moral vision in novels like "Slaughterhouse-Five," "Cat's Cradle" and "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater" caught the temper of his times and the imagination of a generation, died Wednesday night in Manhattan. He was 84 and had homes in Manhattan and in Sagaponack on Long Island.

His death was reported by Morgan Entrekin, a longtime family friend, who said Vonnegut suffered brain injuries as a result of a fall several weeks ago.

Vonnegut wrote plays, essays and short fiction. But it was his novels that became classics of the American counterculture, making him a literary idol, particularly to students in the 1960s and '70s.

Like Mark Twain, Vonnegut used humor to tackle the basic questions of human existence and, like Twain, had a profound pessimism.

"Mark Twain," Vonnegut wrote in his 1991 book, "Fates Worse Than Death: An Autobiographical Collage," "finally stopped laughing at his own agony and that of those around him. He denounced life on this planet as a crock. He died."

His novels - 14 in all - were alternate universes, populated by races of his own creation, like the interdimensional Tralfamadorians, and made-up religions, like the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and Bokononism.

The defining moment of Vonnegut's life was the firebombing of Dresden, Germany, by Allied forces in 1945, an event he witnessed as a prisoner of war. Thousands of civilians were killed in the raids, many of them burned to death or asphyxiated.

The raid was the basis of **"Slaughterhouse-Five,"** which was published in 1969 against the backdrop of war in Vietnam, racial unrest and cultural and social upheaval. The novel, wrote the critic Jerome Klinkowitz, "so perfectly caught America's transformative mood that its story and structure became best-selling metaphors for the new age." To Vonnegut, the only possible redemption for the madness and apparent meaninglessness of existence was human kindness. The title character in his 1965 novel, "God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater," summed up his philosophy: "Hello, babies. Welcome to Earth. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round and wet and crowded. At the outside, babies, you've got about a hundred years here. There's only one rule that I know of, babies - 'God damn it, you've got to be kind."'

Vonnegut eschewed traditional structure and punctuation. His books were a mixture of fiction and autobiography, prone to one-sentence paragraphs, exclamation points and italics. Graham Greene called him "one of the most able of living American writers." Some critics said he had invented a new literary type, infusing the science-fiction form with humor and moral relevance and elevating it to serious literature.

He was also accused of repeating himself, of recycling themes and characters. His harshest critics called him no more than a comic book philosopher, a purveyor of empty aphorisms.

With his curly hair askew, deep pouches under his eyes and rumpled clothes, he often looked like an out-of-work philosophy professor, typically chain smoking, his conversation punctuated with coughs and wheezes. But he also maintained a certain celebrity, as a regular on panels and at literary parties in Manhattan and on the East End of Long Island.

Vonnegut was born in Indianapolis in 1922, a fourth-generation German-American and the youngest of three children. His father, Kurt Sr., was an architect. His mother, Edith, came from a wealthy brewery family. Vonnegut's brother, Bernard, who died in 1997, was a physicist and an expert on thunderstorms.

During the Depression, Edith Vonnegut suffered from episodes of mental illness. She committed suicide, an act that haunted her son for the rest of his life.

Vonnegut went east to attend Cornell University, but enlisted in the Army before he could get a degree. In 1944, he went to Europe with the **106th Infantry Division** and saw combat in the Battle of the Bulge. With his unit nearly destroyed, he wandered behind

enemy lines for several days until he was captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp near Dresden.

When the war ended, Vonnegut returned to the United States and married his high school sweetheart, Jane Marie Cox. They settled in Chicago in 1945. The couple had three children: Mark, Edith and Nanette. In 1958, Vonnegut's sister, Alice, and her husband died within a day of each other, she of cancer and he in a train crash.

The Vonneguts adopted their children, Tiger, Jim and Steven.

In Chicago, Vonnegut worked as a police reporter for Chicago's City News Bureau. He also studied for a master's degree in anthropology at the University of Chicago, writing a thesis on "The Fluctuations Between Good and Evil in Simple Tales." It was rejected unanimously by the faculty. (The university finally awarded him a degree almost a quarter of a century later, allowing him to use his novel "Cat's Cradle" as his thesis.) In 1947, he moved to Schenectady, N.Y., and took a job in public relations for General Electric Co. Three years later he sold his first short story, "Report on the Barnhouse Effect," to Collier's magazine and moved his family to Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, where he wrote fiction for magazines like Argosy and The Saturday Evening Post. To bolster his income, he taught emotionally disturbed children, worked at an advertising agency and at one point started an auto dealership.

His first novel was "Player Piano," published in 1952, was a satire on corporate life. It was followed in 1959 by "The Sirens of Titan," a science fiction novel featuring the Church of God of the Utterly Indifferent. In 1961, he published "Mother Night," involving an American writer awaiting trial in Israel on charges of war crimes in Nazi Germany. Like Vonnegut's other early novels, they were published as paperback originals. And like "Slaughterhouse-Five," in 1972, and a number of other Vonnegut novels, "Mother Night" was adapted for film, in 1996, starring Nick Nolte.

In 1963, Vonnegut published "Cat's Cradle." Though it initially sold only about 500 copies, it is widely read today in high school English classes. The narrator, an adherent of the Zen-like religion Bokononism, comes to witness the destruction of the world by something called Ice-Nine, which, on contact, causes water to freeze at room temperature.

Vonnegut shed the label of science fiction writer with "Slaughterhouse-Five." It tells the story of Billy Pilgrim, an infantry scout (as Vonnegut was), who discovers the horror of war.

The novel also featured a signature Vonnegut phrase.

"Robert Kennedy, whose summer home is eight miles from the home I live in all year round," Vonnegut wrote at the end of the book, "was shot two nights ago. He died last night. So it goes.

"Martin Luther King was shot a month ago. He died, too. So it goes. And every day my Government gives me a count of corpses created by military science in Vietnam. So it goes."

One of many Zen-like words and phrases that run through Vonnegut's books, "so it goes" became a catchphrase for opponents of the Vietnam war.

"Slaughterhouse-Five" reached No.1 on best-seller lists, making Vonnegut a cult hero. Some schools and libraries have banned it because of its sexual content, rough language and scenes of violence.

After the book was published, Vonnegut went into severe depression and vowed never to write another novel. Suicide was always a temptation, he wrote. In 1984, he tried to take his life with sleeping pills and alcohol.

Forsaking novels, Vonnegut decided to become a playwright. His first effort, "Happy Birthday, Wanda June," opened Off Broadway in 1970 to mixed reviews. Around this time he separated from his wife, Jane, and moved to New York. (She remarried and died in 1986.) In 1979, Vonnegut married the photographer Jill Krementz. They have a daughter, Lily. They survive him, as do all his other children.

Vonnegut returned to novels with "Breakfast of Champions, or Goodbye Blue Monday" (1973), and in 1997, "Timequake," a tale of the millennium in which a wrinkle in space-time compels the world to relive the 1990s. The book, though it was a bestseller, it also met with mixed reviews.

Vonnegut said in the prologue to "Timequake" that it would be his last novel. And so it was.

His last book, in 2005, was a collection of biographical essays, "A Man Without a Country." It, too, was a best seller.

It concludes with a poem written by Vonnegut called "Requiem," which has these closing lines: When the last living thing has died on account of us, how poetical it would be if Earth could say, in a voice floating up perhaps from the floor of the Grand Canyon, "It is done." People did not like it here.

Local vet recalls his POW days with the late Kurt Vonnegut 2007-05-03 By Daniel Sturm Athens NEWS Contributor .....

When **Kurt Vonnegut, {424/HQ/106th Division),** called my home on Feb. 23, I was thrilled. It was so exciting to hear the famous writer's voice on the phone that I didn't mind so much that he was calling to cancel a sit-down interview I'd suggested, to discuss his experiences in Dresden during WW II, and current views on war. As a captive POW, Vonnegut had survived the 1945 firebombing in an underground meatpacking cellar known as "Schlachthof 5." His experiences are memorialized in his best-selling 1969 novel, "Slaughterhouse-Five," and the film by the same name.

The 84-year old Vonnegut was frank but polite in his refusal of the interview. "I am [*******] sick and tired of talking about war," he said. "I don't know what else to say about all these [*******] wars. I'm afraid I have nothing new to add to what I've already said."

Vonnegut passed away a few weeks later.

For a special issue of a journal I am editing on the topic of war, my plan had been to ask the novelist to revisit the scene of Dresden's destruction (where an estimated 75,000 civilians died within 14 hours), and to compare it to the Bush administration's "shock and awe" attack of Iraq and, more recently, to Israel's cluster bombing of southern Lebanon. A German colleague offered to contribute a companion piece on the evolution of Dresden's peace movement in the wake of 9/11.

When I heard of Vonnegut's death, on April 11, after he had suffered brain injuries from a fall several weeks earlier, I realized that I may have been the last journalist to speak with him. Joel Bleifuss, his last editor at In These Times, had also been unsuccessful at persuading Vonnegut to put something more on paper. "He would just say he's too old and that he had nothing more to say," Bleifuss said. "He realized, I think, he was at the end of his life."

Last week, I sat down with OU professor emeritus of history **Gifford Doxsee, (423/HQ/106th Division)**, who'd experienced the firebombing of Dresden with Vonnegut. Doxsee had gotten to know this "tall and slender" man as the interpreter of his group of POWs, and had witnessed how Vonnegut was psychologically tortured after calling one Nazi guard a "swine." During the interview, Doxsee shed light on the real "Schlachthof 5" and shared his memories of the great American writer, Kurt Vonnegut.

STURM: When did you last talk to Kurt Vonnegut?

DOXSEE: In September 1997, he gave a lecture at Ohio Wesleyan University, which I attended with my wife. Somebody in the audience asked him, "Mr. Vonnegut, as a writer, what is your judgment of the impact of the computer on our society?" And Kurt said, "If I were a stock broker advising clients, I would advise to buy stocks in companies that manufacture laxatives, because the computer is making us so sedentary." Who but Kurt Vonnegut would say it this way? He saw the world differently from the way most of his contemporaries did. After the lecture we chatted briefly. But Kurt had an assistant, you might call a bodyguard, who allowed him to talk with us for about five minutes and then spirited him away.

STURM: Could you describe the circumstances under which you got to know Vonnegut?

DOXSEE: After we were captured in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, we walked for a couple of days and then were put in box cars for eight and a half days, until we got to STALAG ("Stammlager") IV B, which is just outside of the village of Muhlberg, about 35 miles Northwest of Dresden, right on the Elbe River. There, we were processed as POWs. A section of the camp was occupied by British non-commissioned officers. We were there barely two weeks, and I did not know Kurt. And then 150 of us were shipped off, even though Kurt talked about 100 in "Slaughterhouse-Five." When we got to Dresden, where Kurt was named the interpreter, that's when I first became aware of him. In the first months before the bombing of Dresden, our group of 150 was divided into about 10 teams of roughly 15 each. Most of us went to the factories to provide labor. In "Slaughterhouse Five," Kurt talked about the malt factory where people produced malt syrup for pregnant women. Kurt and I were in the same detail there, in the Koenigs-Malzfabrik. Little by little, we got to know each other better.

STURM: When you first learned of his passing, could you describe what went through your mind?

DOXSEE: A feeling that we had come to the end of an era. He epitomized for many others the experience we had in Dresden. Not only because of his novel, "Slaughterhouse-Five," but also because of his role while we were there. When we arrived in Dresden, we were welcomed by an English-speaking German captain, who said to us that our guards would not know English. He selected Kurt to be our first interpreter. Not only was Kurt tall and slender in those days, so that he stood taller than the rest of us, and was therefore visible, but as an interpreter he became the best-known person in our group for the first month of our time in Dresden.

STURM: So Vonnegut worked as an interpreter throughout the entire time?

DOXSEE: The thing that led to Kurt's dismissal from his role as interpreter was that, one day, the guards decided that the tables and chairs needed to be scrubbed down with hot water and soap, and they assigned five of the soldiers to do this. The German guard who was in charge of this detail noticed that one of the five was not working as hard as the other four. Now, bear in mind, we were not getting Red Cross food packets. We were slowly starving. This soldier had diarrhea and very little energy. So he was making an effort, but he wasn't doing very much. The guard warned him, "You have to work harder, you are not doing your share." Vonnegut had to interpret this. But he also said to the guard, "The guy is sick; take it easy." The guard wouldn't pay attention, and he finally struck the prisoner. At which point Kurt lost his patience, and under his breath said, "You dirty swine." The German word "Schwein," and the English word "swine," sound just the same. So the guard knew what Vonnegut said. He marched off to his superior and said, "Kurt Vonnegut has insulted the honor of the German army." He must be punished. He was dismissed from being interpreter and went back into the ranks. Very soon after that we had the bombing.

STURM: Was Vonnegut punished?

DOXSEE: I think he was tortured psychologically more than any of the rest of us. One 16-year old Hitler Youth kid that we nicknamed "Junior" took it upon himself to punish Kurt for having used the word "swine." After the firebombing, when we had to clean up rubble, we were usually given two blocks of rubble to clean. "Junior" would come out there on the work place with a bayonet attached to his rifle, with the scabbard removed, and would follow Kurt around from morning until night, literally taunting him. "You lazy American, you don't know how to work," he said. "We Germans know how to work. I will teach you." And he would jam him in the rear end with the point of his bayonet. My sense was he was taunting Vonnegut, hoping that Kurt would strike back. I think that Kurt would have paid with his life. He realized that, and so he developed an iron discipline not to respond. He went through this kind of psychological torture for a month. I know from the conversation we had in 1945 that he was furious at "Junior" (Doxsee visited Vonnegut in August of 1945, during his 75-day convalescence furlough in Indianapolis).

STURM: Vonnegut thought of naming his last book "The 51st state." He explained this during one of his last interviews: "That would be the state of denial which we are all living in now, because the game is all over. We have irrevocably ruined the planet as a life-support system." Instead he chose as a title, "The Man Without a Country." Do you share his criticism of technology?

DOXSEE: I guess I am on the fence in this matter. I learned my livelihood in education, as a teacher and a professor. And I have to feel that education has an important role in the lives of people. One aspect of education is the advancement of science technology. So

I guess I don't entirely agree with him on this.

STURM: Vonnegut was slated to become a chemist. WW II made him a pacifist. Do you think that his experiences in Dresden may have turned him against technology?

DOXSEE: Very likely. He studied chemistry at Cornell University, but he never went back to Cornell after the war. He went to Chicago to study anthropology and became much more a humanist than a scientist. His scientific training made it possible for him to write science fiction. I should tell you a little bit more about Billy Pilgrim, who is the epitome of the anti-soldier. It's Vonnegut's way of thumbing his nose at the military by having the main character an anti-hero. I wondered from the time that "Slaughterhouse Five" was published in 1969, until the 1990s, whether Billy Pilgrim was a figment of Kurt Vonnegut's invention or whether he was based on one of our fellow POWs. And finally, in the 1990s, Kurt told the world who his role model was: Edward Reginald Crone. He was a student at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, when I was a freshman at Hobart. So I knew Crone before we were in the military. We ended up in the same division. And finally we ended up in Dresden. Crone died of malnutrition before the war ended, at a hospital in Dresden. He was planning to become an Episcopal priest.

STURM: Was Vonnegut's portrayal of Billy Pilgram, aka Edward Crone, realistic?

DOXSEE: It was exaggerated for the purpose of the book. Crone wasn't quite as disorganized as Billy Pilgrim was. But the fact that he let himself starve to death, and died before the war ended, is an indication that he wasn't entirely rational. Most of us saved our food and managed to survive.

STURM: Describe the firebombing of Dresden, on Feb. 13, 1945, as you experienced it.

DOXSEE: The two British raids were at night. One was around 10 p.m. and the other one at around 2 a.m. Both of those times the guards got us up and made us walk a hundred yards or so, to another building, also in the slaughterhouse compound. It had what Vonnegut called a "meat locker." This was a refrigerated room two stories below ground. That's where we went as a kind of air-raid shelter. When the bombing came, we could feel the ground shake, and the plaster from the ceiling fell on us. So we knew this was very serious. During the first raid the bombs didn't seem to be as close as the second raid. After the second raid, the guards got us above ground. The building that we had been in had been hit by incendiary bombs and was burning. The guards were afraid that we would die of asphyxiation. So they got us above ground as soon as they could. We saw a city on fire all around. A terrifying sight.

STURM: Vonnegut wrote that after the firebombing there were too many corpses to bury. So instead, the Nazis sent in guys with flamethrowers. Did you have to do this yourself?

DOXSEE: We had to carry corpses out of the cellars. The most vivid memory was when we went to the Central Railroad Station where there were probably hundreds of people who had children. By the time we were assigned to carry these corpses out, they had been there for long enough that they were decomposing. When we tried to pull them by their arms, we'd be holding limbs in our hands. This was an existentialist experience. The German carriers carried them to the funeral parlors.

STURM: Can you describe a scene from the book that resonated with your own experience?

DOXSEE: One of the things I learned in talking with other survivors has been how different our memories are. But the one event that everybody remembered was the execution by the SS of one of the POWs. In Vonnegut's novel, it's Edgar Derby, for stealing a teapot. In reality, there was no Edgar Derby and there was no teapot. But there was a POW in our group by the name of Michael Palaia, from Philadelphia. The guards, who were sympathetic, let it be known that if we found food in the basements we could eat it. If we found anything valuable, like silverware or jewelry, we were to tell the guards. We were warned not to take anything out of the cellars, because that was defined as looting. And looting by international law was punishable by death. Michael Palaia found a jar of unopened string beans. He would have gotten away with it, except there was an unexpected inspection by the SS just as he was climbing over the rubble. And one of the SS soldiers saw what looked suspicious and found a jar of string beans. So Michael was a marked man. The next morning at roll call he was called out of formation and taken away. Several days later, four of our other POWs were called out, and when they came back in the evening, shaken, they had had to dig the grave and bury Michael.

STURM: What did you learn in Dresden?

DOXSEE: The fragility of civilization. After I got out of the army I got a job as a messenger boy for the New York Times. Every night at 2:30 a.m. I walked alone from Times Square, down 7th Avenue to Penn Station. Eleven blocks. New York was a safe city then. When I looked at those skyscrapers in 1945, I said to myself, "I wonder if New York will ever be subjected to the destruction of Dresden?" It happened. So, the lesson from my time in Dresden was that the line between civilization and chaos is a very fine line, indeed.

STURM: Vonnegut said that there wasn't much in Dresden worth bombing, according to U.S. intelligence. In his view, burning the whole place down wasn't an exercise in military intelligence, but was "religious. It was Wagnerian. It was theatrical." What's your analysis?

DOXSEE: Anything that would have shortened the war by even one day was worth it. My view is that if something like this had happened in 1938, it would have created a moral outrage throughout the world. But when you have a war like WW II, people become hardened, little by little, until eventually things that would have been unthinkable before the war are just accepted as commonplace.

STURM: In 1973, Vonnegut said that there was "a complete blank where the bombing of Dresden took place, because I don't remember. And I looked up several of my war buddies and they didn't remember either. They didn't want to talk about it." Did you also draw a blank?

DOXSEE: I am not sure to what extent he was telling the whole truth, or whether he was exaggerating. While I was visiting my parents in my convalescence furlough, in the summer of 1945, I decided one day to jot down some of my memories from Dresden. My mother came in the room and casually asked me what I was doing. When I told her, she became very emotionally upset. Now my mother was a very tranquil lady. I don't think I saw her upset more than half a dozen times in all the years that we lived together. She said, "Don't write this. This is behind you, get on with your life." I realized that she had suffered more psychologically than I had. She had gotten a telegram from the War Department on Jan. 12, 1945, that I was missing in action. My mother went through

three entire months not knowing whether I was dead or alive. It was very hard on her. So in deference to her wishes, I never put anything on paper until 1981, five years after she died. A copy of this essay is in the archives of the Alden Library (http://ohiomemory.org).

STURM: From his youth, Vonnegut has the memory of being a prisoner in Nazi Germany, and witnessing the Dresden massacre. At the time of his death, suicide bombers, terrorism and torture are now much more in the news than peace negotiations and diplomacy. That must have been bitter for him.

DOXSEE: I think he had a cynical side to his personality from a very young age, and it probably increased as time went on. I see the world in a more optimistic way. I had two great overseas adventures. The first one was WW II. The second one was teaching in Beirut, Lebanon. The impact of teaching overseas caused me to see the United States in an entirely different way. I came home in 1955 skeptical, recognizing that the American people were fed a certain interpretation of world affairs, which put U.S. interests first, without necessarily making this obvious. The rest of the world was sort of trimmed off. We would go to great lengths to save one American life abroad, but if we killed thousands of others, it didn't matter because they were not Americans. Ever since the 1950s, I have had a certain amount of skepticism about anything our political leaders tell us. Not that they necessarily lie. But they only tell us one part of the story.

STURM: Do you think there might be another World War brewing?

DOXSEE: The lesson I think I've learned from the study of history is that there can be very unexpected developments. There's a saying that the darkest hour comes just before the dawn. The timing of the coming of Moses, Jesus or Muhammad could be interpreted as the Lord sending a prophet at a time of darkness. It's just possible that somebody completely unexpected could emerge as a spiritual or philosophical leader, who would be successful in bringing about a transformation of attitudes. I don't know. I recognize all the reasons why Vonnegut felt less optimistic. They are all valid reasons. But there have been unexpected blessings in the past, and maybe there will be unexpected blessings in our time.

STURM: In March of 2006, Vonnegut gave his last public speech at Ohio State University. Two thousand students attended his lecture, and about as many were turned away. Vonnegut had this to say: "The only difference between Bush and Hitler is that Hitler was elected." What's your analysis?

DOXSEE: I've learned that it's very important to be discreet. One can say only what one thinks in a private conversation. One has to be very careful when speaking in public, because there are certain no-nos, in terms of our values. This country has demonized Hitler. It was justifiable during the war. After the war, the demonization has continued. There are very valid reasons for this. But one of the interesting aspects for me is the question, what role did the United States play in bringing Hitler to power? If Hitler would not have come to power, we would probably never have had WW II. Nobody asks. It is just an assumption that the United States was totally blameless. But I think we had a high level of responsibility.

During the 1920s, when we experienced prosperity in this country, it was our bankers who were lending huge amounts of money to the German bankers -- short-term loans, which meant high interest rates. And the Germans were now repaying this, and every three months they were borrowing more, to keep up with the interest. If our leaders in

Washington had understood the reality of the economics more thoroughly, we could have modified our policies, and either eliminated the Depression or at least diminished its impact. Forty percent of the Germans were unemployed. Hitler came along and said, "I will give you jobs."

STURM: You have seen war and its effects. Do you see a solution to the current spiral of violence in Iraq?

DOXSEE: I have been very critical of the Bush administration from day one. The administration has given a whole series of explanations as to why we needed to invade Iraq. To me, it seems that they are not telling the whole story. I think that there are several powerful reasons that have not been shared with the American public, for political reasons: The Saudis wanted an American army when Saddam Hussein was threatening them. But when he was driven out of Kuwait, the danger was passed, and from then on the Saudis wanted our army out. But our government did not want to remove its troops from the Middle East. So the question became, if U.S. troops left Saudi Arabia, where should they go? Iraq became a viable substitute.

STURM: In his last book, "A Man Without a Country," Vonnegut wrote that "George W. Bush has gathered around him upper-crust C-students who know no history or geography." What's your take?

DOXSEE: He may have exaggerated a bit. My view is if you start with Abraham Lincoln's phrase at the end of the Gettysburg Address, that we have a government of the people, by the people and for the people, what I see today is we have a government of the Halliburtons, by the Halliburtons and for the Halliburtons. I'm using the word "Halliburton" as a generic term to talk about all the huge corporations who have profited so much from the war in Iraq. We haven't helped the Iraqis at all. They are far worse off than they were under Saddam Hussein, except that they have more freedom to say things. But they also have a civil war going on.

Editor's note: Daniel Sturm is a German journalist who covers underreported social and political topics in the United States and Europe. For four years, Sturm lived in Leipzig near Dresden, before relocating to the U.S. in 2002. Some of his work can be read at www.sturmstories.com.
http://www.athensnews.com/issue/article.php3?story_id=28114

Note: None of the 106th Veterans familiar with the Battle of the Bulge, and actions following, had ever heard of an "advance scout" designation for anyone.

June 1, 2008

The blood of Dresden

The author Kurt Vonnegut was a prisoner of war in Dresden during the allied bombing raids and was later forced to dig out bodies from the ruined city. In papers discovered by his son after his death last year, he provides a searing eyewitness account of the 'obscene brutality' that inspired his novel Slaughterhouse-Five

It was a routine speech we got during our first day of basic training, delivered by a wiry little lieutenant: "Men, up to now you've been good, clean, American boys with an American's love for sportsmanship and fair play. We're here to change that.

"Our job is to make you the meanest, dirtiest bunch of scrappers in the history of the world. From now on, you can forget the Marquess of Queensberry rules and every other set of rules. Anything and everything goes.

"Never hit a man above the belt when you can kick him below it. Make the bastard scream. Kill him any way you can. Kill, kill, kill – do you understand?"

His talk was greeted with nervous laughter and general agreement that he was right. "Didn't Hitler and Tojo say the Americans were a bunch of softies? Ha! They'll find out."

And of course, Germany and Japan did find out: a toughened-up democracy poured forth a scalding fury that could not be stopped. It was a war of reason against barbarism, supposedly, with the issues at stake on such a high plane that most of our feverish fighters had no idea why they were fighting – other than that the enemy was a bunch of bastards. A new kind of war, with all destruction, all killing approved.

A lot of people relished the idea of total war: it had a modern ring to it, in keeping with our spectacular technology. To them it was like a football game.

[Back home in America], three small-town merchants' wives, middle-aged and plump, gave me a ride when I was hitchhiking home from Camp Atterbury. "Did you kill a lot of them Germans?" asked the driver, making cheerful small-talk. I told her I didn't know.

This was taken for modesty. As I was getting out of the car, one of the ladies patted me on the shoulder in motherly fashion: "I'll bet you'd like to get over and kill some of them dirty Japs now, wouldn't you?"

We exchanged knowing winks. I didn't tell those simple souls that I had been captured after a week at the front; and more to the point, what I knew and thought about killing dirty Germans, about total war. The reason for my being sick at heart then and now has to do with an incident that received cursory treatment in the American newspapers. In February 1945, Dresden, Germany, was destroyed, and with it over 100,000 human beings. I was there. Not many know how tough America got.

I was among a group of 150 infantry privates, captured in the Bulge breakthrough and put to work in Dresden. Dresden, we were told, was the only major German city to have escaped bombing so far. That was in January 1945. She owed her good fortune to her unwarlike countenance: hospitals, breweries, food-processing plants, surgical supply houses, ceramics, musical instrument factories and the like.

Since the war [had started], hospitals had become her prime concern. Every day hundreds of wounded came into the tranquil sanctuary from the east and west. At night, we would hear the dull rumble of distant air raids. "Chemnitz is getting it tonight," we used to say, and speculated what it might be like to be the bright young men with their dials and cross-hairs.

"Thank heaven we're in an 'open city'," we thought, and so thought the thousands of refugees – women, children and old men who came in a forlorn stream from the smoldering wreckage of Berlin, Leipzig, Breslau, Munich. They flooded the city to twice its normal population.

There was no war in Dresden. True, planes came over nearly every day and the sirens wailed, but the planes were always en route elsewhere. The alarms furnished a relief period in a tedious work day, a social event, a chance to gossip in the shelters. The shelters, in fact, were not much more than a gesture, casual recognition of the national emergency: wine cellars and basements with benches in them and sandbags blocking the windows, for the most part. There were a few more adequate bunkers in the centre of the city, close to the government offices, but nothing like the staunch subterranean fortress that rendered Berlin impervious to her daily pounding. Dresden had no reason to prepare for attack – and thereby hangs a beastly tale.

Dresden was surely among the world's most lovely cities. Her streets were broad, lined with shade-trees. She was sprinkled with countless little parks and statuary. She had marvelous old churches, libraries, museums, theatres, art galleries, beer gardens, a zoo and a renowned university.

It was at one time a tourist's paradise. They would be far better informed on the city's delights than am I. But the impression I have is that in Dresden – in the physical city – were the symbols of the good life; pleasant, honest, intelligent. In the swastika's shadow, those symbols of the dignity and hope of mankind stood waiting, monuments to truth. The accumulated treasure of hundreds of years, Dresden spoke eloquently of those things excellent in European civilization wherein our debt lies deep.

I was a prisoner, hungry, dirty and full of hate for our captors, but I loved that city and saw the blessed wonder of her past and the rich promise of her future.

In February 1945, American bombers reduced this treasure to crushed stone and embers; disemboweled her with high explosives and cremated her with incendiaries.

The atom bomb may represent a fabulous advance, but it is interesting to note that primitive TNT and thermite managed to exterminate in one bloody night more people than died in the whole London blitz. Fortress Dresden fired a dozen shots at our airmen. Once back at their bases and sipping hot coffee, they probably remarked: "Flak unusually light tonight. Well, guess it's time to turn in." Captured British pilots from tactical fighter units (covering frontline troops) used to chide those who had flown heavy bombers on city raids with: "How on earth did you stand the stink of boiling urine and burning perambulators?"

A perfectly routine piece of news: "Last night our planes attacked Dresden. All planes returned safely." The only good German is a dead one: over 100,000 evil men, women, and children (the able-bodied were at the fronts) forever purged of their sins against humanity. By chance, I met a bombardier who had taken part in the attack. "We hated to do it," he told me.

The night they came over, we spent in an underground meat locker in a slaughterhouse. We were lucky, for it was the best shelter in town. Giants stalked the earth above us. First came the soft murmur of their dancing on the outskirts, then the grumbling of their

plodding towards us, and finally the ear-splitting crashes of their heels upon us – and thence to the outskirts again. Back and forth they swept: saturation bombing.

"I screamed and I wept and I clawed the walls of our shelter," an old lady told me. "I prayed to God to 'please, please, please, dear God, stop them'. But he didn't hear me. No power could stop them. On they came, wave after wave. There was no way we could surrender; no way to tell them we couldn't stand it any more. There was nothing anyone could do but sit and wait for morning." Her daughter and grandson were killed.

Our little prison was burnt to the ground. We were to be evacuated to an outlying camp occupied by South African prisoners. Our guards were a melancholy lot, aged Volkssturmers and disabled veterans. Most of them were Dresden residents and had friends and families somewhere in the holocaust. A corporal, who had lost an eye after two years on the Russian front, ascertained before we marched that his wife, his two children and both of his parents had been killed. He had one cigarette. He shared it with me.

Our march to new quarters took us to the city's edge. It was impossible to believe that anyone had survived in its heart. Ordinarily, the day would have been cold, but occasional gusts from the colossal inferno made us sweat. And ordinarily, the day would have been clear and bright, but an opaque and towering cloud turned noon to twilight.

A grim procession clogged the outbound highways; people with blackened faces streaked with tears, some bearing wounded, some bearing dead. They gathered in the fields. No one spoke. A few with Red Cross armbands did what they could for the casualties.

Settled with the South Africans, we enjoyed a week without work. At the end of it, communications were reestablished with higher headquarters and we were ordered to hike seven miles to the area hardest hit.

Nothing in the district had escaped the fury. A city of jagged building shells, of splintered statuary and shattered trees; every vehicle stopped, gnarled and burnt, left to rust or rot in the path of the frenzied might. The only sounds other than our own were those of falling plaster and their echoes.

I cannot describe the desolation properly, but I can give an idea of how it made us feel, in the words of a delirious British soldier in a makeshift POW hospital: "It's frightenin', I tell you. I would walk down one of them bloody streets and feel a thousand eyes on the back of me 'ead. I would 'ear 'em whisperin' behind me. I would turn around to look at 'em and there wouldn't be a bloomin' soul in sight. You can feel 'em and you can 'ear 'em but there's never anybody there." We knew what he said was so.

For "salvage" work, we were divided into small crews, each under a guard. Our ghoulish mission was to search for bodies. It was rich hunting that day and the many thereafter. We started on a small scale – here a leg, there an arm, and an occasional baby – but struck a mother lode before noon.

We cut our way through a basement wall to discover a reeking hash of over 100 human beings. Flame must have swept through before the building's collapse sealed the exits, because the flesh of those within resembled the texture of prunes. Our job, it was explained, was to wade into the shambles and bring forth the remains. Encouraged by

cuffing and guttural abuse, wade in we did. We did exactly that, for the floor was covered with an unsavory broth from burst water mains and viscera.

A number of victims, not killed outright, had attempted to escape through a narrow emergency exit. At any rate, there were several bodies packed tightly into the passageway. Their leader had made it halfway up the steps before he was buried up to his neck in falling brick and plaster. He was about 15, I think.

It is with some regret that I here besmirch the nobility of our airmen, but, boys, you killed an appalling lot of women and children. The shelter I have described and innumerable others like it were filled with them. We had to exhume their bodies and carry them to mass funeral pyres in the parks, so I know.

The funeral pyre technique was abandoned when it became apparent how great was the toll. There was not enough labor to do it nicely, so a man with a flamethrower was sent down instead, and he cremated them where they lay. Burnt alive, suffocated, crushed – men, women, and children indiscriminately killed.

For all the sublimity of the cause for which we fought, we surely created a Belsen of our own. The method was impersonal, but the result was equally cruel and heartless. That, I am afraid, is a sickening truth.

When we had become used to the darkness, the odor and the carnage, we began musing as to what each of the corpses had been in life. It was a sordid game: "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief . . ." Some had fat purses and jewelery, others had precious foodstuffs. A boy had his dog still leashed to him.

Renegade Ukrainians in German uniform were in charge of our operations in the shelters proper. They were roaring drunk from adjacent wine cellars and seemed to enjoy their job hugely. It was a profitable one, for they stripped each body of valuables before we carried it to the street. Death became so commonplace that we could joke about our dismal burdens and cast them about like so much garbage.

Not so with the first of them, especially the young: we had lifted them on to the stretchers with care, laying them out with some semblance of funeral dignity in their last resting place before the pyre. But our awed and sorrowful propriety gave way, as I said, to rank callousness. At the end of a grisly day, we would smoke and survey the impressive heap of dead accumulated. One of us flipped his cigarette butt into the pile: "Hell's bells," he said, "I'm ready for Death any time he wants to come after me."

A few days after the raid, the sirens screamed again. The listless and heartsick survivors were showered this time with leaflets. I lost my copy of the epic, but remember that it ran something like this: "To the people of Dresden: we were forced to bomb your city because of the heavy military traffic your railroad facilities have been carrying. We realize that we haven't always hit our objectives. Destruction of anything other than military objectives was unintentional, unavoidable fortunes of war."

That explained the slaughter to everyone's satisfaction, I am sure, but it aroused no little contempt. It is a fact that 48 hours after the last B-17 had droned west for a well-earned rest, labor battalions had swarmed over the damaged rail yards and restored them to nearly normal service. None of the rail bridges over the Elbe was knocked out of

commission. Bomb-sight manufacturers should blush to know that their marvelous devices laid bombs down as much as three miles wide of what the military claimed to be aiming for.

The leaflet should have said: "We hit every blessed church, hospital, school, museum, theatre, your university, the zoo, and every apartment building in town, but we honestly weren't trying hard to do it. C'est la guerre. So sorry. Besides, saturation bombing is all the rage these days, you know."

There was tactical significance: stop the railroads. An excellent manoeuvre, no doubt, but the technique was horrible. The planes started kicking high explosives and incendiaries through their bomb-bays at the city limits, and for all the pattern their hits presented, they must have been briefed by a Ouija board.

Tabulate the loss against the gain. Over 100,000 noncombatants and a magnificent city destroyed by bombs dropped wide of the stated objectives: the railroads were knocked out for roughly two days. The Germans counted it the greatest loss of life suffered in any single raid. The death of Dresden was a bitter tragedy, needlessly and willfully executed. The killing of children – "Jerry" children or "Jap" children, or whatever enemies the future may hold for us – can never be justified.

The facile reply to great groans such as mine is the most hateful of all clichés, "fortunes of war", and another: "They asked for it. All they understand is force."

Who asked for it? The only thing who understands is force? Believe me, it is not easy to rationalize the stamping out of vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored when gathering up babies in bushel baskets or helping a man dig where he thinks his wife may be buried.

Certainly, enemy military and industrial installations should have been blown flat, and woe unto those foolish enough to seek shelter near them. But the "Get Tough America" policy, the spirit of revenge, the approbation of all destruction and killing, have earned us a name for obscene brutality.

Our leaders had a carte blanche as to what they might or might not destroy. Their mission was to win the war as quickly as possible; and while they were admirably trained to do just that, their decisions on the fate of certain priceless world heirlooms – in one case, Dresden – were not always judicious. When, late in the war, with the Wehrmacht breaking up on all fronts, our planes were sent to destroy this last major city, I doubt if the question was asked: "How will this tragedy benefit us, and how will that benefit compare with the ill-effects in the long run?"

Dresden, a beautiful city, built in the art spirit, symbol of an admirable heritage, so anti-Nazi that Hitler visited it but twice during his whole reign, food and hospital centre so bitterly needed now – ploughed under and salt strewn in the furrows.

There can be no doubt that the allies fought on the side of right and the Germans and Japanese on the side of wrong. World war two was fought for near-holy motives. But I stand convinced that the brand of justice in which we dealt, wholesale bombings of civilian populations, was blasphemous. That the enemy did it first has nothing to do with the moral problem. What I saw of our air war, as the European conflict neared an end,

had the earmarks of being an irrational war for war's sake. Soft citizens of the American democracy had learnt to kick a man below the belt and make the bastard scream.

The occupying Russians, when they discovered that we were Americans, embraced us and congratulated us on the complete desolation our planes had wrought. We accepted their congratulations with good grace and proper modesty, but I felt then as I feel now, that I would have given my life to save Dresden for the world's generations to come. That is how everyone should feel about every city on earth.

Extracted from Armageddon in Retrospect by Kurt Vonnegut, with an introduction by Mark Vonnegut, is published by Jonathan Cape at £16.99. Copies can be ordered for £15.29, including postage, from The Sunday Times BooksFirst on 0870 165 8585

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After the Second World War ended, I met Kurt Vonnegut face to face only twice. The first time was in August, 1945, when I went out to Indianapolis to visit friends I had met while serving at Camp Atterbury the preceding year. I remembered that Kurt came originally from Indianapolis, to I looked up his parent's phone number and called. He answered the telephone, remembered me from Dresden, and came over that evening for a four-hour chat, 8 p.m. till midnight.

My second encounter with Kurt took place in 1997 when he gave a talk at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio. I went with my wife and a fellow POW from Dresden, and after Kurt's talk, we had a short five-minute conversation during which he autographed his newest book "Time Quake." I was never part of Kurt's inner circle of friends, but I have followed his career with deep interest.

Dorac Banta was another member of my pledge class in the fall semester of 1942. We were initiated into the Xi chapter of Theta Delta Chi the same day in November, '42. After the war both of us transferred to Cornell where we both affiliated with Beta Charge. Dorac told me after the war that he had served in the Eighth Air Force and had dropped bombs on Dresden when I was on the ground to receive these. Later I met others who had also served in the Air Force and had participated in the bombing of Dresden, but Dorac was the first to share that news with me.

I have been blessed by a wonderful life, and, now in my 80's, I can look back on it with gratitude and appreciation for all who have helped and guided me. My brother, Bob Doxsee, still lives in Nassau County (in Point Lookout, near Jones Beach) where I spent my summers as a boy, living in Freeport most of the year.

Thanks again for writing.
Gifford B. Doxsee