

Accounting for Death in War: Past, Present and Future

Professor Michael Spagat

Department of Economics

Royal Holloway, University of London

m.spagat@rhul.ac.uk

Talk given at Birkbeck College for the event:

Conflict Reporting in the 21st Century

February 8, 2020

The Vietnam War Memorial lists names of fallen ***US service personnel***



We have a strong impulse to memorialize our war dead.

Humans have a long, albeit, spotty history of making such lists.

Although the overwhelming majority of war dead over the centuries have perished without a lasting record, we can trace the roots of casualty recording at least back to the ancient world

The Marathon Stone

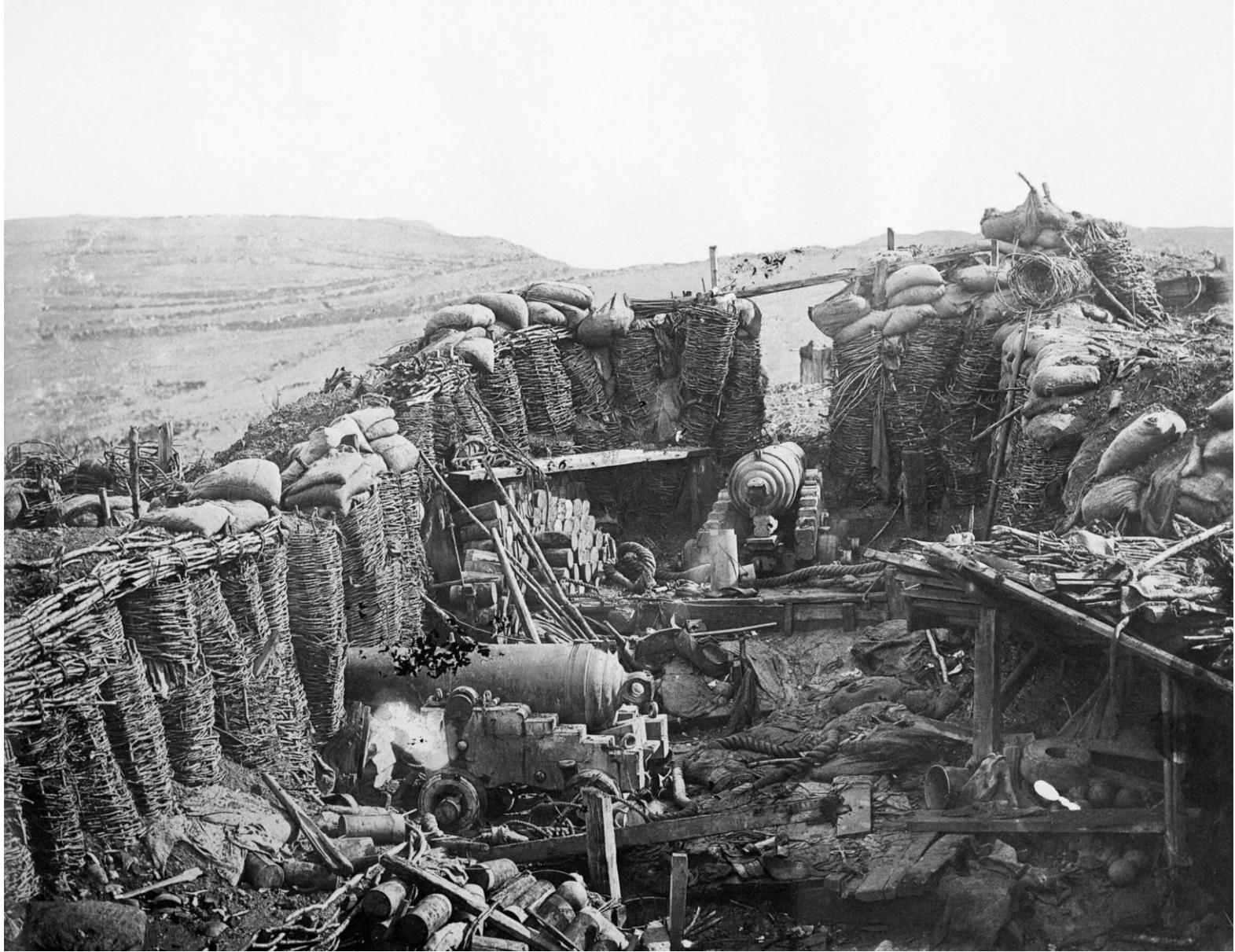


Names of ***Athenian soldiers*** killed in the Battle of Marathon

The above two lists cover just home-country **military personnel** - the mid-19th century seems to mark a turning point for this type of casualty recording.

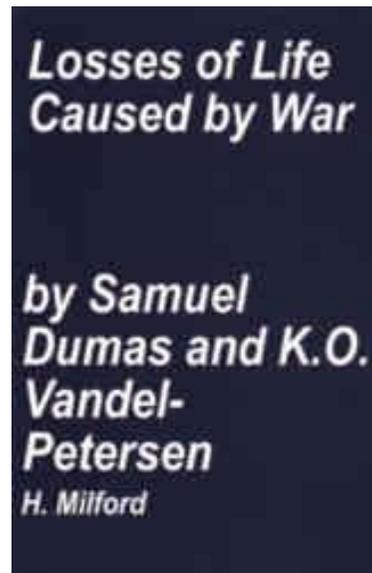
In particular, there were massive efforts to record deaths of British and US *military personnel* in both the [Crimean War](#) (slide 5) and the [US Civil War](#) (slide 6).

This development occurred simultaneously with the emergence of war photography which is a complementary technology of documentation.





In 1923, the newish Carnegie Endowment for International Peace released a landmark study that attempted to ***estimate*** both military ***and civilian*** losses in a bunch of wars.



This book's primary achievement was to ***signal that all human losses in war matter***, (although some of the specific estimates and methods presented in the book are also of interest).

Let's pause briefly to consider three related but fundamentally [distinct concepts](#) that are routinely confused both by professionals and by the media: **documentation, counting and estimation.**

For greater depth on these concepts I recommend taking my open online course entitled "[Accounting for Death in War: Separating Fact from Fiction](#)" or reading [this paper](#) and/or this [short piece](#).

Documentation is case-by-case listing of either individual deaths, e.g., victims' names as was done on the Marathon Stone and/or the violent events in which people are killed, e.g., airstrikes in the work of [Airwars](#).

Counting is, literally counting as in 1, 2, 3,... - whenever you have a list of documented victims or events then you can count them up.

Estimation is using a statistical procedure to approximate, e.g., the total number of people killed in a war or the number of females killed within a certain time frame.

Just to make sure we're all on the same page imagine that we use a public opinion survey to estimate that Donald Trump has an approval rating of X%.

This is an *estimate* procedure that is very different from attempting to list the names of all people who approve of Trump (*documentation*) and *counting* up their number.

The Carnegie book of Dumas and Vandel-Petersen made **estimates** that included both **civilians and combatants**.

Later came efforts at case-by-case documentation of the deaths of both civilians and combatants.

A particularly stellar documentation project is [Kosovo Memory Book](#), a [virtually comprehensive](#) listing of deaths in the war in Kosovo.

The War in Kosovo – 1998-1999



The picture on the previous slide renders obvious an important point about war-death documentation.

Although people do want to know about estimates and counts of people killed, they are interested in more than just these numbers.

People want to remember individual victims and the circumstances of their deaths.

Don't forget this picture



The NGO [Every Casualty Worldwide](#) (ECW) (for which I'm a Board member) is dedicated specifically to fulfilling this need for memorialization of war death – there is a campaign:

“The Every Casualty Campaign calls on states, in partnership with other actors, to recognise every casualty of armed violence by ensuring that all casualties are

- **promptly recorded**
- **correctly identified and**
- **publicly acknowledged”**

And ECW also supports work on the documentation of war deaths, a practice we refer to as “**casualty recording**”.

There is a Casualty Recorders Network of organizations from all over the world who do casualty recording.

The main fruit of this network so far was the creation of Standards for Casualty Recording which are agreed principles that are rooted in the practical experience of many casualty recording organizations.

Here's a highlight reel of quotes from the Standards.

“Casualty recorders must make information about their methodology transparent and publicly accessible.”

“Casualty recorders must be inclusive in their recording”

“All data entries should remain open so as to incorporate any new information.”

The Standards are relevant both for practicing casualty recorders and for groups that want to start new casualty recording projects.

But they don't provide an off-the-shelf template or software package for casualty recorders to follow – such a thing does not exist at present.

Still, by all means contact me if you're thinking of starting a new casualty recording project – I'll do what I can including linking you up with help within ECW and the Casualty Recorders Network.

A more relevant issue for most of you is that you will encounter war-death numbers in the course of your work – so you need to become a sophisticated consumer of these numbers.

This need is especially acute because many widely cited war death numbers are unreliable, including figures for the [Iraq](#), [Peru](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#).

The reliability and unreliability of war-death numbers is the main theme of [my blog](#), which includes numerous posts on the faulty estimates just mentioned: [Iraq](#), [Peru](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#).

There is also some pretty poor casualty recording, e.g., [widely cited figures](#) put out by [ACLED](#) on the war in Yemen are marred by their practice of just pencilling in 10 deaths in the large number of events for which they don't know the actual number of deaths.

Some final advice:

Bone up on the issues, using some of the links contained in this presentation.

But also trust and use your on-the-ground experience – there's no substitute for specific knowledge of real conflicts

When in doubt don't hesitate to email your questions to me – I'm always ready to help as best I can (m.spagat@rhul.ac.uk).

**THANKS
FOR
LISTENING**