

James Jones:

The Evolution of a Soldier and a Writer

*Presentation at the 2004 Illinois Authors Book Fair
Springfield, IL
March 27, 2004*

By Ray Elliott

In the last section of James Jones' 1975 book, "WWII," a nonfiction, soldier's view of the war, he wrote about the end of the war and the transformation that takes place in those who fight our wars; a process he called "the evolution (and de-evolution) of a soldier. In the last two paragraphs, he wrote:

"How many times they had heard the old, long-drawn-out, faint command pass down the long length of vast parade grounds, fading, as the guidons moved out front.

"So slowly it faded, leaving behind it a whole generation of men who would walk into history looking backwards, with their backs to the sun, peering forever over their shoulders behind them, at their own lengthening shadows trailing across the earth. None of them would ever really get over it."

Jones himself certainly never got over the war. Yet he was able to write about it in a way that was uniquely frank, real and from the point of view of the ordinary enlisted man he had been, leaving a body of work on World War II that is unparalleled. Even before leaving the Army in 1944, he was writing about war and his own experiences in letters to his brother Jeff and in college class essays while he was still in Hawaii and stationed at Schofield Barracks; and he was thinking about life as a writer.

He wrote about how Henry Fleming, the young Civil War soldier in Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage," was handling his first combat experience, comparing how Fleming responded to his own experience during the attack on Pearl Harbor. And it was at the post library reading Thomas Wolfe that he later wrote that it was then that he knew he had, "been a writer all along without having realized it."

James Ramon Jones was an Illinois boy, born into a well-to-do family in Robinson in 1921. His father was a dentist who lost much of his practice and social and economic standing during the Great Depression and drank heavily. He committed suicide while Jones was in the Army. His mother had died of congestive heart failure a year earlier, the same heart problem that caused Jones' death in 1977 when he was only 56 years old.

Not much in his early life indicated Jones would become an internationally famous writer. He was a loner who liked to read but didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. After he graduated from high school in 1939, Jones enlisted in the regular Army because, like a lot of young men of the time, he had few other options. So he spent the next five years soldiering and, essentially, preparing for his life as a writer.

Frank Marshall, a member of Jones' company at Schofield Barracks upon whom the character Friday is based in "From Here to Eternity," says it was in those days when Jones would sit at a desk in the orderly room and type away at some piece of writing under a sign that read: "Quiet. Genius at work."

The "genius" would soon have the material dumped in his lap that would make it possible for him to become the only person who witnessed the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor to go on to write about it and become a well-known novelist because of it.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, it was a typical Sunday morning for the soldiers stationed at Schofield: a Sunday morning after a night of hard drinking, fighting and making the rounds of the whorehouses—a routine weekend for soldiers. Some men were eating morning chow when a blast rocked the mess hall in a scene that later showed up in "From Here to Eternity":

"He stopped in the doorway of the KP room and looked back at the mess hall. " (This is Sgt. Warden talking, or Burt Lancaster for those who might know the movie.) "He remembered the picture the rest of his life. It had become very quiet and everybody had stopped eating and looked up at each other.

"'Must be doin' some dynamitin' down to Wheeler Field,' somebody said tentatively. ...

"'This is it,' somebody said quite simply. ..."

"Warden found his eyes and Stark's were looking into each other. There was nothing on Stark's face, except the slack relaxed peaceful look of drunkenness, and Warden felt there must not be anything on his either. He pulled his mouth up and showed his teeth in a grin, and Stark's face pulled his mouth in an identical grin...

"Down the street over the trees a big column of black smoke was mushrooming up into the sky. The men behind were crowding out the door. ..."

Now the evolution of a soldier begins in earnest. Jones' eyes were good, his mind clear. You really start to feel the power of his writing. And for most of the next 150 pages of "From Here To Eternity," you see how the Japanese attack must have looked to those who were there. You see the grinning, waving Japanese pilot - that Jones actually saw - strafing the barracks, the beginning of a war and the birth of new era for the United

States - just as clearly as you see the excitement of Warden and Stark about the prospect of going to war, like young men about to have their first sexual experience.

"From Here to Eternity" may not be Jones' best-crafted book, as he maintained it wasn't, but there's little doubt that it's one of the best eyewitness accounts of the peacetime, pre-World War II American Army on the brink of being thrust into the war, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the resulting uncertainty of the future for people everywhere that you're ever likely to read.

In that respect, it is Jones at his best. And he won the National Book Award for it in 1952.

That Sunday morning in December 1941 changed many people's lives forever; and it and the war that followed gave James Jones the barrage of raw material from which he drew upon in his writing right up until his death when he was four chapters short of completing "Whistle," the last novel in his noted World War II trilogy that included "From Here to Eternity" and "The Thin Red Line" and which he started when he came home from the war.

He dictated those last chapters of "Whistle" into a tape recorder from his hospital bed for his trusted friend, writer Willie Morris, to finish. Jones was turning out words until two days before he died with the urgency of an old soldier cranking out rounds to turn back a frontal assault.

So in a sense, Jones went to war on Dec. 7, 1941, and stayed there, like many other combat veterans, until his death on May 9, 1977. Willie Morris wrote the chapters in summary form from Jones' dictation, and the novel was published posthumously in 1978 - the last step of a mission started more than 30 years earlier.

When Jones got out of the Army in 1944, he returned home to Illinois and began working with his writing mentor and patron Lowney Handy - a remarkable and complex character in her own right who, together with Jones and her husband Harry, later started the Handy Writers Colony in Marshall. (After operating unofficially since Jones came home from the Army and met Handy, the colony was officially in operation in Marshall from just after "From Here to Eternity" was published in 1951 until Handy's death in the early '60s. Several novels were published from colony writers and several books and articles have been written about the colony and Handy's methods of teaching creative writing.)

Jones wrote an-unpublished novel called "They Shall Inherit the Laughter" under Handy's early tutelage and sent it off to New York. Legendary Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins liked the writing but steered Jones, instead, to write about the peacetime Army in Hawaii and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Handy shepherded the writing of the manuscript in Robinson and several other spots around the country supported Jones and picked up other writers with whom to work. Long before Jones finished the manuscript for "From Here to Eternity," he said he realized that he should write a trilogy to cover the ground he wanted to.

He said: "I was going to go from Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal up through New Georgia and back to the hospital in Memphis - mainly the path I had taken - and finally realized that it would take three books to accomplish that."

In addition to the three books that comprise the trilogy, he also managed to write, among other non-war-related works, a short novella ("The Pistol"), the nonfiction "WWII" and numerous short stories and articles. And he worked as a consultant and dialogue writer on the movie of "The Longest Day," Cornelius Ryan's account of the 1944 allied invasion of Normandy.

Not as well received by the critics, but no less significant, Jones wrote, too, about the soldier's return to a changed world at home that he no longer understood or accepted in "Some Came Running," which was set in southeastern Illinois and western Indiana. And near the end of his life, he went back for one last look at war and its aftermath on a 1973 trip to Vietnam that resulted in "Viet Journal."

So, let's take a closer look at how Jones made his mark as a war novelist.

In "From Here to Eternity," starting out in pre-war Hawaii, Jones introduces the universal soldier and begins the process of his evolution. The concept of this evolution was not necessarily clear-cut for Jones initially, but developed over time. When he explained it in "WWII," he wrote: "I think that when all the nationalistic or ideological propaganda and patriotic slogans are put aside, all the straining to convince a soldier that he is dying FOR something, it is the individual soldier's final full acceptance of the fact that his name is already written down in the rolls of the already dead. ... Only then can he function as he ought to function, under fire."

That evolution is revealed, and Jones himself is revealed, in Prewitt, the rebel bugler, boxer and straight-duty soldier who loves the Army but hates the system that takes away his individualism and honor. He's in Warden, the cynical, hard-nosed first sergeant who dislikes officers and runs the company, taking care of his enlisted men without seeming to care for them. He's in Stark, the mess sergeant who feeds the troops well and runs the mess hall without interference from anyone, including Warden. Regular Army men, hard drinkers all. And men who are obviously based on real soldiers. But Jones also speaks through these characters, and thus for all soldiers.

And as the rugged individualist, Jones broke the language barrier in literature with "From Here to Eternity" when it was published in 1951. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" was

published later that year and contained the controversial word. In his big 1948 World War II novel, "The Naked and the Dead," Norman Mailer had been forced to use "fugg" for the four-letter word that is used liberally in Jones' realistic rendering of Army life. Mailer, Henry Miller, Ernest Hemingway and a host of other fiction writers had wanted to include such language in their books published in the mainstream press and had been unable to do so.

Jones' writing, then, reflected a realistic, credible picture of the attack on Pearl Harbor and of the peacetime Army, with its adventurers, bums and drifters - many escaping the Depression - and its Regular Army non-commissioned officers and officers waiting for a war to earn their promotions. The harsh language and raw descriptions infused his work with authenticity.

He found his literary voice in "From Here to Eternity," which became a blockbuster literary success that gave him the audience he needed to continue to write about the war and the Army for the rest of his life. And it enabled him to be ranked up there with the very best among war novelists when one looks for the literature of World War II.

The late Willie Morris wrote of his friend in "James Jones: A Friendship": "It is a compelling thought to ponder that this boy from Robinson, Illinois, from all the countries, is the one person to have given us this stunning corpus of work which will be read and remembered and reread 500 years from now."

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jones helped set up island defenses for the Japanese invasion that never came. It was from these days, too, that Jones found material not only for "From Here to Eternity" but also for his novella, "The Pistol," which focused on a .45 caliber pistol a young soldier was carrying on duty on the morning of the Japanese attack and shows the significance a soldier placed on having one in wartime. The soldier knew the pistol wasn't much use against airplanes but felt safer having it in the holster on his hip.

Jones himself had come across a pistol during this time and knew the feeling. And the writing style of the two works is of interest. "From Here to Eternity" is written more in the style of Thomas Wolfe, with lengthy sentences and long descriptive paragraphs - a big novel divided into five books. "The Pistol," on the other hand, is written in a more sparse, terse style that's reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway, another writer whom Jones had studied and admired.

From the defense of Hawaii, his outfit, the 25th Infantry Division, was rumored to be headed towards Australia but ended up on Guadalcanal in November 1942 as part of the Army deployment to relieve the Marines who had landed on the beaches in early August. As Jones wrote in "WWII," the Marines who had been there since the landing and had

fought the constantly reinforced Japanese to a standstill were, "dead beat, ill and tired, decimated by wounds and tropical diseases, but evolved into soldiers at last."

He also wrote that nobody looking at his outfit going ashore that day and staring in awe at what he described as "hollow-eyed, vacant-faced, mean-looking 1st Marines could have believed that in three months from that day that we would be known as the famed 25th Infantry Tropic Lightning." The division took part in, Jones continued, "the final offensive on Guadalcanal, chased the Japanese to Tassafaronga in the whirlwind windup that gave us our name, and began to move up to New Georgia for the next fight of their campaign."

"The Thin Red Line," the second book in the trilogy is Jones' account of Guadalcanal and is often mentioned as one of the best novels ever written about combat. Published 17 years after the end of the war, the soldier's attitude about war that Jones captured so well in "From Here to Eternity," has matured slightly from the earlier excited and somewhat adolescent view of war.

He claimed all his books were actually antiwar in scope, and it's not without a touch of irony that he dedicates "The Thin Red Line": "To those greatest and most heroic of all human endeavors, WAR and WARFARE; may they never cease to give us the pleasure, excitement and adrenal stimulation that we need, or provide us with the heroes, the presidents and leaders, the monuments and museums which we erect to them in the name of PEACE."

On Guadalcanal, Jones wrestled with the agony of war and his own feelings of fear in combat, as did the rest of the men. "I was scared shitless just about all the time," he wrote in "WWII." And he became decidedly more antiwar after he killed a charging, half-starved Japanese soldier or he killed himself. Afterwards, he no longer wanted to fight and used the incident in "The Thin Red Line" but never mentioned it in any of his nonfiction work.

Sometime later and still fighting, though, he was slightly wounded, returned to finish the campaign, and then was shipped out because of an ankle injury. He said the thing he was most proud of after he was wounded was that he remembered to remove his canteen and toss it to another man in the company.

In "The Thin Red Line," Jones again becomes the universal soldier and writes omnisciently from an infantryman's point of view. This time the honor of the individual isn't what's at stake. Honor doesn't keep people alive. Survival does. The glory of war soon vanishes as Jones shows the collective behavior of a cross-section of American men forced into a situation where they have no choice except to fight. You see man at his lowest, most base level, taking the final step in the evolution of a soldier.

Jones himself had a difficult time in taking that final step. In "WWII" he writes about drinking at a bar on Waikiki in May of '42 with three sailors from the Yorktown, fresh from the battle of the Coral Sea where the carrier Lexington had been lost, and heard them matter-of-factly tell about the battle there and the damage to the Yorktown. And they were drinking themselves into a stupor because, as one of them said, "they might not get another chance."

"More than anything in the world, I wanted to be like them," Jones wrote, but said he saw in "their sun-blackened faces and hollow haunting eyes, they were men who had already passed on into a realm I had never seen, and didn't particularly want to see."

The Yorktown was sunk at Midway a few days later.

Jones later wrote his brother Jeff from Guadalcanal that "some of us will live thru it, but that doesn't help one guy any, because if he doesn't live thru it, what happens to the rest doesn't make any difference. I've sort of got a hunch that I'm not going to make it."

Afterwards he wrote, "I simply did not want to die and not be remembered for it. Or not remembered at all."

Although Prewitt is killed in "From Here to Eternity," Jones resurrects him as Whitt in "The Thin Red Line" and justifies changing the names of many of the other characters. While this seems a bit strange because they seem to be the same men, it works because the characters change with what has happened to them and what they have endured in the war.

So Warden, the top sergeant in "From Here to Eternity," is now Welch on Guadalcanal. While Warden seems eager to go to war at the time of Pearl Harbor when he gleefully goes up to the barracks roof to shoot at Japanese fighter planes, Welch isn't quite so eager to fight, even though he's still cynical and hard-nosed and takes care of his men.

"The way Welch chose to see it," Jones wrote in "The Thin Red Line, "he had beaten the Depression in his country, and now today, November 10, 1942, he was preparing to pay for it." Welch believes that war is for one thing: property. With which he wants nothing to do. He seems almost content to survive with his canteens full of gin. He volunteers for nothing, does his job and nothing more—exactly what Jones later said he did himself.

Only Whitt seems to be unconcerned about survival. Still the rebel, he has been transferred to another company as a troublemaker. He rejoins the old company to fight when he pleases and according to whether he's under the command of someone he respects. The soldier's soldier, Whitt swears he'll never return to the company after a tactical error causes all but two of a squad-sized patrol he is on to be killed. Shortly

before the company leaves for New Georgia, however, Whitt returns. His loyalty is with the company. And the evolution of the soldier goes on.

Jones' understanding of the emotions of men in combat and his knowledge of military tactics are impressive. As the reader, you participate vicariously in the strategies and battles for each hill. You feel with the men, for the men. And you know that Jones is articulating what thousands of combat veterans must know but slowly forget as the years pass, and they begin to lose some of the feeling of what it was like—the de-evolution of the soldier.

Perhaps that's partly why Jones writes at the end of the novel as the survivors of C-for Charlie leave the island for the New Georgia campaign: "One day one of their number would write a book about all this, but none of them would believe it, because none of them would remember it that way."

But they all knew about the evolution of the soldier. Even the old cigar-stomping doctor who treats Fife for the same type of head wound Jones actually received on Guadalcanal had evolved into a soldier. Fife wants to be evacuated, even though the wound isn't serious, and Jones writes of the doctor: "Quite suddenly his smile disappeared from around the cigar butt in it. His eyes got flatter, as if some veil had fallen over them. . . .

... "Old Doc Haines stared back at him obdurately now. 'I don't make the rules, son,' he said. 'I just try to live by them.'"

Fife goes back. He has no choice and is assigned to a platoon leading an attack. This time he learns that he, too, can kill. Death becomes routine, part of the brutality of war. Jones shows up close what combat is like. He feels fear and hope with the men, compassion for them.

Combat doesn't deal a very good hand to play, and Jones leaves no illusion that it does. Even for the survivors. That's particularly true in "Whistle," the last book in the trilogy, where the de-evolution of the soldier begins in earnest. Now back home, the characters think much differently than they did in the first two books of the trilogy – and it was written more than 30 years after the end of the war. Shortly after the hospital ship arrives in San Francisco, Winch (the top sergeant much like those from the first two novels) goes on liberty and gets drunk.

Walking through an area where "all the old duffers (were) on their soapboxes, droning out their worn-out, ancient, old-fashioned political speeches," Winch gives one of them a \$5 bill to borrow the soapbox.

And Jones writes: "The concept for (what he was going to say) was one he had had quite a while. It had occurred to him first on Guadalcanal last year, lying up under a mortar

barrage. He had developed and expanded it later, playing with it at times when he sat alone drinking, or watched from a ridge with the company commander as their overheated mud-breathing platoons tried to advance. He had summarized the whole concept in the slogan he worked out for it, 'Soldiers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your guns.' That was what he began to shout from the soapbox.

"A crowd of amused servicemen formed fairly quickly. At first, they were laughing, and cheering him on, but some began to get disturbed as he went on. 'Hey, you,' he singled out a private. 'What are you making a month? Thirty-eight bucks, right? What do you think you'd be making if we organized, huh? No, don't laugh. Think about it. What couldn't we do, if we were organized? Every country needs us, right? Everybody else has unions, why not us? Jap soldiers, German soldiers, English soldiers, U.S. soldiers. Russians, French, Australians. All united. We'd corner the market. Hell, we could take the explosive charges out of mortar shells and artillery! Put white flour in them instead! How would that be?' A couple of derogatory whistles came from the back of the crowd. 'You don't like that? Why not? No more casualties!' Winch bellowed in his command voice. 'You simply walk to the rear. We could have arbitration committees to decide where the battles would be held.' He spread his arms. 'No more jungles, right? Who'd pick a jungle?'"

A mad man speaking, perhaps. But a man trying to make sense out of his combat experience in a war that he knows will soon be over, the warring countries friendly again and the soldiers left to fend for themselves. He says he's more like "a Jap or a German first sergeant" than he is like a civilian. Which is the problem seen in each of the men coming back with him. Four of the old company go to a Tennessee Army hospital after being evacuated from New Georgia. All have "the peculiar numbness of soul that combat caused in everybody."

Only Winch, the 1st Sgt., isn't wounded. He has fever, hypertension and congestive heart failure. He quits his hard drinking, but he still has his men to take care of, in spite of his condition. Prell (evolved from Prewitt and Whitt in the first two novels) had been awarded the Medal of Honor but had taken .50 caliber machine gun bullets in his thighs and is fighting to save his legs. Strange has an injured hand. Landers has a smashed ankle.

All are faced with the problem of adjusting to a new life where the enemy is now a changed society, torn apart by war but benefiting by good economic times. And there are no indoctrination centers to help these men assimilate into that society as there were when they entered the Army and began preparing for their evolution as soldiers. Jones shows the agonies and frustrations each of these men has as he copes with his own pain and depression from his combat experience and wounds and the shock of the world around him. Before losing his sanity and ending up in the hospital prison ward, Winch does what he can for each of them, even though they all hate him and he knows it.

None of the others make it, either. Strange finds his wife in love with an officer who did things to her sexually that Strange had never done, that he found perverted. Taking the \$7,000 he and his wife were going to use to open a restaurant after the war, he throws it away on a hotel suite, booze and women for his old company. On the way to Europe after being returned to duty, he commits suicide by jumping over the side of the ship.

Landers gets the discharge he thinks he wants. With it in his hand, he walks into the path of an oncoming car rather than face civilian life. Prell conquers his last battle when a soldier hits him in the head with the big end of a pool cue.

Not a very pretty picture of how war and warfare affect the fighting man. But Jones paints a realistic picture that is crystal clear.

"Some Came Running" is Jones' post-war novel that brought the soldier home and showed how the war and the changes at home affected everyone. Both "Some Came Running" and "From Here to Eternity" were made into movies. The latter was recently named by the American Film Institute as among the top 100 films of the 20th century, and the novel was named as one of the top books of the century by The Modern Library Board. "The Thin Red Line" was made into a movie during the early years of the Vietnam War, and director Terrence Malick wrote and directed a second version in 1997. Plans are underway for "Whistle" to be filmed.

James Jones gained fame and notoriety for his war-era novels and with the world climate being what it is, there's a resurgence of interest in what he has to say about the effects of war. He was a regular enlisted infantryman from Middle America who was able to articulate a lot of the fears, frustration and heroism common to combat soldiers and a great many other American servicemen and women. He was one who looked backwards for a long time and left much to ponder about regarding war and warfare. As one D-Day veteran from near Jones' hometown once told me: "That old boy knows what he's talking about. You could tell he's been there."

As an author from a town not far from Robinson, I was greatly influenced by Jones and his realistic writing style. But it was the concept of the de-evolution of the soldier, the process of readjustment to civilian life after a soldier has been in an environment where he has come to the point where he "accepted that his name is already written down in the roles of the already dead" that intrigues me and is what I have focused on in my own writing.

My book, "Wild Hands Toward the Sky," depicts some of the difficulty veterans have in returning to life in a small Midwestern farm town after the war and is told from the point of view of a boy whose Marine father was killed on Guadalcanal before the boy can remember – and who wants to be just like his father and the other combat veterans in the community.

The military does a thorough job of making its warriors and getting them to do what is asked of them, but it does very little to "unmake" them when war is over. And as Jones showed, and as my book shows, these people are changed forever. "None of them would ever really get over it," he wrote. That's true of Jones' World War II; it was true of Crane's Civil War; and it was true of those in other wars through the years and those who are in Afghanistan, Iraq and other places today.

James Jones' literary legacy is to make us realize the true price paid by those who are sent to do the fighting in our wars. He did so with brutal honesty and with great respect and empathy for the ordinary soldier. His collective work provides valuable lessons for us all.