Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission.
Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is Pritzker Military Presents.
Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents with author James McGrath Morris discussing his book The Ambulance Drivers: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and a Friendship Made and Lost in War. I’m your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago and is sponsored by the United States World War One Centennial Commission. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. America’s contribution to an Allied victory in WWI cemented the United States as a world political and economic power. Yet the destruction and horrors of the world’s first modern war left the men and women who fought in the trenches and worked in the hospitals scarred and disillusioned for the rest of their lives. This lost generation defined America’s post-war consciousness for the next two decades. Two defining voices of this era, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, both drove ambulances during the First World War, and their experiences on the front deeply influenced their writing. But while Hemingway saw war as an opportunity for adventure and a cause worth fighting for, Dos Passos saw only oppression and futility. It was only when the two friends traveled to Spain during the Spanish Civil War that their divergent visions came to a head and their friendship devolved into a bitter public fight over war, its purpose, and its impact on humankind. James McGrath Morris is an author of biographies and narrative nonfiction including the New York Times best-selling Eye On the Struggle: Ethel Payne, The First Lady of the Black Press; Pulitzer: A Life in Politics Print and Power; and The Rose Man of Sing Sing: A True Tale of Life, Murder, and Redemption in the Age of Yellow Journalism. Morris previously worked as a journalist and high school teacher and has written extensively for newspapers and magazines. He earned his bachelor's degree from American University and his master's from George Washington University. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library James McGrath Morris.

(Appplause)

Morris: When the guns of august began firing for real in 1914 the world didn’t know quite what to make of it, much like we did when our American Civil War erupted. We thought, "This isn’t gonna last for long." If you look at letters from back then, people from England thought, "This isn’t gonna last for long." And of course, it didn’t. It continued to go on and on and on. But here in the United States, which had not entered the war, generation was coming of age looking across the Atlantic and seeing this kind of fighting that was going on, and it was fighting that no one had ever quite experienced before. I mean it was kind of an endless slaughter, and mechanization of death. And young people in the United States didn’t know what to make of it, but many of them, particularly the two I'm gonna talk about tonight, felt that this war was gonna be the defining event of their generation, much like, if you judge my age, for me the defining event of my generation would have been the Vietnam war. Much like it would have been for different generations. But since we hadn't entered the war, a lot of these young men weren’t sure how they would either witness it or participate in it. And of course we know some went to Canada to join early forces. But an unusual thing occurred in Europe. In Paris Americans decided to lend a hand, particularly to the French who were being wounded, by running trucks out to the front line. You could do so from Paris and return to the American hospital in the Bonneuil just outside of Paris, to provide medical assistance. And they ran every kind of vehicle they could find. And they began to organize and raise money in the states for these
ambulance corps. These were all volunteers, not part of any military force. And everybody got into the act, including, there's a wonderful poster you can find probably online of the American poets raising money to buy an ambulance. But this offered a unique opportunity because they needed ambulance drivers, so they began to recruit in the United States for drivers to come to Europe. And there's a wonderful book about ambulance drivers, and as I went through it as an author looking for a story to right, I discovered a remarkable set of accomplished Americans joined the ambulance corps--people like E.E. Cummings; Malcolm Cowley, who had become a famous American critic; Ray Kroc--we're talking about McDonalds. Even Walt Disney got into the act. And I thought, "Wow, this is the way of the path of success in the 20th century, rush off and join the ambulance corps." Of course, as any of you know research, I had it the other way around. There were certain requirements to joining the ambulance corps. One of which was that you needed to know how to drive a vehicle. Now think back to 1914. Who in the United States knew how to drive a vehicle? Would be people with money. They were the only ones who had access to cars. Secondly you would need money because this is a volunteer job, so you would need to have some means to get to Europe, some means to--even to buy the uniform you would be fitted with would require you to come out of your own paycheck. Third if you’re gonna go to France, speaking French might not be a bad idea. What I just described to you of course are kids at Harvard, Yale, all of these elite schools, and that's exactly the recruiting grounds of these ambulance drivers. So the men who got on the ships to go to Europe to serve as ambulance drivers were already destined in some sense for success. They were on third base at the start of their lives ready to come home with success, and so they're also very reflective group, a group that thought a lot about what they were doing and the world that they were entering into. So as I looked around as an author looking for a story, I discovered that two of them in particular caught my attention, and that was John Dos Passos, who is lesser known today, and Ernest Hemingway. Both are Chicagoans, and both ended up forging a friendship based on meeting in the war, having to process--if you would pardon using a late 20th century term—what they had seen in the war, and both becoming writers. Of the two John Dos Passos is the one who experienced the war the first. He was born here in a hotel in Chicago in 1896, the product of a widow named Lucy Madison from Virginia and a New York City attorney named John R. Dos Passos. It would have been an affair because John Dos Passos was married. And so the younger John Dos Passos, who went by the name Madison a this point, grew up in a hotels throughout Europe because it was the only place his parents would meet without scandal, since one was married and the other was not. So he had a very odd, wandering childhood. He was sent off to Choate Boarding School where at last his name became Dos Passos because his father's wife had passed away and the two were able to marry. But at Choate he had a hard time. I don't know if you know much about American boarding schools. Even though they were the land of the privileged, they were pretty tough area for kids, particularly one like John Dos Passos who wore thick glasses, was un-athletic, and uninterested in the things of a testosterone-driven group of young males in a freezing cold New England boarding school. But he made his way to Harvard, and there at last he found something that he flowered in. Now Harvard of course was an institution of the wealthy, and most anyone who graduated from a boarding school like Choate could get admitted to Harvard or Yale, but it had something different--it had an intellectual meritocracy. So someone like John Dos Passos could meet with enormous success at Harvard, and that's when he flowered. That's when he became in touch with the idea of writing, writing poetry, became friends with E.E. Cummings and all these folks. He also became like a lot of young kids then, and this happened of course many generations later--quite left wing at Harvard. He was impressed with John Reed who had
graduated a few years before he had. He was probably what we would call a fellow traveler in the sense of being very impressed with what was happening or about to happen in the Soviet Union—what was Russia, the communist movement, the sense of ending oppression that he saw in the United States. So he's a searching, sensitive left-winger who at the end of his Harvard career is desperate to get to the war. He feels that he must somehow see it, participate in it, taste it, be part of it, but keeping in mind he is a pacifist; he doesn’t want to be fighting in it, and the United States hasn’t entered the war yet. So he joins up with the ambulance corps. And so in 1917 just after the United States has entered the war, he’s on the ship Chicago heading to Europe and Bordeaux and arriving in France when there's still plenty of fighting. The Americans has not yet arrived. The transportation and building—we had no armed forces to speak of, so just because we declared war doesn’t suddenly mean we’re landing in France. So it's still a French war, British war, with these Americans running around as volunteers. Driving an ambulance, he’s taken up to Verdun. Now in 1916 some of the worst fighting in the war took place in Verdun. This is 1917; it's still not a picnic. And so I want to describe to you what John Dos Passos first experienced when he reached Verdun in the summer of '17. On one of his first nights, he is—he pulls up his ambulance behind the front lines, and so several of the ambulances pull up. And what he notices is that all of the men in trench look back as if these are ravens collecting, because they know if the ambulances are pulling up, that means probably tomorrow they are gonna be ordered up from the trenches to march into the fuselage of German bullets. And what I always want to remind people when we talk about WWI, WWII, we’re talking about kids. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-old kids in the trench. We’re not talking about long-term war veterans who are facing this. So Dos Passos says, "They must have thought us a collection of scavenger crews." Dos Passos and Parshall—Parshall is his assistant, the two running these ambulances—joined a caravan of vehicles rushing back and froth from the front to ferry the hundreds of wounded men back for medical attention. It was like the children’s game of dodge ball but on a deadly scale as German shells descended on them. The ambulance was punctured with holes from the shrapnel. The noise of the exploding shells proved terror among the newcomers that all men told to keep their mouths open at all time to safe guard their eardrums. The men driving the ambulances quickly learned the rhythm of the cannons, each taking different amount of times for reloading and dashed from one location to another in the interludes. On each trip back from the fighting, John Dos Passos’ ambulance was loaded down with more wounded soldiers than it was meant to carry. Sometimes those soldiers with more manageable injuries stood on the running boards or squeezed into the front seat between Do Passos and his assistant. “At every lurch the wounded groaned horribly,” said Dos Passos. And then there was the gas. Thicker than air, clung to the ground like fog. Quote, "The smell of death changed to the bittersweet smell of mustard gas," said Lawson, who was one of Dos Passos' friends who’d met on the ship. He was driving an ambulance nearby. On the first night at the front, Dos Passos saw green-colored wrathes of gas curling like serpents above the blackened battlefield soil. On some runs the remaining presence of gas was so strong that Dos Passos and Parshall got out of the ambulance every few miles to vomit in the roadside ditch. The horses pulling French 75mm field guns heaved and gasped, their eyes bulging and nostrils spurting blood. "I shall never forget," he wrote after one such run, "the frightened eyes of the horses choking on gas standing besides the overturned gun carriages waiting for the shell that will finish them." That night Dos Passos wrote to an old friend that he corresponded with throughout the war that he could not imagine a more hellish experience. So for Dos Passos his exposure and keep in mind his sensibility to what he saw was one of horror. And he ended up before the end of his service—for instance one of his jobs was carrying out the
amputated limbs from the operating room. Being reflective he also saw how one builds a kind of veneer of protection. I was a reporter for many years, and you’ve probably heard this, but reporters have a morose sense of humor. We sometimes crack jokes in the most--worst moment, but it's the way of dealing with the horror we saw. He wasn’t cracking jokes, but he noticed one day that he was eating a sandwich basically in the corner of an operating room where a man was fighting for his life. In September the United States army took over the ambulance corps and disbanded all of the volunteers. And so Dos Passos went to Paris and rejoined the new US Army volunteer, and I shouldn’t call it volunteer---the new US Army ambulance corps run by the Red Cross, and was sent to Italy to that front line. While that was happening, Ernest Hemingway who was growing up here in Chicago--he's a few years younger than Dos Passos--had made his way to Kansas City to work as a reporter. The Kansas City Star had lost most of its young people, being going--now that the war was underway and the draft was underway, and the got a job through a friend of his father's working at the Kansas City Star. And there he met a returning army ambulance corps driver who convinced him that this was the way to see the war. Now Hemingway of course is different. He's not part of--he's from a family that did very well, but he's not part of that East Coast elite. He had no intention of going to a Harvard or a Yale. But he was a very reflective young man, how he too believed this was gonna be their defining moment of their generation. He writes to his sister, "I cannot--to use a double negative--not be there. I must somehow find some way there." And the way there for him was the ambulance corps. So he arrives in Italy to serve as an ambulance corps driver. Now there is a famous picture of him in an ambulance. He probably never actually drove an ambulance. An ambulance is, in those days were really hard to drive. The pedals were like that of an organ. Lots of pedals. It wasn't just a gas and a clutch. There was something that retarded the sparks, something that adjusted the air. You needed a lot of training to get behind them. They were also very temperamental. They were Ford and Fiat. And those of you who know cars know very well that those are acronyms for Fix Or Repair Daily or Fix It All the Time. (Laughter)

Morris: But Hemingway arrived, and was very excited about this proximity to the war. And he gets to Milan, and the first thing that happens is a munitions factory has blown up very near Milan. And munitions factories were basically all staffed by women. The men were fighting, and the women were having a very dangerous job of loading these explosives. And so Hemingway has his introduction to the war from Milan. He and another man--there are about thirty-five people who have been killed--are dispatched to go and go to the factory where it was and clean up the scene. The men fanned out to collect the bodies and search for human remains. The teenaged Hemingway who until this moment in his life had only seen corpses in the manner of birds and small animals he shot in Michigan faced a carnage like that of a Francisco de Goya depiction of war. Arms, legs, backs, torsos, heads, and bits of hair clung to the barbed wire fence surrounding the place. Hemingway and Milford Baker, another Red Cross volunteer, grabbed a stretcher and made their way to the wall of human fragments. The first thing the two men saw was the headless and legless body of a woman. "Heming and I nearly passed out cold," said Baker, "but gritted our teeth and laid the thing out on the stretcher." When they got back to Milan in the late evening, other Red Cross men immediately besieged them. Like adolescent males basking in the glow of lost virginity, Baker and Hemingway savored the moment. They were the envy of the group. "Having a wonderful time," Hemingway wrote--scribbled on the back of a postcard to his friends at the Kansas City star, using three exclamation points. "Had my first baptism of fire my first day here when an entire munitions plant exploded. I go to the front tomorrow. Oh boy. I am glad to be in of it." Very different sense of war than the older Dos Passos who
had been shocked by the horror of it. Well, one day in June of 1918 John Dos Passos is now working in Italy as an ambulance driver and his Fiat did break down. And he went in to have lunch in the mess hall, and he sat down next to a very handsome young man, and they introduced each other. Obviously one was Ernest Hemingway and the other was John Dos Passos. And they didn't obviously know what they were gonna end up doing with life, but they remembered the meeting, and John Dos Passos headed back to the United States. He had troubles, because while he had been serving overseas the draft board was looking for him and now thought he was trying not to show up. They didn’t know he was already in the warzone, so he had to go home and fix that problem. And Hemingway began his service in the war. Now as I said he wasn’t an ambulance driver, but he was serving the Italian troops in the trenches on a bicycle, providing them with chocolate and cigarettes. That may not seem significant, but you know, if you know anything about the horrors of trench warfare, a piece of chocolate or a cigarette could be a salvation of importance to fighting trench foot and the horror of who’s shooting at you. And so in July one night, he bicycled out, left his bicycle by the trench, and went down into the trench. And there he was distributing chocolate and cigarettes, and he heard this sound, which all of these soldiers heard, which was a kind of (thud), and that's the sound of a mortar leaving its tube. And you know, mortars are not only very deadly, but they're horrifyingly deadly, because a shell coming at a high speed in war, you hear it— you hear the (zipping) of something going through the air fast. A mortar you hear its launch, the (thud), and then this silence because it's being lobbed at you at a very slow speed. It goes up very high with the idea of coming down quite vertically inside the trench using the trench walls to extend the damage it would do. And as would happen, a mortar fell right in front of Ernest Hemingway. But between him and the mortar was an Italian soldier. The soldier took the brunt of the explosion. And Hemingway was wounded—I always have to look it up—famously 267 bits of shrapnel, maybe 266. It's— you know, it's somewhat accounted, that it's in there. Well, one of the interesting things is that there's now a memorial at the Piave River to Hemingway's wounding that night in July of 1918, but it makes no mention of the fact between him and the mortar was a young man whose life was lost saving the life of a man who would become perhaps the 20th century’s most famous writer. This bugged me as a historian, so with some research assistance of an Italian researcher in Rome, I was able to compile a list of the men, Italian men who died that night along that particular trench. Don't know which one it is, but I listed all of them in the back of the book, and now there's some graduate students using that list, and someday we may know the name of the man who gave up his life. And I think this is important in a couple of ways. History is often written about those who are at the top of the command, particularly war. And in some ways young children grow up believing that Eisenhower won the war by himself or that FDR ended the Depression and won the war all by himself, and it's the unnamed that risked everything who are remembered in this museum to make that victory possible. So finding that man's name is a very important task I think, and hopefully someday we can report to you that happened. So Hemingway was wounded, and he was transported to a hospital in Milan where he recovered from his wounds. And he had what in WWII was often called the million-dollar wound, meaning a wound that would end your service in the military but not in such a way that you'd be disabled. He would carry some shrapnel forever, but he also had a kind of badge, and I've spoken to a number of veterans about this. There is a wound that gives you a kind of honor to have. As long as you’re not disabled, your having the name wounded is an added benefit. It also brought Hemingway something very important that he always connected with war, and that was love. He met his nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, and as you well know a very famous love affair began between these two. And so for Hemingway war became a very different thing because he never
saw any war after that until the Spanish American War or WWII, it fulfilled a very different vision, which I'll outline in a second about war. Von Kurowsky famously jilts him when Hemingway returns to the United States, but Hemingway begins doing something that's connected to the war and connected to a president that he'd grown up knowing quite a bit about, and that's Theodore Roosevelt. Theodore Roosevelt had a couple features like other presidents that led him to get the presidency, and one of which was being a war hero. But he had very smartly remembered when he'd gone up the hill in San Juan to make sure that who would come along with him but the press. He made sure that he was covered. In a way--and the media was not a term used in 1898, but in a way Theodore Roosevelt was our first media president, the first to understand the media as a way to reach the public. Well, Hemingway took a lesson from that. When he returns to the United States and is greeted at the docks as this famous wounded ambulance driver by two of the more sensationalist newspapers in New York, the evening world and the journal, he lets them mis-portray his heroism. He doesn't correct it. And so he's beginning to build a public persona about his being wounded, to the point that when he gets back here to Chicago and goes to Oak Park high school, he let's them tell stories about how he put cigarette filters in the wounds to stench the bleeding and various things. He even poses with a gun at one point, and Red Cross volunteers did not carry weapons. And so he begins to use his war experience, as he will later in the 30s and 40s when he's writing for Esquire, to build this manly concept of himself. So these two men who have met during the war in a mess hall in Italy, who both experience the war very, very differently, finally meet again in 1924. Because like most artist and writers, they all came to Paris. Now I'm sure many of you have seen Woody Allen's movie about Paris in that time. And it's a terrific movie. But Paris also had a different side to it. It was destitute. The war had raged such ravages on the French economy that Americans with a few dollars could find a place to live, have a morning maid, and evening maid, drink in cafes all day. And so this cadre of artists, sculptors, centered around people like Gertrude Stein, came to Paris not because alone it was a creative place to be, it was also a place to slum very easily as an artist with very little money. And so these two men meet again, and they begin gathering at some place called the Closerie des Lilas--it's a famous French cafe--and they would gather everyday after they've reacquainted themselves with each other and read from the new testament and talk about writing. In the midst of his Parisian literary colony, Hemingway and Dos Passos delighted in each other's company. Ernest was always looking for somebody who could really talk with him on his level in the same interests. This was Hadley he said. Hadley of course was Hemingway's first wife who had been introduced to him by a woman named Kate Smith who was an upper Michigander. The two Chicago natives however were very different from each other. Hemingway was egotistical, certain of himself, willing to get ahead at the expense of others, apolitical, and very athletic. The Harvard-educated Dos Passos was timid, questioning, considerate to a fault, committed leftwing pacifist, and incapable at all sports except for hiking. Their common pursuit however trumped their differences. They were plotting a literary revolution. To them the war, the Great War, the one we're talking about, had made traditional writing styles inadequate. The generation needed its own voice, not one that imitated another voice from the past. By that they were referring to people like Willa Cather, who had written One of Ours, and incredibly powerful WWI book. Or Edith Wharton who'd written a book also called The Age of Innocence, about how the world was changing and she was trying to recapture that thing from the past. Dos Passos at this point was deep into a new manuscript that used an interesting pastiche of visual imagery and cinematic jump cuts. For his part Hemingway worked like a jeweler in paragraph-long, unadorned stories trying to pen, as he would famously say later, "the truest sentence that you know." But now in 1924 these two men were forging
a friendship based on something very unique that related to the war and their mutual pursuit of a new means of expression. Their friendship rose out of this common bond. Like other ambitious Americans drawn to the cafes of Montparnasse or even their colleagues that remained in the United States, they dreamed of penning the great books of their generation. But Hemingway and Dos Passos were different from the rest. They were almost alone among American writers of their age in having witnessed the war first hand, the war that they felt would define their generation. They held front row seats as part of a cadre of men who volunteered for ambulance duty on the killing fields of Europe. In fact 1924, six years later, Hemingway still carried shrapnel in his body. The men had confronted hardships and dangers to a lesser degree than the soldiers of course, but they had been afforded a greater view than that seen from the trenches. It was exhilarating and harrowing. Malcolm Cowley who I'd mentioned had been an ambulance driver, wrote, "The war had created in young men a thirst for abstract danger, not suffered for a cause but courted for itself." Now six years after the conflict John Dos Passos and Ernest Hemingway burned to put on paper what they had seen and experienced. The Great War was over, but not for them. And as you know, war ends on the battlefield, but it never does for the veterans. And for these two writers the war had ended, but processing it, trying to figure out what they had seen and then turned to their creative art and use their art to talk about it was what they were seeking out to do. John Dos Passos had already met at this point with enormous success. I mean the--the interesting moment in 1924 is John Dos Passos is sitting at this table at the Closerie des Lilas with already a contract for more books and success and well known. Hemingway at this point was a stringer for a Toronto newspaper and living partially off his wife’s trust fund and has still not published anything. And as you know the tables would be reversed. Dos Passos had famously published a book called The Three Soldiers. It was the second attempt he’d done at writing about the Great War, and he portrayed the lives of three Americans in the war, not ambulance drivers but infantrymen. And in doing so he resorted to something that would have been horrible for most Americans to read. And much like a famous movie “The Crying Game” that we saw many years ago where when you left the theater you didn’t tell anyone about what occurred you didn’t want to spoil, Dos Passos had introduced the concept of fragging or to frag the main officer. In the middle of the book one of his soldiers kills his superior. Well, the United States bought the book, but reviewers did not. They thought it was treasonous. They wrote articles saying had this been published during the war, he would have been put in jail, and in fact that is very likely the case. E.E. Cummings and others were locked up for a while for what they wrote during the war. You remember the espionage act and other acts of congress made these kinds of things treasonous--well not treasonous but imprisonable at that point. So Des Passos had begun to write about the war, and for him--now, remember he’s a left-winger, and he was probably deeply influenced not maybe directly--he shouldn’t have been a Marxist, but Karl Marx had famously said, "Philosophers have hitherto merely interpreted the world. The point is to change it." And John Dos Passos believed that if he had a creative power as a writer, he should use it to end war, to bring about a realization of how awful war was, that it was part of an even larger thing, the mechanization of war, how capitalism ground people down to hourly workers. It was part of a larger vision. But he wanted to use his power of the pen to change minds, to change the world. And this is what brought about a lot of discussion between the two because Ernest Hemingway had no interest in using writing that way. Merely he wanted to represent the reality of war that he’s seen, and for him the reality of war was fundamentally different. War for Hemingway was an inevitability of humankind. But wonderfully it tested your manliness to go to war, and he had proof. He had shrapnel in his body, he had been tested, which in a sense it made him a better individual in
comparison to those who hadn’t gone to the battlefields. And thirdsly for Hemingway war always brought love. Von Kurowsky was always on his mind. So these two men engaged in a literary and deep friendship forged over their having come together in war. I’m writing a book about another person who was involved in WWII who was a mortar gunner, and I met another mortar gunner who knew him. And so I said to this individual, "Did you two talk about the war?" And he said, "No, we didn’t have to. We both knew what it had been like. It's not something we talked about, but it created a friendship, a bond." So Hemingway and Dos Passos feeling as if they were the only two members of the literary arts—Fitzgerald hadn't been there, Faulkner hadn't been there—to have actually seen, tasted, or even been shot at like Hemingway was during the war, forged this friendship that was deeply personal and literary. So they met for instance regularly in Spain where Hemingway was famously pursuing the bulls of Spain. And when he does, you know one of the things I always wondered about Hemingway and bulls when I was growing up and reading his books and I came across the book about bullfighting and thought it was dull, I thought, "Why is he so interested in this?" Well, it relates to the war. Hemingway says it was in fact death that brought him to Pamplona. In trying to write fiction in Paris he struggled to capture feelings, events, or moments essential to bringing characters to life. He decided instead he would begin with the basics. "One of the simplest things of all, the most fundamental is violent death," he said, “the only place where you can see life and death, i.e. violent death now that the war was over, was in the bull ring." The bullring became a proxy for him in his pursuit of being close to death. So these two men met all the time in Europe. The Murphy's, who were the wealthy couple who inherited the Mark Cross fortune and supported a lot of writers, would meet with them in Gstaad. Hemingway was always teasing Dos Passos for his lack of manliness, for instance taking him skiing down desperately hard slopes in which Dos Passos discovered the best way to stop was to sit down until he had a hole in his pants, to take him fishing, hunting, all these things. They even met in Montana at one point, and—you know, Dos Passos could hardly see through the sight of the rifle, but off they went hunting. That was the interplay between these two men, a kind of rivalry. But the rivalry also had to do with writing. And they depended greatly on each other to read each other’s works. So when The Sun Also Rises came out, which people don't often think of as a war book—it's about a group of expatriates from Paris who go to Pamplona and engage in a lot of sex and drinking and disruptive behavior, and there's a fight—let's not forget that the main protagonist is wounded in some particular way, and it's not direct but we can surmise how he's wounded. And so Hemingway is publishing the book to enormous success. It’s hard for us to understand why that book was so successful, and I offer you a comparison. If you were to go to a museum today and see Cubists, you would see Picasso, and then you would see a whole bunch of other Cubists. And you might say, "Oh, I know this. It’s not so revolutionary." You have to go back in history and understand how dramatic their work was. Well, Hemingway was the Picasso of that literary movement. Others including Dos Passos were trying to change writing, but we remember Hemingway. And when you reread The Sun Also Rises, which I urge you to do, just focus on the language, and you'll be stunned at how different it is from Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, and everybody else—or Fitzgerald—who was in the bookstores at the time. Like many others, Dos Passos was in awe of the writing as he read passages of the book in preparation to review it. "It's an extraordinary well written book," he said. “So well written that while I was reading it I kept telling myself I must be growing doleheaded for not getting it." This is what he wrote to Hemingway at the time. He turned to his typewriter and began writing his review by chastising his friend from whom he had read biblical passages in a Paris cafe for beginning the book with a quotation from the Bible. "It leads the reader to believe the book will be substantial," Dos Passos wrote.
Instead these things of deep importance, you find yourself reading about the tangled love affair, the bellyaches of a gloomy young literizing Jew, or an English lady of title who's a good sport and a young man working in the Paris offices of an American newspapers, The guy who tells the story. Frustrated by Hemingway's lack of plot or even a plot, Dos Passos said the lost generation needed an epic, but The Sun Also Rises was not it. And this kind of tit-for-tat went on with Hemingway and Dos Passos as they each tried to--and pardon my use of 20th century sense--but work out the war in their literature. And in fact there's another 21st century work that works--a word that works wonderfully for their relationship; they were really having a bromance. They had this kind of deep emotional connection, but with these things comes this rivalry, this sense of writing, and Dos Passos was still the activist. He got involved in trying to prevent Sacco and Vanzetti the famous anarchists from being executed, and he'd write to Hemingway and Wilson and others and say, "Come and join me on the picket lines in Boston," and Hemingway was still at work on his kind of studio-like writing, writing that perfect sentence, and didn't want to get involved. And Dos Passos was at work on the work that he's now remembered for, the USA trilogy, three massive books that used really innovative and today in many ways inaccessible forms of writing. Using little bits from film, jump cutting, mixing in nonfiction with fiction. And Hemingway had published in 1927 A Farewell to Arms, his answer in some ways to Three Soldiers. It's interesting--people say you should never judge a book by its cover, although Mark Twain rapidly came back and said, "Anyone who doesn't is a fool." If you go and look online or in a library at the old covers of A Farewell to Arms, what do you see? You see a young man and a woman very close in an embrace of some sort, yet it's a war novel that he's answering. And so again you see the different themes of war worked out in that business of war being inevitable, war being a thing that tests one's manliness and love. And unlike the desperate portrayal that Dos Passos offers, that war is something imposed on us to kill a generation of young kids, war is almost an opportunity, even though it comes to a sad end in A Farewell to Arms, and Hemingway works to bring the book to a close. He decides to write, "That's all there is to the story. Katherine died, and you will die, and I will die, and that's all I can promise you." He decided that wasn't it. Or, "When people die, you have to bury them but you do not have to write about it. You meet undertakers, but you do not have to write about them." And after many more tries, he settled on, "But after I got them out and shut the door and turned out the light it wasn't any good. It was like saying goodbye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in rain." So Three Soldiers and A Farewell to Arms were in bookstores all throughout the United States. And it dawned on me one day that the generation, what we call the greatest generation that's about to go off to the next great war are being introduced to war through American fiction with these two very different representations of war. And of course one of them wins out. The 20th century becomes the century of war, and Hemingway's version of war as this inevitable but opportunistic thing is the vision that prevails. But the problem for Hemingway and his friendship with Dos Passos is two-fold. There's the USA trilogy that has come out, and since Hemingway had written The Sun Also Rises and A Farewell to Arms in the 30s, he hadn't written anything substantial except again some book about bulls. And Time Magazine puts John Dos Passos on the cover first of the two men and describes him as coming the closest possible to having written the great novel of the 20th century. Hemingway, who's in Key West stewing--and by the way, how did he come to choose Key West? Well, after The Sun Also Rises comes out and no one in Paris will talk to him again because they're all real characters, he goes to Key West because John Dos Passos who had been to Key West first told him this was a great place to go. Again an annoyance to Hemingway because when Hemingway wasn't to own something he wants to own it fully. Spain,
which is really Hemingway's world, John Dos Passos had been there first. Key West, which is Hemingway's world, John Dos Passos. So you can see the beginning of the friction that begins to occur because one of the things about writing--and I'll tell you this is a moment of confession, of honesty--writing involves envy. No matter how successful you are as a writer, you'll always wonder, "Why are they getting on Oprah? Why are they getting a million dollars?" Well Hemingway and John Dos Passos were having this in the sense that Hemingway could write a book as like writing a check, but John Dos Passos was getting the adulation of critics. He was being taken as the great serious writer of the 20th century, even though we may not remember him as much now, and Hemingway was stewing. So add to that women, and you've got a complicated picture. Kate Smith had been Hemingway's first great love when he was in Michigan as a teenager. She introduced him to Hadley. Pauline, who moved Hadley out of the scene, was a friend of Kate Smith's. Kate Smith was an important presence in Hemingway's life, and came to Key West to visit Hemingway and fell in love with John Dos Passos. So now John Dos Passos has critical adulation, his vision of the war is being—is the prevailing one, and he has in a sense Hemingway's ideal of the woman. So his friendship was getting on very rocky grounds, and war brought yet one more chance to fire up their friendship again. The Spanish Civil War was underway. They both loved Spain. They both supported the republican government against Franco. So they rushed to Spain to put together a documentary to support the republican cause in Spain. Problem was related again to women. Martha Gellhorn has now moved in with Hemingway, so when John Dos Passos and Hemingway meet together, Dos Passos' presence is a reminder of Hadley, Pauline, Kate Smith, and all these things, which makes the hanky panky with Martha Gellhorn a little tougher. But on a more serious note, Robles, a teenage friend of John Dos Passos and his translator have been killed by the communist members of the forces. Hemingway was very callous and dismissing. You know, people die in war. Maybe it's one of your best friends, but it's to big deal. And the other problem was that digging in to who was responsible for Dos Passos' friends' death meant embarrassing the republican government, and Hemingway did not want that to happen. But what was happening to Dos Passos was that he'd been urging Hemingway to move to the left to become politically active. Hemingway had now done so, and to Hemingway's annoyance John Dos Passos was pulling back because he was beginning to understand the atrocities of Stalin, the business of his friend Robles being killed. And instead of seeing politics as a means to the end, he wrote to a friend, "Politics really is only the means. There is no end, and if you in any way get away from the means, you've destroyed everything that you're seeking in life, that you can't destroy the system in order to achieve a certain end." And that's what the death of Robles meant for him. So the two men with all of these elements--Hemingway annoyed saying, "I've come to the left and now you're leaving." Hemingway annoyed—you've married the girl of my dreams. Hemingway annoyed—you've got the critics' adulation and I don't. Their bromance came to an almost violent, at least verbally violent end. And they never really spoke to each other really again. They have one meeting in the 1950s when Dos Passos stopped in on Havana. There were furtive attempts to bring them back together, but they were never able to do that. The Kennedy Library in Boston retains Hemingway's papers, most of them. And there's quite an extraordinary little item, on which I'll be closing. This great war that we've been talking about tonight left damage on all of its survivors. It didn't matter how you came out of the war. And the pursuit of an appropriate literary presence was what Hemingway and John Dos Passos attempted to do. So if you reread their works and look at their works, it's a chance to see an artistic vision of the horror of the opening war of the 20th century, a vision that shaped the lives and perceptions of war for those that would go to war. These novelists--this is Malcolm Cowley again--"These
novelists who afterwards wrote about the war underscored its disjunctive role. War changed men in such a way that the could never again be made whole." When you come to a museum like this or the Great War Museum in Kansas City or the World War II Memorial in Washington, remember that when you see the survivors or references to the survivors. I grew up with one, a man I admired greatly, who never talked about the war. And you know very well why. Many ways, those who came back felt they were the survivors, not the heroes. War's lasting effect on Hemingway and Dos Passos distinguished them from other members of the lost generation. It forged the friendship, but in the end another war took it from them. Sadly this kind of loss was one of the unchanging tragic aspects of Hemingway's life. Whether it was fame, money, his mother, or shellshock that are to be blamed, Hemingway destroyed every relationship, every love affair, and ultimately himself. I came across a letter that Hemingway wrote in 1949 that he sent Dos Passos from Italy. This is a good dozen years after their friendship broke up. And he said, "I've been studying the life of Dante. Seems to be one of the worst jerks that ever lived, but how well he could write," Hem wrote to Dos. "This may be a lesson to us all." Indeed. It's hard to remember now, but several generations, what we think of as the trio of great novelists born around the turn of the century--Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner--was a quartet, wrote George Packer in the New Yorker one day, with the fourth chair occupied by John Dos Passos. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

1: We live just a couple blocks from where Hemingway was born and then his boyhood home. Wondering if Dos Passos ever made it out to meet the family in Oak Park. Morris: No, they--that's--first time I've been asked that question, and they didn't. Dos Passos learned a lot about Hemingway's family, but mostly from little bits, like for instance he was in Key West when the famous box arrived from his mother--from Hemingway's mother that included the gun that Hemingway's father had used to commit suicide. And so he and Kate Smith talked about Hemingway's mother in the sense of--I understand Hemingway, is the way Dos Passos would have put it. So no, he never met any of the family. He met of course all the wives and lovers along the way. But the thing that's interesting about the two is that Dos Passos I think understood Hemingway in the way nobody else, including his family did, and that's why the friendship lasted for so long. Much in the way that there are different kinds of cruelties occur in the world when you're a teenager and you're beginning to access the boys--if you're a boy that is--around you, there's always the one who goes out and--goes out of his way to crush a bug on the street corner. And there's the other who does because we're kind of playing with life and death as children. Hemingway was so beset with things that Dos Passos forgave his trespassing, and I didn't even mention some of the trespassing that went on. As this friendship friction built up, they wrote about each other in their novels, and Hemingway portrayed Dos Passos in very vicious means, suggesting that he was inadequate in the nightly duties that a husband might have, that Kate Smith was in it for the money. I mean, it's all there. And there's this great scene where he's writing one thing, and he shared with the editor of Esquire, a guy named Gingrich, who says, "You can't publish this. It's libelous." He says, "I'm coming to Key West." So the lawyer and the editor arrive, and they go out on the Pilar, the famous yacht, and they're floating around, and Hemingway says to him "You know, Dos Passos should feel complimented being in my book, much like somebody would be complimented being in a Cezanne painting," reminding Gingrich had been described as the Cezanne of American literature. But in the end the Cezanne of American literature took those lines out of the final manuscript. So I think what even having not met the family, Dos Passos was very charitable, and that's why his friendship was so important. And in many ways when
Hemingway killed it, he killed the most important friendship because it was the one who understood it as opposed to somebody who just wanted to be around him.

2: I think there was a canard about Dos Passos that while he became very conservative in the 50s he lost his writing abilities. Was his—how do you judge that?

Morris: I haven’t—I never understood Dos Passos’ move to the right on the political scale. I couldn’t understand how he could go from one viewpoint to the other. And in the course of researching this book I came to understand for Dos Passos left and right are not a line. It's much more like a circle, and he jumped from the little gap from one side to the other because of his concern with liberty and his belief in liberty. And he was so upset by what the communist Big C in the Soviet Union and Stalin and the Little C in Spain that he felt that the conservative side was a better home for those who support liberty. His writing did not diminish. His writing ability did not diminish during that period, but I think because of the sense of our viewers they tend to be less noticed.

3: So I think we have a question from one of our online viewers. The question is, post-WWI literature is unique in the sense that it was fiction writing, but when it was being published it was treated almost as nonfiction by the public. And James I think you touched on this a little. How do you think Dos Passos and Hemingway influence not just postwar literature but the actual history of the war?

Morris: That's a really on-spot question, because if you read the reviews what Dos Passos got—one time he wrote an article in the LA Times to a reviewer saying, "Might I remind you this is a novel?" Because they were taking it as if it was nonfiction reporting. I think the biggest affect that the two men had was one working out in the field of literature, just like artists or composers working out in their various fields, the consequences of the war and visions of the war, whether you’re gonna write a great composing piece against war or a tribute to war is in a sense what they were doing to literature. But the other thing is that the war changed them, and they forever changed writing. People write—I mean, we even have a contest of imitating Hemingway. That style of writing is a result of this sense that previous means of expression were inadequate to describe what they had seen. And so writing like many things was forever changed by the war just like going into a museum or understanding why the British leadership became different, because a whole generation of young kids who had gone. The Great War changed everything right down to the way we wrote sentences, and right down to the way we write sentences today. So excellent question.

4: I just had a question--Spanish Civil War. With George Orwell and “Homage to Catalonia”. Did they interact with Orwell at all?

Morris: They interacted but not in person. And they knew very much of each other’s works. They passed—I don’t remember ever running across direct correspondence, but there would be things like, "Orwell had been here the week before." So they clearly—you know, it's a very small world in that sense. Those who could write were part of a small elite of Americans. Those who could go to Spain to support the republican cause were a small group. They were the same group who had been hanging out together in New York or in Chicago. I mean, the Lincoln Brigade was made up of people who knew each other. That’s very different than today. That’s very different than for instance those who went to Vietnam as war correspondents. They were from such different backgrounds. But so they knew of each other. They knew where Orwell was and what filmmakers were working and in Spain at that moment. So you know, and for me the war—and I don’t mean to diminish the horrors of the Spanish war, the civil war—but what it did for me is serve as a bookend, because the war brought their friendship together, brought this creative outpouring, and the second war that they went to together broke apart the friendship, drove Dos Passos to the right, and began in many ways the un-wrangling of Hemingway. So that’s what I mean by—I think Malcolm Cowley is so right, and we should
never forget that. War ends, but never ends for the veterans. They never cease to be affected. They are never again whole no matter what happened to them.

(Clause)
Clarke: Thank you to James McGrath Morris for an outstanding discussion and to the United States World War One Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is *The Ambulance Drivers: Hemingway, Dos Passos, and a Friendship Made and Lost in War*, published by De Capo Press. To learn more about the World War One Centennial Commission, visit WorldWar1Centennial.org. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org.

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