

outpost amidst the sweltering farm fields of Sangin District of Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan.

The platoon is asked to accomplish an extremely difficult and often nebulous mission which West chronicles through the daily struggles of the Marines, numerous fire fights, and “ground-level” treatment of the failings of counterinsurgency. What has always stood out most about West’s reporting across his various works is not only his intimate understanding of Infantry Soldiers and Marines, but also his personal willingness to step out with them, to endure the hardships and dangers they face, and to report their struggles and triumphs with compassion and a knowing empathy. *One Million Steps* is no different. It is an ode to Marines and the young men who are willing to volunteer for hardships that most will never experience. He revels in the bonds forged between the Marines of 3/5 and throughout the narrative links those bonds through the history of the Marines to World War II and Vietnam. West paints a vibrant picture of the young men who serve in the Infantry. Brave, stubborn, gregarious, his narrative shows young men at war doing the same things young men at war have always done. Through his own personal observation on patrol and at 3rd Platoon’s base, West is able to lovingly describe these Marines in a way that only someone who has experienced war in much the same way possibly could. *One Million Steps* continues the trend of West’s other books where the characterization of the men shines throughout. For the tactical Infantry leader, the narrative provides not only a ground-level view of small-scale, low-intensity conflict, but more importantly can teach young leaders something about the nature of men engaged in the constant stress of combat and help prepare, even the uninitiated, for those realities.

But while *One Million Steps* heaps praise on individual Marines and junior leaders, it also places in doubt much of the thinking of senior commanders. Throughout the book, West discusses the failure of leaders to develop a long-term strategy and decries “civics lesson” counterinsurgency. West feels so strongly about the lack of leadership from higher echelons and the futility of current counterinsurgency doctrine that he cannot help but intersperse critiques as asides throughout the 3rd Platoon narrative. He also takes high-level commanders to task for their confused and contradictory messages to Soldiers and Marines about what the mission in Afghanistan was and what its goals were.

West’s connection between the leadership and strategic failures of policy makers and the hard work and suffering of 3rd Platoon’s mission is heartbreaking. Through 3rd Platoon’s daily grind of patrolling, we see the end result of unclear or wrongheaded policy. The sacrifices made by 3rd Platoon were not wedded to a coherent end state and thus, in West’s words, “There would be no winning or defeating of the enemy. All 3rd Platoon could do was slug it out, day after day.” If there is one central theme in *One Million Steps*, it is the juxtaposition of young Marines, doing the very best they can with the orders given to them, fighting it out day after day, and policy makers and generals dithering about timelines and methods without developing a fully formed strategy. To West, that is the tragedy of the war in Afghanistan.

*One Million Steps* is West’s final discussion of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The courage it chronicles and the

missteps it casts light upon conclude West’s outstanding reporting on the wars of the last decade, the totality of which stands as an important record of the successes and failures of the armed forces during that time. *One Million Steps*, when taken with West’s other books, encompasses a body of work that should be reviewed carefully by military leaders of all levels and should influence decision makers in the future.

***Heroes in Death:  
The von Blücher Brothers in the  
Fallschirmjäger, Crete, May 1941***  
By Adrian Nisbett

Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing,  
2014, 176 pages

Reviewed by USMC

LtCol (Retired) Michael R. Janay

This is a book about a warrior family (a true story by the way): the three von Blücher brothers who fought and died in the Battle of Crete in May 1941.

It recounts the brothers’ real lives, however short, in Germany before World War II, their training as airborne paratroopers (Fallschirmjäger), how they died in the invasion of Crete, and the aftermath of their deaths.

The author’s primary research is exceptional — he visited the von Blücher estate in Fincken in central Germany (former East Germany). This town exists today through its farms, but it’s searching for a way to the future.

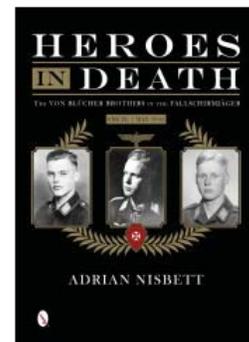
It begins with the pre-action phase of “waiting.” For as long as there have been armies preparing, training, and rehearsing battle drills, there has always been waiting! The selection and training to be a German airborne paratrooper was tough and demanding. An important point is that these men retained the right to act on their own initiative. They had the ability to move rapidly to trouble spots and immediately go into action. These soldiers had an aggressive spirit and unwavering determination to succeed, and all ranks were encouraged to be leaders.

The Fallschirmjäger’s Ten Commandments on pages 57-58 gave a no-nonsense summary of what each man’s duties and responsibilities were expected. With excellent training and quality of the men first-rate, they were ready for war.

With the beginning of World War II on September 1939, planning was underway for the assault on the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael and the bridges over the Albert Canal. The dramatic, bold, and astonishing operation immediately gave the Fallschirmjäger hero status in Germany.

But, the price they were to pay in the Battle of Crete would be great. They did not adjust their doctrine by paying attention to “lessons learned” in earlier battles, and that cost them dearly. They carried little equipment on their person — their weapons and equipment containers were specially marked. They had not done any terrain appreciation of landing zones either. Also, their parachutes did not have a quick-release harness buckle.

The Battle of Crete was destined to play out in the “fog of war” because of Ultra signals intelligence, which gave the British decrypts of German orders and signals relating to Crete.



The Germans knew the British Royal Navy dominated the eastern Mediterranean, and the Germans also lacked suitable amphibious landing ships needed for a seaborne assault. The British assumed an attack was imminent and planned the defense.

The German concept was to strike all three airfields in Crete almost simultaneously. But this was a hastily conceived operation based on poor intelligence and poor staff work. The operation order stated there were just 5,000 disorganized defenders, when in fact the British had fortified Crete with 43,000 Allied troops from Egypt, who had time to properly prepare a defense in depth. It was the Germans who were totally surprised, not the British! This book describes the Battle of Crete in great detail. In hindsight, the Germans were almost doomed because of over-confidence, poor intelligence on enemy dispositions and numbers, dispersal of forces, and troops who were too lightly armed. Bravery alone should not compensate for such failures, but in fact it did. The Germans won the Battle of Crete, but the price was their airborne jewel — the Fallschirmjäger. There would be no more large-scale airborne assaults.

After World War II all the fallen were re-interred into one cemetery on Crete. The von Blücher family fled advancing Russian armies and lost most of their personal effects. The three von Blücher brothers' only surviving sister as well as the Fallschirmjäger archives provided many of the details which will also impress readers of this book. The lessons of this book are timeless — the professional benefit is the opportunity to learn. I enthusiastically recommend this book to Warriors as well as the families they have to leave behind.

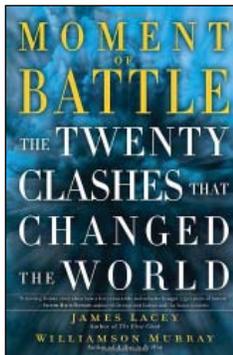
---

***Moment of Battle: The Twenty Clashes that Changed the World***

**By James Lacey and Williamson Murray**

**NY: Bantam Books, 2013, 496 pages**

Reviewed by LTC (Retired)  
Rick Baillergeon



Since the release of Edward Creasy's *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World in 1851*, we have seen many books published tied to that basic theme. Ensuing authors have put their own twists to Creasy's original idea. These variations have included the selection criteria of battles, number of battles selected, the detail of scholarship, and the focus of the book. A few of these volumes have been on par with Creasy's seminal book while many others have fallen significantly short. One recent release that is clearly comparable with Creasy's is the outstanding *Moment of Battle* by James Lacey and Williamson Murray.

Within *Moment of Battle*, acclaimed authors Lacey and Murray have selected 20 battles in history they believe have or will have the most long-term impact on the course of history. The battles selected range from Marathon in 490 B.C. to the 2003 seizure of Objective Peach in the race for Baghdad. In

between, there are many battles readers will be quite familiar with (Vicksburg, Marne, Midway, Kursk, Normandy) and some that are not so recognizable (Zama, Adrianople, Yarmuk, Annus Mirabilis).

Obviously, the authors' selection of battles will not make everyone happy. The authors are not under any pre-conceived notions that there will not be some consternation from some readers. In their introduction they state, "There will be those who object to our selection of decisive battles, an inevitable reality for those who write military history. In fact, the authors are more than willing to admit that a number of important battles are deserving of consideration." Most of readers' objections will likely focus on the Western flavor of the battles and perhaps the long-term or even short-term significance of Objective Peach. (The authors justify this selection at the beginning of this chapter.)

Of the battles chosen, the authors use the same basic formula to achieve their objectives. It begins with an introduction of the period and events that led to the battle. With this foundation set, Lacey and Williamson concisely detail the execution of the battle. This in turn leads to the most valuable portion of the volume — the "what-ifs." What if the battle had ended differently? What would the consequences have been for each side in the short term and long term? Would there been dramatic changes economically, politically, militarily, and even in regards to religion? The authors superbly provide their alternative endings, but more importantly, provide readers much to think about.

As highlighted earlier, authors Lacey and Murray have established sterling reputations. Lacey is known for his books on the Iraq War and his book on Marathon and its long-term impact (which is certainly the basis for one of chapters in *Moment of Battle*). In regards to Murray, he is a prolific writer who has crafted a large and highly praised body of work. Certainly, many potential readers of *Moment of Battle* will have previously read one of his prior volumes.

The area where their talents truly stand out is their ability to crisply summarize the battles themselves. In a minimum of pages, they are able to articulate the highlights of every battle. I believe their summarization provides readers with a good working knowledge of each battle. Thus, in roughly 20 pages they are able to execute the aforementioned formula for each battle. These 20 pages enable readers to consume *Moment of Battle* in the chunks they have time for.

The only negative I found within this book is the scarcity of maps. Each battle contains one map at the beginning of the discussion. Being one who believes maps add significant clarity to an author's text, this was a disappointment. I believe the addition of some more maps and even an "alternative ending" map for each battle (answering a what-if) would have been added value.

Will there be future books published along these lines? There should be little doubt on this. However, I believe *Moment of Battle* is clearly a mark on the wall for these future authors. Its concise and informative summaries of the 20 battles selected will benefit every general reader of military history. Its ability to make readers think will be of valuable to the more seasoned reader as well. In total, Lacey and Murray have crafted a volume which you would expect from these two celebrated authors — entertaining, informative, and thought-provoking.