

# Book Reviews



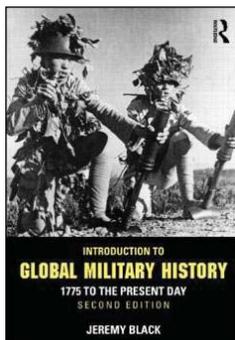
## ***Introduction to Global Military History: 1775 to the Present Day***

**By Jeremy Black**

**NY: Routledge, 2013, 319 pages**

Reviewed by

CPT Nathan A. Jennings



Jeremy Black's impactful work, *Introduction to Global Military History*, is a richly informative and comprehensive narrative of how warfare has evolved across the world landscape since 1775. Arriving in its much-improved second edition in 2013, the book offers a marked departure from most Western-centric military histories now used in both academic and popular study with a concerted effort, according to the author, to "re-examine earlier struggles" in a "context of plurality" with shared emphasis on Asian, African, and Latin American affairs. Thus, while the author, who is also a noted professor at the University of Exeter in England, both chronologically and regionally incorporates seismic confrontations that have typically defined military history projects, like the Napoleonic wars and World Wars I and II, he studiously maintains balance by "moving away from the idea that there is a clear hierarchy of importance in military history and an obvious pattern of development."

With such a dynamic approach, *Global Military History* provides an excellent primer for military professionals in regionally aligned brigades and special operations units seeking general understanding of how human conflict has evolved between 1775 and now. Beginning with the American Revolution and Napoleonic era as "the origins of modern war" and concluding with careful presentation of the West's current focus on "terrorism and rogue states" in Southwest Asia and Africa, Black employs engaging writing across 13 relatively condensed chapters that are replete with maps and pictures to capture and retain the reader's attention. While this format — and the work's necessary dearth of analytical depth and detail in any single period or event — will not serve for advanced or graduate studies, it nevertheless achieves its aim of priming newcomers to military history with a comprehensive description of how humanity has waged war in diverse settings over the previous two centuries.

First published in 2005 and now substantially enhanced with updated chapter introductions and conclusions, primary source perspectives, case studies, color maps, and an annotated bibliography, *Global Military History* finds greatest import in its explicit imperative to "include more discussion of Asian developments than" in previous works. Recognizing that the majority of the world's population lived and lives in East and South Asia during the period covered, the author discards "the notion that they were somehow passive victims of the inexorable rise of Western military dominance." This includes

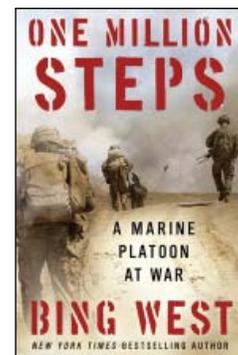
not just discussion of familiar confrontations between American and European powers and Asian, African, and Latin American peoples during the World Wars and decolonization, but also lesser studied events between and within less industrialized societies such as Chinese and Indian civil instability, the Arab-Israeli wars, and the Indian-Pakistani conflicts. The picture on the book's cover, which displays Chinese soldiers from the Sino-Japanese War instead of traditional images of Western combatants from places like Gettysburg or Normandy Beach, symbolizes this shift, or broadening, of emphasis.

Taken as a work that carefully weaves the often sporadic and haphazard development of armed conflict into an eminently digestible narrative, *Global Military History* should be considered for defense professionals seeking introductory understanding of the history of warfare at continental scale or in specific regions. Throughout the study, the historian eschews definitively committing to either traditional "war and society" approaches or the more recent "cultural turn," but rather seeks broader and more nuanced engagement with evolving "social, cultural, political, and economic" influences, in addition to technological factors, as he balances context and "the military dimension." While the resulting focus moves rapidly between events and geography, a necessary limitation due to the book's intended purpose and the ambitious span of history explored, it nevertheless allows maximum exposure to the rich, if unfortunate, diversity of conflicts that have plagued humanity during the modern and post-modern eras. Moving beyond the "Eurocentricity" of studies still used in most military academies and universities, Black's innovative work — and its emphasis on incorporating Asian, Latin American, and African conflicts as developments worthy of attention on par with Western affairs — arrives as a much-needed complement to the current field of military histories.

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## ***One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War*** **By Bing West** **NY: Random House, 2014,** **320 pages**

Reviewed by CPT Jake Miraldi



Bing West's latest book, *One Million Steps*, continues his unique and prolific reporting on the wars of the last decade. Over the course of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, West has been a constant presence. In Iraq, he lived and patrolled with Marines in Fallujah. In Afghanistan, he chronicled Army and Marine operations in support of the 2009-2010 surge. In *One Million Steps*, West embeds with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines — specifically 3rd Platoon, Kilo Company — which is isolated in a small combat

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.

