

# Book Reviews



***No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah.* By Bing West. New York: Bantam Books, 2005, 380 pages, \$25 (cloth).** Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Rick Baillergeon.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines classic as “serving as a standard of excellence.” In utilizing this definition, several recent books come to my mind as true classics. These include General Hal Moore and Joe Galloway’s *We Were Soldiers Once and Young* and Mark Bowden’s *Black Hawk Down*. Each of these books superbly captured the true psychological and physical essence of battle in a way that totally grips its readers. After reading Bing West’s *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah*, I have no doubt this book will receive the same acclaim and recognition by readers and critics alike. By definition, it must be categorized as a classic.

Many readers may be familiar with West’s last work, *The March Up: Taking Baghdad With the 1st Marine Division*. In it, he collaborated with Major General (Retired) Ray L. Smith to detail the 1st Marine’s offensive operation into Baghdad from March 20–April 10, 2003. This book received well-deserved praise and garnered several awards. I agreed and felt *The March Up* was a superb book and possessed numerous strengths. West carries these strengths over in his latest effort and in fact takes them to another level.

The best way to give a concise description of *No True Glory* is to utilize the author’s own words. In his introduction West states, “THE OBSCURE, HARDSCRABBLE INDUSTRIAL city of Fallujah erupted into the major battle of the Iraqi insurgency, involving fifteen thousand combatants and claiming 153 American and thousands of Iraqi lives. Fallujah provides a cautionary tale about mixing the combustible ingredients of battle and politics. This book describes how it came to do so and why.”

In detailing how it came to be and to answer the why, *No True Glory* focuses on

the period from April 2003 through December 2004 in the embattled city of Fallujah.

Throughout the pages, West expertly weaves the political climate with operational and tactical decision making. The constant with these two elements is West’s outstanding ability to capture the fighting on the ground at the individual Marine and Soldier level. The author’s ability to seamlessly combine these three places this book a cut above of anything I’ve presently read regarding Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

In my opinion, one of the critical things missing from books of this genre is the inability of authors to set the stage for the reader. To better understand the fighting at the small unit level, a reader should know the political and operational context and how these shaped events on the ground.

Truly, West paints this picture for the reader. Throughout *No True Glory*, readers have an understanding of how the political environment totally affected military decisions during the Fallujah campaign. As West discusses the political context, he pulls no punches. His frustration is evident when he opines how political indecision translated to casualties on the ground. The author’s treatment of the political landscape is complete and to be truthful was an added bonus for myself. Before reading the book, I had the misconception that it entirely focused on operations on the ground.

Certainly, West’s ability to describe the combat on the ground is the major strength of the book. His ability to do this was supported by two actions. First, he spent countless days with the Marines and Soldiers on the ground during operations in Fallujah (as well as Ramadi). There is nothing like being there and West was truly there. Second, the author has conducted hundreds of interviews to fill in any of the missing pieces to tell the story. Combined, these actions enable West to capture the human dimension of war unlike any book I’ve read in many years. It will leave a lasting impact on all readers.

Besides the above strengths, I found

several other items that made this book even better. First, he utilizes the inside flaps of the book to place maps and some graphics of the cancelled April 2004 offensive (Operation Vigilant Resolve) and the actual November 2004 offensive (Operation Phantom Fury). Second, West begins the book by writing paragraph-size biographies of the major political and military leaders involved in the Fallujah campaign. He follows this by adding a “Where Are They Now?” section at the end of the book telling readers what these and others discussed in the book are currently doing today. Third, West provides a large section of color pictures (most taken by West himself) that add power to his words. Finally, he crafts a superb conclusion which offers tremendous insight on various subjects such as defeating the insurgency and the performance of the world press.

In summary, *No True Glory* is a superb book. I believe in years to come it will rightfully be recognized as the book to read not only on the operations in Fallujah, but on the opening months of the insurgency in Iraq. As you can surmise, I give West’s volume my highest recommendation. I am confident future readers will share my sentiments.

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***Ambush Alley, The Most Extraordinary Battle of the Iraq War.* By Tim Pritchard. New York: Presidio Press, 281 pages, \$25.95.** Reviewed by Major Keith Everett.

The only thing extraordinary about this engagement was the number of casualties. Eighteen Marines were killed and more than 55 were wounded in the battle at Nasiriyah on March 23, 2003. Tim Pritchard captured the fear, the confusion, and the mistakes after interviewing about 55 of the Marines who fought there. The thoughts and deeds of these Marines forced success out of the mistakes made leading up to the battle.

Pritchard, a London-based war journalist who also films documentaries, is not shy in documenting the mistakes made in planning and executing this battle. Some

of the participants even stated the high cost of the battle would be offset somewhat if Marines could learn from it. The battalion commander's decision to not wait for his tanks cost him dearly in time and men. The decision was made apparently in a desire to take the two bridges and secure the route through Nasiriyah quickly. The author is not judging the commander from his armchair, just pointing out what the Marines of the battalion felt occurred that day. It was not supposed to be a difficult mission. A determined enemy made the missing tanks a critical factor.

Pritchard brings the war to eye level as the Marines charge in with their characteristic speed but with a poor plan. After a series of blunders, the Marines emerged severely bloodied, wiser with the terrifying experience of close quarter battle slammed into their knowledge base.

Nasiriyah, a medium-sized Iraqi city of about 500,000 has two bridges of strategic importance. A bridge over the Euphrates River on the southeastern edge of the city and about four and a half kilometers away another bridge over the Saddam canal. Both bridges allowed easy access across the major water obstacles between the Marines and Baghdad. The 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Rick Grabowski, had the mission to capture these two bridges. During the encounter, the streets were compared to those of Mogadishu in the minds of many Marines. LTC Grabowski's concept included a "series of rapid, violent and unexpected maneuvers." The maneuvers ended up predictable after getting bogged down in the city. The tanks may have even prevented this battle from getting started by destroying any initial enemy success.

The battle of Nasiriyah should be studied by any Soldier at the brigade level down for emphasizing the importance of adapting in positive ways to the changes demanded by enemy contact. Speed is gained not just by forging ahead, but by using assets wisely to take care of obstacles. Nasiriyah and the Marines who fought here gave many valuable lessons. We need to heed them.

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*The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry In Northwestern Europe, 1944-*

**1945. By Paul Fussell. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.** Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Michael A. Boden.

Paul Fussell's book, *The Boys' Crusade: The American Infantry In Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945*, is not a typical historical examination of World War II. It is something deeper, more thought-provoking, and above all, more rewarding. The author is a distinguished American professor of English as well as a former rifle platoon leader, who was seriously wounded fighting in Germany in 1945. Fussell produces an account of the conflict that is poignant and fascinating, providing a window into the life of the war's participants that is seldom encountered, and even more rarely addressed in such a comprehensive manner.

*The Boys' Crusade* is a collection of essays centered around the experiences of the Soldiers who fought in the war, the young men who were suddenly and violently exposed to the broader world beyond the borders of the United States. Fussell tells their story chronologically, through episodic glimpses from the participants' perspectives of the events during the last year of the war in Europe, from the invasion preparations in England, through the fall and winter fighting, to the final defeat of Germany in the spring.

Throughout the book, Fussell constantly reminds the reader of the suffering and sorrow of war. As a constant companion to this focus, however, is the author's constant stress of the sacredness of life, regardless of an individual's role in the conflict. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the penultimate chapter, "The Camps," where Fussell writes a moving essay about the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps. Here, in places like Dachau and Buchenwald, young U.S. Soldiers finally understood, after all of the tragedies they had endured the previous year, why they fought. And they realized that sometimes great hardships are necessary and must be borne to end even greater suffering.

World War II was neither pretty nor fair, and many of the actions taken by young American Soldiers were ethically questionable at best, and Fussell does not shy away from the less-than-respectable aspects of U.S. involvement in the war. He

deftly places these events in context with the wider war and world, forcing the reader to think about morals and ethics in war beyond simplistic "means and ends" comparisons. This is a powerful book, and should be considered among the best books published on World War II in recent years. The momentous events are well-known, but Fussell's essays of far lesser-known happenings invite reflection and consideration from a different perspective.

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*Civil War Medicine: Challenges and Triumphs. By Dr. Alfred Jay Bollet. Tucson, AZ: Galen Press, LTD, 2002, 489 pages, \$44.95.* Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel (Retired) Albert N. Garland and Patricia Weekley.

I found this a fascinating book to read and a solid historical work. It is not a gruesome narrative, although there are a few sections — embalming; chronic diarrhea, "it takes good guts to be a good soldier" prison camps; and "laudable pus" — that may bother some readers. This is not in any sense the author's intent.

Doctor Bollet has long served as a medical doctor in various academic institutions, including the Medical College of Georgia. At present, he is a clinical professor of medicine at Yale University.

He has long been interested in all aspects of our Civil War. During his reading and study, he began to devote more and more time to the medical history of the war and he finds "the preponderance of the existing data refers to the Union Army, since the bulk of the Confederate records were destroyed in the fire that consumed much of Richmond on April 2, 1865." But in the Confederate records he did locate, "their data are similar to the Union as far as can be determined."

What I particularly liked about this book was the author's "attack" on so many Civil War histories in which the authors don't bother to include any discussion of the medical side of the war. And their histories invariably contain nothing but "lasting negative evaluations" of the medical services.

Bollet admits both the Union and Confederate departments did perform "dismally" when the war began, but he is quick to point out "the Medical Services responded remarkably well to the immense

demands” placed on them “by achieving survival rates for disease and wounds not known in previous wars by developing innovations that later became standard components of battlefield and disaster medicine.”

He also wants his readers to know — and rightly so — how poorly our society had done in recognizing the valiant service of our medical personnel in not only the Civil War but in all of our wars. Our nurses in Vietnam did finally get a statue, which was added to the war’s memorial, but can you name another such memorial?

(As an Infantry rifle company commander in Northwest Europe during World War II, I can remember the frequent cries of “aid man!” from my squads and platoons. No once did any of these aid men let us down. Looking back, I regret I did not give them more recognition and the kind they truly deserved, and I can’t forget the work carried out by our regimental detail responsible for collecting our dead.)

During the Civil War, 51 surgeons died either in battle or of wounds suffered in battle, while in Bollet’s words, “A total of 335 surgeons died while in service, most from disease.” And after the war, Bollet suggests that “as emotions cooled, it was easier to see what a fine job Civil War physicians had done.”

He uses his 27 chapters and seven appendices to support his arguments. Along the way, he brings to the forefront the most important service rendered by such individuals as Jonathan Letterman (the father of both the Modern Military and the Emergency Medical Systems); Charles S. Tripler, who proposed a proper ambulance system and also suggested improvements in the nursing care in hospitals; and William Hammond, “one of the founders of the specialty of neurology in the United States.”

I cannot recommend this book too highly. I would have liked more space and details devoted to the important role played by those men (company aid men) who treated and evacuated the wounded and the dead on and from the war’s slaughter houses, i.e., Second Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Gettysburg, and the rest. But I am more than willing to forgive this one subject I happen to be quite interested in. So, if you are a student of our Civil War, you must become familiar with this book.



Tech Sergeant Jeremy Lock, USAF

*Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment, 1st Armored Division, simulate breaching a house during training in Ramadi, Iraq. The Soldiers were training Iraqi Army soldiers from the 7th Iraqi Army Division on patrolling and breaching techniques.*

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