

# Book Reviews



***Gates of Fire.* By Steven Pressfield. New York: Bantam Books, 1999 (reissue) 480 pages, \$7.99 (paperback).** Reviewed by Kenny Toole, *Infantry Magazine* editorial intern.

Steven Pressfield has made a name for himself by bringing historical battles to life in his epic novels. He has written *The Virtues of War*, the story of Alexander the Great, and *Tides of War*, a novel of Alcibiades and the Peloponnesian War. In *Gates of Fire*, Pressfield documents the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 B.C., in which 300 Greeks are able to hold off the entire Persian Army for three days. The story is told by the lone Spartan survivor of the battle, Xeonos.

The novel begins when Xeonos is a young child and his country is invaded. He and his cousin were able to escape the enemy but still witnessed the murder of his mother and father. Shortly thereafter, his cousin was savagely raped by six enemy soldiers. A very cruel yet vivid and memorable beginning shows the realities of war as enemy soldiers spread terror through the countryside.

Pressfield gives a very realistic portrayal of the training Spartan soldiers endured to prepare them for war. In the Greek society, there was no greater honor than to become a soldier and fight for your country. After the death of Xeonos' parents, he wanted to become a soldier and avenge their murders. He became a squire for the Spartans under his war-hardened master Deinekes. The intense training and discipline instilled in soldiers is revealed through Xeonos' experiences and observations as a squire.

Throughout the years of training Xeonos endured, the Greeks were keenly aware that the Persian King Xerxes and his army were conquering all of Asia and approaching Greece. By the time he was 20, the Persian Army was near the border and preparing to invade Greece itself. In order to delay the invasion and allow the main force of the army to organize a defense, 300 Spartans were selected to delay the Persian invasion for as long as possible. Among the 300 were the Spartan King Leonidas,

Deinekes, and Xeonos. Each soldier chosen knew this was a suicide mission, but they were more than willing to sacrifice their lives to defend their country from the Persians.

Thermopylae is a narrow rocky mountain pass in northern Greece. It was determined that this location would give the Spartans the best tactical advantage against the massive Persian Army. The pass between the mountain and the sea was narrow enough to limit the number of Persians that could enter it at one time, thus keeping the Spartan forces from getting overrun. For two days the Spartans were able to fend off the Persians. These two days are filled with extremely realistic and graphic battle scenes of hand-to-hand combat that gives the reader a true sense of what warfare was like 2500 years ago.

On the third day the Spartans' numbers were down to barely 100. Xerxes sent a messenger to the Spartans telling them to surrender their weapons and they would not be harmed. Leonidas replied with two words "Molon labe" which means: Come and get them. The remaining Spartans fought them off for as long as they possibly could, but were eventually overrun. Estimates range that the Spartans killed between 20 and 100 Persians for every Spartan killed. Although the Spartans were defeated at Thermopylae, their courage and sacrifice motivated the Greeks to unite, and they eventually defeated the Persians.

This is an extraordinary book on so many different levels. Pressfield does a tremendous job of recreating the Greek society from 2,500 years ago. In addition, despite our tremendous advances in weaponry, the tactics of land warfare used by the Spartans against a far superior force are still relevant on the battlefield today. The courage, honor, discipline, and sacrifice these Spartans showed in the face of certain death should serve as an example to all soldiers defending their country. *Gates of Fire* is a tremendously entertaining and magnificent work for Soldiers and civilians alike.

***A Military Miscellany.* By Thomas Ayres. New York: Bantam Dell Publishing Group, 184 pages, \$15, 2006.** Reviewed by Tracy Raines, *Infantry Magazine* editorial intern.

Thomas Ayres, who passed away in March 2006, wrote for the *Dallas Times Herald*, *Civil War Times* and *Columbiad*, (USA national history magazine). A seasoned investigative reporter and an award-winning columnist, he was the author of *Dark and Bloody Ground*, *The Battle of Mansfield and the Forgotten Civil War in Louisiana* and *That's Not in My American History Book*.

*Military Miscellany* is listed as a reference/trivia book. It is a compact book packed with interesting tidbits about military personnel and forgotten events. Ayres shares untold stories of Americans such as Walt Disney, and how he was an ambulance driver in World War I. He also briefly notes that Cadet Edgar Allan Poe was dismissed from West Point, but provides little detail as to why.

The book is a sure page-turner, unfolding unknown facets of American military history. Ayres included many notable quotes from people such as General Philip Sheridan, who said "A crow could not fly over it without carrying his rations with him," describing the devastated Shenandoah Valley. The book also includes many military facts such as the breakdown of the construction of the Pentagon and how many of the pieces of heavy equipment are buried within the building site. "A Chronology of America's Foreign Military Involvement," also lists important United States encounters from 1775-2005.

Although Ayres does not include a bibliography, he includes an index as a quick reference guide. He also includes timelines, lists, and other facts. The book is packed with interesting military lore. The stories within the book reflect the military in an honest witty tone.

Anyone, from the general to the private or the historian to the military enthusiast, will find *A Military Miscellany* informative and inspirational. This book is certain to

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be a favorite, with Ayres' descriptions of some amazing and amusing blunders and surprising trivia.

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***Warrant for Terror: The Fatwas of Radical Islam and the Duty of Jihad.* By Shmuel Bar. Published in cooperation with the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California and available through Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 152 pages, \$21.95.** Reviewed by Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein, USN.

One of the root causes of Islamist militancy and methods to enable recruitment and sanction violence are the so-called unchallenged *fatwas* (religious edicts) issued by clerics. It is vital that well-known *fatwas* utilized by jihadists like those of Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman and Abdullah Azzam not only be exposed for the damage they do to Muslim society as a whole, but be Islamically challenged by other clerics. This requires a sensitization for the *fatwas* of jihad, and Shmuel Bar, director of Studies at the Institute of Strategy and Policy at Herzliya University in Israel, provides an insightful starting point to begin understanding how war of *fatwas* represents the tip of the spear in the debate over whether Islamic history, law and precedent will be interpreted in a constructive or destructive manner in the 21st century. In many ways classical Islamic scholars were much wiser than their counterparts today. The book highlights a quote by 13th century scholar Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who serves as a major source of fundamentalist Muslims. He said, "As for the fanatics, they can place any problem upside down. When they turn to the *sunnah* (Islamic precedence) they borrow only what corresponds to their pronouncements and contrive tricks to push away evidence that does not suit them." This sentence rings as true today as it did more than 700 years ago, as jihadist ideology selectively applies only those aspects of Islamic law that advances its agenda of dominance and control.

Among the problems identified is how the relationship between the *ulama* (religious establishment) and the government differs from one Middle Eastern country to another. The Saudi royal

family is highlighted as having lost control of the rank and file *ulama*, and that the number of *fatwas* issued by unsanctioned Saudi clerics is on the rise since 9-11. This has led to a decree that only authorized *ulama* can issue *fatwas* and only the government can issue calls for jihad. Egypt attempts to balance its Fatwa Committee rooted in Al-Azhar independence with a wide range of rulings from the Sheikh Ali Gomaa's condemnation that western tourists in Egypt are unarmed guests who contributed to Egypt's economy and should be protected to the radical rulings sanctioning suicide bombings. Syria does not care about nor desire an independent clerical establishment.

Pages dissect how a sound *fatwa* is made that includes *maslahah* (pragmatic determination of public interest), *daruriyat* (necessity) and *tahsiniyyat* (improving the human condition). These were ways in which the four schools of Sunni Islamic law were derived and represent a complex and highly educated means of making sound rulings, an education not rooted in Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other movements who issue militant edicts condemning whole swaths of society, both Muslim and non-Muslim. One chapter focuses on the complex debate on jihad and issues of what tradition would call just war, it reveals an obsession by classical Islamic jurists not on the reward of 72 virgins in paradise but the morality of killing noncombatants to include women, children, monks, nuns and the spoiling of the environment by destroying trees and damaging wells. Page 17 does have a typographical error, citing the massacre of tourists in Luxor, Egypt, as occurring in 1977; it happened in 1997. The book ends with a chapter entitled, "The War of the Fatwa," and takes reader into the ideological struggle between clerics for the soul of Islam. Bar ends with an appeal for western policymakers to come to terms to the reality of the religious nature of this conflict and to pay close attention to those who have a healthy, reasoned, and constructive view of Islam versus those who manipulate the faith to serve destructive ends.

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***Sister in the Band of Brothers, Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq.***

**By Katherine M. Skiba. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 296 pages and 40 photographs, \$29.95.** Reviewed by Tracy Raines, *Infantry Magazine* editorial intern.

Photographer and journalist Katherine M. Skiba shares her experiences as an embedded journalist in her book *Sisters in the Band of Brothers, Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq*. The book is an insightful account of the embedding process of U.S. journalists on the front lines of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Skiba, a seasoned award-winning reporter, is a Washington, D.C., correspondent for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*. She has covered stories such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the 9-11 terror attack on the Pentagon and various U.S. peacekeeping missions.

Official plans began on October 30, 2002 to hold training sessions for potential embedded reporters. The plan consisted of embedding 600 journalists into units conducting specific operations of major interest. Skiba describes her determination to hold a media position with the DOD and how she shuffled to find every military piece that she had written, in order to qualify to receive a place in the journalistic "lottery".

Her embedding process began at Fort Benning, Georgia. She recounts her "media boot camp" training in an honest, humorous tone. "Orders is orders" she said as she describes her military greeter, Major Alex Covert, who was prepared to deploy on short notice. She describes his dedication and willingness to sacrifice his presence, as he may deploy and leave his wife to deliver their firstborn child alone. Skiba recalls her own farewell to her husband; in the event that anything should happen to her, she said, "Marry someone nice. Fish a lot. Forgive me for doing this."

Although she trained alongside the troops, the truth is, that up until this war the military and the media have been adversaries. Skiba and other journalists have been depicted as members of "humanity's dumpster," she claims.

Her account of Operation Iraqi Freedom is a collection of real-life situations during her journalistic involvement with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). The unit, also known as the Screaming Eagles, was famous for the heroism of its Soldiers

during World War II. The unit was recently immortalized in the “Band of Brothers” television series. She describes the “golden deserts” of Iraq and the inconveniences of war through the eyes of an “outsider at best, and a problem to solve at worst,” although she admits that the Army does not have “problems, only issues.”

In her book, she presents an image of our U.S. Soldiers as the caring humans they are, describing their comrades, men and women, their families, their hopes, and their dreams. Her vivid descriptions of human experiences of Camp Thunder, whether viewed by military or media, combatant or noncombatant, man or woman, range from a “sand-drenched, snake-infested outpost” and a “five thousand star hotel.”

Her 50-day tour with the 101st Airborne to “Bad Guy Land” ended with the collapse of Baghdad and the concomitant fall of Saddam Hussein.

After her return to the United States, nightmares, flashbacks and post-traumatic stress became a part of her being. She felt distanced from the peace that she once had and admits that she will never be the same.

*Sister in the Band of Brothers, Embedded with the 101st Airborne in Iraq*, is a must read for infantrymen, academia, civilians, and journalists. The powerful story of this reporter provides an account of the individual stories from family members, who were searching the media for answers about their loved ones — their soldiers. Professionally, her accounts of the conflict provided hope, strength and courage for the waiting families at home and became a vital lifeline to encourage patience during troubled times. The book is a testament to the bravery and courage of 101st Soldiers in the face of danger during war.

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***Malice Aforethought, A History of Booby Traps from World War One to Vietnam.* By Ian Jones. Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 240 pages, \$34.95 (hardcover).** Reviewed by Major Keith Everett, U.S. Army Reserve.

Staying alive is the best reason for a Soldier to read and study this history of booby traps. From rats in WWII stuffed with plastic explosives to explosives

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disguised as stone, mud, rock or horse droppings, many devices from past wars can be compared to devices used Iraq or Afghanistan. Knowing what to look for and developing an idea of tactical possibilities aids Soldiers in coming home unscathed.

Ian Jones worked in bomb disposal for 35 years, first as a British Army officer, then as an explosives officer for the London Metropolitan Police. He was the commanding officer for all bomb disposal in Northern Ireland as an Army major and also worked in Germany, Bosnia, Belize, South Africa and Kosovo. Jones uses his extensive knowledge to organize a detailed introduction to explosive devices. A thorough reading of his work helps raise bombing awareness dramatically. Jones uses detailed anecdotes to survey the period from World War I to Vietnam.

Jones starts his survey with WWI experiences ranging from the standard booby-trapped grenades, flags, an eight-day delayed bomb in a German building, to explosives on an observation balloon that downed an attacking German plane and

pilot 150 yards away. The mine clearers of the time developed the method of using a magnetic compass to locate mines or shells hidden in the wall. The compass needle deviated up to 30-40 degrees when passing a hidden large metal object like a mine. The WWII section introduced a greater variety of devices, increasing the need for advanced training for engineers. The booby-trapped canteens and radio handsets set the standard for going after the Soldier/souvenir hunter. The report of a British patrol encountering a booby-trapped door during WWII in 1943 is especially memorable. The patrol notices the device and carefully attaches a line to the doorknob. A slit trench located straight across the road provides convenient cover for the entire patrol as they pile into it to protect themselves from the door device. As the door knob is pulled, explosives go off in the trench, killing the entire patrol.

The wide variety of devices and tactics used in both World Wars and Vietnam was fascinating. Despite the awkward British title, *Malice Aforethought* is an excellent primer on improvised explosive devices.

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