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Bill Sloan, *The Darkest Summer: Pusan and Inchon 1950: The Battles That Saved South Korea—and the Marines—from Extinction*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009. Pp. ix, 385. ISBN 978-1-4165-7174-2.

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Bill Sloan, a former Pulitzer-nominated reporter at the *Dallas Times Herald*, has published popular books on the Marines at Wake, Peleliu, and Okinawa,¹ along with other works of nonfiction and two novels. His latest work, according to the book's dust jacket, "is the dramatic story of the first three months of the Korean War, captured through author interviews with dozens of surviving U.S. veterans, as it has never been told before." *The Darkest Summer* does not live up to this billing or to its subtitle.

The book opens with a brief account of the origins of the Korean War, followed by one on the U.S. Army's deficiencies at the start of the war. There is a detailed section on the Task Force Smith battle. After discussing the Marine Corps' enemies in Washington, Sloan looks at Eighth Army's battles in July 1950. Thereafter the book focuses on the actions of the First Marine Provisional Brigade and then the 1st Marine Division in the Pusan Perimeter and the Inchon-Seoul campaigns. Sloan does provide the occasional vignette about Army units in August and September, usually to highlight how the marines were superior to the soldiers. He also sketches in the big picture by discussing actions in MacArthur's headquarters and in Washington. The final chapter is a brief account of the United Nations' defeat in North Korea by the Chinese, followed by an epilogue that recounts what happened after November 1950 to a number of the men, both high and low ranking, featured in the book.

Sloan's intended audience is the general reader of military history. There is no attempt to engage the existing literature on his topic nor any effort at analysis beyond that found in the bases for his narrative: secondary literature, memoirs, and his interviews with veterans decades after the war. Most of those veterans served as company-grade marine infantrymen; others include a field-grade marine staff officer and several soldiers. Instead of footnotes or endnotes, chapter notes at the end of the book list relevant sources. The four maps are adequate; among the forty-two photographs are head shots of a number of the veterans featured in the text.

The author is sometimes careless in his use of secondary sources, as when he has elements of the 7th Infantry Division deploying to Korea in July instead of September 1950 (56); has four divisions instead of the actual one reinforced division in Task Force Kean (105); and provides an incorrect name (Frank A. Allen rather than Leven C. Allen) for Eighth Army's chief of staff (281). He accepts without question accounts provided by veterans in memoirs and interviews, most notably a marine battalion commander's dramatic story of being threatened by black soldiers fleeing the destruction of the 555th Field Artillery Battalion at the Bloody Gulch in August 1950. The 555th, however, was not a black battalion (133-34).

Sloan writes in a journalistic human-interest style, particularly when recounting battles from the perspective of marines and soldiers at the company level. He himself is a pronounced presence in the book, getting across his own judgments about events and people.

Over the next sixty years, the officers and enlisted men of Task Force Smith have been among the favorite "whipping boys" for Korean War historians and armchair critics. They've been targeted for the bitterest kind of condemnation and even outright ridicule for "bugging out" in the face of the enemy. But in truth, the majority

1. *Given Up for Dead: America's Heroic Stand at Wake Island* (NY: Bantam, 2003), *Brotherhood of Heroes: The Marines at Peleliu, 1944—The Bloodiest Battle of the Pacific War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2005), *The Ultimate Battle: Okinawa 1945—The Last Epic Struggle of World War II* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

of them—green, poorly trained, and shoddily equipped though they were—fought bravely in an untenable situation.

If the real culprits had been singled out, they could have been found in Washington, Tokyo, and Taejon, among the ill-advised commanders who sent 548 American soldiers into a battle they had no hope of winning against a tank-led army of thousands (37).

This quotation reveals the major weakness of *The Darkest Summer*: despite the promise on its dust jacket, the book offers nothing new. Too often, Sloan simply repeats judgments already presented by T.R. Fehrenbach and Clay Blair.² By ignoring more recent work³ on the war's first three months, he deprives the reader of important revisionist arguments that differ with the "Fehrenbach School."⁴ Sloan's use of interviews, memoirs, and a lively prose style makes it clear that serving as an infantryman in Korea during the summer of 1950 could be a hellish experience, but this story, too, has been told before.⁵

While Sloan clearly admires the Marine Corps, the omission of any reference to Allan R. Millett's indispensable *Semper Fidelis*⁶ vitiates his discussion of the struggle over the role of the Marine Corps in national defense after 1945. For example, he correctly emphasizes President Truman's antipathy towards marines, quoting his infamous letter (of 29 August 1950) calling the Marine Corps "the Navy's police force," yet fails to mention that it was written in response to press accounts criticizing his administration for problems the First Provisional Marine Brigade encountered in its first combat operations. Indeed, Sloan seems to imply that Truman wrote the letter *before* the war.

Sloan also does not follow the developments after Truman's letter became public, culminating in the 1951 law making the Marine Corps the only service whose force structure is set by Congress. Nor does he link the battlefield achievements of marines in Korea with what happened in Washington. Instead, he ends his final chapter with a simple declaration: "In the fifty-six years since the Korean War cease-fire, no authority figure in Washington has ever again suggested eliminating the Marine Corps as the nation's premier fighting force" (328).

The Darkest Summer, although it rightfully salutes the bravery and sacrifice of American marines and soldiers during the first three months of the Korean War, is an inadequate history of their efforts and of the campaigns in which they served.

2. In *This Kind of War: Korea: A Study in Unpreparedness* (NY: Macmillan, 1963) and *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (NY: Times Books, 1987), respectively.

3. Notably missing from the bibliography are Richard E. Wiersema's School of Advanced Military Studies monograph, "No More Bad Force Myths: A Tactical Study of Regimental Combat in Korea" (18 Dec 1998) and Thomas E. Hanson's "America's First Cold War Army: Combat Readiness in the Eighth US Army, 1949–1950" (diss. Ohio State 2006) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1024.htm>.

4. The term is Hanson's (note 3 above) 11–15.

5. Notably in Donald Knox, *The Korean War: Pusan to Chosin, an Oral History* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1985); Rudy Tomedi, *No Bugles, No Drums: An Oral History of the Korean War* (NY: Wiley, 1993); and Louis Baldovi, ed., *A Foxhole View: Personal Accounts of Hawaii's Korean War Veterans* (Honolulu: U Hawai'i Pr, 2002). Also untapped is the U.S. Army Military History Institute's Korean War Veterans Survey Project.

6. Subtitle *The History of the United States Marine Corps* (1980; rev. ed. NY: Free Press, 1991).