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Charles Glass, *The Deserters: A Hidden History of World War II*. New York: Penguin, 2013. Pp. xx, 380. ISBN 978-1-59420-428-9.

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Military deserters in World War II have had few champions. Charles Glass, a distinguished journalist and prolific author,¹ intends to change that. With a deep and extravagant empathy, he reprises the unrelenting intensity of infantry combat in North Africa and Europe and the resulting psychological breakdown, self-wounding, and desertion that inevitably accompanied long exposure to battle. None of this will be news to readers of Paul Fussell² or Charles Doubler,³ among others. But Glass wants to persuade his readers that the travail of battle and the army's inadequate response to it caused desertion.

"Few deserters were cowards," Glass writes. The "strain of constant battle" (xiii), poor leadership, and a replacement system that sent men to units they had not trained with, badly undermined unit cohesion. But it is hard to see how the army could have filled depleted infantry ranks differently. Glass asserts, without documentation, that those who expressed the "greatest sympathy" for deserters were fellow front-line soldiers; he complains, with no trace of irony, that "deserters ... went unacknowledged" (6) in a New York City parade of veterans returning from the First World War.

The book's title is deceptive and readers hoping for a thoroughly researched study of desertion in World War II will be disappointed. Glass focuses on three deserters who wrote memoirs or autobiographies years after the war. Alfred Whitehead's privately printed book appeared in 1989. John Bain, writing as "Vernon Scannell," published two autobiographies.⁴ Steve Weiss wrote unpublished drafts of his memoirs, one dated 2009, the other apparently undated. Glass provides no thorough evaluations of the quality of his sources. He does not mention the differences between Weiss's drafts or Scannell's two autobiographies. Nor does he comment on the reliability of memoirs as historical sources more generally—a strange omission, considering that these particular memoirs were written by deserters seeking to explain or justify their actions.

Glass gives the most space to Weiss, the only one of his subjects who fits his thesis about the causes of desertion. A Brooklyn Jew with a high school education, Weiss sought to join a psychological warfare branch, but was assigned instead as a replacement to the Thirty-Sixth Infantry Division. He saw his first action in Italy in May 1944 and later took part in the invasion of southern France. Separated from his company near Valence, on the Rhône in southeastern France, he and his squad briefly joined a French resistance unit working with the American OSS. He later wrote that he found father figures there, in contrast to his cold and aloof company commander. His efforts to be reassigned to the OSS were rebuffed and he and his mates returned to a unit that had suffered many casualties. No officer shook his hand.

Within a matter of days, he deserted, then returned about a week later. His CO ignored his request for temporary noncombat duty but, remarkably, did not punish him. Back on the line, he deserted again, returned again, and this time faced a general court-martial. Asked by a prosecuting attorney whether he would be willing to return to his unit, Weiss answered "I don't think I can sir" (249). The court sentenced him to life in prison, a punishment never likely to be fully enforced.

1. He was chief Middle East correspondent for ABC News (1983-93) and is the author of, among other books, *Tribes with Flags: A Dangerous Passage through the Chaos of the Middle East* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1990), *Americans in Paris: Life and Death under Nazi Occupation* (NY: Penguin, 2010), and *Syria Burning: ISIS and the Death of the Arab Spring* (NY: OR Books, 2015).

2. *Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996) and *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989).

3. *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1994).

4. *The Tiger and the Rose: An Autobiography* (London: Hamilton, 1971) and *Argument of Kings: An Autobiography* (London: Robson Books, 1987).

Within a month, Weiss was again offered a chance to return to the front, in return for dismissal of his conviction at war's end. His refusal speaks volumes about the fear that had overtaken him. A few months later, an army psychologist recommended that the charges be dropped—"You don't belong here. You belong in a hospital" (272). And then a final twist. An army lawyer, apparently ignorant of Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's decision that no soldiers who had already served in two theaters of operation would be assigned to the Pacific, asked Weiss whether he would fight in the Pacific. Weiss, aware of Eisenhower's order, said he would—a lie, however understandable.

Years after the trauma of combat, Weiss may have gained a deeper understanding of his overmastering fear of battle. Combat fatigue is a better diagnosis than cowardice. But Weiss's retrospective self-psychoanalyzing, especially his observations about father figures, suggests a disconnect between experience and memory.

John Bain, a working-class youth from England, deserted three times. The first, while his Scottish regiment was still in Scotland, led only to a demotion. The second, on the front lines in North Africa, was motivated, he wrote, not by fear, but by the sight of his fellow soldiers stripping whatever they could from the corpses of their fallen comrades. His court-martial was followed by harsh imprisonment near Alexandria. After six months, he, like Weiss, was given a chance to return to the ranks. Unlike Weiss, however, he agreed and rejoined his unit in time to land in Normandy on D-Day. Ten days later, severe wounds to both legs ended his war. Convalescing in England, he inexplicably deserted again—"I really loathed the army"—fearing he would "become a brown automaton, a thing without imagination" (286).

He certainly showed considerable imagination during a life on the run in London and Leeds: he changed his name to "Vernon Scannell," became a professional boxer, and began to write poetry. The Army finally caught up with him. At his court-martial, he claimed he had deserted to protect his "imagination, sensitivity, and intelligence" and that he wanted to be a poet. "Well, send him to a psychiatrist," he claims a member of the court said; "He's clearly mad" (294). And so they did. In the end he was granted an honorable discharge for "anxiety neurosis" (295). He went on to write several volumes of poetry and fiction besides his two autobiographies; he was elected to the Royal Society of Literature. Vernon Scannell clearly does not fit Glass's argument.⁵

Neither does Alfred Whitehead, who grew up in rural Tennessee with a brutal stepfather, left home at fourteen, and enlisted in the Army in 1942. Military life seemed to suit him. Assigned to the Second Infantry Division, he landed on D-Day plus one (7 June 1944) and fought until December 1944, earning a promotion to corporal and a Silver Star, the army's third highest award for valor. He is, however, an unreliable narrator, as Glass makes clear. For example, he did not land on D-Day (6 June 1944) and was not awarded a Purple Heart. Despite such exaggerations and falsehoods, he was a brave and competent soldier.

After recovering from appendicitis, Whitehead was sent to a replacement center rather than to his former company. Angry and resentful, he fled to Paris and joined other US deserters in such criminal activities as stealing from American warehouses and French citizens. His ill-gotten gains enabled him to invest in a café and small hotel for his girlfriend. In the end, he returned to military custody and after his court-martial was given a five-year sentence and a dishonorable discharge. The court never learned of his months of thievery. He returned to the United States and became a barber. When he sought to join a Second Infantry reunion in 1970, his former comrades wanted nothing to do with him.

The appearance of corrective accounts⁶ of the "greatest generation" should come as no surprise. Charles Glass does clarify the extent of desertion in Europe and the army's growing concerns about it, but, of the three deserters whose tales he tells, only one fits the profile of a fearful and traumatized combatant. Though he puts a human face on desertion, his empathy is misplaced. The true costs of desertion were borne by the equally fearful and traumatized men who remained in their ranks.

5. See further James Andrew Taylor, *Walking Wounded: The Life and Poetry of Vernon Scannell* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2013).

6 See, e.g., J. Robert Lilly, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe in WWII* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), and Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2013).