



*The Marines in World War II* by Michael E. Haskew.

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In *The Marines in World War II*, Michael Haskew offers a concise and riveting account of the US Marines' role in history's greatest military conflict. Though they served in a range of capacities—on land and sea, and in the air—they are “best remembered as the gritty, determined combat force that matured rapidly, learned hard lessons, took on the powerful defenders of the Empire of Japan, crossed the Pacific Ocean island by island, and fought, bled, died—and won” (11).

The book's eight chapters move from the attack on Pearl Harbor (7 Dec. 1941) through the Pacific War to the joint Army-Marine assault on Okinawa (spring 1945). We learn of the Marines' evolving techniques in pre-landing bombardments and reconnaissance as well as their development of demolition teams and the elite but short-lived Marine Raider units (1942-44). The author presents the Marines' defensive stand at Wake Island as an important psychological victory for the American people and a public relations triumph (in the spirit of Belleau Wood) for the Corps itself. At a dark moment in the early days of the war, the Marines' tenacity on Wake inspired a depressed home front.

After describing the Marines' baptism of fire at Guadalcanal and subsequent drive through the Gilbert and Mariana island chains, Haskew stoutly defends Adm. Chester Nimitz and Gen. Douglas MacArthur's decision to attack Peleliu, where Marines endured temperatures over 100°F and the fiercest Japanese resistance yet seen. He stresses that the controversial Peleliu landing taught US forces “invaluable lessons” (162). But most of said lessons had been painfully learned in the Tarawa Atoll and Solomon Islands, respectively one and two years *before* the American attack on Peleliu. Japanese defensive tactics had progressed in that interval, but not so much as to compel the Marines to re-learn costly lessons about the nature and difficulties of amphibious assaults.

Throughout, Haskew interweaves well-crafted vignettes on topics like the Higgins Boat, Gregory “Pappy” Boyington, the Navajo Code Talkers, and the Corps's cherished 75mm pack howitzers. A full chapter is devoted to Bougainville and the Northern Solomons, operations that historians tend to give short shrift in recounting the American advance through the Central Pacific.

Haskew portrays the assault on Tarawa (20-23 Nov. 1943) as a victory won by Marines' courage and resiliency during a “lightning strike of 76 hours” (219), and not as the painful, near-disaster that contemporary observers might have labeled it. While the Devil Dogs' valor no doubt contributed to their success, the Americans' fortuitous destruction of the Japanese communications network on the central island of Betio was at least equally decisive. As Maj. Gen. Julian Smith, commander of the 2nd Marine Division on Tarawa, humbly reflected after the battle: “We made fewer mistakes than the Japs did.”

An accomplished author and editor of *WWII History Magazine*, Haskew vividly recreates the experiences of individual Marine riflemen undergoing fierce combat in harsh environments

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1. Joseph H. Alexander, *Across the Reef: The Marine Assault of Tarawa* (Washington: Marine Corps Hist Ctr, 1993) 52.

throughout an agonizingly long Pacific War. His readers learn at some length about the exploits of Marine Medal of Honor recipients, a select group of eighty-two men by war's end.

Though he dwells on the exploits of Marine legends like Earl "Pete" Ellis, Merritt "Red Mike" Edson, and Lewis "Chesty" Puller, the author also records the less recognized heroism of young Marines—officers and enlisted men alike. In his account of Tarawa, for example, we meet a remarkable LVT (Landing Vehicle, Tracked) crew-chief:

[John Joseph] Spillane was a professional baseball prospect, and scouts from the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Yankees had visited his parents. When the Japanese began lobbing hand grenades into "The Old Lady," Spillane displayed incredible skill and bravery. Accounts vary as to how many hand grenades he fielded, spearing, trapping, and throwing them back like a shortstop. There were at least three and as many as six that hissed his way. "I didn't have time to think. I just kept throwing them back," Spillane remembered. "Finally, one came over with a lot of blue smoke coming out of it. I picked it up anyway, and just as I pushed back my hand to throw it went off. I was stunned for a minute. There wasn't much left of my hand, but I felt no pain." (97)

The author has less to say about the Corps's changing tactics in 1943–45, including improvements in tank-infantry coordination, better execution of close air support, and increased use of flamethrowers and 75mm pack howitzers. One wishes, too, that he had given more space to the roles of women and African-Americans, who receive, respectively, only one paragraph and one page of discussion. Readers will also regret the absence of footnotes and a bibliography, which makes it hard to follow Haskew's research and evidence.

Readers and viewers familiar with the work of Richard Wheeler and Joseph Alexander,<sup>2</sup> John Wayne's *Sands of Iwo Jima*,<sup>3</sup> or HBO's ten-episode series *The Pacific* (2010) will enjoy Haskew's new and exciting chronicle. But it fails to take a fresh, provocative, or analytical view of events that would engage serious students of its subject. Though the Corps's achievements are indeed worthy of recognition, characterizations like the following are more hyperbolic than scholarly: "The Marines who fought in the Philippines upset the Japanese timetable of conquest and denied them the use of harbor facilities at Manila Bay for a while" (31); the Marines of World War II "established a record of combat achievement unsurpassed in the history of warfare" (220).

On balance, then, *The Marines in World War II* is a succinct rendering of the Marine Corps's exploits, replete with dozens of riveting photographs befitting the author's narrative skills. But it adds little that is new and true to our understanding of the Pacific War.

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2. Respectively, *A Special Valor: The U.S. Marines and the Pacific War* (NY: Harper and Row, 1983; rpt. 2003), and *Storm Landings: Epic Amphibious Battles in the Central Pacific* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1997; rpt. 2012).

3. Dir. Allan Dwan (1950).