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FIGHTING FORCES AND SOLDIERS' EXPERIENCES IN WORLD WAR II AND KOREA:

Volker Griesser, *The Lions of Carentan: Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6, 1943-1945*. Philadelphia: Casement, 2011. Trans. Mara Taylor. Pp. 272. ISBN 978-1-61200-006-0.

Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Give Me Tomorrow: The Korean War's Greatest Untold Story—The Epic Stand of the Marines of George Company*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2010. Pp. xii, 261. ISBN 978-0-306-81801-1.

Dick Camp, *Last Man Standing: The 1st Marine Regiment on Peleliu, September 15-21, 1944*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2009. Pp. xi, 308. ISBN 978-0-7603-3493-5.

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The conventional wars of the twentieth century continue to grip the imagination. The experience of troops on the ground, in particular infantry soldiers, is central to this fascination. The three books reviewed here represent diverse ways of portraying and explaining the experience of battle. Two of them concern respectively German airborne units and American Marines during World War II; the third is about a US Marine unit during the “forgotten war” in Korea.

“The Lions of Carentan” is the unofficial appellation of the Wehrmacht’s Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6. It derives from the name of a small, rural town in the Cherbourg area of France, where the unit bravely fought against American airborne divisions and Canadian and British units that had landed at Normandy on D-Day. Volker Griesser, himself a former paratrooper in the postwar Bundeswehr, has made an interesting contribution to the history of the forces the Allies faced in Europe during the Second World War. Though unenlightening on the overall strategic situation of the Wehrmacht and in analyzing successes and failures of the Fallschirmjäger Regiment unit, his book nevertheless adds details about battles the regiment fought in Italy, the Soviet Union, France, Holland, and Germany.

Griesser provides a rich depiction based on (often lengthy) quotations from interviews with former soldiers. The book includes hundreds of photographs and maps as well as appendices listing commanders, citations awarded to the troops, sub-unit tags, and battle dates. There is also much information about the unit’s uniforms and weapons. Unfortunately, there is no index. The many photographs (often from private collections) significantly enhance the text, giving a feel for the locales where the regiment fought, from the stark and snowy plains of Russia to the streets Rome and the forests of France. Many of the maps, however, fail to make clear the unit’s positions and movements.

The volume comprises ten chapters arranged chronologically from the unit’s establishment to its surrender at the end of the war. Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 was formed in 1943 from a core of experienced troops from other units who trained and integrated newcomers (some with little military education and no combat experience). They deployed first to Italy, where they helped disarm the Italian military and subsequently fought Allied forces moving relentlessly north up the peninsula. They were then transferred to Russia, where heavy casualties forced a reorganization of the unit. In 1944, they were stationed in Normandy to counter the Allied invasion spearheaded by American airborne units. Armed only with light weapons, the unit was highly mobile, but its lack of mechanized formations resulted in horrific casualty rates in Russia and Normandy and later in Holland and Germany.

The battles around Carentan are recreated through the reminiscences and letters of veterans. Outnumbered, outgunned, and sustaining constant casualties, they fought a rearguard action marked by a high level of professionalism. Eventually drawing back from France, the Lions participated in fighting around Arnhem, Holland. Later still, they parachuted for the last time during the German offensive in the Ardennes, where they were scattered and had to make their way back to their own lines. They then took part in the

final battles in Germany itself before surrendering to the allies. Throughout, the unit earned the respect of the formations it fought.

Commendably, the tone of the book is not heroizing and the text, though marred by spelling and grammatical errors and even missing sentences, gives a workmanlike description of the regiment and its actions. Perhaps because of the translation, the voices of the soldiers often sound detached and unemotional. For example, a newly promoted corporal sent on a reconnaissance mission at Sainte-Mère-Église writes that

Around midday on 6 June, I received the assignment from our platoon leader, Lieutenant von Socha, to lead a recon troop and gather information about the enemy. We advanced from cover to cover, bush to bush, in the specified direction, intending to use our machine gun for fire-support. At that point, we hadn't seen anything of the soldiers on the other side.

In this way we entered into a disastrous situation. Even before we got our machine gun into position, Obergefreiter [roughly, lance corporal] Walter Klute was pushing through a hedge and was halfway through when we heard a short burst of gunfire. Because Klute took a round directly in the chest, he was dead right away, our first casualty. We had established contact with the enemy; our assignment was fulfilled with this, and we pulled back. When we reported the strength of the enemy and his position to the company, Lieutenant von Socha gave me a proper dressing down for having lost someone in our first deployment. (101)

Despite its rather distanced tone, the passage well conveys both the conditions the men operated under and the dynamics of the relations between NCOs and commanders. Another soldier describes a fierce battle against Canadian forces for a village in Holland:

One could recognize them well by the uniforms that were greener and not as brown as the Tommies. The fight for the village was bitter; often enough we weren't even fighting house-by-house, but room-by-room. Once we lay in a fully shot-up bedroom the chinstraps of our helmets undone, shirts open, and smocks buttoned open to our belt, panting from the battle. Next door in a similarly shot-up bedroom sat the Canadians, helmets in their laps and jackets open. They would only have to throw one hand grenade into our room, or us into theirs, but in that moment we were all too exhausted. After we all recovered our breath, we made ourselves combat-ready. We ran up the stairs to the attic, the Canadians jumped out the open window and disappeared into the neighboring garden. (174)

In such dispassionate terms, the book describes how, despite horrendous attrition and poor quality replacement troops, the regiment's fighting power did not significantly diminish. Even allowing for some romanticizing of the unit's prowess, the tenacity and innovativeness of ordinary troops and commanders are impressive. With its core of experienced NCOs, formidable platoon and company commanders, and a charismatic regimental commander, Fallschirmjäger Regiment 6 was a consistently difficult foe for the Allies.

Griesser well achieves his main goal of portraying battles from the perspective of soldiers and especially junior commanders, stitching together long quotations of veterans with relatively short narrative passages. As a result, the reader gets a good sense of the distinct experiences of troops and leaders not only in combat but also during training and the day-to-day routines of the military life. Lacking any elaborate scholarly apparatus of citations, *The Lions of Carentan* belongs to the genre of informal unit histories, with a heavy emphasis on the human side of war.

In *Give Me Tomorrow*, the prolific combat historian Patrick O'Donnell tells the story of a company that served in the US Marines in the Korean War. The title quotes a Marine who, after a terrible battle, was asked by a journalist what he would like, if he could have any wish. When it originally appeared in major newspapers, the photograph on the book's dust-jacket of a Korean War soldier—dirty, weary, cold, suffering battle exhaustion—came to symbolize the whole war. O'Donnell aims to capture the experiences and actions of George Company, one of the most decorated yet unrecognized units in a “forgotten war.”¹ Some of the troops of George Company had seen combat in World War II, but most were inexperienced (several were Marine reserves mobilized for the war). Interviews with these men, some of whom went on to become

¹ See Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950–1953* (1987; rpt. Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 2003).

senior Marine officers, together with letters, photographs, and conversations during the unit's annual reunions, form the basis of the book. There are also citations of oral histories and books about the Korean War, an index, and five appendices. One appendix takes a "then and now" look at the main characters; another lists Marines killed in action during George Company's time in Korea.

The volume's twenty-four short chapters are constructed around evocatively drawn scenes (landings, firefights, regroupings) suggestive of short, action-packed television vignettes. We follow the company from its formation at Camp Pendleton in California to its landing in Korea as part of General MacArthur's strike from Inchon eastward across the peninsula, its five stands against North Korean and later Chinese communist forces, and the subsequent American drive to the north of the country. The bulk of the book recounts the engagement at Chosin Reservoir in northern Korea, where badly outnumbered US troops had to endure dreadful weather, with temperatures well below freezing. We read here of the heroism of George Company as it withstood repeated Chinese attacks and broke out of the reservoir along an eleven-mile road, where the enemy held the high ground. All this is told from the viewpoint of individuals. Towering above everyone else is 1st Sgt. Ralph Zullo, the decorated Second World War veteran who led the company. Wounded and transferred to an aid station, Zullo was given up for dead but later discovered alive. He lived to attend the company's reunion thirty-five years later in a very emotional setting.

Allowing himself some literary license, O'Donnell vividly reconstructs the sounds, smells, and emotions of battle. For example, describing George Company's crossing of the Han River, he writes:

Boom! Splash!

Boom! Splash!

The amphibious vehicle swerved to avoid incoming North Korean mortar fire, while nervous Marines clenched their weapons and prayed that none of the rounds would hit the DUKWs.

Horace Edwards, a tall teetotaler from Texas who was a rifleman with First Platoon, remembered, "Our DUKW operator moved the rudder back and forth to zigzag the vehicle, making an S pattern in order to avoid the enemy mortars that were hitting the zigzag pattern where we weren't. I sat on the seat and looked at the mortar shells hitting the water and wondering if one of them was going to get lucky—and hoping it wouldn't." (53-54)

Recreating Zullo's final battle, where he was wounded by Chinese soldiers posing as Marines, O'Donnell writes that

Zullo pulled back the bolt on the .50 and threaded the copper and steel belt into the chamber. A hastily wrapped bandage covered a fresh bullet wound on this left wrist, and crimson seeped through the left shoulder of his parka where he'd taken shrapnel. He adjusted the head space on the weapon and began firing on the Chinese with projectiles that could cut a man in half.

Zullo provided covering fire as Marines rushed to recover a fallen man. He stayed on the gun for hours as the trucks pushed forward through one Chinese roadblock after another, while he administered a steady drumbeat of death.

Finally the Marines and what was left of the convoy of trucks and tanks cleared the last enemy roadblock. Still manning the .50, the World War II veteran of the Pacific campaign spotted a beautiful sight: tents and working lights from the airfield under construction in Hagaru-ri. *We made it*, he thought.

Abruptly, several individuals clad in Marine uniforms emerged from the tents and approached the convoy. Zullo turned to George Company's commanding officer. "Captain, what's our next move?"

Right at that moment, small arms fire erupted from the tents, and muzzle flashes illuminated Chinese faces cloaked by Marine Green. Machine gun fire and rifle bullets tore through Zullo's side, leaving a hole the size of a grapefruit. Blood gushed from his guts like a geyser. (3-4)

The subjective character of the book is both a strength and a weakness. For many readers, the intensity of the veterans' words will provide a stirring testament to the heroism of George Company's marines. The weakness of the volume lies in the lack of external validation of the men's accounts. As in Greisser's book, soldiers' recollections—colored by decades of both nostalgia and painful memories—may obscure any realistic view of George Company's operations. We learn very little, for instance, of the foibles and mistakes of

commanders and troops or of the petty politics that characterize any unit. With these provisos, *Give Me Tomorrow* may be read as a testimony to the achievements of George Company cast as a sort of morally edifying celebratory history.

Last Man Standing, by historian and Marine Corps veteran Dick Camp, is the most sophisticated of the three books reviewed here. Its subject is the Corps's very bloody Operation Stalemate on Peleliu. The invasion of the island was actually irrelevant to US victory in the Pacific (American forces had virtually eliminated Japanese airpower and the airfield on Peleliu could not service Japanese planes). But the extremely heavy casualty rates on both sides make this one of the iconic battles of US military history. In a critical and fair assessment of the battle, Camp skillfully analyzes the complex geopolitical context, the relevant operational and tactical moves, the status of American firepower, competition between senior commanders, and the experiences of ground troops. His writing features multiple perspectives and the voices of both American and, where possible, Japanese participants, drawing on personal interviews, oral histories, official reports, photographic collections, and a variety of other sources (some hitherto unpublished). Useful maps and diagrams clarify the challenges the Marines faced on Peleliu. As in his other books, Camp uses boxed inserts to accentuate such related material as the grounds for awarding citations, short biographies of officers, and details of local conditions on the island.

Framed by an introduction and a postscript, the volume's eighteen chapters proceed from the broad background of the Pacific campaign to the specific stages of the Peleliu operation and finally to the sad musings of senior Marine officers about the island's insignificance to the greater war effort. The well-written narrative follows the general contours of the battle, but also the movements of discrete units and the actions of individual soldiers and officers. We learn of the careful preparations of the Japanese forces (digging deep into the coral mountains, creating bunkers, and designing killing fields) and the lack of intelligence that led to an underestimation of their strength. The book mostly covers the landing on the beaches and the slow slog of the Marines over the first six days of the battle, until they were replaced by an army regiment.

The strength of the volume is its blend of matter-of-fact accounts, the more emotional reflections of soldiers, and striking passage like the following on the sights and sounds of nighttime combat:

A radio operator made a frenzied call and flares suddenly blossomed over no man's land. All along the line, tense scared men peered into the greenish-tinged landscape. Shadows played on their imaginations—a bush appeared to be a crouching enemy soldier; a boulder took on a human form. Gunfire erupted and explosions quickly followed as the defenders' nerves reached the breaking point. Flashes outlined the front lines as rifle and machine gun fire lashed out into the darkness. Gradually, officers and NCOs restored order. The firing died down and then stopped. (189–90)

Elsewhere, Camp's rehearsal of "dry" facts has a powerful and harrowing effect:

Dead Marines floated lifelessly in the water, the suction of the passing LVT [Landing Vehicle Tracked] drawing them in their wake. There was no stopping to pick them up. Many of the dead drifted out into the sea and were never recovered. They were listed as missing in action. Other remains were not identified and buried as Unknowns. Specifically trained graves-registration teams had to wait until after the fighting moved inland to gather the dead. Theirs was a grisly task—decomposition, ghastly wounds and traumatic amputations complicated the job of identifying remains. As an example, one of Bruce Watkins' men stepped on a bomb. "He completely disappeared, the only trace of him being a long piece of scalp, recognizable by his very black hair." (158)

A particularly effective aspect of *Last Man Standing* is its judicious analysis of the leadership before and during the Peleliu operation. Not content with the customary romantic depiction of the "legendary" Col. Lewis "Chesty" Puller, Camp carefully explains his failure to recognize that the attrition his units were suffering was sapping their operational effectiveness. He also notes Puller's limited mobility (owing to a troubling wound received at Guadalcanal), his stubborn reliance on full-frontal assaults with their appalling human cost, and his refusal to let another regiment replace his own decimated force. Though Puller was later promoted and cited for his actions (including those in Korea), Camp has in fact painted a more accurate portrait of the man than those found in more laudatory accounts. He also sharply criticizes division

commander Gen. William H. Rupertus for refusing to allow an army division to replace his battered marines (battalions had to be cut down to the size of companies), out of some misplaced pride in the Marine Corps. Such criticisms make Camp's book more compelling and convincing than O'Donnell's.

Griesser, O'Donnell, and Camp all state that personal experiences motivated them to write their books. In Griesser's case, it was his time in the post-World War II Bundeswehr and his desire to document the experiences of Wehrmacht paratroopers. His research entailed many interactions with Fallschirmjäger Regiment veterans. O'Donnell met some men of George Company when they came to welcome Marines returning from Iraq. He himself was just returning from a stint as a war correspondent in Iraq.² For his part, Camp became interested in the battle of Peleliu when he was aide-de-camp for Maj. Gen. Ray Davis, a Marine battalion commander under Chesty Puller. Personal connection to their subjects helps explain the power of these authors' narratives and their deep respect for the combatants whose stories they tell. The triumphal tone of O'Donnell's book in particular led me, an external observer of US society, to see such works, quite apart from their historical value, as typifying the American commitment to "our boys (and latterly girls) over there" in foreign deployments.

The three books prompt us to contemplate similarities and differences between the fighting forces of various nations, especially in the context of conventional or symmetric warfare. All three attest to close parallels between individual experiences and unit dynamics across militaries on opposing sides. Time and again one is struck by common personal motivations (concern for comrades, simple patriotism, or sheer survival), small group dynamics (the importance of junior and more senior commanders, the emergence of informal leaders in combat situations, and the value of social support), and drills (hand signals and voice commands, training and exercises, and weapons handling).

The resemblance between the US Marines and Wehrmacht soldiers also extended to a readiness to improvise in specific situations, as soldiers or their leaders came up with solutions to tactical problems. Similarities are also evident in the informal life of the barracks, characterized by the boredom endemic to military existence as well as by such practices as scrounging and "swap outs" and inventive forms of stealing for the good of the unit. For example, one leader in George Company encouraged his troops to exchange their weapons for superior rifles belonging to another unit, while Griesser recounts the German paratroopers' "requisitioning" of vehicles in Rome. Further, the dynamic of unit disintegration and rebuilding in and around battles was common on both sides; I refer not to the withdrawal of a unit to re-form and train incoming troops, but to the integration of additional soldiers (often support personnel like clerks or kitchen staff) into the line units, even during firefights. Finally, there were the more mundane commonalities of life in industrial warfare: the sights and smells, the sounds and feel of weapons, the physical and emotional exhaustion, and the unique language of combat forces.

Yet, for all this, the overarching political and cultural situations of the units were not at all alike. Griesser reports this eyewitness account by a soldier describing a comrade's request for leave to get married:

A Feldwebel [senior sergeant] came to us in the business office and filed a request to be married. Before our company chief, Lieutenant Emil Preikschat, could grant this, proof of Aryan descent had to be solicited. When the documents were finally present, I called the Feldwebel in and showed him the papers. His grandfather had been identified as a Jew. If this information had landed in the wrong hands, he could have been released from service and sent to a concentration camp. The Feldwebel stood before me, with his Crete cuff title and his chest fully decorated. A real warhorse and an experienced soldier from the front, and cried. I threw the piece of paper in the oven, where it burned right away. I wrote him a replacement certificate: "The original not able to be located, grandfather probably Catholic." Now the Feldwebel could marry and everything was well. (74)

² Which resulted in his book, *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006).

In the American case, O'Donnell stresses the wider ideology of expected acculturation of ethnic groups³ in his account of Native-American soldiers and of troops from both the north and the south of the United States fighting side by side in George Company.

Conspicuous, too, was the underlying racism of many American troops toward Asian foes such as the Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese,⁴ who were routinely called "Gooks" or "Geeks." In this regard, the experiences of World War II, Korea, and later Vietnam may best be understood in light of the American experience of conquering their frontiers while defeating alien "others" thanks to a mighty industrial advantage. The markedly different attitudes held toward the German enemy on one hand and Japanese and Koreans on the other should caution us against propounding any all-encompassing, universal model of combat or the behavior of combatants.

To be clear, I do not suggest an equivalence between the ideologies of National Socialist Germany and democratic America. Far from it. Rather, I want to stress that combat units themselves are always anchored in a wider context of cultural and political forces and beliefs. Deeply held assumptions about ourselves and our adversaries dictate how enemy soldiers are "handled"—understood and acted upon—in battle situations.

A fitting end to this review is Greisser's account of a local understanding that testifies to the mutual respect and professionalism of American and German forces fighting in Europe.

The Fallschirmjäger opened fire on three Americans, but realized shortly afterwards that they were dealing with army chaplains, who had slipped into the combat zone unarmed and unnoticed. A Protestant pastor, a Catholic priest and a preacher from the Salvation Army were searching for wounded survivors among the corpses strewn through the river meadow, which was open to constant fire from both sides' heavy machine guns. Disregarding the fact that what was occurring was an act of humanity, American fighter-bombers attacked in a low level flight, covering the field with fire. When the airplanes turned away, some American medics arrived to help the army chaplains and Major von der Heydte (the German unit's commander) ordered that his Fallschirmjäger should help them recover their wounded; he offered the Americans a three-hour ceasefire. In return, the Americans sent over wounded Fallschirmjäger from the 11th company, who had been taken into captivity the day before during the advance of the 358th Infantry Regiment. During the ceasefire both sides recovered their wounded and fallen without danger. (135)

³ See Richard Slotkin, "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality," *American Literary History* 13 (2001) 469–98.

⁴ See Thomas Schrijvers, *The GI War against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific during World War II* (NY: NYU Pr, 2002).