



## *The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes*

by Bruce Kuklick.

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This is a slight book, less than two hundred pages, with limited appeal since it concerns a minor episode stored in the memory of a dying generation of Americans. Its fading resonance is embodied in a mediocre Hollywood film, *The Fighting Sullivans*, produced shortly after the actual event in order to energize civilian support for the war effort in the Pacific in 1942-43. The incident constituted a horrifying family tragedy, the deaths of five Sullivan brothers on the light cruiser USS *Juneau*, sunk by the Japanese in the naval battles off Guadalcanal. The brothers, ranging in age from nineteen to twenty-seven, enlisted after Pearl Harbor on condition that they could serve together despite prohibitive Navy policy meant to prevent multiple deaths in one family. The rare enormity of the Sullivan family loss—there were also two daughters—and its use in domestic mobilization, as well as Hollywood's special role in encouraging the nation's patriotic fervor are engagingly recounted in the distinguished American culture historian Bruce Kuklick's new book.

In a reversal of the usual relationship of book-into-film, this particular book could not have come to pass without the prior existence of the seventy-five-year-old film, which is its main and essential document and narrative centerpiece. Though the film is a fiction from beginning to end, its prologue boldly asserts, "This is a true story." Well, hardly. In fact it is almost entirely movie-land make-believe. For example, Waterloo, Ohio, hometown to the Sullivans, was a meat-packing center with a substantial lower-class Black population. But the producers make it into a replica of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town."

The Sullivan parents, Tom and Aletta, are portrayed in the film as an attractive, god-fearing couple. In reality, Tom was a heavy drinker who eventually declined into alcoholism (a problem for the family as a whole) and Aletta was a slovenly, clumsy, and reclusive mother. Predictably, the five brothers receive the most cosmetic scrubbing. Kuklick describes them as a "notorious litter" of "rowdies" and "wastrels" who left school before the ninth grade. The most charitable thing he can say about them is that they enjoyed a singularly unenviable reputation in town. Yet the film depicts them as a bunch of adolescent Mickey Rooneys, each one mischievous but endearing in his own way.

The most noteworthy departure from the historical record is the treatment of the heroic demise of the *Juneau*, which, after all, is the crucial event in the narrative. The film almost skips over it! For good reason. What actually happened is forever lost in the "fog of war." But what we do know is that the deadly torpedo that slammed into the vessel was meant for another ship. The badly damaged *Juneau* was then pursued by the Japanese as it attempted to escape back to its home base. Its final sinking left some seven hundred sailors either dead or floundering in the sea with just a few rafts scattered among them. The commander of the fleeing American group conveniently assumed there were no survivors and continued to sail onward; there was no search, contrary to Navy protocols. Upon hearing this surprising news, Adm. William Halsey Jr. immedi-

ately removed the now disgraced commander. In the end, only ten sailors were rescued. The hundreds who died were victims of hysteria, exposure, and sharks.

Of course, such unsavory details have no place in a story of patriotic valor. Nor can they tarnish the deaths of the fraternal Sullivans. So the screenwriters instead created an all-purpose “cover story”: the boys’ imaginary and joyous arrival in heaven. Any complaints about the irrelevant contrivance are, of course, out of bounds and mean-spirited. Nonetheless, it remains inarguable that the Sullivans could not have engaged in any heroic acts, given the ascertainable facts and circumstances. The Sullivans were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Which brings us to a final misleading assertion embedded in the use of the present tense in the book’s subtitle—*How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes*. Readers might have expected some attention to the sad state of the heroic notion in American society, the soldierly glory of the ancient Greeks having devolved into today’s manufactured bravery. Heroes these days do little more than witness a catastrophe or find themselves in the crosshairs of fate. The passengers on the *Titanic* were not heroes, sorry. The people in the World Trade Center on 9/11 were not heroes, apologies. Nor do the victims of the latest hurricane or tsunami qualify. This calculated debasement of the heroic has even reached into the sacred precincts of the heroes’ original home—the battlefield. In the two World Wars, for instance, the exploits of Sergeant York and Audie Murphy were genuinely impressive feats. But the public relations disasters perpetrated by the military on Jessica Lynch in Iraq and Pat Tillman in Afghanistan were clearly staged fabrications designed by the Pentagon. The machinations of Fox News and President Donald Trump have given us Navy Seal Edward Gallagher. Hollywood did not do that, the government did. And the public has developed an appetite for such dramaturgy. Unfortunately for the reader, Bruce Kuklick, who has the credentials to tell this story, and the Univ. Press of Kansas chose to keep his book slight.