



Sheer Misery: Soldiers in Battle in WW II by Mary Louise Roberts.

Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 199. ISBN 978-0-226-75314-0.

Review by Teddy J. Uldricks, University of Nevada–Las Vegas (teddy.uldricks@unlv.edu).

In *Sheer Misery*, historian Mary Louise Roberts (Univ. of Wisconsin) aims to write “a somatic history of war”¹ (3). Specifically, World War II, whose combatants faced the most destructive weapons in history, capable of shredding both bodies and minds. She concentrates on the sensory overload endured by British, American, and German soldiers in the war’s European theater. She vividly evokes the horrendous sights of battle, its awful sounds, smells, and feel—the screams of wounded comrades, the earsplitting explosions of artillery, the acrid scent of cordite, the nauseating stench of burnt or decomposing bodies, and bitter cold European winters. Her litany of horrors endured by ordinary soldiers is in the tradition of works by Paul Fussell, Eugene Sledge, Lizzie Collingham, and Eric Bergerud.²

Soldiers might sit in foxholes for days on end, with no toilets, running water, or hot meals—only cold (sometimes frozen) K-rations.³ Though they were “designed to be eaten in the field for two or three days, infantrymen were often forced to down them for weeks at a time.” (30–31) Those cans of dehydrated “foods” provided the calories needed to keep the soldier going, but lacked all the taste, aroma, and visual appeal of real food.

During rainy periods, foxholes on the front lines might fill with water, leave soldiers to sit up to their necks in cold water day and night. When troops were on the move, mud was a constant source of irritation and danger. Prolonged wearing of wet boots and socks caused cases of trench foot that might even require amputations. (A greater problem for US troops than British, because of poorly designed and manufactured American boots.) Disease often killed more soldiers than enemy fire. Though most GIs avoided fatal wounds and deadly disease, many suffered from chronic intestinal distress, frequent vomiting, and diarrhea. The conditions of combat required soldiers to go for long periods without bathing or shaving, even though army regulations required cleanliness. Officers were sharply critical of unclean, unkempt “grunts” and “doggies,” in part, Roberts notes, because of class prejudices: “If infantrymen were treated like dirt in Naples and Anzio, that was because dirt was the root of class stereotypes. Both the British and the American working classes [the majority of recruits] were stigmatized for their personal ‘filth’” (51). The author attributes much of the soldiers’ misery to their commanders’ tendency to dehumanize them as “manpower” rather than see them as human beings. While there is some truth in that judgment, the tendency to regard soldiers as units of combat power is unavoidable: the commander

1. Her other works include *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1994), *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (id., 2002), *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (id., 2013), and *D-Day through French Eyes* (id., 2014).

2. Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1989), Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1981), Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (NY: Penguin, 2012), Bergerud, *Touched with Fire: The Land War in the South Pacific* (id., 1996).

3. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. “K-rations.”

whose main goal is to preserve the lives and health of his troops is unlikely to prevail against a determined enemy.

In a chapter on “wounds,” Roberts examines the phenomena of initial shock, pain, passing in and out of consciousness, coma, and sedation. These things made it hard for the wounded to create a coherent narrative of their experience, a serious problem because “fashioning a continuous account with a beginning, middle, and end enabled these men to mend a traumatic break they experienced when wounded” (104). In some cases, the psychological devastation of a wound could be worse than its physical damage.

Roberts also discusses the psychological stress suffered by medical personnel. In triage, doctors and nurses made life-or-death decisions about who should receive immediate treatment, who could wait, and who was too gravely injured to save. They were also torn between their desire to care for their patients’ health and their mandate to send them back into combat as soon as possible. Like the infantrymen, medical staff experienced long periods of relative quiet between battles, punctuated by bursts of extreme stress when casualties poured in. For the doctors (as well as their patients) “There was a race against time, a race against blood loss, a race against bacteria, and a race against the pressing needs of others.” (114)

Roberts’s final chapter, “The Corpse,” reflects her interest in the “human tendency to make the dead body *speak*,” because “in speaking, the corpse tells us much about what the war meant to those who fought it” (127). In the United States, every effort was made to keep the public, and especially the families of combat casualties, from seeing the mangled bodies of the fallen. Each deceased serviceman had to be properly identified (if enough body parts remained to do so) and buried in an individual grave, preferably in a well landscaped cemetery with orderly rows of crosses marking each interment. Families received the deceased’s clothing and other personal possessions only after these items had been carefully cleaned of dirt, blood, and gore. Corpses held special significance for soldiers. The sight of dead combatants, whether enemy soldiers or their buddies, brought home “the precarity of their own lives.... In the corpse, infantrymen saw the meaning of their war. Forced to leave their selves behind, they fought and died as nothing more than a body, a living corpse” (140, 144).

Roberts explores these topics in detail, using a range of archival and published material, from soldiers’ letters and diaries to Bill Mauldin’s Willie and Joe cartoons. Her perceptive and enlightening book will reward careful reading by scholars and general readers interested in the world of combat troops in southern and western Europe during the Second World War.