

The Power of the Man in the Arena

reviewed by Col Eric L. Chase, USMCR(Ret)

Well-regarded war histories seldom narrate and analyze combat from enlisted and junior officer perspectives. Instead, as Alexander Rose observes in his introduction to *Men of War*, “innumerable volumes have been written about the generalship of various commanders, their leadership skills, and how they won (or lost) their battle at the operational level, but relatively few about the lowly soldiers who served under them.”

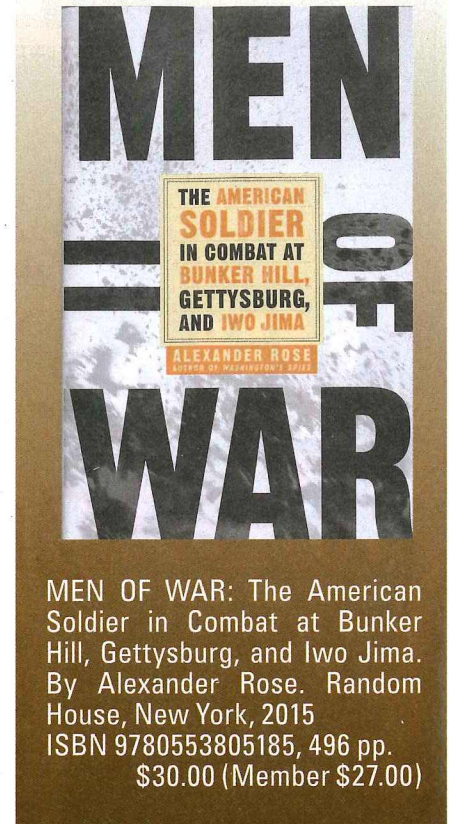
Rose is right. Other than first-person memoirs and fiction, high-level accounts of war dominate the field. Memoirs about small unit action can make compelling reading, but even the best of them, such as Eugene Sledge’s classic, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, (Presidio Press, 2007) tend toward the anecdotal. The dearth of authoritative portrayals of “lowly soldiers” is lamentable, though, because up-close portraits of war’s human dimensions connect with those in uniform readying for war and those who return from it. *Men of War* masterfully captures and proves the relevance of a powerful study of “lowly soldiers” in action.

In a riveting grunt-level three-part narrative, Rose dives deeply into the world of enlisted men and junior officers in three iconic battles that span 170 years of American history—Bunker Hill (1775), Gettysburg (1863), and Iwo Jima (1945). From an American frontline perspective, Rose purposefully emulates the late John Keegan’s approach in *The Face of Battle* (Penguin Books, 1983), which focuses on Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815), and the Somme (1916).

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Men of War transcends first-person recollections and memoirs, as Rose captures a broad swath of what war was like for men who pulled triggers and lanyards. Unlike histories of or by generals, which emphasize the strategic landscape and “larger meaning,” the young fighting man in a long campaign came to see Iwo Jima as, in Rose’s words, “a grinding, repetitive slog that had to be endured until it ended.”

Rose, like Keegan, never served in the military. But, as with Keegan’s writing, Rose presents an eye-level view of combat. The fast-paced journey through his three selected battles, though often brutal and wrenching, is hard to put down. Combatants in each battle speak for themselves. Rose’s assemblage of contemporaneous quotations, inserted at the right moments, bring home realities and fears at the frontline. At the most basic level, Rose offers exceptional insight into human frailties as well as the fears, courage, and sacrifices of junior men in combat, and develops the drudgery, violence, and chaos of individual



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participants’ experiences into page-turning drama.

Although far apart in time, the three battles nevertheless portray both similarities and dramatic differences among American combatants across centuries. One commonality was that inexperienced troops, anticipating their first combat, were prone to anxiety about the unknown and questioned their ability to measure up.

The factors of luck and happenstance are present in all combat, and Rose depicts well the often apparent randomness of military violence. Sudden, immediate death or maiming was commonplace in Rose’s three battles. Bouncing cannonballs at Bunker Hill tore into men viciously, tearing flesh and lopping body parts. Physical deprivation, terrible weather, and challenging terrain exacerbated the toll at Gettysburg and on Iwo. In all three battles, men became resigned to their fates. On Iwo especially, where Marines struggled yard by yard against a formidable entrenched enemy for five weeks, most openly

expected wounds or death. Rose speaks of Marine lieutenants on Iwo whose platoon leader tenures lasted only a few hours or even just minutes.

The differences in fighting across different eras included the increasing lethality of individual weapons and artillery, evolving tactics, and the duration and intensity of battles. Bunker Hill lasted only a single day, engaging perhaps a total of 5,000 men between the two sides; Gettysburg encompassed three days of almost incomprehensible carnage—more than 50,000 total casualties; and Iwo Jima spanned five weeks from first landing to all-secure and total casualties soared above 50,000 (although nearly all Japanese casualties were KIA, whereas the Marines suffered about 6,000 deaths among 26,000 casualties).

Be warned: Rose draws often from numerous graphic recollections and descriptions. This reference to recollections of Union hospital duty at Gettysburg is illustrative:

... there were rows of “helpless soldiers, torn and mangled, [whose] lacerated limbs were frightfully swollen and, turning black, had begun to decompose; the blood flowing from gaping wounds had glued some of the sufferers to the floor.”

Rose breathes reality into descriptions of embattled men. He brings into sharp focus the tactics of the 1860s that piled up breathtaking casualty figures. Today’s military would call the ubiquitous frontal assault tactics “crazy,” as there was little encouragement to maneuver, cover, or conceal. Forces marched headlong into almost certain death or serious wounding as they braved artillery barrages from a distance and point blank fusillades from an awaiting entrenched enemy. After citing some of the appalling casualty numbers, Rose says:

A willingness to suffer, rather than inflict, high casualties was considered evidence of a muscularly Christian and heroically masculine will to win, not of lamentably poor command, bad planning, flawed execution and

idiotic decision-making, as we might assume today. In our eyes, attacking an entrenched position manned by thrice one’s number might be regarded as insane and criminally wasteful rather than as bold and brave, but to Civil War contemporaries, a man’s internal “moral” tower could conquer any such “physical” obstacles as field works, artillery and rifle fire.

By far, Iwo Jima spans the longest section of *Men of War*. The grinding yard by yard advance to take Iwo lasted more than 10 times the three days of Gettysburg and 35 times the single day of Bunker Hill. Taken alone, this part of Rose’s book should be required reading for anyone with an interest in amphibious assaults and operations ashore. For the Marine Corps, the island became a wounding and killing machine. “[A] significant number of platoons and squads experienced a hitherto unthinkable casualty rate of greater than 100 percent. In these units, no original members remained, and even their replacements, and *their* replacements had been burned through.” In that environment, the tacit no-quarter practice in the Pacific War continued, as did innumerable atrocities, including mutilation of the dead.

From raw and brutal experiences of men at war who endured unimaginably savage fighting, Rose succeeds masterfully in portraits of three battles spanning 170 years, spaced among three centuries of American history. He describes weaponry, ballistic characteristics, tactics, and training. Most prominently, he portrays the intimate brutality of combat, and the men as they fight, including the destructive power of a cannonball as it hits, bounces, or explodes (Bunker Hill and Gettysburg). Although the term “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) awaited a late-20th century definition, Rose presents plentiful illustrations of the phenomenon in and after these battles, as in this observation of Iwo’s Marines:

[A] man’s comrades had to watch for subsequent indications of what was variously known as the Asiatic stare, the bulkhead stare, or, perhaps most

famously, the thousand-yard stare. This affliction was caused neither by trauma nor by the fall of artillery, but by day after grinding day of bone-tiredness, nervous exhaustion, poor diet, and exposure to extreme danger.

Gettysburg veterans showed, among other afflictions, “increased incidence of . . . postwar nervous disease and depression.” However, Rose seems to embrace the counter-intuitive view that America’s Revolutionary Era soldiers probably did not suffer from such afflictions. “It is likely,” he says, “that profound psychological problems were, relative to their modern incidence, somewhat uncommon.” This conclusion, however, seems too speculative, given the little attention at the time to the psychological consequences of combat.

Superbly crafted, *Men of War* weaves the stark realities of horrific combat violence and “crazy” tactics (Gettysburg) into a compelling narrative of American men who fought in the three battles of Rose’s choosing. Although some of the description, often in quotations from survivors, can be graphically mind-numbing in intensity and detail, Rose nevertheless successfully places the bloodshed into the context of tactics that, by modern standards, may seem wildly sacrificial of the combatants.

At the end, Rose himself seems overpowered by the violence and mayhem he narrates. He recalls Keegan’s observation that “professional military historians . . . tend to be more pacific, if not pacifist, than the population at large because they keenly understand the costs, price and tolls of war.” But this epiphany for Rose is hardly new for the professional servicemen who fully comprehend the sacrifice of those called to fight. *Men of War* reminds the American democracy to consider sending its youth to war when, and only when, the cause is as clear and vital, as was the case in this fine book’s three poignant examples.

