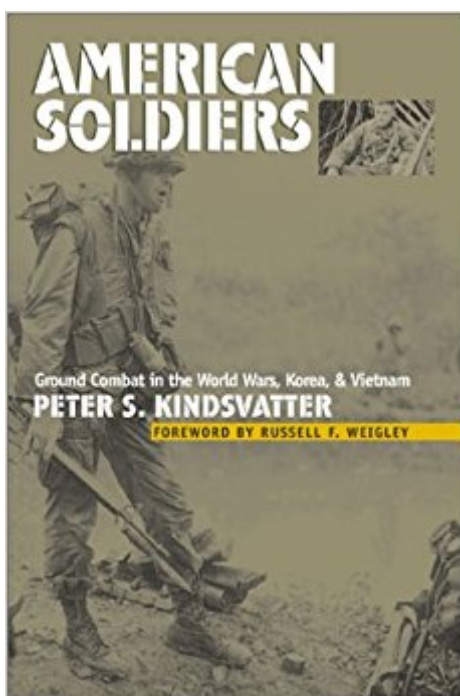


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American Soldiers: Ground Combat In The World Wars, Korea, And Vietnam



Synopsis

Some warriors are drawn to the thrill of combat and find it the defining moment of their lives. Others fall victim to fear, exhaustion, impaired reasoning and despair. This book synthesizes the wartime experiences of American soldiers, from the doughboys of World War I to the grunts of Vietnam. Focusing on both soldiers and marines, it draws on histories and memoirs, oral histories, psychological and sociological studies and even fiction to show that their experiences remain fundamentally the same regardless of the enemy, terrain, training or weaponry. The author looks at what motivated these men to serve and how they were turned into soldiers. He recreates the physical and emotional aspects of war to tell how fighting men dealt with danger and hardship, and he explores the roles of comradeship and leadership. He also investigates why some men broke down under fire while others excelled. By capturing the core "band of brothers" experience across several generations of warfare, Kindsvatter celebrates the American soldier while helping us to better understand war's lethal reality, and why soldiers persevere in the face of its horrors.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Command Historian at the U.S. Army Ordnance Center and Schools, Aberdeen Proving Ground, and a retired Army lieutenant colonel, Kindsvatter offers a phenomenological history of the hearts and minds of Army ground troops. Using a comprehensive spectrum of printed and unprinted sources from the subtitle's eras, Kindsvatter argues that soldiers of those times began with unreal images of war that allowed them to memorialize conflict by fictionalizing it. But despite military

training, nothing could prepare them adequately for the modern battlefield with its harsh physical environment and extreme emotional stress; the typical progression was from initial confusion through relief at surviving to a period of peak effectiveness. Comradeship was important to that process. So was belief in "America" and "America's cause"; if those constructs vanished as ideals, nothing could replace them. The excitement of battle was also engaging. Besting the enemy was a challenge, allowing pride in a job well done. American soldiers, Kindsvatter finds, were neither too frightened nor too guilt-ridden to kill. Some were reluctant; some enjoyed it; few hesitated to pull their triggers when necessary. Eventually, however, for most combat veterans some event or emotion, usually accompanied by physical exhaustion, triggered loss of confidence or nervous collapse. While improved therapeutic methods made it possible to return many breakdown cases to the line, the best treatment was preventive: relief, temporary or permanent, from combat's alien environment. Much of this book is geared toward commanders or scholars looking to understand troops, but its fascinating, unsentimental arguments about the minds of soldiers are ripe for magazine adaptation. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Thoroughly mining twentieth-century foot soldiers' memoirs and novels, Kindsvatter integrates this literature of personal experience into a generalized assessment of what combat was like and how men reacted to it. The author was a U.S. Army officer for two decades but does not discuss his own war experiences, if any; however, he plainly brings to his task an understanding of military life and death. It all starts, in all wars, with turning a civilian into a trained killer, the jolt of boot camp being just the initial step in acclimating soldiers to the radical differences between peacetime and wartime. Most of the soldiers Kindsvatter quotes admit some awe about the literally incandescent, surreal spectacle of the combat zone, followed by profound intimidation born of realizing the pitiless randomness of death. Kindsvatter's illuminating work is about coping with that fear at the foxhole level, and it (via soldier-writers such as William Manchester or Tim O'Brien) powerfully conveys the psychology and military sociology of combat in the draft-era armies. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

As a member of the military I feel this book is a very good explanation of what it is like to be a soldier. It covers many things as to how it feels to be there and that makes it different then every other book out there. My only complaint is that it uses a few fiction books as "sources." Now these fiction books are supposed to be real life stories told in the fiction venue but still, not credible sources. But beyond that I feel the book is a great read for anyone interested in what is is like to be

a soldier.

Wow! It isn't often that I actually feel a little shaken by virtue of what I have read, but if anything can conjure up for one an unforgettable yet eminently non-fictional picture of the modern battlefield in the post-WWII era, then this book by retired U. S. Army historian Peter Kindsvatter does so. What the author offer is literally a phenomenological exploration into the heart of darkness of modern combat, one into which young soldiers have been sucked into the vortex of the experience with wildly inaccurate and romanticized notions regarding their own fallacious expectations of the experience. As the dust jacket appropriately remarks, this is a journey into the hearts and minds of the average soldier, in Korea, Vietnam and since, and shows how popular "John Wayne" colorized fictions set our kids up for a fateful slam into the brick wall of a much more horrible reality. Thus, beginning with such unrealistic ideas of what to expect, Kindsvatter argues quite forcefully that such inaccurate conceptualizations aided the soldiers in creating what he refers to as a "fictionalized" set of images of war. Therefore, despite the relatively intensive military training the young recruits received, the author contends nothing could succeed in disabusing them of these fallacious notions or completely prepare them for the horror of actual combat. The nature of that combat, with its extreme emotional stress, physical hardships, and bloodthirsty graphics, spawned a kind of emotional syndrome that the author argues progresses fairly predictably from initial shock and disbelief through a period of confusion toward a perpetual state of much more hyperawareness, a state in which their immediate performance becomes maximal while the effects on their long-term mental health becomes progressively more dangerous. Critical to the success of this progression of this 'pilgrim's progress' from disbelief through confusion and into a battle-weary hyper-vigilance was the camaraderie of their fellow soldiers, their belief systems, and each soldier's individual will to survive. Obviously, Kindsvatter observes, in situations such as Vietnam, where the belief systems came into serious question both within the ranks and in the culture back home, successful maintenance of this state of combat readiness was more and more imperiled. What the author contends is that once such belief systems are destroyed, few things can repair or sustain them. For some, the excitement of battle turns them into "combat junkies", and it is these guys who may succeed in surviving only to find readjustment to civil society later is extremely hazardous. For the majority, it was integration into the unit and the friendships within it that sustained them, and allowed them to continue under some of the most extreme continuing conditions modern humans can experience. Yet eventually, for most soldiers the ability to function slowly eroded, to the point that many casualties occurred for "burned out" grunts who had more than enough savvy to protect

themselves, but who has lost the kind of emotional edge they needed to continue. In these cases, many of them suffered emotional breakdowns and/or total physical exhaustion. This is an important book, and one that anyone with either a friend or relative in the military would do well to read. I hope it gains wider readership, as it is a serious, enlightened, and worthwhile entry into the field of military history. Enjoy!

Awful. Dry, totally academic treatment. Maybe for a academic course on sociology, but not history. Even worse is the audiobook, narrated terribly.

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