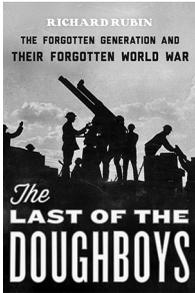


REVISITING THE GREAT WAR

The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War

By Richard Rubin

Reviewed by Dr. Michael S. Neiberg, Professor of History, Department of National Security Studies, US Army War College



New York: Houghton
Mifflin Harcourt, 2013
528 pages
\$28.00

Richard Rubin travelled around the United States at the beginning of this century to find some veterans of the most important event of the last century. He managed to find several surviving World War I veterans, all of them 100 years old or older. To his surprise, and our good fortune, most of them were more than willing to talk to him and had excellent long-term memories. Rubin has done us all a great service by getting their recollections on paper and recording them for posterity.

Their stories are nothing short of astonishing, offering glimpses into a world, and an America, before the great calamity of 1914. For some of these veterans, military service was a highlight of their lives, giving them a chance to see some of the world and to participate in the most important event of their generation; for others, military service was an interesting (and sometimes terrifying) interlude in a life that went on as normal once they returned to the United States. They kept some memories alive and suppressed others, sometimes for decades. Rubin gave them a chance to talk about those memories.

Some common themes emerge from Rubin's interviews. Few of his interviewees showed much interest in geopolitics, and almost all of them joined the military for the same reasons young men have throughout history: for adventure; for a vague sense of patriotic duty; or because their friends were doing the same and they did not want to be left behind. Virtually all of them use the word "lucky" or some synonym to explain why they survived while so many others did not, reminding us all of the random and capricious nature of war. They were for the most part modest men, many of whom had not spoken seriously about the war in decades.

Between chapters featuring interviews with veterans, Rubin has spliced chapters about the war itself. Some of this material introduces the big concepts of the war to a reader who might be unfamiliar with trench warfare, the Meuse-Argonne, and poison gas. Others deal with elements of American culture in 1917, including a chapter on the most popular songs of the time, another on the books Americans would have been reading about the war in Europe, and one on soldier memoirs. The chapter on music is his best; Rubin collects old music and thus knows the subject well. He has introduced a new generation to the wonderfully-titled Tin Pan Alley tune "If He Can Fight Like He Can Love, Good Night Germany!" It contained the lyric "If he's half as good in a trench/ as he was in the park on a bench . . ." It wasn't such an age of innocence after all.

These chapters, however entertaining at times, break up the flow of the book and distract the reader from the book's core theme, the

recollections of the veterans themselves. Rubin is not an historian, and his lack of knowledge about some key components of the war will be transparent to those who have studied the war in any depth. As a result, he repeats several old myths and stereotypes about the war. He also has a tendency to simplify very complex topics into one or two sentences. A greater attention to the actual history of the war would have smoothed off some of the rough edges of these digressions. He might also have chosen to drop most of these chapters altogether, keeping the focus where it belonged, on the veterans themselves.

Rubin, a journalist, writes in an informal style that some readers will find engaging and others will find distracting. One three-page stretch of the book features the word “I” no fewer than 33 times. Rubin aimed for a conversational tone, trying to bring the reader along with him into the living rooms, retirement homes, and hospitals where he interviewed these men (and two women). That choice may work for some, but it also distracts us from the people at the center of the book, the best-known of whom, Frank Buckles, was the last surviving American veteran of the war.

And those people are the real reason to read this book. We learn about the intense racism and segregation that marked not just the Army but American society in general. We also learn about the complex identities of so-called hyphenated Americans; the tensions experienced by Americans in this time of transition from a rural to an urban society; and the difficulties of getting the United States involved in the most terrible war the world had yet known. The veterans he talked to told stories of comrades, most likely suffering from post-traumatic stress, committing suicide after the war. He also notes a veteran who never cashed the check the Army gave him on separation. He would rather, he said, have had that check (for one dollar) as a souvenir.

If not for the work of Richard Rubin, these voices and the stories they told would have been lost forever. His book, therefore, performs an important service to all of those interested in World War I, the experience of soldiers at war, and the history of the United States in these years. The criticisms above do not in any way detract from the real value of the book, a chance to listen to men and women who lived through an extraordinary age.

Winning and Losing on the Western Front: The British Third Army and the Defeat of Germany in 1918

By Jonathan Boff

Reviewed by Dr. Dean A. Nowowiejski, COL (USA Retired), whose dissertation analyzed the performance of the American military governor of the Rhineland, MG Henry T. Allen, who commanded the 90th Division in the AEF before commanding American Forces in Germany during the occupation

Jonathan Boff takes the readers of *Parameters* into a different world in this book. Those who are American students of military history get to explore the British perspective. Those who have studied World War I receive a new argument that mines both British and German sources to understand tactics, operational art, and an analysis of the outcome of



New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012
286 pages
\$99.00