Naval War College Review

Volume 48
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 27

1995

American Samurai: Myth, Imagination and the Conduct of Battle in the Fint Marine Division, 1941-1951

Allan R. Millett

career, Dwight D. Eisenhower in particular. Nonetheless, this book will, I believe, be the definitive work on James Gavin—a heroic general, a tragic bureaucrat. Booth and Spencer have done an excellent job. They portray the times and the man clearly and interestingly. What emerges is a Horatio Alger tale in which the principal did in the first part of his life most of what he was to become famous for. The book is a good read.

DOUGLAS KINNARD
Richmond, Virginia

Cameron, Craig M. *American Samurai: Myth, Imagination and the Conduct of Battle in the First Marine Division, 1941–1951*. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994. 297pp. $24.95

In this deconstructionist assault on the mindset of the First Marine Division in the Pacific and Korean wars, Cameron draws heavily on the work of his intellectual heroes Michael Geyer, Omer Bartov, John Dower, Bruce Cumings, John Keegan, Michael Sherry, Akira Iriye, Paul Fussell, Glenn Grey, and John Shy. What is Cameron and what is borrowed is difficult to say, but the result is obvious—PC meets the USMC.

Cameron, an ex-Marine officer of the 1980s, will never be accused (as he accuses this reviewer) of excessive enthusiasm for the Corps. He argues that anti-Asian racism, male chauvinism, seething resentment of all sorts against the U.S. Army, and irrational fantasies about prior Marine operations turned the First Marine Division into a horde of crazed killers who barbarized the Pacific War as much as did the poor, misunderstood Japanese. He likens U.S. Marines to the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front or the frontiersmen who "exterminated" the native Americans. The effect is much like discovering at Peace Park, Hiroshima, that the Pacific War began and ended with the atomic bomb.

Cameron argues that the demonization of the enemy drove the Marines to intolerable ferocity on Guadalcanal, Peleliu, and Okinawa. Despite an institutional effort to keep the mythic momentum rolling in the Korean War, the Marine Corps could not keep the troops at a frenzied pitch, and the division lost its sharp edge in combat by June 1951—which will be news to the survivors of the fighting of September of that year. Not surprisingly, Cameron pontificates about the Vietnam War and connects its "barbarization" to the dysfunctional myths of past Corps glories and to the ways that they reflect cultural values retarding domestic reform and international harmony.

Other than using the bodies of brave men as a bully pulpit, Cameron commits two errors: he has not done appropriate research, and he does not write proper history. He begins with a legitimate concern: How did the organizational culture of the First Marine Division affect the way it fought? One can then subsume related questions about visions of the enemy, allies, other services, leadership, weapons, comrades, training, and psychological indoctrination. In fact, he does not get off to a bad start with his discussion of Guadalcanal, but

then he quickly loses his way. One problem is his sources and focus; his cultural target group is the division's young officers and enlisted men, but his sample is less than ten. He has ignored an entire population of the thousands of veterans affiliated with the First Marine Division Association. But then, can such old Marines recall the past with any accuracy? Cameron himself says "yes," their "Rockwellized" memories can at least be telling. More importantly, it has long been demonstrated by oral history projects in the United States (for instance, the work of Don Rickey for the Army, at least thirty years ago) that veterans' recollections, if used carefully and in large enough numbers, can produce dependable information. Moreover, their letters, diaries, photographs, copies of newspapers, and other memorabilia not in official repositories are invaluable research sources. For information on Guadalcanal, Cameron did not have to depend only on the Marines. Major Martin Clemens, the Scot-Australian Chief of Scouts, has freely shared his diaries and views with researchers, and on the Japanese side there are veterans' remembrances and an official history of the campaign. But official reports, however cleverly Cameron subjects them to literary criticism, are no substitute for human testimony. Cameron's analysis of Guadalcanal only suggests the sort of intellectual self-indulgence to be found in *American Samurai*, and it sets the tone of the book.

He argues that Marines shot prisoners of war (some did), desecrated the dead (they did—some), and turned surly (many did) because of their terror of the jungle and the night, and that their fear and loathing of the Japanese—even sexual repression and frustration—contributed to their rage. Conceding the possible validity of some of these observations (which could have been confirmed through interviews), there are other factors that influenced the division's sense of anxiety: massive sleep deprivation; a limited diet; growing sickness rates from tropical diseases; the six-week delay of infantry reinforcements; serious lack of good senior leadership; a sense of betrayal by the Navy, which failed until November 1942 to stop Japanese reinforcements; and outrage at the treatment of their prisoners of war by the Japanese.

There is no reason to hold the U.S. Marine Corps, even its World War II performance, sacrosanct with respect to serious scholarship. It is notorious for confusing organizational indoctrination with combat effectiveness. However, that one is attacking a cultural icon does not excuse a disregard for the connection between assertion and evidence. The author of *American Samurai* and his advisors do not know enough about the Marine Corps to fill a canteen cup.

ALLAN R. MILLETT
The Ohio State University

Koch, Steven. *Double Lives: Spies and Writers in the Secret Soviet War of Ideas against the West.* New York: Free Press, 1994. 419pp. (No price given)