

1994

The Wars of America

Albert M. Bottoms

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Bottoms, Albert M. (1994) "The Wars of America," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 47 : No. 1 , Article 33.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol47/iss1/33>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

training and operations and will probably be a choice (albeit one-sided) source for future naval historians to blend with more objective material. Second, it reveals fascinating (and mostly unflattering) vignettes of key national security officials of the 1980s and makes (unsubstantiated) charges of criminal negligence on the part of the senior Foreign Service Officer responsible for security of the bombed Beirut embassy in which sixty-three personnel were killed. However, it is primarily important for what it teaches our future warrior-leaders: beware the temptation of an unrestrained ego. Perhaps (as if Tailhook were not enough) it will also remind senior officers that they are responsible for protecting subordinates from their own worst instincts. The downfall of the successful commander, like the successful rebel, occurs when he or she can no longer distinguish between what is good for one's organization and what is good for one's pride. Commander Marcinko was both commander and rebel, but his bold victories have been overshadowed by his downfall.

SAM J. TANGREDI
Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy
Falls Church, Virginia

Leckie, Robert. *The Wars of America*.
New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
1,281pp. \$50

Robert Leckie, a superb narrator, military historian, and prolific author, set himself a formidable task in this

book. In one volume he has sought to place the wars of America in perspective. His object is to make his students better citizens by improving their knowledge of the good and bad in our history. In the main, Robert Leckie succeeds.

Historians shoulder an awesome responsibility. They must be precise, accurate, and reasonably objective. They are the reader's surrogate in sifting through the primary source material and in differentiating information from primary, secondary, and hearsay sources. The narrator comes into conflict with the icons of fact while seeking to breathe life into the record of the past. Here also, this reviewer believes that Robert Leckie succeeds.

Leckie escorts the reader from Samuel de Champlain's war against the Iroquois in 1609 to the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Curiously, the author seems to be on firmer ground up to World War I than with more recent events. One feels a degree of superficiality in the discussion of events that led to World War II: little note is taken of the prescient moves of George Marshall, Dwight Eisenhower, and Brehon Somervell in creating the logistic architecture for victory. One senses also in Leckie's treatment of Korea and Vietnam a degree of the polarization in opinion and attitude that occurred after those eras.

This review is intended for an audience with strong interests in the sea services of the United States. There is an intriguing thesis advanced on page

160 Naval War College Review

623, in the chapter devoted to World War I: "Although great wars are usually fought and won on land, they are often decided at sea." It is left to the reader to develop examples from America's wars. There are a fair number. Robert Leckie's reference is to the outcome of Jutland and the effective removal of the German High Seas Fleet as a challenge to allied control of the seas. The author also notes that the German resort to unrestricted U-boat attacks on shipping was a major factor in America's entry into World War I.

The colonial wars, the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the American Civil War all provide examples of the strategic importance of naval activity on the high seas, along the coasts, and in inland lakes and rivers. It is quite thrilling to place the battles of Lake Champlain and Lake Erie in the strategic context. The "Anaconda Plan" for the North's conduct of the Civil War relied upon seapower as the enabling component. Not only did the Union blockade drastically reduce the Southern capability to sustain its fighting forces, but it also led to the Confederate diplomatic failure to gain recognition in Europe. The naval component of the campaign to open the Mississippi was decisive.

Unfortunately, it is left to the reader to supply the context of Mahan's "fleet-in-being" in developing appreciation for the role of naval forces in America's wars. Robert Leckie provides enough substantive detail for the reader to make such analyses and

judgments. The discussions of Midway and Coral Sea fall somewhat short of drawing the strategic lessons in the context of Mahan.

The masterful vignette of individuals and events is the hallmark of Leckie's style. On page 280 is an account of the Battle of the Chipewewa, where the esprit of the U.S. Army was born and which is memorialized by the gray uniforms of the United States Military Academy. On page 329, Leckie recounts a gruelling march past Mexican adobe huts, whose fine, white dust caked the marching men, whom the cavalry called "adobies" and then "doughboys."

Personalities emerge and sparkle: from Zachary Taylor, Winfield Scott as a young commander, George Dewey, John J. Pershing, right up to Norman Schwarzkopf. Robert Leckie deserves great praise for sharing his knowledge of the broader significance of the battles he discusses. It is said, for instance, that Canada reached nationhood in the magnificent stand of the Canadian Division at Vimy Ridge. The United States Marines and soldiers galvanized the jaded allies by their performance at St. Mihiel, Chateau Thierry, and in the Argonne. It was Pershing who insisted that the Americans fight as a national command, and it was Commander Joseph K. Taussig, USN, who, after a stormy transatlantic passage, signaled the entrance of the U.S. Navy into World War I with his response to the British admiral's question about his readiness: "Ready for sea when fueled."

This is an "armchair" book. Keep it handy. Dip into it. Ponder both glorious and not-so-edifying chapters in our military history. Pay also attention to what Leckie says in his epilogue. Our military history is not over.

ALBERT M. BOTTOMS
Charlottesville, Virginia

Sears, Stephen W., ed. *World War II: The Best of American Heritage*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. 280pp. \$9.95

Sears, Stephen W., ed. *Eyewitness to World War II: The Best of American Heritage*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993. 308pp. \$9.95

Many present readers of history were taught to love the subject by *American Heritage* magazine. Even those put off by its eventual (and grudging) acceptance of advertising may admire the quality, interest, and variety of its articles, the distinction of many of its contributors, its careful fact-checking and effective graphics, and its long association with the revered historian Bruce Catton. Stephen W. Sears, editor of these two titles from "The American Heritage Library," is a former editor and a distinguished historian himself. His byline figures prominently in these two collections, and properly so (as it does also in a recent collection of "the best of" *Military History Quarterly*). With so promising a field of choices and an

editor so well qualified to choose, it is no surprise that both of these paperbacks (reissuances of 1991 hardbacks) are quite worthwhile.

World War II is a collection of pieces about that war, *Eyewitness* of recollections of some of its participants. The same selection principles seem to have been applied in both: all services, theaters, "warfare disciplines," and most combat arms are represented. In fact, there is some overlap; for instance, the horrific experience of the USS *Juneau's* survivors appears in one book and a similar ordeal after the loss of the cruiser *Indianapolis* in the other. There are dividends in such duplication, however: a former civilian contractor on Wake Island recalls with understandable pride his contribution to the island's dogged defense, but we learn in the other volume that he would have been one of the few civilians there who did not (also understandably) run, hide, and steal food.

A large fraction of the selections do not touch on combat or do so only obliquely (e.g., the story of the first, not so well known, Suribachi flag-raising). Both volumes cover the home front; there are oral histories of several women in "war work," and an analysis of the underlying purpose of gas rationing (automobile tires, not gasoline, required conservation—but fuel appeared easier to ration than did tires). The writing throughout is measured, and (the *Juneau* and *Indianapolis* aside) there is little that is very shocking.