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World War II: The Best of American Heritage, and Eyewitness to World War II: The Best of American Heritage

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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.

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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.

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There are, of course, memorable descriptions of operations and combat action. The 1970s movie *A Bridge Too Far* would make a closely fitting visual aid for Sears's account of the Arnhem airborne and armored attack, and Charles Cawthon's reminiscence of landing on Omaha Beach evokes the sensations of an inexperienced young officer trying to hold his end up in chaotic circumstances. (Cawthon's story, incidentally, is one of two that point to a third *American Heritage* anthology, not under review. Cawthon tells us in his first sentence that his National Guard battalion was "directly descended" (albeit in a different army) from the Stonewall Brigade of the Civil War, and he never lets us forget it, nor apparently did he himself at the time. General James M. Gavin, writing of the Sicily campaign, is reminded of U.S. Grant at Shiloh and invokes the "shades of gallant Pelham!"—that is, Major John B. Pelham, celebrated Confederate artilleryist.)

These, then, are interesting and entertaining books. They are, however, popular history after all—for which many professional historians will dismiss them. Is there value here for the professional military reader? Yes, a great deal, but much of it takes some digging out. There is value in many intriguing bits of information: B-17s flying so low (raiding the Ploesti oil fields) that their guns, meant for use against fighters, directly engaged targets on the ground; German shells made by Czech forced labor that

contained not explosives but apologetic notes; Japanese intercontinental balloon-bombs, of which some three hundred were launched (killing a woman and five children); American bat-borne incendiaries that never saw service; and light spotter aircraft operating from plywood flight decks on tank landing ships. There are also cautionary tales touching upon current doctrinal concerns such as "friendly fire" (e.g., the repeated Allied bombing of troops assembled for the post-Normandy breakout). We can also see, if we stand back a little, an excellent example of how different arms, working closely together, can achieve astounding synergy. Hughes Rudd, who would become a well known journalist, served in Italy directing the fire of the 93rd Field Artillery Battalion from an aircraft that cost less (by a third) than its own shipping crate. But he and the artilleryists formed a system, an organism—Rudd speaks of his "firing the 93rd"—of such efficiency and effectiveness that the Germans dared not shoot at his defenseless aircraft, because the 93rd's counter-battery fire would be on target, right now.

The term "popular history" is not itself pejorative, or need not be. Read these books, and read them together, *Eyewitness* first; the most jaded student of World War II will find pleasure and profit.

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