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Book Reviews

From *Parameters*, Winter 1997-98, pp. 175-83.

 **Making The Corps.** By Thomas E. Ricks. New York: Scribner, 1997. \$24.00. **Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters**, a frequent contributor to *Parameters*.

Tom Ricks, the *Wall Street Journal's* splendid defense reporter, has written the best non-fiction account of basic training you will ever read. *Making The Corps* is also an account of today's Marine Corps, with its routine triumphs and occasional problems. On yet another level, Ricks reports on America--and on our country's relationship with its military in an age when the values professed by those in uniform are sometimes at odds with the practices of American society. The book is informative, thoughtful, fun--a great, swift read--and an echo from the past for anyone who has gone through basic training in any of our services. When Sergeant Carey, USMC, barks, the young private sleeping inside the graying veteran snaps to attention.

Ricks followed recruit platoon 3086 through basic training at Parris Island, then tracked the survivors--those recruits who had the right stuff to become Marines--for their initial year of service. For military readers, there are no revelations here (although it's a great tour down memory lane). Marine Corps basic training is essentially the training we all got before Harry met Sally in the chow line.

The salient complaint on the part of the trainers is the need today to awaken the young men undergoing the first real test in most of their lives to values drill instructors and general officers wish they could take for granted in young American males. The program works, and values emerge for most new Marines. The rite of passage includes a post-training phase of disorientation and alienation from "nasty" civilian life; basic training and military service in general have always engendered separateness, and that is fundamental to their purpose and success. But the moral aspect works because the values were already there, latent, overlaid with a slacker crust. You don't learn values in a couple of months, you merely begin to realize them.

There are born winners and born losers, studs, steadies, jerks and weaklings. The Marines give them all a chance, and some fail. But anyone who thinks today's youth are difficult to condition to a military worldview needs to look back to the New York City draft riots of 1863 . . . or only to 1969. American training officers have been complaining about the slackness of the human material available to them since Baron von Steuben bluffed his way into a generalcy. Right now, those "valueless" young people in uniform are moral exemplars to the world, from the villages of Bosnia to the slums of Haiti. All soldiers complain about their superiors--but poor leaders complain about the quality of their troops. The complaints of military professionals about our young volunteers are unbecoming. After a point, one just wants to say, "Get on with the job." Ricks, to his credit, reports all sides of such dilemmas, and does it well.

The book is wonderfully written. Ricks captures the feel--the smells and muscle strain, the sweat and the sensation of standing at attention while sand flies stop by for lunch. The prose and the insights are as sharp as the creases on a DI's dress uniform. With the economy of language that marks an accomplished writer, Ricks sketches personalities: of DIs, of disoriented recruits, and of America's most tightly-knit and consistent military service. The DIs came across especially well, with their miserable work hours and their humbling dedication. If they seem to be "types," it is because only certain types of men (and women) make quality drill sergeants, as the Army is learning in a very painful way.

Ricks is also very good--he has the born journalist's nose for a story--at picking out the recruits who have the most to tell us about contemporary America. Watching the most troubled of these young men--provisional losers before they raised their right hand--you get a powerful sense of the young Americans who too often fall through the cracks as we transition to post-modern, post-industrial, post-muscle-power capitalism. For the recruits with the most to lose by washing out, the road to Parris Island led through pizza parlors and fast-food stops, tow-truck shifts and inner-city gangs. It is an American story, very much about the role of our military in rescuing lives nearly destroyed by misguided social programs. To the great credit of both the young men and the Marine Corps, most of the recruits make

it into "the Fleet," where some show surprising potential that otherwise would have been lost to our country. Of all the services, the Marine Corps serves most profoundly as a redeeming religion for our downwardly mobile. Civilian "boot camps" for troubled youth usually fail--for a number of reasons, but primarily because you don't get to be a Marine at the end.

Ricks also interviews former Marines and attends local Marine Corps Association meetings and ceremonies. He visits the recruits on their first leaves and captures the shock we all felt when we went home and realized that we were moving on while our old friends were stumbling toward dead ends. But the Marines have mastered organizational loyalty to a degree their sister services have not. One young man who fell by the wayside shortly after training nonetheless slaps Marine Corps paraphernalia on his car. Ricks captures that extra something that the Marine Corps, our Jesuits in uniform, ingrain in those who survive the high standards of its indoctrination program and maintain the order's spiritual rigor: "Once a Marine, always a Marine," genuinely means something. If there was any repeated detail that annoyed me, it was the countless instances in which Marines or vets with Corps decals get pulled over for speeding, then get a break because the cop is a former Marine. Former MPs would write you a ticket with glee.

This is such a superb piece of military writing that I am reluctant to criticize it in any respect. I want to win readers for this book. There are, however, two counts on which I feel obliged to take Tom Ricks to task. The first point is comparatively minor: for all his experience and savvy, Ricks was taken in more than a bit by the might of the USMC public relations machine. The Corps handles the media with the stunning precision of the ceremonies at the Eighth Street barracks. The Marines are magnificent--I personally believe that the individual Marine is the biggest defense bargain our taxpayers get--but they will probably need the other services to help out now and then.

Ricks does acknowledge the superiority of Fort Benning's infantry training, but he generally treats the Army as a collection of second-raters, even preferring Marine Corps magazines and journals--which tend to inspect the Corps's navel (no pun intended). This at a time when US Army journals are flat-out the leading military pubs in the world. Yes, the Marines argue openly. But the Army *thinks* openly. Criticism without vision is unproductive.

At the end of the day, there are things the Corps does better, things the Army does better--and both organizations can learn from one another. But there are times when the book seems to compare Jaguars with Mack Trucks only to express disappointment that the truck cabs don't have shining burlled walnut appointments. The Army is big and various and rough around the edges. The Marines are smaller, elite and elegant. The new world disorder is going to keep both services stretched. The Marines and the Army are parts of a whole and, increasingly as our numbers dwindle, we need each other. The old interservice rivalry between the Army and the Corps is destructive nonsense. In the words of one of America's most colorful anti-heroes, "Get over it."

My second reservation is more serious, and extremely troubling to me. In the book's only ill-judged chapter (which was recently excerpted in *The Atlantic Monthly*), Ricks takes on a big issue and gets it flat-out wrong. He describes a wildly exaggerated rift between America's military and contemporary society. If you read the credits at the back of the book, you will find that Ricks has been listening to a pathetic little club of failed military types and sensation-seeking professors who have tried to rescue stagnant careers by raving about the secession of America's officer corps from its citizenry. This is shameful nonsense. If anyone is alienated from middle America, it is our domestic elites and their Washington panders, who--far too important in their persons to serve in uniform--no longer have the decency to reserve their sympathy for America's enemies until those enemies are defeated. It was not the folks back home who panicked at the success of American arms in Desert Storm or who rewarded the Somalis who dragged a soldier's corpse through the streets by running away. Americans are fighters. It doesn't take a village, it takes a backbone.

Regard the above as a retort to Ricks' well-intentioned mistake. Read the book. Ricks is a terrific writer who works hard to get it right. He admires men and women in uniform for what we are and for what we have given. If he asks tough questions, the answers are usually enlightening. If he did not get it entirely right in this book, he got it "righter" than most who try to capture the military experience in words. *Making The Corps* is a splendid, enjoyable, memorable book. *Semper Fi*.

pages. \$30.

 **Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History.** By Bruce Cumings. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. 527 pages. \$35.

Reviewed by Richard Halloran, formerly with *The New York Times* as a foreign correspondent in Asia and military correspondent in Washington.

American military officers who might serve in Korea anytime over the next few years--and with the way things are going, that could be a large number--would do well to read Don Oberdorfer's book but to skip that by Bruce Cumings unless he or she is interested in a polemic on ancient and modern Korean history.

Oberdorfer, an American journalist with long experience in Korea, has ventured into this bitterly antagonistic cauldron to produce a superb book evincing prodigious research, prudent judgments, and lucid writing. At the same time, the book is marred by several curious omissions and scattered factual errors. None, however, erode the balanced rationality of the author's reckoning.[1]

On the other hand, Cumings, an academic who has written several controversial works on Korea, equates South Koreans with North Koreans in brutality and repression, faults Americans and Russians for dividing the peninsula after World War II, and assails everyone for starting the Korean War. "Civil wars do not start: they come," Cumings contends. "They originate in multiple causes, with blame enough to go around for everyone."

After Oberdorfer retired as a diplomatic correspondent for *The Washington Post* in 1993, he reached back to his days as a foreign correspondent in Korea from 1972 to 1975 and even earlier to his service as a soldier there just after the Korean War to begin an account of what he calls a "state of no-war, no peace" that persists in Korea to this day.

His research took him from Washington across the United States and thence to Seoul, Pyongyang, Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow, Vienna, and the former (East) German Democratic Republic to question political leaders, diplomats, scholars, military officers, business executives, and intelligence operatives. He also gained access to numerous archives, some for the first time ever.

Perhaps his most remarkable discovery was the transcript, found in East Germany, of three days of confidential discussions in 1977 between President Kim Il Sung, the absolute "Great Leader" of North Korea, and Erich Honecker, general secretary of the East German communist party. The transcript provided what Oberdorfer calls "a rare snapshot of Kim's private views." Rare, indeed, when intelligence on Kim Il Sung has always been scanty.

The transcript is useful even today because Kim Il Sung's dicta still obtain although he passed away in 1994. Among the boasts Kim made to Honecker was that North Korean reconnaissance teams constantly spied on US forces in South Korea, usually without detection. A report from the US command in Seoul at the same time agreed. "The North can infiltrate or exfiltrate its agents or special warfare units by land, sea, or air to virtually any location" in South Korea. The North Korean submarine that ran aground in South Korea last fall was on one such mission.

After North Korea's quest for nuclear weapons began, Oberdorfer reveals, the Central Intelligence Agency and other US intelligence organizations fed satellite photographs and information to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna to help the IAEA monitor developments in North Korea. Sharing that sort of highly sensitive intelligence is exceptional.

The author shows that the United States and South Korea were closer to war with North Korea over the nuclear issue in 1993 and 1994 than President Clinton's Administration acknowledged at the time, raising a question of the President's political responsibility to be straight in keeping the American voters and taxpayers, not to say soldiers, adequately informed.

Oberdorfer is masterful in his detailed accounts of South Korean President Roh Tae Woo's "nordpolitik" and how a rapprochement between Seoul and Moscow came about. The same is true of his reporting on the eruption of deep-seated anti-Americanism in South Korea when Koreans lustily cheered a Soviet team to victory over the United States

in the 1988 Olympics. There's more excellent reportage on China's shifting stance on North Korea, on nuclear negotiations and how the US nearly blundered because its negotiators knew little of either North or South Korea, and on the death of Kim Il Sung and its aftermath.

The tapestry of this thorough research and narrative makes several omissions seem strange. The author mentions the attempt of North Korean commandos to assassinate President Park Chung Hee of South Korea in January of 1968 but largely ignores the North Korean capture of the American intelligence ship Pueblo 36 hours later. Those two episodes, joined at the hip, nearly caused a war.

Similarly, the Japanese role in dissuading Park from executing his political rival, Kim Dae Jung, after having him kidnapped in Tokyo and smuggled back to Seoul is ignored. It was Japanese intelligence that swiftly identified the Korean Central Intelligence Agency as the culprit and informed the Americans so they could take a tough stance with President Park.

Perhaps no episode has so roiled South Korean relations with the United States, and thus the ability of both to meet North Korean threats, as the Kwangju incident of 1980 in which South Korean armed forces put down civil dissidence, leaving more than 200 people dead. Many Koreans still hold the United States responsible for not preventing South Korean forces from acting brutally. Ten years later, Ambassador Donald Gregg ordered a thorough inquiry that largely--but not completely--absolved the United States. Both the Korean press and Oberdorfer have largely ignored the results of that investigation.

Even with these gaps, the author's conclusions about the immediate future of the Korean peninsula are based on hard evidence and are therefore sensible. The fate of North Korea, with its cancerous economic troubles, is unpredictable. In Seoul, "the greatest imponderable for the South today is how it will be affected by the fate of the North," but the South Korean government is not ready for whatever comes.

China, the emerging power of Asia, is likely to expand its influence over the peninsula. In particular, China is not likely to allow North Korea to collapse, which would put a Seoul-dominated unified Korea on China's doorstep. As for Washington, "the absence of clear US goals and a well-articulated policy has diminished its authority as Korea moves toward a new era."

In sum, Oberdorfer asserts: "Whatever the future holds, it is likely to develop with high drama, intense emotion, and powerful impact." Right. That makes this book essential for anyone likely to be affected by events in Korea during the next decade.

In an account that reflects much of the way Bruce Cumings approaches his book, Cumings pins some of the blame for the division of Korea in 1945 on two colonels, Charles H. Bonesteel and Dean Rusk, the former to become Commander-in-Chief of US Forces in Korea and the latter Secretary of State. They were given 30 minutes to look at a map of Korea around midnight of 10-11 August and find a place to split the peninsula between American and Russian forces. They chose the 38th parallel because it would put the Korean capital, Seoul, in the American sector.

The author, an academic at Northwestern, notes that "the atomic bombs had been dropped, the Soviet Red Army had entered the Pacific War, and American planners were rushing to arrange the Japanese surrender." Then he finds fault in that "American officials consulted no Koreans," nor asked the British or Chinese or Russians for their opinions. "Instead," he says, "the opinion was unilateral and hasty."

Like this was the only "unilateral and hasty" decision made toward the end of a violent, exhausting, devastating war? Even with his nod toward atomic bombs and Russia's entry into the war, Cumings fails to account for the context in which the decision was made, plus the human element of fatigue and Clausewitz's fog of war, on a grand scale in this instance. It would have been nice to set up a study committee, deliberate with representatives of all nations concerned, and come to a well-considered conclusion based on the best interests of the Korean people. Regrettably, "if only" doesn't work in this imperfect world.

In contrast, Cumings seems to be on solid ground in his predictions about the fate of North Korea. The conventional wisdom today is that the regime in Pyongyang is beset with so many economic troubles that it is only a matter of time


before it collapses into the waiting arms of South Korea. Cumings says that what will happen is anybody's guess but his is that North Korea will survive.

"In the past," he writes, "foreign observers have gone wrong, in my view, by underestimating North Korea in nearly every way possible. In the meantime, predictions based on the idea that this regime draws deeply from the well of Korean tradition and anticolonial nationalism, and will therefore have staying power in the post-Cold War world, have so far been correct."

Neither Oberdorfer nor Cumings predicts another Korean War caused by North Korean desperation, but neither rules it out. Thus at least Oberdorfer should be read for his firm grasp what is driving both Koreas today.

NOTE

1. Let it be said, up front, that Oberdorfer and this reviewer have been professional competitors and personal friends for a quarter-century. Neither of us, however, has let that get in the way of a rousing disagreement and that holds for parts of this book.

 **The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists.** By Keith Windschuttle. Paddington, NSW, Australia: Macleary Press, 1996. 283 pages. \$24.95 (cloth). **Reviewed by Dr. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr. (Colonel, USA Ret.),** Professor of Military History, US Army War College.

The sensational title of Keith Windschuttle's most recent book catches the eye; it is not merely a gimmick. Professor Windschuttle obviously believes the premise passionately. This is a work of historical philosophy--an examination of the philosophical theories Windschuttle finds creeping into, if not dominating, recent historical works. The thesis is clear and boldly stated: "The traditional practice of history is now suffering a potentially mortal attack from the rise to academic prominence of a relatively new array of literary and social theories." Professor Windschuttle identifies a whole slew of potentially dangerous theories and practitioners. He contends the practitioners have captured prestigious academic chairs, attracted numerous graduate students, and dominated the publishing of an uncritical academic press. There is truth in each assertion; Allan Bloom, Roger Kimball, and Dinesh D'Souza have each written convincingly on the subject of the corrosive effect of radical ideology or political correctness on American campuses.

Windschuttle, however, takes the discussion to a more fundamental level. He is particularly worried about relativism, the theory that truth depends on the context of the speaker, and all its subtle variants. He writes, "In the 1990s, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all." Structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and scientific skepticism are bent on redefining or mutating history into a form of footnoted fiction. To Windschuttle, cultural relativism, which asserts that every culture (except mainstream Western culture) has positive worth and can be judged only on its own terms rather than against a universal human standard, represents a related and equally dangerous trend. Although philosophically sympathetic, I am unconvinced of the mortal danger to the discipline.


The Killing of History is not an easy read. I do not say that because it is not well written--it is. The subject, the issues, and the arguments are simply too complex for anything but painstaking, exhaustive, detailed study. I had occasional unpleasant flashbacks to a required graduate course in historiography--section titles like "The Double Hermeneutic and Reflexivity" do that to me. On the other hand, portions of the book are almost elegant. It is fun to watch a skilled intellectual take on a large and influential segment of the academic community. Windschuttle does an admirable job of explaining obtuse, convoluted, often counterintuitive theories. He gives the proponents a fair hearing--they probably feel their thoughts have been oversimplified and significant nuances ignored--before savaging them.

Even the savaging is done well. He made the excellent tactical decision to respond asymmetrically; instead of remaining on the opponents' chosen ground of theory, *The Killing of History* debunks theory with historical case studies. Windschuttle uses his opponents' work against them by citing recent empirical studies to show how adherence to radical theory produced distortions of history. Thus, we get case studies of varying extent on such diverse topics as the Spanish conquest of Mexico, the death of Captain Cook, the mutiny on the *Bounty*, the convict system in Australia,

and mental asylums and penal policy in Europe. Perhaps some of Windschuttle's targets are too easy--Paul Carter's attempt at "spatial history" falls apart during the explanation without waiting for the refutation--but others are more formidable. They all eventually succumb to logical empirical assault.

I obviously liked *The Killing of History*, so why am I unconvinced of the mortal danger to the discipline of history? The reason is the book itself. The traditional empirical style of history Keith Windschuttle advocates has a characteristic that ensures its survival against the insidious attacks he identifies. History is self-policing. Despite occasional temporary popularity, badly researched history structured around indefensible theories does not survive. Eventually somebody compares such work with empirical evidence and finds it wanting. That is exactly what Windschuttle has done in *The Killing of History*. In fact, in an article commenting on the first edition of this book Professor Windschuttle noted, "A number of their prominent former supporters are hastily producing new books and articles to distance themselves from the relativism and scepticism that dominated the field from the 60s to the 80s." His and similar books are the primary evidence that history as a discipline has a vibrant future. Instead of the murder postulated in the title, Keith Windschuttle has proven the charge assault--but has also apprehended, tried, and convicted the perpetrators.

 **Quartered Safe Out Here: A Recollection of the War in Burma.** By George M. Fraser. London: Harper Collins, 1995. 225 pages. \$14.

 **Doing Battle: The Making of a Skeptic.** By Paul Fussell. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1996. 310 pages. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Alan C. Cate, Commander, 1-61 Infantry, Ft. Jackson, S.C.

At this late date, more than a half century after the end of the Second World War, no one should hold the illusion that combat during the "Good War," particularly infantry combat, was anything other than savage, dirty, and obscene. We know this from the numerous graphic, first-person accounts we already have, so why read two more? It's not that *Quartered Safe Out Here* and *Doing Battle* tell us anything new; rather, it's the sheer literary quality of both works that makes them worthy of our attention. In these highly personal memoirs, two marvelously talented authors who share brutal honesty, barely restrained anger, and a sense of the absurd have produced a pair of notable additions to the classic literature of war experienced at the "sharp end." It's especially fascinating to read them together, because for all their similarities, the two men reach fundamentally opposed conclusions about the nature and meaning of their experiences.

It's interesting to juxtapose the two authors. George M. Fraser is a wonderful comic novelist, the creator of the incomparable *Flashman* series, as well as a successful Hollywood screenwriter. He served as an infantry squad leader with the British 14th Army as it waged its "forgotten war" in Burma. Paul Fussell is a retired Ivy League professor, who, in addition to his scholarly work in 18th-century English literature, has written critically acclaimed volumes about both the First and Second World Wars' effects on culture. He was a rifle platoon leader in the US Army's 103d Infantry Division in Europe from November 1944 until he was seriously wounded in March 1945.

Of the two, Fraser has more successfully come to terms with his experiences--his reminiscences are far less bitter than Fussell's, even though, much as Fussell, he recounts the petty injustices and idiocies of military authority, the foul-ups and "friendly fire" deaths, and the filth, fear, and fatigue that are the combat infantryman's lot. But he is also extraordinarily proud, 50 years on, of his unit's suffering and accomplishments. Among other things, *Quartered Safe Out Here* is a moving tribute to unforgettable comrades. It's also very funny. Readers familiar with *Flashman* will recognize that character's voice in Fraser's recollections and deft comic touch. In spots, one is tempted to believe that some of Fraser's vignettes are too pat, too well-structured, but Fussell--who absolutely rejects "war stories"--also remarks in his memoir the extraordinary narrative structure of events that simply must be seen to be believed.

Fussell's account is much darker. His experiences have marked him far more gravely--not only in the obvious matter of his wounds, but also in his outlook. Indeed, his subtitle--"The Making of a Skeptic"--refers precisely to the war's effect upon him. Where Fraser feels pride, Fussell feels shame at having been a part of the sordid enterprise he

describes. Fussell absolutely and repeatedly condemns the cant, hypocrisy, and euphemism that he associates with military service and war in general, and with his own experience in particular. Indeed, this really was the theme of his earlier war books. In *Doing Battle* he furnishes the expression "he gave his life for his country" as a powerful illustration of all that he despises.

Yet, Fussell's book is not merely another anti-military screed. It is complex and ambiguous, as is all literature about men in battle. It is complex, however, not in the traditional sense, such as with Fraser, where profound anti-war sentiments (as can be expressed only by those who have experienced war firsthand) exist in tension with a celebration of youth, comradeship, and excitement. None of the latter have any place in Fussell's narrative. Rather, Army-haters and the VFW will find in *Doing Battle* equal measures of comfort and consternation. In conjunction with Fussell's savage rejection of the pointlessness and dishonesty of his service, readers also encounter the veteran's supreme impatience with those who haven't experienced combat and who thus can never fully enter into his private world, combined with the sensibilities of the author who unironically titled a collection of essays *Thank God for the Atom Bomb*.

While both accounts memorably convey the experience of battle, it is Fraser in his "Introduction" who best captures the difference between himself and Fussell. With some heat, Fraser lists the urge to respond to those possessed of "a bitter desire . . . to undermine what they call the `myths' of the Second World War" as a major reason for undertaking his own memoir. He cites an unnamed book by an "American scholar" as particularly emblematic of "fatuous" attempts to conform to the modern intelligentsia's "fashionable prejudice" about the war and its influence on understanding and behavior. Curiously enough, it is clear from the internal evidence that Fraser is referring to one of Fussell's earlier books. Ultimately, of course, the experience of battle--like any human experience--for all its universality remains uniquely individual. On that level we can say that these two memoirs, with all their similarities and differences, can be equally true.

Reviewed 3 November 1997. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil