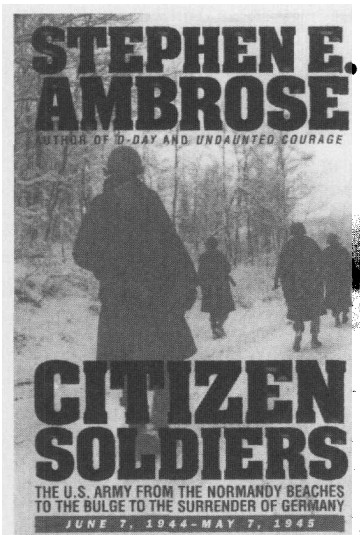


Absolute Devotion of the Common Soldier

reviewed by Williamson Murray

CITIZEN SOLDIERS: The U.S. Army From the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944-May 7, 1945. By Stephen E. Ambrose. Simon and Schuster, NY, 1997, 480 pp., \$27.00. (Member \$24.50)



Over the past decade, Stephen Ambrose, who made his academic reputation as the biographer of Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, has turned out an extraordinary set of books dealing with American military history and leadership. *Band of Brothers* (on the Commandant's reading list), *D-Day*, and *Undaunted Courage* (the tale of the Lewis and Clark expedition) all have set standards for scholarship, readability, and depiction of the human attributes that lie at the heart of the Marine Corps ethos—courage, dedication, and military professionalism.

With *Citizen Soldiers* Ambrose has added another gem to this list of first-class military histories. The author sets out the experiences of the common soldiers of the U.S. Army in the terrible battles from Normandy to the collapse of the Wehrmacht in spring 1945. In telling the story of the campaign from the point of view of common soldiers and junior officers, Ambrose has woven human interest into a

brilliant analysis of the effectiveness of the U.S. Army during the European war's last 11 months.

Unfortunately, the history of the U.S. Army's combat effectiveness has been influenced all too much by the negative portrayals in Russell Weigley's *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* and Martin Van Creveld's *Fighting Power*. Ambrose helps to set the record straight as to where U.S. forces did well (and in some respects did extraordinarily well) and where their weaknesses lay. Not all of this will be new to students of the European war, but the form in which Ambrose tells his story certainly is. Admittedly, he draws considerably from the pioneering work of the Army's Col Michael Doubler (a student of mine in the military history program at Ohio State)—a fact that Ambrose underlines in a number of places.

Given the political and strategic circumstances under which America embarked on its effort to defeat Nazi Germany and Japan, the U.S. Army confronted a number of hurdles that the Wehrmacht never faced. For the Germans, rearmament began in early February 1933, and Nazi troops would not be committed to battle for 6½ years—and at a time chosen by their political leaders. On the other hand, the U.S. Army (as opposed to the U.S. Army Air Corps and the U.S. Navy) began its rearmament in June 1940, when the collapse of France finally brought home to the American people the enormous danger posed by Nazi Germany. Within 18 months American ground troops were involved in combat with the Japanese in the Philippines and on Wake Island. In only slightly more than 2 years they would take the offensive against the Japanese on Guadalcanal and the Germans in

North Africa. Moreover, besides the short time between the onset of rearmament and the commitment of troops to battle, the American military confronted the problem of projecting those forces over tens of thousands of miles of oceanic distance—a problem that the Germans and Japanese failed dismally to solve.

The great strength of the U.S. Army was to be found not only in the enlisted ranks, but also among the great majority of its junior officers. At their best they were men like Richard Winters, a man still willing to volunteer his time and knowledge to the Infantry Officer Course at Quantico. Winters volunteered for the draft in 1941, graduated from Officer Candidates School in 1942, joined the 101st Airborne Division, led a platoon in Normandy (where he won a Distinguished Service Cross), commanded a company in Operation MARKET GARDEN, and by December 1944 at Bastogne, commanded a battalion while still a captain. In Normandy, leading 12 men, Winters took out a reinforced German battery of nearly 200 men. In Holland, leading a company that had barely enough men to fill up a platoon, he broke up an attack by two Waffen SS companies.

It is these men whose tale Ambrose so ably tells. Their generation has nearly had its day—month by month its members pass on. America is the worse for their going, for they returned from the catastrophe of war to build the stunning era of prosperity that has lasted for over 50 years. It is a tale that America must not forget, for we may well face challenges as grim in the next century.

What makes *Citizen Soldier* such an extraordinary piece of historical writing is that Ambrose is able to move from the particular actions of individual soldiers to collective experiences with ease. America—and much of the rest of the world—owes an enormous debt to those who fought and died in World War II. Ambrose underlines with justifiable anger the failure of the U.S. Army to always do right by those on the sharp end. While the equipment the Army provided its soldiers was serviceable and often effective, there were inexcusable weaknesses. U.S. tanks were grossly underarmed (especially since experience in Tunisia suggested what we would be up

against), U.S. machineguns never matched the capabilities of those possessed by the Germans, and, as Lt Paul Fussell suggested about the German 88, "The allies had nothing as good, despite one of them designating itself the world's greatest industrial power."

Gen Omar Bradley's reputation has steadily dropped over the past two decades. As Ambrose points out, Bradley made the same mistake that the Germans did in fall 1941, when they pushed their advance on Moscow

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by shoving forward all the ammunition and fuel possible and neglecting any preparations for the harsh winter that historically descended in December. The conditions under which U.S. combat troops fought over the winter of 1944/1945 never reached the catastrophic level of what hit the Germans in Russia, but they were bad enough. Moreover, frontline troops were the last to receive winter clothing and boots, as those in the supply services ensured that they were equipped first.

That raises another harsh issue that Ambrose focuses on—a supply system that clearly placed its needs well before those of the combat soldier—a supply system that provided in Bill Mauldin's terms, the "garritrooper" with the best boots, the best clothes, the best food, and certainly the best beer and cigarettes. The penultimate crook in this crime was LtGen John C.H. Lee, a man Ambrose fairly describes as the "biggest jerk in the ETO." In early September 1944, as Patton's tanks were stalling on the German frontier due to a lack of fuel, Lee flew his entire head-

quarters from London to Paris, including—according to the testimony of Lt-Gen James Gavin to this author in 1979—his grand piano.

Yet Ambrose's most telling criticism is aimed at the U.S. Army's senior leadership in Europe, and its system of individual replacement of casualties. Admittedly Eisenhower and Bradley confronted a considerable problem in George Marshall's decision to scale back the U.S. Army's force structure to 89 divisions. Consequently, they were forced to commit virtually every division they possessed to the frontline. But they were not forced, as Ambrose underlines, to order those divisions, many bloodied and badly attrited, to launch a constant series of attacks that had scant chance of success. The result was heavy losses—all replaced by ill-trained individual soldiers who never received adequate training or preparation for combat:

The replacements paid the price for a criminally wasteful replacement system that chose to put quantity ahead of quality. Its criteria was the flow of bodies. Whose fault was this?

Eisenhower's first. . . . And Bradley's. And Patton's. They demanded an even greater flow of replacements while doing precious little to insist on improving the training, and got what they demanded. In no other way did the American high command in the ETO show such disengagement. . . . It can only be that Eisenhower, Bradley, et. al. had no clear conception of life on the front line. . . . So they threw the eighteen-year-olds into battle, untrained, alone.

There are a few nits that one could pick with the book—they reflect a rush to print by the author and publisher that do a disservice to a first-class book. But the work stands as an extraordinary tribute to the American "citizen soldier" of World War II. Ambrose has lavished praise where praise is due, but also offered telling criticisms where appropriate. As usual, he has told his story with eloquence, and has done an extraordinary job of taking the particulars of individual experiences and weaving them into a larger tapestry.



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