

Fighting For Friendship

by Josh Liller

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Someone once said, “War brings out the worst in people but it also brings out the best.” This is quite true. For all the death, destruction, and horror of the battlefield, war also brings people closer together. Most notably is the bond shared by fighting men, most commonly referred to as comradeship. Comradeship is in many ways like friendship: an attachment, caring about another person’s well being, looking out for them, being willing to put yourself in danger to help them. But in a way it is different than normal friendship. One Alabama corporal added it was “for those with whom one has shared danger” and that it is “never felt for anyone else, or under any other circumstances.”¹ Perhaps William Manchester, who served in the Marines during World War II, put it best when he said “those men in the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than...my friends had ever been or ever would be. They had never let me down and I could not do it to them... Men, I now knew, did not fight for flag or country, for the Marine Corps or glory or any other abstraction. They fight for one another.”²

The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier provides an interesting contrast to our later books. All of the soldiers in For Cause and Comrades and most of the soldiers in Eye Deep in Hell, With the Old Breed, and Even the Women Must Fight were volunteers or, if required to serve, were quite willing to do so. However, Jakob Walter was drafted and did not really care to fight. He was from a small German kingdom and had not real interest in fighting with the French army. In the early 1800s, Germany was by no means united and as a result there was neither any feeling of nationalism or common heritage among Germans from different kingdoms and states. Furthermore, in the Russian campaign, men from Walter’s country made up just a small portion of Napoleon’s army.³ Walter looked upon his military as another job, albeit one which was less pleasant and had a much higher probability of death. Walter had no interest “either in killing more Russians or helping their fellow soldiers of other nationalities.”⁴ The only notable concern Walter expresses during the book for a fellow soldier is when he gets a chance to visit his brother who is serving in another regiment. They are quite happy to see one another and are upset that they cannot protect each other.⁵ While this “brotherly love” is to be expected amongst actual brothers, similar sentiments are expressed by soldiers in other books toward their comrades, but are absent from Walter’s tale. Fellow soldiers in Walter’s Wurttemberg regiment do occasionally assist one another, such as when a few soldiers share some wine shortly before leaving Moscow.⁶ The only repeated example of comradeship is between Major von Schaumberg and Jakob Walter. They seem concerned for one another’s well being. While such

comradeship between a lowly private and an officer would normally be unusual, Walter notes that the retreat from Moscow having become a struggle for survival “every soldier was like an officer.” Their shared hardships and the lack of organization had to an extent bridged the gap between officers and foot soldiers⁷. The two are happy to see a familiar friendly face. The lack of comradeship amongst soldiers from different nations is shown repeatedly. In one instance, Cuirassier Guards take Walter’s food, but one of his countrymen later shares food.⁸ In the most extreme example of the differences between soldiers of different nations is the incident in which Walter is nearly killed by some Frenchmen for his bread. Some of his countrymen come his aid and, after saving him, proceed to take his bread themselves. Walter is angry at the French, but less so the soldiers from his own country, despite the fact that they did essentially the same thing.⁹

For Cause and Comrades features more displays of comradeship than Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier. The fact that there are not different nations fighting on one side helps, but the personal interest of many of the soldiers in the war itself seems to have been a larger factor. The soldiers volunteered and care about winning, rather than merely surviving. A theme that is repeated in our later books is a bond amongst soldiers due to the “common danger they face in battle.”¹⁰ Furthermore, since many Civil War regiments were made of volunteers, friends and relatives often served together in the same unit. Many men wrote home about the strong bonds they had with their fellow soldiers, caring about them as friends and brothers and not wanting to let them down. But true comradeship was largely formed by the experience of having been under fire together. It was capable of dissolving “petty rivalries and factions.”¹¹ Camaraderie became so strong that men would often reenlist despite objections from their families and refuse transfer to more prestigious units because they felt such strong bonds with their current regiment.

In World War I, soldiers developed camaraderie with each other and in some cases the enemy as well. This was caused by the sheer hell that was life in the trenches. Soldiers in the First World War faced a nearly unparalleled misery from mud, rain, lack of shelter, artillery bombardment, and being forced to make suicidal charges through a barren wasteland against machine guns, barbed wire, and massed enemy troops. As with the theme mentioned in For Cause and Comrades, the shared experience of combat induced comradeship more than anything else. There was even comradeship between the soldiers on the two sides, albeit a limited one.

For the most part, the men on the front lines did not hate each other as much as they hated the conditions they existed in. In addition to this unusually strong camaraderie between the two sides, the lack of camaraderie between the front line troops and their higher officers was immense due to the relative safety, security, and good living conditions those officers had. The fact that many men in the trenches felt their superiors incompetent for ordering so many senseless and futile attacks did not help things. A feeling of estrangement caused by the fact that many on the home front were rather clueless as to what life in the trenches was really like also strengthened the bond between soldiers.¹² While soldiers' families back home could not grasp what they were going through, their comrades in arms understood because they experienced the same things. Everyone needs someone who understands them and to whom they can relate and that was their fellow soldier. "...the more men felt estranged from their old way of life, the more they turned to each other for support and consolation."¹³

In With the Old Breed, E. B. Sledge feels his comradeship is not just due to the shared experiences of war, but also due to the fact that they are all Marines. This Esprit de Corps is mentioned to some extent in Eye Deep in Hell and For Cause and Comrades, being mostly related to their state or specific regiment in the Civil War.¹⁴ However, while in the Civil War this feeling was more a long-standing sense of pride for one's state and because the volunteer regiments were from a specific region, in World War II this was not the case. Sledge's K/3/5 contains men from all across America and with varied amounts of experience yet they still feel comradeship for one another. They are in battle with family: not only the other members of their company, but the rest of the Marine Corps. "This sense of family was particularly important in the infantry," explains Sledge, "where survival and combat efficiency often hinged on how well men could depend on one another."¹⁵ Another difference from earlier books is comradeship between officers and enlisted men. While there is still a proverbial "glass ceiling" beyond which comradeship is rather limited - if not nonexistent - there is more comradeship between several of the higher commanders of Company K and Sledge and the other enlisted men, particularly their commanding officer during Peliliu, Captain A.A. Haldane.¹⁶ This seems to be mostly due to the fact that Haldane and many of the other officers tried to look out for and help their fellow Marines. While this feeling of comradeship was not as great as between the enlisted men themselves, it still existed with most of the officers. Company K was like a family and

Haldane was the father. Of course, a few of the officers like Shadow who seemed less competent, less caring, and “sloppy” the camaraderie was not there.¹⁷

Even the Women Must Fight presents an interesting aspect of comradeship that is not usually explored in literature: women in war. None of the women were actual combat soldiers, although most of them served under fire or bombing raids. They were volunteers and since the Vietnam War was very patriotic, one might expect that there would be a great deal of camaraderie in the book, but that was not the case. It seems the very family-oriented society of Vietnam, while not preventing women from serving their country in various fashions, did not seem to completely accept large numbers of their women in the war. While they were respected and admired by their peers in the war – especially for their courage under fire¹⁸ – a true sense of comradeship between the men and women in the war seemed lacking. There also seems to be less comradeship between the women than there is between the men.¹⁹ This seems somewhat in contrast to the earlier books, since conditions for some of the women in Vietnam was equally poor. But while poor conditions were shared, the women were not in true “the bullets are flying” combat.

Comradeship seems to develop based on conditions. A large portion of it is from shared experiences of combat. Soldiers can relate to other soldiers, sharing the danger and the misery of combat. In a way, it also develops of necessity; you need to be able to trust your buddy in the foxhole. But there has to be more than that, based on Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier and Even the Women Must Fight. The lack of comradeship in those books has separate causes however. Desire to be in the war, determination to win, and patriotism all help the formation of comradeship and all are lacking from Walter’s tale. Society also influences this, as communist Vietnam and the small kingdom of Wurttemberg kingdoms of the 1800s were not very open and free. In particular, Vietnam’s traditional views of women show strongly in Turner’s book.

So what was the importance of this camaraderie that certainly does exist in some form or another? First and most importantly, it gives soldiers comfort. It helps them get by, having people they know and can trust when their lives are on the line, as they often are in war. However, it is not just about surviving the strain and stress of fighting in the long run, but also preparing new soldiers for what they were about to experience and helping them come to grips with what they have experienced. As much as training prepares a man for the horrors of war, nearly everyone going into battle for the first time is quite frightened and many still come out of

their first engagement uncertain if they can handle their next. The camaraderie between the men helps comfort and ease some of the fears and tension in new soldiers. A great example is E.B. Sledge helping to set a new Marine's mind at ease during the fighting on Okinawa. He summed it up quite well when he said, "There was nothing unique in the conversation. Thousands like it occurred every day among infantrymen scheduled to enter the chaos and inferno of an attack. But it illustrates the value of camaraderie among men facing constant hardship and frequent danger. Friendship was the only comfort a man had."²⁰

- ¹ James McPherson, For Cause and Comrades (New York: 1997) 87.
- ² McPherson, Comrades 86.
- ³ Jakob Walter, Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Solider (New York: 1991) pg XX.
- ⁴ Walter, Diary XXIII-XXIV.
- ⁵ Walter, Diary 21-22.
- ⁶ Walter, Diary 59 & 78.
- ⁷ Walter, Diary 70, 75, & 78.
- ⁸ Walter, Diary 70 & 75.
- ⁹ Walter, Diary 65.
- ¹⁰ McPherson, Comrades 85.
- ¹¹ McPherson, Comrades 87.
- ¹² John Ellis, Eye Deep in Hell (Baltimore: 1976) 193.
- ¹³ Ellis, Deep 196.
- ¹⁴ McPherson, Comrades 84.
- ¹⁵ E.B. Sledge, With the Old Breed (New York: 1981) 98-99.
- ¹⁶ Sledge, Old Breed 38.
- ¹⁷ Sledge, Old Breed 226-227.
- ¹⁸ Karen Turner, Even the Women Must Fight (New York: 1998) 59, 120, & 136.
- ¹⁹ Turner, Women 124
- ²⁰ Sledge, Old Breed 217-218.