

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick O'Donnell. *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006. xxii + 244 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-306-81469-3.

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Portraying the Human Dimension of War

Over the past months numerous books relating to the war in Iraq have been published. The quality of these books has certainly been mixed. The greatest weakness in most has been the inability of authors to depict truly the human dimension of war. This is a glaring omission because individual and small unit actions characterize the war in Iraq. It is not a war fought with long-range weapons systems and pure technology.

Patrick O'Donnell's new volume, *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah*, superbly captures the human dimension of war that is missing in so many books of this genre. *We Were One* details the raw emotions, the ultimate highs and dramatic lows, the supreme personal sacrifices, and the bonding and unbreakable friendships resulting from intense combat. It is an extremely powerful and personal volume that will dramatically impact both those who have experienced combat and those who have not.

O'Donnell should be familiar to many. His previous efforts were *Beyond Valor: World War II's Ranger and Airborne Veterans Reveal the Heart of Combat* (2001), which was the winner of the prestigious William E. Colby award for Outstanding Military History; *Operatives, Spies, and Saboteurs: The Unknown Story of World War II's OSS* (2006); and *Into the Rising Sun: In Their Own Words, World War II's Pacific Veterans Reveal the Heart of Combat* (2003). Superb writing, exhaustive research, and the ability to quickly gain and maintain a reader's interest characterized these books. Following the same formula, *We Were*

One takes these characteristics to a higher level.

In four parts, O'Donnell tells the story of the marines through the First Platoon, Lima Company, Third Battalion, First Marine Regiment. First, he describes the platoon's initial formation while platoon members executed predeployment training in Camp Pendleton, California, in March 2004. Second, he examines the platoon's arrival in Kuwait in June 2004, and their initial months in Iraq. Third, he details the platoon's participation in the fierce Battle for Fallujah in November 2004. He concludes by examining the physical, emotional, and mental effects the battle had on these marines.

The Battle for Fallujah (Operation Al-Fajr, or New Dawn) is the focal point of the book. Coalition forces (led by over ten thousand American troops) began their assault of the city on November 8. Their mission was to regain control of Fallujah by the January 2005 elections in order to assist in making the elections reality. Defending the city (almost completely evacuated by civilians) was a combination of well-entrenched and heavily armed two thousand to three thousand insurgents, Jihadists, and terrorists. For the next two weeks, coalition forces (including First Platoon, Lima Company) engaged in brutal urban fighting. Finally, after intense fighting and significant casualties, coalition forces took control of the city.

How does O'Donnell succeed in depicting the human dimension of war? First, from the book's opening pages, he begins to humanize the marines of the First Platoon. He describes their personalities, includes short biogra-

phies on each marine, and provides brief vignettes on most platoon members. By the time the First Platoon enters Fallujah, readers will feel they know these marines personally. This sets the conditions for O'Donnell to portray the human dimension during the Battle for Fallujah.

The second reason why the author is successful is because he spent the Battle for Fallujah with the First Platoon. O'Donnell volunteered to go to Iraq (one of the first civilian historians in-country) and observed combat operations directly. This has obviously enabled him to gain valuable insight and the "feel for the battle" that authors utilizing interviews after the fact cannot hope to obtain. In writing books such as this, there is nothing that can take the place of being there. Certainly, the adage, "you must walk the walk to talk the talk" is relevant here.

Readers will find numerous strengths in *We Were One*. Inserted throughout the book are excellent, detailed, and easy to read maps. These maps greatly assist readers in visualizing the terrain in which the battle took place. The author includes over forty photographs (many taken personally), which vividly depict the operations in Fallujah and further humanize the members of the platoon. These images perfectly complement the author's written words. O'Donnell's writing style is fast paced and descriptive. Consequently, many will find *We Were One* to be one of those rare one-sitting books. Readers will not want to put it down.

The book's biggest strength is O'Donnell's ability to

convey the personal aspect of combat. Throughout the book, the author highlights the emotional and mental hurdles that each marine faced. Among the areas the author addresses are how individual marines dealt with their fears of combat, the interaction between veteran marines and those taking part in combat for the first time, the emotions marines felt when they had killed their first person in combat, and how marines individually and collectively handled the deaths of their fellow marines in combat (the First Platoon lost seven marines during the battle). These combine to portray the human dimension of war better than any book I have recently read.

However, those expecting a broader view of the second Battle for Fallujah will not be satisfied with this volume. The author offers just enough of the operational and strategic context of the operation to put the small unit actions in perspective. For those in search of this broader perspective, Bing West's equally outstanding *No True Glory* (2006) is highly recommended.

In his preface, the author tells the story about a marine (who had just experienced the death of his close friend) who asked O'Donnell what he would write about regarding his experience in Iraq. O'Donnell answered, "That I was with a band of heroes and I am going to tell the truth about what happened here" (p. ix). O'Donnell has clearly done both in *We Were One*. Those who seek to gain understanding of the human dimension of war and the type of fighting our marines and soldiers conduct daily must read *We Were One*.

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