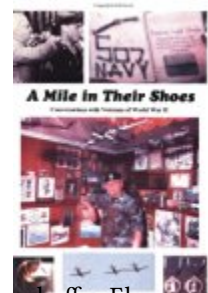


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Aaron Elson. *A Mile in Their Shoes: Conversations with Veterans of World War II*. Maywood, New Jersey: Chi Chi Press, 1998. 239 pp. \$17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-9640611-2-5.

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I have been entranced by World War Two since, as a kid in the 1940s, I joined my brother and friends, donned the ubiquitous camouflaged helmet liners, dug foxholes in our parents' back yard, and played "war." Two of my uncles, both heroes in my mind, served, one in North Africa and the other as a B-24 navigator. Today, I enthusiastically devour the latest fiction and nonfiction about the conflict, still wonder what made Hitler tick and why he manages yet to lurk ominously behind the headlines, and look forward to new firsthand accounts. I have even authored a couple of volumes of oral history about civilian internment and teach a course on the war. All of this left me unprepared for the disappointment of *A Mile in Their Shoes: Conversations with Veterans of World War II*, a volume that serves neither its veterans nor readers well.

The "conversations" in *Mile*, most of them with World War II veterans, are reported in twelve chapters. The World War II experiences range from the Normandy landings in June 1944, to the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp the following spring, and to the postwar. None of the veterans served in Africa or Italy. Only one participant, a Coast Guardsman, had any Pacific Theater duty (off Iwo Jima and Okinawa), but the reader learns little from him about either campaign. Elson devotes one chapter to the "Exercise Tiger" disaster off the English coast in April 1944. Two of the men also saw combat in Korea and Vietnam, and an additional chapter features a 1940's vet and his son, who fought in Vietnam. The volume ends with discussions of PTSD and POW experiences. Some of the veterans were airborne and infantry, but most rode the tanks of the 712th Battalion, Elson's father's outfit, about which the author has written previously (*Tanks for the Memories*).

The audience for *Mile* will be primarily veterans of

the war, not historians or even history buffs. Elson apparently has no other purpose than to compile conversations. He does not explain why he chose particular narrators (there are hints he obtained names from the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans), and there is no organizing theme other than an invitation to readers to "walk a mile" with these men.

Elson never places the conversations in a historical context, which could have been accomplished through introductory and/or summary essays, and he makes frequent references to locales and events for which he provides no explanation. He first mentions Pointe du Hoc (p. 84) without revealing where it is and why it is important; similarly, Hill 122 (p. 159) and the little-known Dachau trials (pp. 178-80). Another illustration of this point is "Exercise Tiger," about which Nigel Lewis has written definitively, even interviewing Elson's participant, Angelo Crapanzano, with far greater effect.[1] At first mention (p. 39), Lewis's fascinating book rates no citation, and it is not until nearly one hundred pages later that readers come to the chapter on the ill-fated operation.

The volume's quality is uneven; some participants have riveting, harrowing, informative tales to tell about combat, but others do not. Elson should have been more selective. Pages of pedestrian questions and answers about noncombat events (recruitment, training, romance) often divert the reader's attention from the main event. Elson's interview with Wes Boyer (1st Inf. Div., World War II, Korea, and Vietnam) is a tortuous series of single-sentence questions and answers that the author vainly tries to sustain and to inject with substance. For example, Elson to Boyer (pp. 206-7): "You can't remember anything at all funny about Vietnam? There's got to be something humorous that happened." Too many

conversations ramble on disjointedly (especially Chapters Three, Six, Nine, and Eleven) and/or confound sensible chronology (discussions of Vietnam, Korea, and the postwar before World War II). All of this could easily have been remedied had Elson been respectful of readers as well as narrators.

Most annoying is the author's failure to exercise sufficient discretion and control over individual interviews and the volume as a whole. These are not raw transcripts; there has been some stylistic and grammatical editing, but entire sections of most interviews could have been cut severely—even eliminated—and rearranged. The "conversations" are literal, wherein Elson and his narrators sometimes interrupt narration of moving and exciting battlefield experience to discuss photos or mementos they are looking at (pp. 84-85, 90, 92), and where participants wander into range of the author's microphone (p. 53) and are sometimes addressed before readers are aware of their identities or presence (p. 201). It is all very intimate and conversational, of course, but again the

reader senses that he/she does not very much matter.

Ironically, in his "Acknowledgments" Elson praises his editor for transforming "a collection of rambling interviews into compelling conversations." And similarly, he thanks a friend "for confirming my belief that this was indeed a book, and not just a bunch of interesting transcripts." Unfortunately, the interviews do ramble, the ones that are interesting are demeaned by the side issues and chit-chat, and the absence of any organizational scheme and context raises doubts about the volume as a "book."

Notes:

[1]. Nigel Lewis, *Exercise Tiger: The Dramatic True Story of a Hidden Tragedy of World War II* (New York, 1990).

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