

H-Net Reviews

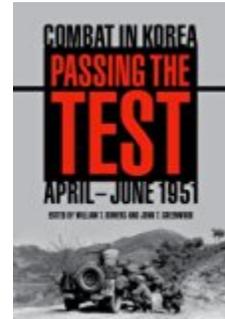
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William T. Bowers, John T. Greenwood, eds. *Passing the Test: Combat in Korea, April-June 1951*. Battles and Campaigns Series. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011. Illustrations. 488 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-3452-9.

Reviewed by Terry Shoptaugh (Minnesota State University Moorhead)

Published on H-War (January, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Recalling Combat in the Forgotten War

The late Forrest Pogue was one of the earliest U.S. Army combat historians, and helped pioneer the use of oral history techniques by interviewing soldiers in Europe during the Second World War. Serving in the Historical Division of the V Corps, he gathered narratives in the field as the Americans fought their way across France and Germany. Pogue kept a diary of his experiences. One day in late 1944 he commented in the diary that during his interviews he noticed that the soldiers' "testimony was especially unreliable when it came to the question of [fire] support." In essence, men believed that their unit fought without much support; when speaking of his combat, "the average man was nearly always certain that everyone else had quit the war except *his* platoon."^[1]

Pogue's acute observation should be kept in mind while reading the combat accounts in *Passing the Test: Combat in Korea, April-June, 1951*. *Passing the Test* is the third and final volume in this series of detailed combat narratives, edited by William T. Bowers and John T. Greenwood, both former staff of the U.S. Army Center of Military History.^[2] The battles related in *Passing the Test* are taken from field interviews conducted with GIs soon after the events in question. The resulting book is a narration of tactical engagements, fought at the platoon and company level, told through the notes gathered by the field historians.

The editors (primarily Greenwood, who took charge of the series soon after the death of Bowers in 2008) did

a fine job in relating the background to these fierce, brutal clashes between the U.S. Army forces of Eighth Army and numerous units of the Chinese "volunteer" armies that had intervened in the Korean struggle late in 1950. Following the departure of the legendary and controversial General MacArthur in early 1951, the new United Nations force commander, General Matthew Ridgeway, had decreed a new strategy—to stabilize the front, "inflict maximum personnel and material losses" (p. 5) on Chinese and North Korean forces, and by so doing set the stage for a negotiated settlement of the Korean conflict. The editors carefully lay out the battle terrain where this strategy was carried out. They summarize the conditions of the American forces, and emphasize how these forces employed maneuver and concentrated firepower to punish the massed charges of attacking Chinese troops. They emphasize that the ensuing stalemate produced by this strategy was not without cost, as American soldiers frequently took heavy losses in order to throw back the assaulting waves.

Overall, the soldier's combat narrations are taut and grim; forced to fight in a true "no win," situation, some the soldiers' frustrations are clearly evident. Sometimes the gritty nature of combat peaks through even in the dry prose of an historian's summary. In his compilation report of interviews with the men of 8th Ranger (Airborne) Infantry Company as they defended hills attacked by elements of the 27th Chinese Army, field historian Martin Blumenson relates the memory of a corporal manning a

light machine gun: “The 1st Platoon reported about fifteen Chinese up ahead. The company commander said to go get them. But there were more than fifteen, and the first platoon was pinned down. Sgt. Moore, the platoon leader of the 1st Platoon, was hit. Lt. Strong, the platoon leader of the 3rd Platoon, went forward, and he was hit. Strong came back looking for Capt. Herbert. By then the captain was hit” (p. 132). Blumenson almost certainly polished the corporal’s words, but even so, the soldier’s apprehension in a tight situation comes through. In other parts of the book, the readers will be struck by the constant reference in interviews to Chinese attacks as “banzai charges,” a legacy of the war against Japan.

Careful readers, particularly those who have knowledge of oral history, especially in military settings, will appreciate both the value and the limitations of these kinds of combat narratives. Only two of the accounts, those concerning fighting along the “outpost line” (chapter 2) and the ordeal of an armored artillery unit in escaping a Chinese ambush (chapter 3), are based notes that were later reviewed by the men interviewed, allowing them to “personally ... edit and authenticate their comments in the transcripts” (p. xi). All the other accounts in the chapters are summaries written by the field historians from their no longer extant notes, but these summaries often quote the soldiers.

Taken individually, one soldier’s memory will invariably leave out important information, show some bias, and raise questions about accuracy. But taken together, ten or a dozen accounts of the same battle, reproduced in these chapters, produce a fairly reliable picture of the nature of combat in Korea. For a full month, from late April to the end of May 1951, Chinese troops attacked American and British positions along much of the front that

the UN forces held north of the South Korean capital of Seoul. The Chinese forces under the command of General Peng Dehuai greatly outnumbered their opponents but were hampered by difficulties in obtaining sufficient rations and ammunition, often hauled by labor troops on foot, down the Korean peninsula from China. This long supply line, under constant attack by American air forces, served to even the odds. American artillery and automatic weapons further aided the UN defenses. By the end of June, the strategy of stalemate had achieved its purpose. Although the war would drag on for another two years, the American and UN forces more than held their own in this frustrating, restrictive warfare.

This book will be of greatest interest to readers who enjoy a “grunt’s view” of modern combat. Historians of the Korean conflict, and those who have an interest in how oral histories are used in war narratives, will also profit from it. If they use the book in conjunction with other such larger studies as Billy Mossman’s official history of this phase in the Korean conflict, *Ebb and Flow: November 1950-July 1951* (1990) and Clay Blair’s *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (1987), they will have much fodder for their own researches.

Notes

[1]. Forrest Pogue, *Pogue’s War: Diaries of a WWII Combat Historian* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 220-221; italics added by reviewer.

[2]. The previous volumes, *The Line: Combat in Korea, January-February, 1951* (2008) and *Striking Back: Combat in Korea, March-April, 1951* (2009), were, like this reviewed volume, published by the University Press of Kentucky.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Terry Shoptaugh. Review of Bowers, William T.; Greenwood, John T., eds., *Passing the Test: Combat in Korea, April-June 1951*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=34528>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.