H-Net Reviews
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**John Lewis Barkley**. *Scarlet Fields: The Combat Memoir of a World War I Medal of Honor Hero.* Edited by Steven Trout. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas in association with the National World War I Museum at Liberty Memorial, 2012. vi + 268 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1842-2.

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**Stewart on Barkley**

On April 6, 1917, the United States Congress officially declared war on Germany, and thus entered the fight against the Central Powers. After years of provocation and fragile American neutrality, 1917 would prove to be a turbulent year. The United States began mobilizing for war in earnest, and trench warfare had taxed Triple Entente soldiers to their limits for over two years on the western front as the Nivelle Offensive pushed thousands of French soldiers to stage their infamous mutiny. Farther north, attacks by German submarines based in Belgian ports drove Field Marshall Haig to commit troops to the Third Battle of Ypres, another costly, unsuccessful encounter for Allied forces. The outcome of World War I in Europe was far from certain. Among the men called to duty during the American build-up was John Lewis Barkley, a simple man from Holden, Missouri, a small farming community in the west-central part of the state. In his work *Scarlet Fields: A Combat Memoir of a World War I Medal of Honor Hero*, Barkley attempts to relay his war experiences in his own words with the assistance of Captain Mike Mulcahy, a postwar colleague from John Tarleton College. Years had passed since the end of World War I, and interest in such a story was waning. With limited time, even more limited resources, and a story too candid not to tell, Barkley, through his partner, approached King Features in a final attempt to get his story out. Through a the subsidiary publishing company, Cosmopolitan Books, a team of editors rewrote the book with Barkley prior to publishing it, and in the end the work was put forward with his approval. It is not a large-scale story that recounts several aspects of American intervention in the Great War; instead it is his recollection of a small but very integral piece in the larger scope of action. *Scarlet Fields* concentrates on operations Barkley's small intelligence platoon conducted as part of Company K, $4^{th}$ Infantry Regiment, of the U.S. $3^{rd}$ Infantry Division, and periodically expands out to larger formations and battles, but most importantly recounts the contributions of his small band of friends as can only be told by the men who made the sacrifices.

Barkley's autobiographical work does an exceptional job of conveying his story to readers, using early twentieth-century American language with no holds barred. Originally printed in September 1930 as *No Hard Feelings!*, the publication followed pieces such as World War I hero Sergeant Alvin York's book *His Own Life Story and War Diaries*, released in 1928, and thus did not get the same level of acclaim or notoriety. Professor Steven Trout's introduction provides an overview of details in the book, preparing the reader for the subsequent pages and aiding in piecing together the role Barkley's intelligence platoon of the U.S. $3^{rd}$ Infantry Division had in the larger war effort. Beginning with the challenges he faced while attempting to enlist due to his severe stutter, Barkley takes the reader on a journey that explains the training and critical functions of ground-based intelligence personnel in both trench and open field warfare on the western front in 1918. He continues by conveying the very human aspect of the Great War–shell-shocked frontline soldiers, the horrors of mustard gas and chemical warfare, the misery of trench warfare, the destruction of the earth by artillery, watching casualties return from the line, as well as the inner struggle he faced when killing a human being and how he dealt with it on a personal level. Pieced together from his diary during the war, the book is a very personal account that engages the reader with its detail. While not all-inclusive, the book does provide important insight into the fog that plagued ground forces in the Aisne-Marne and Meuse-Argonne campaigns, and the impact individual and small unit actions had on the outcome of larger operations. From the time Barkley entered intelligence training through

his final patrol, occupation duty, and return home, *Scarlet Fields* vividly describes numerous actions along "his front," and pinnacles with his single-handed attack on October 17, 1918, near Cunel, France, that won him the Congressional Medal of Honor for valor.

The greatest benefit this book provides, aside from the firsthand account of Barkley's Congressional Medal of Honor actions, is its insight into the First World War from the vantage of a frontline soldier and the camaraderie that existed in small units. Barkley's intelligence platoon was an amalgamation of Americans from all walks of life brought together for a common cause. Learning the specialized tricks of the trade, Barkley formed a special bond with five men from various walks of life and ethnicities. They relied on one another in battle and had their own code of conduct for warfare. Although not militarily flawless in their behavior away from the front, these men looked out for one another and executed their tasks not only in support of their respective missions, but as a part of their allegiance to one another. They complemented one another's abilities in battle, and *Scarlet Fields* recounts the good times, the difficulties and challenges, and the successes and failures of their unit. This book provides insight into more than just combat; it also offers a glimpse into the humanity involved when making life and death decisions in the heat of battle. While not written for individuals searching for a more broad-based look at World War I, this book offers a better understanding of the impact small unit actions had on the larger objectives, and makes it extremely personal to the reader, in great detail in some instances. This is best captured when Barkley notes at the end of his text, "Two Indians, an Irishman, a Jew, a Syrian, and a middle-western farm boy … that was an honest-to-goodness American gang" (p. 252). Additionally, the book provides a frontline perspective for every major battle the $3^{rd}$ Infantry Division took part in, from the defense of Paris at Chateau-Thierry on the banks of the Marne River in June 1918, through the final battles of St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne offensive in the final days of the war. Although Barkley's work ends almost abruptly, the afterword written by his daughter Joan Barkley Wells does a good job of bringing the details of the man, her father, following his return to the United States in 1919 and his life following his service to the forefront. Although the author has taken some liberties in regards to minor details of events off the battlefield, significant incidents and facts were validated and noted by Professor Trout, leading to an overarching credibility of the book.

*Scarlet Fields* is worth reading for both general historians interested in World War I as well as those looking for specific insight into the combat psyche of the U.S. frontline soldier on the western front in 1918. Barkley's hard-hitting memoir provides a glimpse into each of these while unknowingly addressing some of the larger social issues of early twentieth-century America. Although the work is not a comprehensive overview of the American Expeditionary Force operations in World War I, it is not intended to be; instead, *Scarlet Fields* is a very personal work that defines the average doughboy, and more importantly pays tribute not only to his own repeated heroic actions, but also to those of his "gang." Additionally, the book makes a case that anyone can be a hero, regardless of their background and ethnicity. At no time does Barkley or any of his friends seek acclaim for their actions. Instead, they looked out for one another while accomplishing their mission. It was that bond that kept them strong personally and professionally in the face of insurmountable odds. The human experience, the reality of men both in and out of combat in World War I, is balanced by both the ferocity and tenacity of killing with the rule-breaking actions that provide equilibrium to Barkley's life in uniform overseas. Although it can be argued with merit that sheer numbers won the war on the western front, *Scarlet Fields* exemplifies the critical roles individual initiative and intelligence men played in that fight, and how camaraderie, discipline, and brotherhood were central to that ideal. The premise that heroes are typically ordinary people doing extraordinary things is core to this book, which is definitely worth reading.

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