H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Timothy K. Nenninger, ed. *The Way of Duty, Honor, Country: The Memoir of General Charles Pelot Summerall.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010. 328 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2618-0.

Reviewed by Mack Easter III
Published on H-War (September, 2013)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

The Way of Duty, Honor, Country: The Memoir of General Charles Pelot Summerall is well put together by Timothy K. Nenninger. Mr. Nenninger does a good job of rendering the prose of a memoir that was arguably never genuinely intended for public consumption into clear, readable text. At the same time the reader can hear the voice of General Summerall throughout the book. The editor admits in his notes that the challenges in producing the book included sharpening the flow of the monologue, gaining some clarity on exactly who General Summerall is referring to at various places in the book, and correcting basic grammatical errors of a text that was originally written in long hand. The notes are a significant part of the story, and are very complementary to the primary document. Mr. Nenninger has done an admirable job in his role as editor.

General Summerall's life spanned from 1867 to 1955. This period saw much change in America, and radical change in the life of Summerall himself. This is a true rags-to-riches story that is told in a direct, clear, and factual manner. With a straightforward approach that neither denigrates his upbringing nor aggrandizes himself, Summerall tells the story of rising out of extreme poverty. He talks about the help and grace of others that it took to overcome the deficit into which he was born. From the perspective of personal commitment, and the honest admission that he needed the help of others, this is a remarkable read. The story remains interesting and enlightening when he steps outside of his own upbringing and writes about the events that he personally experienced as an army officer.

The book moves chronologically, as you might expect, and carries the reader through Summerall's youth (very quickly), admission to and attendance at the United States Military Academy, his experience in the Philippine Insurrection, the Boxer Rebellion, and the first World War, and his experiences as Chief of Staff of the Army. The narrative ends with Summerall's time as president of the Citadel. Along the way, the reader is introduced at various times to a veritable who's who of twentieth-century American leaders–Colonel Douglas MacArthur, General JohnPershing, President Woodrow Wilson, President Calvin Coolidge, and Brigadier General William Mitchell. General Summerall offers a candid view of these and other leaders; whether or not you with his assessment, hearing his voice adds to our ability to comprehend the world that these leaders lived in, and how they understood one another. Summerall also provides some insight on specific issues regarding leadership.

A fascinating aspect of the story is his take on his own development. In this area he doesn't spend much time discussing his own limitations (although he does mention some in passing), but over the course of the book he gives specific insight on his view to successful leadership. As one might expect Summerall's views on leadership are set in the context of the military; however, his observations aren't limited to operating in the military or to combat leadership. He makes some astute observations about leading in political and civil service environments as well.

For the enthusiast or academic with an interest in World War I, General Summerall's treatment of the action surrounding the movement to Sedan at the end of the war, and his relationship with other leaders regarding this incident, is enlightening.

The University of Kentucky and Mr. Nenninger have done an admirable job of publishing a story that helps fill a gap in the historiography of the twentieth century. General Summerall's story is well edited, and presented in manner that retains the nature of the author. An improvement would be the addition of two or three maps that cover the areas General Summerall discusses. The events that he relays are not new revelations, but the maps would help the reader more easily comprehend distances and relationships.

This is a personal story, written in prose that sounds

like something you might hear if you were sitting in the living room listening to the generations above you tell their story. It is fascinating, revealing, and intimate. This is one man's journey through a very important time in American history. With the exception of the military action against Sedan at the end of WWI, General Summerall makes very little effort to justify himself, nor does he attempt to tell the full story of any of his experiences. This is his journey. It is a journey well told, and it is worth reading.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Mack Easter III. Review of Nenninger, Timothy K., ed., *The Way of Duty, Honor, Country: The Memoir of General Charles Pelot Summerall.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38733

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