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**Reflections, One-Half Century On**

I must confess to a reluctance to criticize collections of veterans’ reminiscences, for fear that criticism of the published work will be taken as criticism of the veterans. By giving of themselves, the twenty veterans and one civilian who share their stories in this edited volume have all contributed to a fuller appreciation of the war in Korea. However, as a work of oral history, this collection ultimately fails to provide new insights into the social world of soldiers in battle. To paraphrase the Dean Martin character in the original version of the film, *Ocean’s Eleven*, this is not a work of oral history, it is an alumni meeting. Because it is methodologically compromised and lacks a central organizing theme narrower than “the war,” *Voices* is only a marginal contribution to the growing oral history of the 1950-53 war in Korea.[1]

The book is rather loosely organized. Chapters 1 through 4 provide the reader with a brief history of the war, based exclusively on the secondary literature. As summaries go it is adequate, but lacks the nuance of even James L. Stokesbury’s *Short History of the Korean War* (1998). The editors’ intent, of course, is to put the veterans’ remembrances into historical context, not to write a history of the war; and to this limited extent, the chapters succeed. The book concludes with a brief retrospective to complete the framing of the veterans’ stories. The oral history portion is generally thematic: “On the Front Lines,” “Behind the Front Lines,” “POWs North and South.” This helps sort the reminiscences, but does little to organize them analytically or conceptually.

*Voices* suffers from two principal failures, one is methodological and the second is somewhat inherent to all oral history. Methodologically, the book is weak. The population of American veterans from which stories were solicited is very small and is limited geographically to Oklahoma, where the veterans were members of the Oklahoma City chapter of Korean War Veterans Association and where (not coincidentally) the volume’s two editors live. While I have no reason to believe *ex ante* that Oklahomans are necessarily unrepresentative of Americans generally, I would be more comfortable with a wider geographic sample. All of the American veterans, for example, are white, which reflects the self-selection bias inherent in this type of work and the limitations of restricting the sample population to Oklahoma City. In ad-
dition, as Peters and Li freely admit, the sample is limited principally to Army and Marine personnel and, of them, primarily to combat infantry—an important group of men to be sure, but one that by no means provides a comprehensive view of life in wartime Korea.

The editors promise “voices” from Korean and Chinese soldiers, but the text is heavily weighted towards American ones (though for understandable reasons). I commend the editors for seeking out the voices of our then-enemy, but again the sampling method gives one pause. In the preface, Xiaobing Li points out that the Chinese veterans were nearly all officers, a limitation he claims as acceptable because in a peasant army, most of the rank-and-file are perforce illiterate. Apart from the fact that the veterans wrote their stories, it is unclear to me why an illiterate soldier cannot contribute to oral history; presumably, he could dictate. Li also notes (importantly, I think) that he was “permitted” to speak to the selected veterans by the regional military command and other agencies of the Chinese government. It seems reasonable to infer from the fact that his subjects were officers and had a kind of stamp of approval, that the subjects were selected by the Chinese government for their ideological reliability. It should surprise no one, then, that we “learn” about the steadfastness and motivation of the Chinese troops, and their fraternal love for their North Korean comrades. As for the lone North Korean veteran, he is, in fact, an ethnic Korean Chinese and is probably best considered a veteran of the Chinese army, having been briefly seconded to the North Korean People’s Army at the time of China’s intervention.

Finally, there is the question of editorial intervention. Again, Peters and Li freely admit that they performed various feats of editing on the materials submitted by the soldiers. However, they do not tell us where; consequently, we are unable to judge the full validity of the soldiers’ reminiscences. This is particularly problematic in the case of the Chinese respondents, who seem unusually well-versed in technical details of the war, such as distances traveled by the U.S. X Corps or the order of battle of the Eighth Army, which suggests to me that, at a minimum, these men have benefited from a comprehensive reading of Korean War history.

In large measure, the book’s second failure stems from its principal success—the gathering together and presentation of voices from the past. Unfortunately, the intervening half-century has deprived the veterans’ combat reminiscences of the immediacy readers get from (for example) the Korean War section of Andrew Carroll’s War Letters (2001). Indeed, one longs even for the somewhat contrived blood-and-guts of Stephen Ambrose’s work. Even the book’s dust-jacket copy recognizes the rather antiseptic tone of the American veterans’ accounts, which largely center on “going home.” Having been deployed to a combat zone myself, I can certainly appreciate the desire to survive and return, but I also know that, in combat, men think of much else besides home. Unfortunately, readers must largely surmise what that “else” might be. The years have, as a result, rendered some memories banal and have enriched others beyond contemporary experience. Consequently, it is best to think of this as a collection of reminiscences of the war, rather than memories of it, because all of the veterans have had much time to think, study, and reflect. And while such reminiscences can be valuable as oral history, they do not provide the window-into-battle that many readers expect from this genre. Compared to several other oral histories cited in this review’s notes, those collected in Voices are strangely detached.

Despite these formal weaknesses, there is much to commend this book. The veterans of the communist forces, for example, seem to have been more ideologically motivated than were the Americans in battle. They report having felt that the war in Korea was in many respects the logical continuation of the civil war in China, of which many members of the Chinese Communist Forces were veterans (see pp. 76-84, 242-258). Again, however, such claims should be treated somewhat skeptically, given that the interviews were arranged by the Chinese government. In addition, it is just as likely that many Americans fought for ideological reasons, though none of those included in this volume cast their experience in anything other than survival terms.[2]

The Asian veterans also help to dispel some commonplaces about the war. For example, even knowing that the Chinese and North Koreans outran their supply lines and had to forage for food, I unthinkingly accepted the widely held story that they were equipped for winter warfare, while we were not. Captain Wang Xuedong writes, however, that his troops were as shocked by conditions at the Chosin Reservoir as were the Americans; his division, the Fifty-eighth, was normally stationed on the southeast Chinese coast, “where the average annual temperature is about 72 degrees Fahrenheit” (p. 119). The cold cost the Chinese seven hundred casualties in the first week.

I was interested to learn, too, that in at least some instances officers and men in the North Korean People’s
Army were only “North Korean” in the strictest sense of the word. Colonel Lee Jong Kan is an ethnic Korean, though his home was, and is, in China. Kan fought with the Chinese Communists during World War Two and the Civil War as a political officer. Kan served in an all-Korean Chinese army unit, one which was seconded to the NKPA when the men returned “home.” Kan points out, however, that he “didn’t know why they called it ‘return,’ since I had never been in Korea” (p. 79).

Kan’s story brings to life some of the problems inherent in politicizing a peasant population, and he humorously relates the challenges of making terms like “class struggle” and “international imperialism” as well as the theories of Marx, Lenin and Mao comprehensible to the illiterate farm boys he led. Indeed, he himself found it difficult to work out the meaning of communist theory, having qualified for his political officer duties by virtue of his eighth grade education. Those of us with slightly more formal education and who have likewise struggled with the jaw-breaking lexicon of Marx and his followers can certainly sympathize!

Ultimately, these sorts of insights, while empirically trivial on their own, represent the important contribution oral history makes to a fuller appreciation of armed conflict. Serious students of the Korean War will need to turn to other sources for a broader understanding of the conditions under which the conflict was fought, as the sample of sources in this volume is simply too limited to provide even a once-over of personal experience. Students of tactics and logistics might want to read these accounts with an eye to refining their understanding of how the war was fought on the ground. One can tease out several consistent themes, not the least of which is the importance ground personnel on all sides attached to America’s air superiority. Given the limitations of method and sample scope, however, Voices is at best only a partial contribution to the Korean War historiography. In gathering contributions from North and South Koreans, as well as Chinese, it broadens the oral history of the conflict and shows the common suffering and common nobility of men at arms. Whatever the technical limitations of the book as history, the sacrifice and contributions of the soldiers themselves should be honored. To that end, Voices is a success.


[2]. In a letter to his father in November 1950, Army Sergeant John N. Wheeler wrote, “Americans had best prepare themselves for a bitter struggle in the years to come between two ideals, i.e., freedom and communism ... and I think one of which will be totally destroyed.” Wheeler was captured by the Chinese and died or was killed in captivity in 1951. Andrew Carroll, War Letters: Extraordinary Correspondence from American Wars (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 327-334.