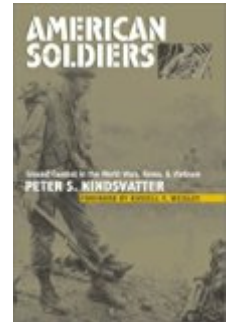


**Peter S. Kindsvatter.** *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. xxiii + 432 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1229-1.



**Reviewed by** Brent Watson

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## Lessons from Wars Past

What was it like to serve as a combat soldier in America's wars during the draft era? In four-hundred and seventy-two pages, Peter Kindsvatter, an Army veteran of twenty-two years, answers this important and heretofore neglected question.

Kindsvatter's *American Soldiers* is a masterful work of historical synthesis that marshals an astonishing array of sources--from soldiers' memoirs to historical fiction--to paint a compelling portrait of soldier behavior in the two world wars, Korea and Vietnam. The book is organized thematically within a broad contextual narrative that roughly corresponds with soldiers' wartime service. Thus, chapter 1 explores soldiers' motives (including selective service) for "rallying to the flag," while chapters two, three and four consider the physical and emotion environments of war, and soldiers' reactions to them. Subsequent chapters cover topics such as comradeship, battle exhaustion, views of the enemy, the experience of combat, leadership at the small unit level, impressions of support troops, and race relations in the

front lines. Reflecting on the ground combat experiences of American soldiers in the four conflicts under consideration, Kindsvatter's conclusion closes with a decidedly sober message for today's fighting men and women: "Don't expect too much from war" (p. 285).

Kindsvatter's seemingly unconventional concluding message cuts to the heart of the book's purpose: to provide military leaders, policy makers and combat soldiers with insights into the stark reality of modern ground combat. But Kindsvatter's synthesis is much more than a didactic treatise on the realities of combat. It is also a work of considerable scholarly merit, very much in the classic academic vein of history for history's sake. Thus, he accomplishes what many contemporary military historians have tried, but only a handful have successfully accomplished. By combining the utilitarian with the academic, Kindsvatter crafts a history of ground combat that is both didactic and scholarly.

In this regard, *American Soldiers* clearly builds on the "bottom-up" approach to military history popularized by John Keegan close to three

decades ago in his seminal *The Face of Battle*. But unlike Keegan, Kindsvatter does not extrapolate his conclusions from a series of historical case studies. As intimated above, Kindsvatter's scope and purpose is much wider. Indeed, it would seem that *American Soldiers* owes its greatest intellectual debt to Richard Holmes' *Firing Line* (also published as *Acts of War*), a book that appears several times in the endnotes but that is all but ignored in the introductory historiographical overview.

Indeed, of *American Soldiers'* thirteen chapters, the introduction is probably the least inspiring, reflecting more than any other the book's origins as a doctoral thesis. Excessive quotations and historical name-dropping contribute to the introduction's overall malaise. That said, Kindsvatter rapidly comes to life in the chapters that follow as he explores the nitty, gritty details of the American ground combat experience in the two world wars, Korea and Vietnam.

Kindsvatter shows that there were beyond doubt many commonalities in the battlefield experiences of American soldiers in these conflicts. From the importance of comradeship, to physical and emotional privations, to fear, there were certain elements that were universal across the several generations of twentieth-century American fighting men. Yet, there can be no question that there *were* some very important differences between these conflicts--differences that Kindsvatter acknowledges but seemingly downplays at some points in his analysis. The most obvious seam is between the world wars on one hand and Korea and Vietnam on the other. While the world wars were colossal struggles involving the entire national effort, Korea and Vietnam were nothing of the sort. Fought in remote Asian lands amid the broader context of super-power confrontation and Cold War, Korea and Vietnam were limited both in scope and purpose. There was to be no victory as there was in the world wars. Thus, the very nature of these limited conflicts created

unique experiences that set them apart from the world wars. Just ask any veteran who served in both the Second World War and Korea. Certainly there was no world war parallel to the Korean experience of fighting deadly patrol clashes under the ghostly glow of the search light aimed above the truce village at Panmunjom during the last years of the "Forgotten War."

Another issue the author might have considered is the combat experience of American doughboys versus that of allied soldiers. As it were, the doughboys missed the very worst of trench warfare. Indeed, by the time they took to the field in appreciable numbers the allies had been fighting for over three years and, in the case of the French, had already been racked by mutinies in the front lines. Would the doughboys have behaved similarly had they joined the fighting three years earlier? Or, would they have soldiered on like the Canadians and Australians, sustaining relatively high casualties in accordance with their status as elite national contingents? Although not the sort of issue that would keep most American readers awake at night, consideration of this fundamental difference between the Americans and the allies would have helped to build the case for a unique American ground combat experience.

These small gripes notwithstanding, there is very little else to complain about. Kindsvatter has written a book that is both compelling and informative, not to mention well-illustrated, which should be mandatory reading for anyone even remotely interested in military affairs. I look forward to more books by the same pen--perhaps a history of American ground combat since Vietnam?

#### Notes

[1]. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle*. New York: Viking Press, 1976.

[2]. Richard Holmes, *Firing Line*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985. Also published as *Acts of*

*War: The Behavior of Men in Battle*. New York: Free Press, 1986.

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