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(Review)

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DYING IN BATTLE: A REVIEW ESSAY

Eric Bergerud

Michael Stephenson's *The Last Full Measure: How Soldiers Die in Battle* is a recent and generally impressive book that follows the late John Keegan in exploring experience in battle to understand the heart of war. The title indicates the major focus of the work. Stephenson, painting with a very broad brush, attempts to find recurring elements of violence in all wars big or small, ancient or contemporary. The author's intent is ambitious:

In fact, by trying to represent death in battle as honestly as possible and with as much regard to the complexities as my "poor power" would allow—in other words, to deal with the whole bloody business as humanely as I can—I hope to honor the slain by helping to rescue them from appropriation by the cynic and the jingoist (xii).

But the title is a bit of a misnomer. As Stephenson remarks in several places, killing and dying are two sides of the same coin. So his book deals much with the processes that lead to death, the killing as well as the dying. Both killer and killed shared the same world, and perhaps both deserve a kind of honor. I am not sure whether or not this book should be described as "heritage history." If so, each reader will have to decide whether honoring the dead is a valid goal for history. One could argue that the dead do not need honor from the living, the relationship being exactly the opposite: the living need the experiences of the dead to make sense of their own world. Whatever the reader's answer, Stephenson's goals do plant the work firmly in the world of the humanities, a place I am most comfortable with as a military historian. And, at its best, the book shows a deep empathy for people in the past, mostly very young men, who found themselves asked to pay "the last full measure."

Although I think he goes awry on some points, a powerful thrust runs through the best parts of the book, especially the material dealing with the American Revolution through the First World War. In general, military leaders and campaign narratives are shunned in favor of an examination of the impact that the worst of war has on the soldiers who fight it. He refers often to the frequency of death in war and, largely through the words of participants, creates a powerful vision of what events looked like. He deals with the fear, honor, perfidy, cowardice, and courage found on the battlefield. He examines basic weapon systems and describes what they do to the human body. He provides the deadly statistics of the battlefield. He avoids many clichés. Yes "war is hell," but he finds that many people have found much to enjoy in war, and some enjoy battle itself. At the

same time, he points out that it is often confusion and torpor more than courage that drive soldiers forward. Stephenson also pays proper attention to the most painful statistic to any army: friendly fire. It has always struck me that war brings out the best and worst in nations and people. I think Stephenson's book strongly supports this simple but important point.

Michael Stephenson, *The Last Full Measure: How Soldiers Die in Battle* (Crown, 2012).

Stephenson's book is part of what is now, thanks to John Keegan, a major genre in military history. I think this genre is important. Military history, like all political history, requires good narrative as a base from which to explore. But if the reader of a campaign history does not understand the violent dynamic of battle, then the development of plans, the movement of units, and the course of battle become abstract or even indecipherable. It is here that knowledge contained in books like Stephenson's are of great value because they allow the reader to "decode" the events. When a narrative dryly comments that a company came under "heavy artillery fire," recalling some of the images recounted by Stephenson in his chapters on the world wars will add great weight, and menace, to the account. Knowing more about the "forensics" of battle is invaluable for interpreting leadership. Although, as one of my dearest friends and a veteran of three wars often reminded me, dumb luck and simple stupidity often decided the day. Good armies are almost always well led by men who understand how the battlefield works. But even a good army can come to grief if led by someone who does not understand reality as it exists at the tip of the spear. If this is true on the part of people who dedicate themselves to fight wars, it will be even more true for the student.

I have interviewed more than 200 combat veterans. In my experience, when young men return from a war, they are most anxious to embrace the normal world—a place where things make sense. (Vietnam soldiers on tour referred to the U.S. as "the world.") They believe, usually rightly, that unless someone has shared the experience, accounts of death and risk will not be understood. Civilians sense this and, even if they do wish to know more, rarely pry. So children often grow to adulthood knowing little or nothing of their father's role in immensely important wars. This situation is exacerbated in the West by a reluctance to show films or photos that portray real violence. Violent images exist in large number but are

invariably muted. I have had access to extremely graphic battlefield photography that would have matched well with each of my books, and each editor has declined to show them. Therefore, if a reader wants to appreciate—even to the limited degree possible second-hand—what a battlefield looks like, the powerful images collected by Stephenson and writers in the same genre are the best way to do so.

Like all good books, Stephenson's raises questions in the process of answering others. Two questions in particular trouble me deeply about the inner dynamics of battle. Perhaps they defy answer. First, Stephenson examines unit solidarity and a kind of historical inertia to help explain why men will face the very real possibility of death. The battlefield is filled with people who wish to live, and although war is very unlike peace it has a logic of its own. So Stephenson explains why men will stay and fight on a given day. But he does not directly confront a common and frightening phenomenon: the most violent year in World War II was 1944, just as 1864 held that dubious honor in the Civil War. Why do armies continue to fight ferociously even as it becomes perfectly clear that the outcome of the war has been decided? After Sherman broke the Confederate position at Atlanta, helping Lincoln retain the White House, was not defeat obvious? Could a single German soldier have held any hope for victory after the Wehrmacht was smashed in both the Ardennes and in Poland? There are many other such examples.

Perhaps an answer to this question might shed light on a second. Stephenson quotes several soldiers as admitting they enjoyed war—I heard the same from many veterans. Like Stephenson, I also heard some men admit that they enjoyed—if only for a moment—the violence of battle. Both reactions are understandable in the upside down world of war. Yet the longer I study the subject, I grow more convinced that the upside down world of war offers safe harbor to the psychopath who enjoys killing and inflicting pain. I do not refer to a soldier who kills a prisoner in a fit of rage, but someone who kills to suit an inner need or simply to inflict vengeance or steal. Modern armies know such people exist and do their best to keep them away from the front. Yet war can cause conditions akin to anarchy, particularly in the world of insurgency. A U.S. adviser in Vietnam told me that because life was so cheap no one was startled by a body lying in the road. Was he killed in a military operation? Was he targeted for political assassination by either side? Or was he murdered by his neighbor for a craven reason? It was very unlikely, I was told, that anyone would look for an answer, much less find one. This man might as well have been describing Spain in 1810, the Ukraine in 1943, or Baghdad in 2005.

Stephenson limits the scope of his inquiry to

military combat on land. Although he gives a brief history of military medicine in an appendix, he explicitly sets aside the subject of disease, which, as he makes clear, was the main killer of soldiers until the Franco-Prussian War. (This may explain his decision not to examine siege warfare, a kind of combat that has been central to war since the invention of walls and utterly dominant in many periods of military history. Certainly many combatants fell either on or in front of walls.) However, the closely related subjects of disease and fatigue also play a large role in the deadly equations inherent in battle. Many veterans I interviewed stressed how often a sick or exhausted man did “something dumb” that led to death. Soldiers who do not see straight do not think straight and are very to quick kill an enemy trying to surrender or an “enemy” who turns out to be a friend. Omer Bartov’s pioneering work on the “barbarization of war” on the Eastern Front during World War II emphasizes that miserable physical conditions were central to the development of an almost reflective bloodlust learned in the East and later brought to the West by Wehrmacht soldiers. Exhaustion often made worse by disease also undoubtedly accounts for a very high number of accidental deaths in training or combat. These statistics are frighteningly large. The U.S. kept very good casualty statistics during World War II, and approximately 20% of servicemen killed died in training or by accident. I do not think this is a subject that Stephenson should have ignored.

Stephenson intentionally segregates the experience of the ground soldier in battle from sailors and airmen. Certainly, authors must limit their scopes. But what is left out of Stephenson’s book are the experiences of submarine crews under depth charge attack and bomber crews riding out flak barrages. Because both experiences were so intense, they were closely studied by the U.S. military in World War II. Both situations generated a paralyzing fear very similar to that generated by an artillery barrage. If anything, they were more dangerous. That is why both submarine and bomber crews were rotated after a set number of missions in the United States. German airmen and submariners were not so lucky. Nearly 70% of Germany’s U-boat crewmen perished, making it almost certainly the most dangerous single assignment in history’s worst war.

Although Stephenson has many interesting observations about officers in combat, he largely ignores the importance of their military skill or lack thereof. It is likely that bad leadership has done more bad than good leadership has done good. Indeed, the equivalent of “fragging” has taken place in every war. If an officer demands a high blood tax, he had better provide victory in way of compensation. If men think that a leader, whether lieutenant or general, is squandering their lives, morale will plummet. Ironically, this can save lives although it loses wars.

Many an army has disintegrated because it knew it was badly led at every level and proved the point by

Alfred R. Waud's sketch of Union sharpshooters of the Eighteenth Corps in Petersburg, Virginia, July 1864. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-7053].

running at the first shot. Conversely, an army that is structurally sound can find victory even when put into a serious hole by chance or miscalculation. The Jena Campaign is a good example of this. After 1866 the German army showed an uncanny ability to avoid debacle because it was so strong at the foundation. In my opinion, the idea that good leadership can compensate for material disadvantage is one factor that leads many historians to be very uncomfortable with military history. It’s comforting to think that great events have great causes. If so, individuals (including historians acting as citizens) have little to do with the sweep of history. If one can argue, for instance, that had Lincoln proven the fool many thought he was, then the South would have succeeded in secession, perhaps without a fight, it means that the fate of a nation lay in a very small number of hands. Or would Europe have developed differently had Napoleon listened to all of his advisers and decided not to attack Russia? What if Moltke had decided that the German soldier had “toughed it out” so frequently in 1870 that it was worth the risk to “mix it up” along the Marne in 1914? What if Hitler had ordered his Panzers to Moscow in July and shattered the Eastern Front into thirds? If it is true that political/military leadership had been decisive in the outcome of war, it raises the importance of the political/military sphere as a shaper of history. It also makes events more precarious and less predictable than most scholars like to think they are.

Stephenson has done work in 18th-century military history, and it shows. The chapters dealing with that period, the American Civil War, and World War I are the best in the book. When he gets away from these subjects and strays from the focus on killing and dying in battle, Stephenson often gets on shaky

ground. He begins the book with a quote from Herodotus that suggests that Greek warfare was crippled by pointless ritual. He takes the quote to mean that “Herodotus looked at the warfare of his age (fifth century BCE) and saw anything but a heroic clash of arms. Greek warriors could be almost lemminglike in their tunnel-visioned stampede to oblivion. His view echoes the modern debate—a hawk-versus-doves standoff—about our ancient and prehistoric ancestors”(2). The problem is that the quotation is from a speech that Herodotus attributed to General Mardonius, the commander of the Persian army who, as every Greek reader knew, would soon perish along with most of his army as the “lemmings” demolished it at Platea in 479. The author digs a deeper hole a few pages later. Although he gives a reasonably clear examination of the phalanx and polis at war, Stephenson argues that the physical courage so prized as central to *arete* in the Greek mind (or *virtu* in the Roman) was somehow misrepresented to the population to keep the armies in the field:

But the need to maintain a heroic aura around battle is compelling (if civilians knew how truly gruesome combat is, societies would be hard-pressed to sustain it), and mass warfare is very rarely depicted on ancient Greek vases; the image that had to be promoted was one of heroic individual combat. The engine of war runs on the intoxicating vapor of mythology (36).

I think there were times or places when this description would have been appropriate. However, it is hard to think of a society more acquainted with the harshest realities of war than the Greek polis. Homer, known intimately to all members of that society, includes the most graphic description of battlefield violence in the history of world literature. In addition, an extremely high percentage of Greek male citizens experienced war at one time or another. It is perhaps possible that large battles do not fit on vases. It is also true that Greek armies regularly humbled foreign opponents for 400 years, and Greek mercenaries became the heart of armies throughout the Mediterranean basin.

When covering antiquity and the Middle Ages, Stephenson stresses the impact of military culture on battle. War making will always reflect social organization and cultural belief systems. It will also reflect military and political reality. (Stephenson makes this point later in the book.) Classical phalanx warfare between did indeed take on a ritual aspect. But it did so only when the city-states involved were fighting over a border dispute or a matter of honor. A quick battle leading to a clear (if temporary) outcome fit these conditions perfectly well, as it was not the intention to conquer and lay waste to the enemy’s

city. When the polis believed it was under mortal threat, the military universe changed. The war with Persia was so important to the greatest of the Greek cities that they were willing to risk their existence on its outcome. The result were battles like Salamis, one of the most violent in all of antiquity, and Platea, after which a large Persian army perished almost to the man. (As Persian soldiers and sailors could flee from neither battle and were annihilated, it is very likely that both engagements were more violent than Alexander's victories, which ended with the Persians running away.) During the Peloponnesian Wars, as so vividly described by Thucydides in his terrifying account of the revolution in Corcyra, the restraint of phalanx warfare greatly eroded. Melos was crushed as though it were a foreign conquest. An Athenian army was enslaved after Syracuse. When Athens was driven to its knees, there were calls (opposed by Sparta) for the destruction of the greatest polis. Simply put, in the ancient world the consequences of victory or defeat did more than any other factor to shape the intensity of violence. Cultural factors were secondary. The stunning conquests of Alexander and the rapacious rise of the Roman Republic were gained with methods possessing great coherence. As Thucydides observed, men fight because of fear, honor, or desire for profit. The greater any of the three (especially the first or third), the more the blood flows.

The powerful connection between the consequences of victory or defeat and battlefield violence does not often appear in Stephenson's book. Even the "little wars" fought to expand European empires were existential to many of the combatants. With the stakes high enough, Afghans would face the Raj, Zulus would face machine guns, and Native American peoples would fight a string of hopeless engagements. The men with Custer suffered as much as the soldiers fighting at Cannae or Stalingrad, but the government that paid their wages allowed their Sioux enemy to continue to exist even if in humiliation. There was no need for the equivalent of the destruction of Carthage or Berlin.

I think Stephenson makes the identical error when analyzing World War II. He makes the important observation that despite a more fluid front, the two world wars were extremely similar when it came to killing. Men by the million were consumed, and most perished due to artillery fire and machine gun and small arms fire. For some reason, he then enters the realm of operations, a very secondary subject in most of his book, and does it badly. He claims that the three great tactical revolutions of the war were airborne operations, amphibious landings, and tank warfare and describes each at length. In fact, amphibious landings, a staple in wars for 2,000 years, cost only a handful of casualties. The naval gunfire that he dismisses because of its failure at Omaha saved the Allied campaigns at Salerno and Anzio and was instrumental in victory during the six-week Normandy campaign. Airborne operations were a financially expensive failure that almost certainly hindered the Allied war effort. Stephenson treats the tank as a kind of latter-day knight: when generals did that they lost their tanks. Combined arms, of which the

tank was only one part, did transform land warfare. Certainly the use of tactical airpower dwarfed the importance of paratroopers in the war.

When explaining the extraordinary viciousness of the Eastern Front and the Pacific War, Stephenson puts great stress on racialism. It is very true that racial enmity, already apparent in the East during World War I, poured fuel on a massive fire. (In one sense, racialism caused the war in the East when Hitler decided to rewrite world history in favor of Germany by exterminating entire peoples.) Yet just as the Greeks fought differently when facing Persians than when fighting each other, the soldiers of the Red Army—despite living under a ruthless despotism in which battlefield discipline was enforced by the deliberate shooting of thousands of their own soldiers—knew full well that defeat meant the enslavement of their entire nation. The desperate tenacity showed by the Red Army reflected this reality. When it became obvious to German soldiers that their war was not going to end in Moscow but Berlin, they employed their formidable tactical skills to keep Russian soldiers away from German civilians. In both cases racial hatred existed, but in both cases it was the existential nature of the war that was the primary cause of the bloodbath.

Concerning the Pacific War, I have taken issue with the thesis that racial hatred caused the "war without mercy" in two books and an essay for this publication. Briefly put, if one seeks a culturally motivated bloodbath, the Pacific War was it. The Japanese government had convinced its citizens that their lives were completely subordinate to empire. Surrender dishonored the nation and was out of the question. When American GIs confronted this battle ethos in the South Pacific, long before the American propaganda machine was in operation, they learned that the Japanese would not surrender but would use a surrender ruse to take a last American victim with them into death. A vicious circle developed. The Americans decided that it was senseless to risk taking prisoners so they quit trying. When Americans confronted Japanese suicide tactics, evident much earlier on land than in the air, they concluded that the Japanese were crazy. I do not doubt that American soldiers hated the Japanese more than they did the Germans. But if racial hatred caused the bloodbath in the Pacific, it is very difficult to understand why American soldiers took tens of thousands of Asian prisoners in Korea and more in Vietnam. And we should remember that poison was seeping into the Western battlefields by early 1945, as many Allied servicemen learned the vicious kind of war brought by the Wehrmacht from the East. Not only did many Allied soldiers shoot Waffen SS prisoners out of hand in a kind of payback for numerous atrocities (Malmedy being only the most famous), but after encountering camps like Belsen and Dachau they often failed to protect German civilians from measures of revenge taken by some of the millions of newly liberated slave laborers against their former masters.

Often Stephenson displays a deep empathy for the soldiers he studies and, properly, is most reluctant to cast his subjects into groups fighting for good and those for evil. Therefore it is jarring when

Stephenson shows a distinctly 21st-century insensitivity toward some very deep matters for no discernible purpose. Several pointless remarks will distract or even insult some of his readers. The subject of Christianity goads the author to abandon his normally graceful style. While exploring the possibility that early wars were fought for protein, he calls the Christian Eucharist an "obvious" example of "ritual cannibalism" (10). I think millions of Christians would find that the only thing "obvious" is that Michael Stephenson knows nothing of the most complex and profound rite of the faith. Stephenson claims, with no source cited, that the medieval Church would "regularly pass down injunctions against missile weapons because they were 'unfair' to the nobility" (59). I can find no evidence supporting this claim other than a proclamation in the Second Lateran Council of 1139 banning crossbows and long bows from war between Christians. The same Council condemned the tournaments so beloved of the nobility. The Church could not dramatically curb violence in the Middle Ages, but both the Peace of God and the Truce of God were taken very seriously. Both were designed to limit violence inflicted by knights upon the innocent (the Peace) and each other (the Truce.) Stephenson shows no interest in understanding such matters, commenting that it would be easier to deal with a "writhing bag of snakes" than to try to understand the clash of religious ideologies leading to the Crusades. Ironically, it is precisely the willingness of other historians to tackle the subject that has made the military history of the Crusades such a vibrant field. Stephenson's dislike of the subject may account for his strange claim that "[i]n the early phases of the Crusades, the Christians' reliance on heavy cavalry cost them dearly" (70). It was of course in the first years of the Crusades that heavy European cavalry was central to a remarkable string of victories over both the Seljuk and Fatimid armies, allowing the Christians to capture and hold Jerusalem. The campaign of Richard I that Stephenson admires was, in comparison, a dismal failure. Lastly, I do not agree that "Exsanguination may sound like an arcane rite of the Catholic Church" (405). Why the thought occurred to the author I cannot imagine.

The Last Full Measure is a very worthy book that can be read with profit by a very wide audience. That said, I think it would have been considerably better had the author widened his scope on some important issues and showed more care when dealing with others.

Eric Bergerud is professor of history and the humanities at Lincoln University. He has published several books about the Vietnam War and the Pacific in World War II, including Fire in the Sky: The Air War in the South Pacific (Basic Books, 1999).