

THE WORLD'S GREATEST 20th CENTURY BATTLEFIELDS

by Peter and Dan Snow

London: BBC Books – Random House, 2007

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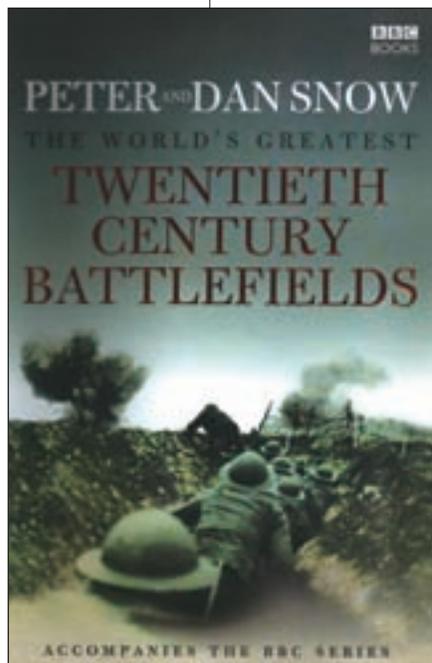
Reviewed by Paul R. Hussey

From its ambitious title through to its structure and style, this is a book aimed at a mass audience of only superficially informed but interested readers. The book was published to accompany the television series entitled, “*Twentieth Century Battlefields*,” first broadcast on BBC2 in 2007. The authors, during the course of writing the book and making the television program, “walked” all of the battlefields they chose to represent. They have used the television technique effectively of overview and context with personal commentary or interview quotes containing tactical detail or compelling “I was there” evidence dispersed throughout the chapters. Obviously, more of these latter personal quotes are available with respect to the more recent conflicts chosen. In all, they add a certain uniqueness and human interest to the book.

The authors chose eight battlefields: Amiens (August 1918), Midway (June 1942), Stalingrad (September 1942 to February 1943), The Imjin River (April 1951), The Tet Offensive (January/February 1968), Yom Kippur (October 1973), The Falklands (April to June 1982), and Kuwait (August 1990 to March 1991). Why these particular battles and not others? Each author and many readers will have their own opinions. Other voices have longer lists of decisive battles. The length of this particular work may, of course, have been influenced by the length and coverage of the television program itself. The authors do admit in their introduction that any list of decisive battles is subjective, and they acknowledge, for example, the importance of the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War, but decided to commence coverage with the First World War. Authors Peter and Dan Snow are of the opinion that these eight all had a critical impact upon the course of history, and that they all had one feature in common – they

changed the future. The world, they say, would have been very different if the outcomes of these particular battles had been reversed.

Each of the eight battles, battlefields, or wars is covered in a similar approach. The authors begin with an overview of the strategic political/military context. They then proceed through a campaign-operational level description, coupled with a tactical and individual skirmish level commentary, or quotes from interviews or testimony given in the post-conflict analysis stage. Overall, given the style of this book and the amount of material covered, these techniques work very well. This is not a book of *analysis*. Rather, it is one of *exposure*. Indeed, it constitutes a good starting point to pique one’s interest in a particular conflict.



It should come as no surprise that there is a little something for everyone in the “BBC audience.” There is even some Canadian content in the chapter on Amiens, and the chapter entitled, The Imjin River Korea. High praise comes for the Canadian soldier in the Amiens chapter, through the comment that the Canadians were left off the front line until the last possible moment because the Germans had so much respect for them that their presence in any part of the line would be taken as a sure sign that the next

attack would be felt at that particular location. In the Imjin River chapter, the authors describe how the Princess Patricia’s Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) unit isolated on Hill 677 near Kapyong, directed the New Zealand artillery to fire upon their own positions as they were surrounded and being overrun by Chinese troops.

The book is full of interesting anecdotes, such as the following lesson in communication and cultural differences. During the Chinese attack at the Imjin River, the British 29th Brigade under Brigadier Brodie, having borne the brunt of an attack by two Chinese divisions, requested a withdrawal. However, his American commander ordered him to remain in place. The British were holding a vital section of the line, and American units were withdrawing on their right and could have been

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attacked from their flank or rear if the 29th Brigade had been permitted to withdraw. Many of the survivors of the onslaught in the 29th felt that Brigadier Brodie and his American superior failed to communicate as effectively as men from the same nation and cultural background might have done. Brodie apparently told his American commander that things were “a bit sticky.” This classic bit of understatement by a British officer was not “fully appreciated” by the American commander, and so, resources were not committed “...in proportion to the threat” that the British forces faced. This is a significant lesson to be remembered in today’s multinational coalitions.

It is these scatterings of personalities and anecdotes that come out of the general overviews and chronology that give this book its appeal and character. Overall, I believe the authors achieved their goal of extending the reach of the BBC television program on 20th Century conflict to the general reader. It provides a very readable introduction across the broad panorama of a very violent century of warfare.

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HOME OF THE BRAVE: HONORING THE UNsung HEROES IN THE WAR ON TERROR

by Caspar W. Weinberger and Wynton C. Hall

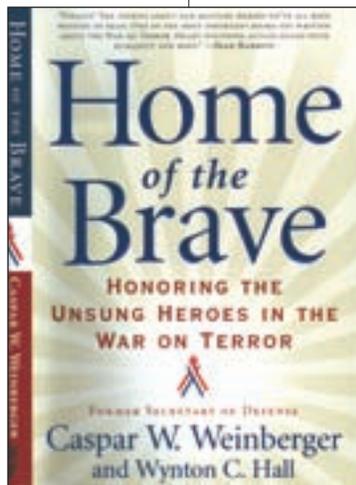
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Review by Craig Leslie Mantle

Finding a true hero or role model in this age of corrupt executives, criminal athletes, and decadent celebrities is a daunting task – although, thankfully, not an impossible task. Those who give tirelessly of themselves without expectation of reward can be found, if one looks hard enough, from small communities through to the international plane, and the ranks of the military are certainly no exception. In *Home of the Brave: Honoring the Unsung Heroes in the War on Terror*, Caspar Weinberger, a former Secretary of Defense in the Reagan Administration, and Wynton Hall, an award-winning presidential scholar and speechwriter, highlight the compelling stories of 19 very ordinary Americans, who, owing to their very extraordinary conduct in the face of the enemy, have earned some of their nation’s highest military honours – the Silver Star, Navy Cross, the Distinguished Service Cross, and Congressional Medal of Honor. With a fluid and captivating style that makes turning the page all too easy, and by never

shying away from graphic depictions of combat’s gruesome reality, the authors vividly describe how this select group of individuals mustered the courage to confront and overcome situations that weighed heavily, sometimes hopelessly, against them. In essence, they have put another human face to the War on Terror, and they suggest that the current generation is truly the equal of all others that came before it in terms of pure military prowess. Their book is as much a call to remember the sacrifices of many as it is a means to recognize the valour of a decorated few.

The stories related within offer an intimate picture of the dynamics of the modern-day battlefield and the mind of the modern-day warrior. Because the authors have, for the most part, relied upon interviews with the recipients themselves, the incidents about which they write offer a useful, first-hand commentary on such weighty matters as fear, cohesion, fatalism, stress, and leadership. Numerous quotations from those who actually were there add much to an already interesting narrative, and they become a useful resource for those studying these and allied issues. More to the point, however, each vignette provides a positive example of some of the many qualities – such as courage, loyalty, and commitment – and the military expects its members to possess, and to demonstrate daily.



This book is comprehensive in both scope and content. Included are personnel from the four branches of the military – army, marines, navy, and