

CITIZEN SOLDIERS

THE U.S. ARMY FROM THE NORMANDY BEACHES TO THE BULGE TO THE SURRENDER OF GERMANY, JUNE 7, 1944 – MAY 7, 1945¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR MARY E. HARTMAN²

I. Introduction

Reading *Citizen Soldiers* is like leafing through an old photo album stuffed with snapshots of combat soldiers. The time and place is World War II Europe, and *Citizen Soldiers* connects the snapshots. Attached to each snapshot is a soldier's brief account of the moment the picture was taken. Not much else is written on the snapshots, and sometimes there is only one snapshot of a particular soldier in the whole album. But sometimes the snapshots jump to life, and the reader is swept onto the battlefield with head ducked to avoid German bullets whizzing past. Upon reaching the end of the album, the reader truly understands the combat soldiers' sacrifices to ensure our freedom.

Author Stephen Ambrose's stated goal is to tell the story of the citizen soldiers of the U.S. Army and U.S. Army Air Forces in the European Theater of Operations in World War II. As the founding director of the Eisenhower Center for American Studies, a non-profit research institute located at the University of New Orleans, Ambrose interviewed over one thousand combat soldiers to preserve their memories of World War II. Ambrose's son, Hugh, working with the son of a German WWII veteran, also interviewed dozens of German combat veterans for *Citizen Soldiers*.³

Ambrose drew from hundreds of diaries, letters, memoirs, and oral histories of front-line soldiers archived at the Eisenhower Center to tell

1. STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, *CITIZEN SOLDIERS: THE U.S. ARMY FROM THE NORMANDY BEACHES TO THE BULGE TO THE SURRENDER OF GERMANY, JUNE 7, 1944-MAY 7, 1945* (1997).

2. United States Air Force. Written while assigned as a student, 47th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 16.

their stories in *Citizen Soldiers*. He wanted the reader to know “who they were, how they fought, why they fought, what they endured, [and] how they triumphed.”⁴ He promises in the introduction not to dwell on the generals, but rather to tell the soldiers’ stories: the GIs, the junior officers, and the enlisted men fighting on the front lines. Ambrose promises to discuss only enough strategy to keep the reader abreast of the “big picture.”

Ambrose does not keep all his promises in this book, but he does give a memorable voice to World War II combat soldiers. Although his analysis of the Allied victory is logically flawed, this book soars when it focuses on the determination, resourcefulness, and bravery of the foot soldiers.

Ambrose begins his mostly chronological account of the citizen soldiers on 7 June 1944, the day after D-Day. Focusing primarily on the front-line soldiers, Ambrose begins with the expansion of the Allied beachhead and the excruciatingly slow hedgerow fighting that stalled Allied progress for weeks. In succeeding chapters, he recounts the breakout from Normandy, the effort to cross the German border, and the setbacks experienced in the Hürtgen Forest and the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. He tells of soldiers spending Christmas 1944 in the thick of battle and of the winter war on German soil in early 1945. He closes with the crossing of the Rhine River and the Allied victory upon Germany’s surrender on 7 May 1945.

Ambrose also devotes a section of the book to other aspects of life in the European Theater: he leads us through a terrifying night in a foxhole on the front line, he recounts the heroic work of the Medical Corps after facing ridicule in training, and he details some experiences of prisoners of war. Ambrose also tells of the Jim Crow racism of the Army and of the “jerks, sad sacks, and profiteers” of the war. Finally, Ambrose describes and condemns the U.S. Army’s replacement policy that sent young untrained men just out of high school straight to front-line combat.

This review will focus on the “photo album” quality of *Citizen Soldiers*, the logical flaws in its analysis of why the Allies won the war, the revelation of the darker side of the American GI, and what remains after reading *Citizen Soldiers*.

4. *Id.* at 13.

II. The Bulging Photo Album

When I began the book, I hoped to learn how the Army transformed a citizen—a farmer, a teacher, a businessman, a recent high school graduate—into a combat soldier. What was the citizen's thought process in changing from citizen to soldier? What life experiences did the citizen draw upon to survive, or to be a hero? Stephen Ambrose supplied almost no information about the soldiers' backgrounds and life experiences, and he did not furnish much insight into how the citizens became soldiers.⁵

What *Citizen Soldiers* gave me instead was a photo album bulging with snapshot moments of soldiers' lives on the front lines, depicting how they fought and what they endured. Ambrose piled one snapshot on top of the last, with little transition between, which gave a somewhat distracting "hodgepodge" quality to the book. Ambrose quotes the soldiers liberally in telling their stories, letting them speak for themselves. But Ambrose rarely presents more than one snapshot of a particular soldier; instead, he quotes a given soldier once and never returns so that we may hear from that soldier again. In this book, Ambrose does not follow individual soldiers chronologically through the war, as he has in previous books.⁶ It is to this book's detriment that Ambrose does not tell the reader who the soldier was and what happened to him, as the reader is always left to wonder. *Citizen Soldiers* would have been a better book if Ambrose provided a very brief background and short follow-up on the lives of the soldiers quoted.

Another distraction that interrupts the flow of the citizen soldiers' stories is Ambrose's broken promise not to dwell on generals and strategy. Contrary to his introductory promise, Ambrose stuffed *Citizen Soldiers* with far more snapshots of strategy and the egos of Generals Patton and Montgomery than necessary to keep readers abreast of the "big picture."

Citizen Soldiers, however, soars when Ambrose focuses on his stated goal to tell the soldiers' stories. His snapshots of front-line soldiers are spectacular and compelling. He describes the unbelievable agony of a soldier enduring daylong combat, and then at dark, without rest or hot food, digging a foxhole to sleep in the dirt without adequate clothing or cover. He paints a vivid picture of the horror and fear the men faced during com-

5. My hopes for the book were fostered by the book's title as well as the author's promise in the preface to tell the readers "who [the soldiers] were." *Id.* preface.

6. STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, *D-DAY, JUNE 6, 1944: THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE OF WORLD WAR II* (1994); STEPHEN E. AMBROSE, *BAND OF BROTHERS: E COMPANY, 506TH REGIMENT, 101ST AIRBORNE, FROM NORMANDY TO HITLER'S EAGLE'S NEST* (1990).

bat, witnessing fellow soldiers mangled and killed before their eyes. Ambrose brings home the reality that, for the better part of that year, the men who fought did not live in tents, did not sleep on beds or cots, did not shower, and did not regularly eat hot meals. He depicts the ordinary men who turned and ran in the face of danger, and those heroes who sacrificed themselves in stunning acts of bravery to save the lives of their fellow soldiers.

While the bulging photo album does not live up to all of Ambrose's promises, the snapshots of front-line soldiers not only illustrate how the soldiers fought and what they endured, but also, the snapshots portray the true sacrifices of the men on the front lines in the war against Germany.

III. Why We Won

A major flaw in *Citizen Soldiers* is Stephen Ambrose's unsupported conclusion that unit cohesion won the war for the Allies. Ambrose does not explain the importance of unit cohesion and does not provide any facts to support his thesis that unit cohesion won the war for the Allies. Ambrose introduces his book with this theory: unit cohesion, teamwork, and the development of a sense of family in the squad and platoon, are why the soldiers fought and how they won the war.⁷ After the introduction, however, Ambrose does not explore this theme again until the closing paragraphs of the book. Ambrose fills the pages between with accounts of scores of action-packed battles and skirmishes, jumping from one to the next without taking a breath. Lost in all this exciting action, however, is any analysis of the question Ambrose poses in the introduction: how did untrained young men, considered by many to be far inferior to the disciplined German forces, defeat Hitler's war machine? At the end of the book, Ambrose concludes that patriotism had little, if anything, to do with the motivation of soldiers in the European Theater. "The GIs fought the enemy because they had to. What held them together was not country and flag but unit cohesion."⁸

While most military members understand the importance of unit cohesion in combat, the ordinary citizen reading *Citizen Soldiers* probably finds the concept of unit cohesion to be fuzzy. Notably missing from the book are the soldiers' thoughts on whether unit cohesion affected why they

7. *Id.* at 14.

8. *Id.* at 473.

fought and why they won. Ambrose does take time later in the book to illustrate the effect of unit cohesion on the German troops: he explains that the Wehrmacht's units were made up of soldiers who grew up together in the same villages, attended the same schools, and trained together from the start. Their effectiveness suffered greatly when members of the unit were killed. Ambrose states that the most devastating experience for a German soldier was to realize that he did not know the soldier next to him.

Additionally, there is a gnawing contradiction in Ambrose's logic regarding the effect of unit cohesion on the war effort. Ambrose devotes an entire chapter to the antithesis of unit cohesion—the Army replacement policy. Rather than rotating battered units out of the combat zone and replacing them with fresh units, General Eisenhower instead kept them on the front lines throughout the last year of the war. He substituted poorly trained eighteen-year-old replacements for the soldiers killed. But the unit's survivors, who had bonded together through months of training and preparation for combat and more months of combat, often left the replacements to fend for themselves, with devastating consequences. Many divisions took one hundred percent casualties of replacement troops, many times within days of the young men's arrival in the unit. Ambrose lambastes the Army's replacement policy as “criminally wasteful,” but does not make the logical connection between the replacement policy and its effect on unit cohesion and the Allied victory.

If Ambrose is correct that unit cohesion won the war for the Allies, how did we win the war despite the replacement policy that tore asunder unit cohesion? How did any of those young replacement soldiers—alone, knowing nobody in the unit, shunned by unit veterans—survive, contribute to the combat effort, and sometimes become heroes? Was it a greater survival instinct—a strong will just to survive and get home? The consensus of the few soldiers that Ambrose actually quoted in the book was that they fought to survive.

Perhaps the reason the Allies won was not unit cohesion or a greater survival instinct, but rather the resourcefulness and determination of the soldiers. Ambrose certainly provides ample evidence for this theory. He describes how, when thick hedgerows in Normandy stopped Allied troops and tanks from advancing, American soldiers improvised and adapted tanks to cut through the bush.⁹ When shells crippled our tanks, American soldiers, repaired the damage and drove the tanks back into battle. Not so

9. *Id.* at 66-67.

the Germans, who left their crippled Panzer tanks smoking in the battlefields.¹⁰

Ambrose portrays the American soldiers as young men with spirit, determination, ingenuity, and resourcefulness that the Germans could not match. Perhaps it was through sheer determination and resourcefulness, rather than unit cohesion, that a bunch of untrained young men was able to defeat Hitler's war machine.

IV. The Darker Side of the American Soldier

Some reviewers have criticized Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers* for cheer-leading "our boys" to the point of hyperbole.¹¹ While it is true that Ambrose never wavers in his admiration for the soldiers and what they endured, he does not ignore the darker side of the American soldier. The author includes stories of soldiers who deserted, stole supplies, and killed unarmed German prisoners-of-war (POWs). Ambrose recounts the experience of Lieutenant Fussell and his infantry platoon, which came upon a forest crater where fifteen to twenty German soldiers were gathered:

Their visible wish to surrender—most were in tears of terror and despair—was ignored by our men lining the rim, Fussell later wrote. As the Germans held their hands high, Fussell's men, laughing and howling, hoo-ha-ing and cowboy and good-old-boy yelling, exultantly shot into the crater until every single man down there was dead If a body twitched or moved at all, it was shot again. The result was deep satisfaction, and the event was transformed into amusing narrative, told and retold over campfires all that winter.¹²

Ambrose makes no comment on the event. He does state that as many as one-third of the one thousand combat veterans he interviewed related incidents in which they saw other soldiers shooting unarmed German prisoners who had their hands up. He recounts the story of an American Airborne officer who murdered ten German POWs while they were under

10. *Id.* at 64.

11. Ernst-Ulrich Franzen, *Stories of "Citizen Soldiers" Well Told*, LET'S GO ONLINE MILWAUKEE J. SENTINEL (last modified Nov. 2, 1997) <<http://www.onwis.com/news/sunday/books/1102bkambo.stm>>.

12. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 353.

guard, digging a ditch. Ambrose believes the following quote from an eyewitness expresses the general attitude toward the murder of enemy POWs:

I firmly believe that only a combat soldier has the right to judge another combat soldier. Only he knows how hard it is to retain his sanity, to do his duty and to survive with some semblance of honor. You have to learn to forgive others, and yourself, for some of the things that are done.¹³

These stories both sobered and disturbed me. *Citizen Soldiers* altered my view of American soldiers as the “good guys” in the fight against the evil Nazis. Ambrose’s seemingly casual attitude toward the more sinister acts of American soldiers also disturbed me. Ambrose did not analyze or judge their transgressions, and indeed seemed to excuse the soldiers’ behavior because they endured the rigors of combat. After much thought on the subject, I realized that Ambrose is a historian, and not a judge. He recounted the harsh and unflattering facts of war in *Citizen Soldiers*. He wrote the difficult truth that American soldiers were not always the heroic good guys, but were only flawed humans like the citizens for whom they fought. His book shows that combat brought out the worst in some men, and the best in more of them.

V. The Soldiers’ Voices Remain

What remains after reading *Citizen Soldiers* is not its shortcomings, but the voices of the soldiers. Ambrose gave voice to the words of Staff Sergeant Bruce Egger, who summed up the experience of the combat soldier serving out the last year of war in the European Theatre:

We were miserable and cold and exhausted most of the time, and we were all scared to death But we were young and strong then, possessed of the marvelous resilience of youth, and for all the misery and fear, and the hating every moment of it, the war was a great, if always terrifying, adventure. Not a man among us would want to go through it again, but we are all proud of having been so severely tested and found adequate. The only regret is for those of our friends who never returned.¹⁴

13. *Id.* (quoting AMBROSE, *supra* note 6, at 210).

14. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 469 (quoting BRUCE E. EGGER & LEE M. OTTS, *G COMPANY’S WAR: TWO PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE CAMPAIGNS IN EUROPE, 1944-1945* (1992)).

Citizen Soldiers brought those words to life, reminding us that our soldiers were men worthy of our pride. Stephen Ambrose's unwavering belief in the American soldier is evident in the book's closing sentence. It says what so many Americans feel but cannot put into words: "At the core, the American citizen soldiers knew the difference between right and wrong, and they didn't want to live in a world in which wrong prevailed. So they fought, and won, and we, all of us, living and yet to be born, must be forever profoundly grateful."¹⁵

Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers* is not a perfect book. Like most photo albums, it allows the reader to see only snippets of reality in its pictures of combat. It jumps from one snapshot to the next, never allowing the reader to see the full life of the soldier in the picture. But the snapshots convey the suffering of combat soldiers—through freezing conditions, exhaustion, grisly wounds, hunger, and homesickness—who endured what most of us would consider unendurable. This reader is profoundly grateful to Stephen Ambrose for preserving the memories he assembled in this photo album called *Citizen Soldiers*.

15. AMBROSE, *supra* note 1, at 473.