

AMERICA'S SPLENDID LITTLE WARS¹REVIEWED BY MAJOR KEITH A. PARRELLA²

*It was the sort of war—neither small nor splendid but short—in which the United States performed at its best to achieve its objective and, most important, minimize casualties.*³

Last year marked the sixtieth anniversary for many of the great battles of World War II. Our nation rightfully celebrates veterans of battles such as Iwo Jima and Okinawa for the incredible sacrifices they made while facing a determined and disciplined enemy. The U.S. flag being raised atop Mount Suribachi⁴ remains an icon of the American fighting spirit. *America's Splendid Little Wars* reminds readers about the sacrifices made by U.S. service members since 1975, a period of military operations that are less familiar than the larger and costlier wars of the twentieth century, but are no less significant for those who fought in them.⁵ Although the book is brief and might leave readers desiring more information, Huchthausen nonetheless provides a fascinating account of America's recent conflicts. More importantly for the author, the book accomplishes its goal of reminding readers that these recent conflicts were "neither splendid nor small."⁶

¹ PETER HUCHTHAUSEN, *AMERICA'S SPLENDID LITTLE WARS: A SHORT HISTORY OF U.S. ENGAGEMENTS FROM THE FALL OF SAIGON TO BAGHDAD* (2003).

² U.S. Marine Corps. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 158 (describing the Gulf War and the successful humanitarian action in Kurdistan).

⁴ The raising of the flag on Mount Suribachi refers to the famous photograph taken by Joe Rosenthal depicting five Marines and one Navy corpsman raising an American flag on top of the mountain during the battle of Iwo Jima. See MARINE CORPS ASSOCIATION, *USMC: A COMPLETE HISTORY* 376 (Jon T. Hoffman ed., 2002).

⁵ See HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at xv ("[T]he personal adventures of the blood-caked veterans described in these pages more accurately reflect the words of the duke of Wellington in 1815: '[A] great country can have no such thing as a little war.'").

⁶ *Id.*

America's Splendid Little Wars provides a chronological, historical account of America's military intervention in over a dozen conflicts since the fall of Saigon in 1975.⁷ The book provides a brief historical snapshot of the actual military operations during this era, succinctly describes the events leading up to and the underlying motivation for each intervention, and analyzes lessons learned for future operations.⁸ Huchthausen traces the evolution of the American military from what was arguably its lowest point of the twentieth century—the years immediately after the prolonged Vietnam War—to its current state as the world's preeminent military superpower. According to the author, each conflict presented an important, and often costly, illustration of the changing threats facing our nation and the corresponding strategic changes required to respond appropriately and effectively.⁹

The book begins in the aftermath of the Vietnam War when the spread of Communism was still perceived as a viable threat to the United States, and the U.S. military sought to prove that it was still able to deliver a potent blow to an adversary anywhere in the world.¹⁰ America's first opportunity to prove its military prowess came in 1975. In May 1975, Khmer Rouge guerrillas hijacked the SS *Mayaguez* while it sailed through international waters off the coast of Cambodia.¹¹ Although the mission to rescue the crew succeeded, the number of U.S. casualties exceeded the number of crew members finally rescued.¹² The mission also suffered from vague intelligence and confused dissemination of information from civilian to military leaders.¹³ Despite

⁷ *Id.* at xiii.

⁸ *Id.* at xiv.

⁹ *See id.* at 219–20 (describing some of the lessons learned from military ventures of the past twenty-five years). The days of large and heavy conventional forces squaring off on the field of battle were replaced by a wide array of complex regional conflicts where the enemy was often elusive and did not adhere to traditional rules of warfare. *See id.* at 220.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 16.

¹¹ *Id.* at 4–5. The SS *Mayaguez* was a U.S.-flagged cargo container ship. *Id.* at 3–4.

¹² *Id.* at 17. The *Mayaguez* incident resulted in eighteen killed in action (KIA) and fifty wounded in action (WIA), whereas the *Mayaguez* crew consisted of only forty people. *Id.* at 7, 15.

¹³ *Id.* at 9, 14. Some of the problems resulted from the Ford Administration repeating the mistakes of earlier administrations by attempting to influence and direct actions at the tactical level. *See id.* at 14. Unfortunately, subsequent administrations repeated this mistake. In Lebanon, for example, the issue of how to handle the security of U.S. Marines after the withdrawal of Israeli forces was decided directly by then-Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who ignored the theater commander's advice to withdraw the Marines and instead left them in an "indefensible position." *Id.* at 56. As

the heavy price in casualties, Huchthausen considers this mission to have been a success because it began the process of America reasserting its military might.¹⁴

In addition to the *Mayaguez* incident, the book also classifies U.S. military operations in Grenada, Libya, Panama, the first Gulf War, and the rescue of the Kurds in Northern Iraq as successful operations.¹⁵ On the other hand, it labels the attempted Iran hostage rescue, U.S. military operations in Lebanon, Somalia, and the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo as failures.¹⁶ Huchthausen surmises that what distinguished success from failure in these operations was the presence of sound policy objectives, not military execution.¹⁷ Simply stated, military intervention with concrete policy objectives generally produced better results for the United States.¹⁸

Huchthausen validates his thesis by providing a detailed description of the respective policy objectives, or lack thereof, for each mission. He effectively contrasts missions with ambiguous objectives, such as Lebanon,¹⁹ with those missions where the United States had a clear, concise objective supported by a vital national interest, such as the first Gulf War.²⁰ In addition, he briefly, yet accurately, reveals the impact of

Huchthausen states, “Diplomatic and political restrictions . . . overrode the designs of combat, echoing the American experience in Vietnam.” *Id.* at 57.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 17. Huchthausen’s inclusion of the *Mayaguez* incident in *America’s Splendid Little Wars* was particularly informative because of the incident’s relative obscurity in comparison to more recent conflicts. Although this incident occurred shortly after the Vietnam War ended, it was a separate and distinct incident that warrants reflection for the part it played in shaping future operations.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 220. *But see* CHARLES TRIPP, A HISTORY OF IRAQ 258 (2d ed. 2002) (suggesting that the U.S. failed to provide military assistance to the Kurds after the Gulf War).

¹⁶ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 209 (noting that the U.S. “finally agreed to concrete intervention” in Bosnia after learning of Srebrenica massacre), 215 (calling the intervention in Kosovo “late and overly cautious”), 220 (listing the Iranian hostage rescue mission, Lebanon, and Somalia as failures).

¹⁷ *Id.* at 220.

¹⁸ *See id.* (explaining that the successful operations resulted from “an overall national policy that either was already in force at the time of the action or had been formed just prior to it”).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 55 (describing how the “American way of war”—to destroy the enemy with all available means—was inconsistent with the peacekeeping mission and led to “self-perpetuating combat”).

²⁰ *See id.* at 130–31 (listing the clear American interests and national objectives asserted by President George H.W. Bush).

the media on the formation of U.S. foreign policy.²¹ For example, Huchthausen discusses how media reports of starving children in Somalia and genocide in Bosnia swayed public opinion and led the United States to enter those conflicts without a clear national interest or a viable chance of success.²² As Huchthausen explains, during the past twenty-five years, “moral outrage and popular sentiment at times interfered with the creation of sound U.S. foreign policy and military strategy.”²³

Fortunately, *America's Splendid Little Wars* does more than just recite history. Whether readers wear combat boots or loafers to work, the book sets forth important lessons. First, it explores how U.S. military experiences in the last quarter of the twentieth century influence our current military-friendly culture. The armed forces have escaped the dark days of the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and military service has regained a favorable place within American society.²⁴ The military has demonstrated that it can deliver decisive and overwhelming force to destroy an adversary anywhere in the world quickly and with minimal U.S. losses.²⁵ In addition, *America's Splendid Little Wars* facilitates an improved understanding of current American foreign policy with respect to military and humanitarian intervention. It explains policies such as the Goldwater-Nichols Act²⁶ and the Powell Doctrine,²⁷ which improved the way the Department of Defense prepared for and executed missions

²¹ *Id.* at 83–84 (discussing Grenada), 137 (discussing the first Gulf War), 167 (discussing Somalia).

²² *Id.* at 167 (recounting how images in the media of the “death and destruction” in Somalia drove the public to demand action despite a lack of U.S. interests in that country), 186–87 (“[T]he United States . . . found it difficult to contemplate intervention until . . . the sight of horrible suffering daily on the news reached unbearable levels.”).

²³ *Id.* at 219 (cautioning that “[m]oral indignation, while a laudable attribute for a powerful democracy, is no substitute for a well-thought-out foreign policy”).

²⁴ Despite the on-going wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marines, the Navy, and the Air Force are all meeting their year-to-date recruiting goals. *Army Expects to Miss Goals for Recruiting*, N.Y. TIMES.COM, Sept. 13, 2005, at A18, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/13/politics/13recruit.html>. The Army, although behind in its annual recruiting goal, had its best recruiting month in four years in August 2005. *Id.*

²⁵ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 220.

²⁶ *Id.* at 104 (explaining that the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 gave senior military leaders the authority to shape command and control to suit the mission).

²⁷ *Id.* at 170 (defining the “Powell Doctrine” as the term used by the media to describe the military’s post-Gulf War hesitancy to enter a conflict without decisive force and clear goals). The term is derived from then-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. *Id.* at 171.

against a changing, complex threat. Finally, *America's Splendid Little Wars* offers numerous lessons for today's professional military officer. For example, Huchthausen uses the conflicts to demonstrate the benefits of improved coordination of joint operations, comparing the poor coordination of the Iran hostage rescue mission in 1980 to the smooth execution of joint forces during the bombing of Libya in 1986 and the invasion of Panama in 1989.²⁸ Huchthausen also provides an interesting history of special operations forces before examining their employment during the failed Iran hostage rescue attempt.²⁹ Missions like Iran and Somalia reveal the risks of not properly integrating special operations forces with conventional forces.³⁰

America's Splendid Little Wars also provides specific learning points for judge advocates. The experience of the Marines in Lebanon confirmed the need for rules of engagement that would not limit the commander's ability to respond to an identified threat.³¹ Further, humanitarian and nation building operations like Somalia and the Balkans, as well as current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, are replete with legal issues and demonstrate the need for thorough planning and training by judge advocates in preparation for deployment.

Why write a book like *America's Splendid Little Wars*? If the average American were asked to name the major wars of the twentieth century, they would likely name World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and the first Gulf War. They would not likely name Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, or the *Mayaguez* incident. Despite an increase in global media access and real-time reporting, these later conflicts, with the exception of the Gulf War, failed to arouse more than a fleeting

²⁸ *Id.* at 37 (discussing the Iranian hostage rescue mission), 96 (discussing the bombing of Libya), 113 (discussing the invasion of Panama).

²⁹ *See id.* at 21–25. The book, however, contains no bibliography for this chapter of the book.

³⁰ Huchthausen attributes some of this to reluctance on the part of conventional military leaders to integrate special operations units, who they sometimes viewed with “serious mistrust.” *Id.* at 24. In Somalia, Huchthausen does not criticize the performance of the special operation's units but blames senior military and civilian leaders who failed to send in either armor or enough conventional forces. *Id.* at 175, 177.

³¹ *Id.* at 92. The sentries guarding the airport in Beirut prior to the bombing of the Marines' barracks were prohibited from keeping ammunition in their weapons. *Id.* According to Huchthausen, many commanders continued to suffer from this “enforced hesitancy,” even after the rules of engagement were changed to give these commanders greater freedom. *Id.*

interest by the general American public.³² Without Hollywood's depiction of these events in popular movies like *Black Hawk Down*,³³ they would be all but forgotten by most Americans. In light of America's recent historical amnesia, *America's Splendid Little Wars* ensures that readers do not forget either the lessons learned from this important period of history or the personal sacrifice of those who participated in these conflicts. As Huchthausen states, it is "necessary to record the details of these events so that neither the participants nor their descendants forget what they achieved."³⁴

A common criticism of *America's Splendid Little Wars* is its brevity.³⁵ In its introduction, Huchthausen boldly asserts that "[u]ntil now, there has been no book that encompassed the full American military experience since 1975 in one volume or explored this period in relation to past conflicts and its larger impact on modern world history."³⁶ After reading *America's Splendid Little Wars*, readers might respond that such a book still does not exist. Although *America's Splendid Little Wars* delivers an interesting overview of many frequently overlooked conflicts of the late-twentieth century, it does not provide a thorough analysis of how this period relates to past conflicts or how it impacts modern world history.³⁷ More precisely, this book represents the *Cliff's Notes*³⁸ for American military history since 1975.

³² Perhaps this is attributable to the replacement of conscription with an all-volunteer professional military, which, in turn, has curtailed mainstream America's contact with the military. See Pat Towell, *Is Military's 'Warrior' Culture in America's Best Interest?*, CONG. Q. WKLY., Jan. 2, 1999, at 25, 25 (noting that because the draft ended in 1973, "relatively few Americans have any military experience, or know any relatives or role models such as teachers who have been in uniform").

³³ BLACK HAWK DOWN (Columbia Pictures 2001) (depicting the experience of Task Force Ranger in Somalia).

³⁴ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at xv.

³⁵ See Daniel Benjamin, *Books of the Times; Military Revival After the Vietnam Trauma*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 15, 2003, at E33 (reviewing HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1) (claiming that *America's Splendid Little Wars* "touch[es] on big themes without developing them"); see also H.W. Brands, *Fire Power*, WASH. POST, July 20, 2003, at T3; HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1) ("Here one wants additional information on the political context in which U.S. military operations took place.").

³⁶ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

³⁷ Huchthausen undoubtedly faced a daunting task in attempting to cover a dozen major military operations in just over two hundred pages. Unfortunately, the process of squeezing it all in forced him to gloss over significant details at the tactical level. See, e.g., *id.* at 179–82 (providing little detail regarding the battle in Mogadishu between U.S. forces and local clan warlords).

³⁸ *Cliff's Notes*, <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/> (last visited Apr. 27, 2006).

Another criticism of *America's Splendid Little Wars* is that it fails to pay adequate tribute to the service members who fought in recent conflicts.³⁹ Critics fairly conclude that the book neglects the human side of these operations by omitting the personal stories of those who participated.⁴⁰ Huchthausen does, however, forewarn the reader that this book is a “purely historical” account.⁴¹ Moreover, although personal stories may have added convincing detail to the book, the book’s notes and bibliography contain ample evidence that Huchthausen thoroughly researched his subject matter and extensively interviewed several key actors.⁴² Further, Huchthausen’s wholly historical description pays tribute to those who fought by reminding readers of what those service members achieved, even when their achievement was only to provide a lesson for future operations.⁴³

In Huchthausen’s defense, writing this book was a challenging task. He attempted to provide a historically accurate, yet interesting, snapshot of twenty-five years of U.S. military history. Each conflict described in *America's Splendid Little Wars* merits its own separate text.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Huchthausen’s consolidation of complex events provides average readers with enough information to grasp the big picture. In fact, the lack of comprehensive detail also makes the book universally appealing and easy to read. Readers do not need comprehensive knowledge of military terminology or hardware to enjoy this book.⁴⁵

³⁹ See, e.g., Daniel Benjamin, *supra* note 35, at E33 (“While [Huchthausen] says his greatest obligation is to those who fought, he tells us little about who they are . . .”).

⁴⁰ See *id.* (“The human side of the military transformation of the last three decades is surely the most fascinating part of the story.”).

⁴¹ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at xiv.

⁴² See *id.* at 225–43. Despite his detailed research, Huchthausen makes some “mistakes of fact.” Benjamin, *supra* note 35, at E33. Perhaps most notably, he states that after the retaliatory bombing of Libya, Libya’s “overt support of terror attacks ceased.” See HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 96. In fact, less than two years later Libyan agents destroyed Pan Am Flight 103, killing 270 people. Benjamin, *supra* note 35, at E33.

⁴³ See HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at xv.

⁴⁴ An examination of the bibliography reveals that each of these incidents have been extensively written upon. See *id.* at 235–43.

⁴⁵ See Jerry Harkavy, *Author Examines U.S. Military Engagements Over 25 Years*, Nov. 10, 2003, <http://www.marinetimes.com/print.php?f=1-213098-269271.php> (reviewing HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1) (“The goal was to pitch this book for the average general reader, and they prohibited [Huchthausen] from using any military jargon.”). The book also contains numerous helpful maps and a limited number of photographs. E.g., HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 31 (map of Iranian hostage rescue mission), 71 (map of Grenada invasion).

Huchthausen intended it for any audience desiring a better understanding of recent U.S. history and military policy.⁴⁶

Further, Huchthausen demonstrates that these so-called splendid little wars were neither small nor insignificant. Throughout the book, Huchthausen awakens readers to the enormity of the operations involved. In describing the monumental preparation for the Gulf War, he writes, "Desert Shield was more demanding logistically and larger than any other operation in military history, including the Normandy landings in 1944. The distances were greater, the cargoes were bigger, and there had been little time to prepare."⁴⁷ The book also lists many other military milestones achieved during these conflicts, proving that the operations had military significance despite their relative historical obscurity.⁴⁸

A career Navy Officer with thirty-two years of active service, Huchthausen was amply qualified to write a book on recent military history. Although his expertise primarily revolves around submarines,⁴⁹ he successfully draws upon his extensive military experience.⁵⁰ Huchthausen clearly demonstrates unfailing loyalty to service members, often defending their actions in missions that turned out badly.⁵¹ Although this loyalty draws criticism from at least one commentator,⁵² Huchthausen seems to understand the frustration of service members

⁴⁶ According to Huchthausen, he hoped that the book would be used as a text for high school or college history classes. Harkavy, *supra* note 45.

⁴⁷ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 137.

⁴⁸ Some milestones included: in Operation Just Cause (Panama), "one of the most high-density air operations" ever conducted, *id.* at 121, the combat debut of the F-117 Stealth bomber, *id.*; and the first complete integration of conventional and special operations forces, *id.* at 123; in Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm, the first use of long range bombers based in the United States to attack targets across the world, *id.* at 144; and the largest mobilization of U.S. Reserve and National Guard components since Korea, *id.* at 151; and in the Bosnian intervention, the longest American resupply in history, *id.* at 201; and the largest NATO combat operation ever mounted, *id.* at 210.

⁴⁹ Huchthausen also authored other works: PETER HUCHTHAUSEN, K-19: THE WIDOWMAKER—THE SECRET STORY OF THE SOVIET NUCLEAR SUBMARINE (2002); PETER HUCHTHAUSEN ET AL., HOSTILE WATERS (1998); and PETER HUCHTHAUSEN, OCTOBER FURY (2002); see HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at i.

⁵⁰ Huchthausen's service as an intelligence analyst in Hawaii at the time of the *Mayaguez* incident, and as a naval attaché in Yugoslavia lend additional credibility to his accounts of the *Mayaguez* incident and the events in the Balkans. See Harkavy, *supra* note 45.

⁵¹ For example, when analyzing the failed Iran hostage rescue Huchthausen is quick to defend the pilots who flew the mission against criticism from senior Carter administration officials. See HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 37.

⁵² See Brands, *supra* note 35, at T3 (noting that when the operations succeed, Huchthausen credits the military, but when the operations fail, he blames the politicians).

when their missions are hampered by poor policy decisions that are far beyond their control.

In taking the reader through the good, the bad, and the ugly of contemporary American military history, Huchthausen concisely and effectively surveys the full spectrum of America's military successes and failures in recent operations. Understanding these operations allows readers to better analyze the nation's most recent military experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Huchthausen notes in his afterword, the military campaigns in both Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate that the military's civilian and uniformed leadership have indeed learned some of the lessons from the conflicts of the past twenty-five years. Huchthausen writes, "The deployment of forces to destroy the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were deliberate, carefully planned, and expertly carried out campaigns."⁵³

On the other hand, as in Somalia and the Balkans, the military's limited nation building capacity still hinders stability and support operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵⁴ This deficiency causes Huchthausen to ask if the "nation building mission" is a "legitimate" task for combat units.⁵⁵ Although this question may fall to policy makers and not the military professional, military forces will need additional planning, training, and preparation to successfully engage in nation building.⁵⁶

Ultimately, the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq will likely join those examined in *America's Splendid Little Wars* to offer both positive and negative lessons for future military intervention. Moreover, like the conflicts in this book, the relatively short conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq will also not be regarded as either "small" or "splendid" by those who participated or shed blood.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 222 ("American combat forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq . . . have been less successful at establishing a secure environment and maintaining the peace."). Since 1 May 2003, the date that President Bush declared an end to major hostilities in Iraq, 2370 service members have been killed while supporting the on-going mission in Iraq. Michael White & Pat Kneisler, Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, <http://icasualties.org/oif/> (last visited Mar. 6, 2006).

⁵⁵ HUCHTHAUSEN, *supra* note 1, at 222.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 223 (suggesting that military occupation activities require additional emphasis in the areas of military government, civil affairs, military police, and psychological warfare operations).

By Order of the Secretary of the Army:

PETER J. SCHOOMAKER
General, United States Army
Chief of Staff

Official:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joyce E. Morrow". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J".

JOYCE E. MORROW
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Secretary of the Army
0608802