



A Rifleman Went to War

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Over 70 years after it was first published, this book remains one of the all-time classics on the art of military sniping, and is still on the required reading list of the U.S. Marine Corps Sniper School. The author grew up learning to shoot and hunt in the woods of Indiana, and went on to compete nationally as a sharpshooter. When World War I broke out in Europe, he was so eager to fight that he enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Wounded seven times and finally invalided home after two years on the front lines, he was an enthusiastic soldier and a superb sniper, with over 100 confirmed kills. His story includes frequent digressions on the mindset, the tactics, and the weapons of sniping, and has many hard-won lessons about personal survival on the battlefield. It stands out as one of the best first-person accounts of World War I.

A Rifleman Went to War Details

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From Reader Review A Rifleman Went to War for online ebook

Christopher says

I wish you could rate with half or quarter-stars, as I think four is slightly below what this book deserves, but I'm learning to be much, much more picky with my "fives." With that said, I'll list out the reasons that readers with an interest in World War I, the history of firearms, the history of 20th century warfare, "western" armies (the United States, British Empire and Western Europe) ought to dig this one out and give it a go.

1) This book is most decidedly NOT in the "Lost Generation" style, or literary camp, of WWI writing. This is far from the perspective of "All Quiet on the Western Front," "For Whom the Bell Tolls," "dulce et decorum est," and the form of war writing that most readers are probably more familiar with, and this is a good thing. Feel free to be offended by McBride's perspective and lack of contemporary political correctness; he's not forlorn, he's not bitter, shell-shocked (at least not so that it comes through in the writing), nor is he jingoistic or bloodthirsty. He writes in the voice of a professional, career soldier both as a national guardsman and a full-time infantryman and machine gunner, someone who's seen several armies at work. He writes as a professional and as an instructor, for the Indiana National Guard, the Canadian Expeditionary Force, and the inter-war US Army. The wording is straightforward, down to earth, realistic, and if it seems distant, it's because it is the writing of someone who sees the concept of war, training for war, and the conduct of war, as a matter of fact endeavor. He is content to leave the theorizing to others. We can argue for all time whether his perspective is superior or inferior to the much well known style of WWI writing, but what matters to me is that readers see this perspective in addition to the literary one we know and "love."

2) This book is a look inside the mindset of a mid-western American male at the turn of the 20th century, looking back (circa 1932) because he can possibly "sense" the war clouds forming on the horizon again, and writing as someone who saw the good, the bad, the ugly, the brilliant, the brave and the stupid side of war, and pulls no punches in wanting to prepare his countrymen for it. It's surprisingly lacking in guile and comes across as sincere. That lack of irony (though there is quite a bit of snark) is also refreshing.

3) The practicality and value of expertise, earned experience; if you're not a "gun nut" or obsessed with the minutiae of tactics, you'll find a lot in here you'll want to skip and could probably do so with little loss. However, when it comes to descriptions of infantry tactics, trench life, planning and how the men operated on the attack, on the defense, as a unit and as individuals, it might paint a VERY different picture of the Great War than you're used to, and for that reason, this detail is valuable. McBride doesn't skimp on the horror, or the deadlock of the trench, but his description of raiding and other tactics reveals that the Front (at least portions of it) were far from static, stagnant, endless artillery duels, and also far from cinematic "over the top" slaughters. All of those are gross oversimplifications for what was a complicated, difficult war, and the men who fought and led during it were more often than not, NOT the "upper class twit" or "morose Junker" often depicted (though McBride shows enough of both to imply some justification for the stereotypes, especially as he dissects the good and bad of the British "Tommy" and the aristocratic officer class).

4) Most importantly, and alluding back to my first point, he demystifies the war, something that 100 years on we should be very intent on doing. This is not Tuchman's Guns of August, this is not poetry, nor is it film, nor is song. This is not the pop culture war, this is a memoir of someone who soldiered, and for whom soldiering was his business. No more, no less. The other books I mentioned are valuable for what they are,

and my comments are not meant to disparage them, but simply to say that you need more than them to understand this conflict and the men that fought it.

From a personal perspective, it was a bit both relieving, and disappointing, to see many of the same criticisms of US forces looking back on 100-80 years ago, remain valid today. Relieving because it makes me think we're not all that different (speaking as a servicemember) and disappointing, because we truly don't have "lessons learned," merely "lessons identified."

Jeremiah says

Well written and still relevant for today's battlefield. This is a war classic for good reason.

James says

A mixed bag. It's a personal narrative of the author's experience in World War I, but it's pretty impersonally told until the very end, with all the verve and intensity of describing a trip to the grocery store. And it's not much as a detailed account of the methods and tactics he and his unit used, either, because he relates things in such general terms, except for a couple of short chapters near the end on tactics.

Also, McBride went off on some tangents with predictions and prescriptions for the organization, training, and equipping the army for the next war - he was writing in the 1930s, so his strongly expressed views were put to the test less than a decade later in World War II, and his batting average was dismal. If it had been up to McBride, our troops would never have seen the M1 Garand rifle, because he was sure that soldiers couldn't exercise the self-discipline to refrain from firing off all their ammo right away if they were allowed to carry semiautomatic rifles. Wrong... And he felt that it was impossible to meld soldiers from different regions or ethnicities into cohesive units - wrong again. And so on. His crystal ball had some serious cracks in it.

Finally, at the end, McBride wrote reluctantly about the impact combat had on him as a person, discussing what sounds like a deep depression he went through, in the depths of which he had lost hope of survival and actually looked forward to getting it over with. A relief to find that he wasn't quite the robot or psychopath he'd professed to be at the beginning, but disappointing because if he'd woven that into his narrative throughout, it would have been much easier to relate to his experience.

I won't be reading his second book, because I'm not interested enough in the subject (a machine gun unit) if he's going to stay clear of the psychology and interpersonal part of his experiences.

Brian says

I enjoyed it tremendously as a first person account of war in and around the trenches. While the writer is very self assured, he does not present himself as a hero, fighting for the glory of ?

I especially like that he is able to be loyal to his country (US), yet also be loyal to the members of his unit (Canadian). He seems to recognize BS where he sees it, and is not afraid to voice his thoughts.

I had a very different view of the First World War, and the fighting and tactics. Artillery played a much greater role than I knew, the night patrols to capture enemy soldiers from their trenches were extreme acts of courage and cunning, and the conditions inside the trenches were deplorable.

I loved the book's authenticity, especially since it goes against the common perception of what WW1 was about.

John says

A great war book written from the perspective of a man who was "down in the trenches". Much of what he says worked then still works today, and insights he wrote about it seems we have forgotten and relearned multiple times since he first wrote them.

John Barlow says

This book reads as if it was written directly as it was spoken. For me, this made reading the book feel like I was being told a story. For some it may seem a bit unprofessional, and truth be told it was written by a soldier not a writer. It is a very engaging read, and gives a great deal of insight into the history of the U.S. army during World War I.

Christian D. Orr says

McBride's book is a stark contrast to your typical First World War literary material, whether fiction ("All Quiet On the Western Front" by Erich Maria Remarque being the most famous example) or non-fiction books, which portray the "Great War" as endless horror & misery. Instead, this author, while acknowledging the horrors and miseries of war, seemed to genuinely enjoy the fighting, thus reminding me of the chapter from LTC Dave Grossman's famous book "On Killing" describing that 2% of combatants who genuinely like war.

And readers like me can't help but be entertained by McBride's book either; exciting and detailed descriptions of battle, life and culture in the British Commonwealth armies, and a wicked politically incorrect sense of humour.

The author's chapter on pistol work in particular give me a hankering to purchase one of Colt's reissued WWI-style M1911 .45 aut pistols (the M1918 they call it now).

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RANDOM STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS (and noteworthy passages)
(page #s are from the Nook Edition)

--p. 11: "...what makes them go is MEN.....the individual man, with whom battles are always won." Amen.

--p. 13: "Perhaps no other single thing in the soldiering games is so little understood as rifle shooting."

--15: Author giving props to the NRA!

--p. 23: Col. Robert L. Moorehead, "one of the first to recognize the fact that individual proficiency with the rifle was the very highest attainment of the 'doughboy.'" And God bless him for it!

--p. 26: "but from that minute, golf was not for me. There was a war on and I did not intend to miss it." Hooah!

--p. 27: "But the best thing we did was to march and shoot--march and shoot." Sounds just like Demo Dick Marcinko! :-)

--p. 30: Haha, so the acronym "S.O.L." already existed back then, I see!

--p. 34: "This was but one of the asinine regulations that our High Command promulgated. Had they spent one-tenth of the time in trying to teach the newly-made soldiers the real and practical side of warfare, there would not be so many graves over there for the Mothers to visit." Well, some things haven't changed after all these years.

Well then, God bless Gen. Sam Hughes!

--p. 36: The old fife and drum bands of Civil War days...That's marching music and fighting music, I want to tell you." Indeed, the good ol' days.

--p. 43: "A short day of carefully planned instruction, with several hours of freedom for rest, recreation or study, will bring results far more quickly." Amen.

--p. 46: "Sized up" = taller-tapping?

--p. 54: "Generals are always late in keeping their appointments, but this one finally came." Some things haven't changed--so much for leadership by example.

"....the Hotel Faucon, which latter I particularly remember owing to the excellence of its cold beer." Haha, cheers mate!

--p. 55: "'Oolan?'"

--p. 56: Hmmmm, apparently "Archie" (ack-ack/triple-A fire) wasn't so effective back in WWI: "so far as we knew, never was a plane brought down in this manner."

--p. 57: Wow, VERY interesting commentary on "All Quiet on the Western Front (and "the 'sob-stuff'" in general)! "The parts which dealt with the actual battle were excellent.....It was only in the portrayal of the individual *men* that I had any reason to find fault--but that was quite enough to sicken me on the whole show. Why, confound it, man; men do not act like that whether in war on in peace." [Original emphasis]

--p. 58: Rum as "'*Medicine*'" [original emphasis]

--p.118 : "That was the word: 'they will retaliate.' Well, hell's bells, let 'em. What the devil are we hare for? A summer picnic?"

--p. 163: "The entire case of the pistol can be summed up in 'I don't want this thing often, but when I do I want it damn bad.'"

Syntactical Disruptorize says

McBride describes his service as a sniper in World War I with the bouncy enthusiasm of a Boy Scout on a dandy adventure. When he talks about the technique of wounding an exposed enemy soldier in order to kill his rescuers, he doesn't change his tone. This is awesome and terrifying at the same time.

McBride significantly advanced the art of military sniping in his time, but he doesn't dwell too much on technical specifics here. Still, he explains things well enough to tell a compelling story of a man whose main joy in life was to kill other men, at a time when this was not considered especially deviant.

V says

Can't tell you how much I love this book. One moment he is working on a railroad and the next he is walking to Canada. To war.

Michael Evans says

An excellent account of the Rifleman's experiences in the Great War. A little too technical at times, but still a fascinating read. Highly recommended.

Broot Root says

Worth readin if into war and mostly directed towards accruacy over fire rate.

Thomas Martin says

Dated language and spelling. Narrative is first person with a mostly sequential story, but McBride chooses to describe certain related events together and others aren't explained until later in the narrative.

Michael says

Great book about WWI and some interesting people that helped to shape the modern version of the scout

sniper programs most military use today.
