



2013-045

Michael Stephenson, *The Last Full Measure: How Soldiers Die in Battle*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2012. Pp. xvi, 464. ISBN 978-0-307-39584-9.

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In *The Last Full Measure*, Michael Stephenson combines a compelling, encyclopedic analysis of the history of warfare with firsthand accounts of battlefield carnage. The finished product is accessible, informative, convincing, and moving. It forgoes any discussion of the geopolitical and strategic elements of warfare to get at what Stephenson defines as the core of military history—killing and dying. Whether inflicted by fire-hardened sharp sticks, swords, axes, arrows, musket balls, high velocity rounds, cruise missiles, or IEDs, violent death links soldiers across the centuries.

Stephenson states his central thesis in a discussion of combat in the Pacific during the Second World War: “The fighting ... reminds us that combat is a bloody gutter-slop: nasty, brutish and short—an abattoir that is only later cleaned up, perfumed, and decorated with the laurel crown of history” (262). He also dismantles the myth of the “Western Way of War,” characterized by heroic man-to-man confrontations on the battlefield, by highlighting accounts from the sharp end, where “the last sound from the lips of the stricken is not so much the rousing call ‘for the motherland’ as the heartbreaking cry for mother” (xii–xiv).

Stephenson draws on his extensive experience as an editor and author¹ in a book that invites comparisons to John Keegan’s seminal exploration of the human experience of war, *The Face of Battle*.² Writing in a lively, straightforward style for a popular market, he takes the reader on a historical expedition, documenting the first evidence of organized violence some two million years ago; the transition from tribal warfare to the wars of the ancient Greeks and Romans; medieval wars fought with pikes, swords, bows, and armored knights; the dawn of musket and black-powder warfare; the slaughterhouse of the American Civil War; the World Wars; and finally the counterinsurgency wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. A short chapter and an appendix examine colonial wars and battlefield medicine, respectively. The story highlights mainly Western European and North American accounts, with forays into the experiences of American Indians, Japanese samurai, and Soviet soldiers.

Stephenson synthesizes many histories, memoirs, and private letters to clarify warfare’s ingenious and brutal effects in each generation. Succeeding chapters briskly explain critical shifts in weapons technology and concomitant changes in tactics and the effects of both on officers and their men. Stephenson taps hundreds of personal accounts to good effect; each chapter features instructive anecdotes and accompanying analysis of the meaning and value of soldiers’ shared experiences.

In his chapter on World War I, for example, Stephenson introduces an argument between French officers over the merits of dying by gas or by high explosive:

Their argument is at the core of combat experience in the First World War. The ways in which men were killed all too often robbed them of even a vestige of heroic dignity. They were destroyed within the colorless, featureless anonymity of great numbers, and by weapons of such range and power that they could not be engaged on any individual level. Their deaths were due not so much to human acts but to mechanized processes. A reflection of this atomization was the great dread soldiers had not so much about being killed but about being blown to bits. (205)

A British medical officer observed that men were prepared for a clean, fatal bullet, but feared the indignity of a gruesome death: “it was not so much that their lives were in danger as that their self-respect had gone out of their hands. They were at the crisis of their lives disheveled, plastered with mud and earth and blood;

1. *Of Patriot Battles: How the War of Independence Was Fought* (NY: Harper, 2007).

2. NY: Viking, 1976.

their actions at the mercy of others, they were no longer certain what they might do. That dread experience was the last stone of the house of fear” (206).

By this point in history, the average citizen-soldier was literate and could record his thoughts and send them home, where they might be collected and kept safe. Stephenson draws on a massive body of World War I and II letters and memoirs and not only by American, German, or British servicemen (from a Canadian’s perspective, a very good thing). This wealth of personal material makes the chapters on the World Wars the book’s most powerful and effective.

Where such sources are limited or unavailable, as for the Bronze Age, Stephenson makes creative use of, for example, Homer’s *Iliad*.³ One would have liked here some discussion of the availability and limitation of source materials and how these factors may compromise a historian’s reconstructions. Nearly all of the perspectives Stephenson presents in the first hundred or so pages of his book are those of officers, poets, or other historians.

The chapter on “modern combat” is the least satisfactory, lumping together counterinsurgency wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan to show that the “end of World War II also marked the end of a compelling and luminous version of heroic warfare” (355), at least for Western soldiers. (Naïvely romantic notions of war live on in crude North Korean propaganda posters, jihadist poetry, and YouTube videos.) The scourge of IEDs, blind booby traps, and enemies without uniforms demoralized soldiers who wished that, for example, the Viet Cong or Taliban insurgents would just stand up and fight. But Vietnam is not Afghanistan (the absence of Soviet accounts of war in that country is puzzling), and the chapter reaches only vague conclusions about death’s meaning in the era of modern warfare.

The book has no formal conclusion, perhaps because wars and their aftermaths are still ongoing in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, and any attempt to assess definitively their outcome or meaning would quickly be outdated. But Stephenson misses an opportunity to use his considerable store of evidence to answer a question he raises at the close of his Civil War chapter. If war is such a devastating experience (in General Sherman’s words, if “war is hell”), why does it continue to exist? Why is it that a man like Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., wounded and thoroughly disillusioned, resigned his commission, yet less than twenty years later, “Like some American samurai, ... discovered a fervent belief in the mystical importance of a warrior’s unquestioning obedience unto death” (165). Why, in short, do men so easily forget the atrocities of past wars just in time for the next one? Of course, many historians have fruitfully explored the meaning and memory of death and the heroic ideal after the battle,⁴ but we are left to wonder about Stephenson’s thoughts on the subject.

This book is a thoughtful, respectful treatment of a difficult subject. Its author deftly balances personal, sometimes extremely graphic accounts of death and mutilation with enlightening historical analyses, steering clear of the purely anecdotal war stories or “pornography of violence” that John Keegan warned against.⁵ I recommend *The Last Full Measure* to both scholars and general readers with any interest in military history.

3. See, e.g., 24–26, where he deploys statistics about the variety and lethality of weapons in the *Iliad* first compiled by a German physician, H. Frölich, in *Militärmedizin Homer’s* (Stuttgart 1879), and recently revised by K.B. Saunders, “Frölich’s Table of Homeric Wounds,” *Classical Quarterly* 54 (2004) 1–17.

4. See, e.g., Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1975), and Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: U British Columbia Pr, 1997).

5. *The Face of Battle* (note 2 above) 29.