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Michael Collins and Martin King, *Voices of the Bulge: Untold Stories from Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2011. Pp. vi, 305. ISBN 978-0-7603-4033-2.

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Oral history can seem deceptively easy. Capturing the memories of human experiences in transcribed or recorded interviews appears to be a basic, straightforward form of storytelling. The engrossing, conversational flow of works like Studs Terkel's *The Good War*¹ or Ken Burns's documentary mini-series *The War* (PBS 2007) makes such history seem effortless. In reality, gathering and presenting oral histories is extraordinarily complicated. Memories are strange creations and dealing with them as a historian is tricky. Gaps and distortions pervade the clearest and freshest of them even without the obscuring effects of war trauma. And eyewitness accounts rarely illuminate much beyond the narrow perspective of the observer, making a comprehensive understanding of a given event difficult. Michael Collins and Martin King struggle with these challenges in *Voices of the Bulge*. The book, with its companion DVD, features the oral histories of survivors of the Battle of the Bulge, one of the bloodiest clashes on the Western Front during World War II.

Americans called the fight the "Battle of the Bulge" because maps in newspapers covering the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes region in December 1944 showed Nazi units punching through Allied lines to create a rump of reclaimed Axis territory. Hitler hoped this counterattack would change the Reich's increasingly bleak fortunes as the war entered its final phase. US forces bore the brunt of the assault, suffering nearly ninety thousand casualties in their costliest battle on the march toward Berlin.

The battle has long held a special place in American military lore, in part because of the dramatic US defense of the besieged town of Bastogne in Belgium. Nazi forces surrounded it early in their advance and demanded that the US troops holding it either surrender or see it leveled. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, in command of American troops in Bastogne, sent a one-word reply to the German ultimatum—"Nuts." Morale soared, and US troops held the town despite a fearsome Nazi onslaught.

Collins and King evince a reverence for such gallantry throughout their book, openly emulating the honorific tone of Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*. Collins, who has worked at a number of American military museums, began researching the Battle of the Bulge to learn more about the experiences of his grandfather, who took part in the fighting. King, a British military historian living in Belgium, has served as an expert tour guide for veterans revisiting battle sites. The affection and awe the authors feel for their interviewees is an endearing and very attractive feature of the book. Each of its thirteen chapters begins with an introduction by the authors, who insert oral histories throughout each section. Their interview subjects are among the last living witnesses to the battle, and this twelve-years-in-the-making project aimed to gather their memories before it was too late.

The tactic of mixing long stretches of expository writing with interviews results in a certain disjointedness. Many of the oral histories are mere snippets included for no apparent reason. Few of the men and women interviewed offer thoughtful reflections that might stir either their own emotions or the reader's. Most simply relate facts as they understood them and perhaps an anecdote or two. But some are the sort of extensive and vivid reminiscences that World War II enthusiasts will treasure. The most arresting passages are those by soldiers recalling their horrifying ordeal as prisoners of war in German hands. Even today, their memories instill fear and revulsion. John Hillard Dunn was among the POWs packed into boxcars for shipment to German prison camps:

We shook from a combination of fear, subzero cold, and the impact from the five hundred and thousand-pounders landing so closely. As the bombs detonated around us on what seemed like a German military con-

1. Subtitle: *An Oral History of World War Two* (1984; rpt. NY: New Press, 1997).

centration from above, it appeared our luck had finally expired. We prayed for obvious reasons, and most of us lived to pray our way through similar nerve-wracking suspense in the upcoming days, weeks and months. We prayed the airmen would make it back to England alive. We wished we were up there with them, en route back to airbases where there were warm beds and something to eat and drink. (238–39)

Similarly affecting, in another vein, are the memories of front-line personnel who created moments of Christmas cheer amid the fighting. Helen Rusz, a nurse tending some of the thousands of wounded soldiers in field hospitals, recalled that

What we did to decorate the tree was we took off our dog tags and hung them on the tree; we took our jewelry off and hung it on the tree. We also took cotton balls and stuck them in mercurochrome, which made them red, and we stuck them on the tree. We had so much fun decorating the tree with all those crazy things, but you know it was Christmas! Then we sang Christmas carols and passed around the cookies and candies and stuff and had a good time. (236–37)

Collins and King do not, however, make good on their subtitle's promise of "untold stories." The ones they do tell are all too familiar. Scores of histories of this battle are replete with recollections and analyses by US participants. The authors claim to bring a new perspective by adding the voices of civilians and German soldiers. But the handful of such interviews adds little to the story and the heart of the book remains the accounts by America GIs. This is all the more disappointing because King, residing in Belgium, could have tapped a potentially vast pool of civilian witnesses.

Conflicts are not simply *fought*, they are *lived*—and not only by combatants, but by civilians drawn into the fray. The most revealing perspectives on war often come from civilian witnesses.² But *Voices of the Bulge* leaves readers to wonder what US soldiers looked like in the eyes of the residents of Bastogne and other war-torn towns. Did American troops ever seem something less than heroes and saviors to the people they were ostensibly liberating? And how did the Nazis appear to those same people?

Sadly, this book represents a missed opportunity, yet another World War II history devoted to nostalgia and romanticism rather than to a deeper understanding of the conflict and its legacy.

2. See, e.g., my *Voices from Iraq: A People's History, 2003–2009* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2011).