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Melinda L. Pash, *In the Shadow of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought the Korean War*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 337. ISBN 978-0-8147-6769-6.

Review by Bruce Zellers, Greenhills School and Oakland University (zellers@greenhillsschool.org).

In this, her first book, Melinda Pash (Fayetteville Technical Community College) explores the experiences and attitudes of the men and women who served in Korea between 1950 and 1953, relying heavily on interviews with the veterans themselves. She finds that they were aggrieved that their “forgotten war” received little attention at the time and that still today “the American public and government [has] had little interest in the Korean War or in those who fought it” (206–7). Korean veterans, she explains, were victims of chronology: “Unlike their older brothers and cousins who served in World War II and returned to ticker-tape parades and welcoming bands, Korean War veterans returned quietly to a country that in their absence scarcely missed them. [Living] in the shadow of the greatest generation” (1) was problematic. While the contrast Pash draws is misleading, there is no denying that many veterans felt and feel this way.

By 1950, citizens of the United States were beginning to recover from decades of depression and war, when their government’s intervention in Korea “reconfigured the life blueprints of many Americans” (8). But, with their still fresh memories of the Second World War, millions of men and women volunteered for service, answered the draft, or responded willingly to Reserve and National Guard call-ups. Of course, African Americans felt some ambivalence after their poor treatment in the earlier war (25), and some reservists “complained bitterly” (32) at having to put their lives on the line again, but both groups joined the ranks. Although many college students earned draft deferments, there was little evasion or protest on the nation’s campuses (42, 30, 37). Once in uniform, men and women began the “process of leaving their individuality behind and accepted their place on the lowest rung of the military ladder” (55). They grew accustomed to serving with citizens from other regions and with African Americans in an increasingly integrated Army. Some (soldiers rather than Marines) felt their combat training did not adequately prepare them for war.

Service in Korea left scars: what happened on the ground, in the air, and on the waters around the peninsula felt nothing like a “police action.” By contrast with World War II, Americans in Korea served shorter tours, typically nine to twelve months, but the mountainous terrain and extremes of heat and cold posed difficult and memorable problems. Combat itself, in the context of modern weapons, “exhilarated” some soldiers and forged strong bonds among participants (109–10), but many were also “changed ... emotionally” by the “tragedies of Korea” and feelings of “guilt, regret, and emptiness” (115). And, of course, so far from home, many underwent the pain of family crises, including marital breakups. The troops might have borne all this stoically had they felt that their sufferings were important or valued instead of taken for granted and ignored.

Moreover, American soldiers “often took a dim view of the land Uncle Sam called them to defend,” sometimes describing it as a “hell hole” (91). They took an equally dim view of Koreans themselves, including those who served with them (180). The seeming lack of purpose for the conflict gnawed at them: “why should I be fighting for this stinking rice paddy.... I still don’t know what we are fighting for” (92, 97). Increasingly, servicemen and women “came to resent” (124) the government that had sent them to Korea and the public that disregarded their sacrifices. For many veterans, the return to civilian life was to be painful.

Veterans returning to the states after a tour in Korea—and often an intervening posting elsewhere—arrived individually, not as units as they remembered from World War II. They re-entered a society “marked by indifference to the war” (217). A family gathering rather than a parade was the best they could hope for. Korean War vets were greeted not as “heroes” like their predecessors in 1945 (184); instead, they were met with apathy and confusion, especially their among friends: have you been away? (165). “After participating in the great life-and-death drama of the war ..., many veterans found civilian life boring and in-

consequential and had great trouble settling down and becoming civilians again” (199). It proved difficult to renew prewar friendships, and they divorced at twice the rate of World War II veterans. They received little debriefing and limited aid from the Veterans’ Administration. Their benefits under the GI Bill, too, were less generous than those granted after the Second World War (210–11).

The situation of former POWs was especially difficult. Victims of brutal treatment at the hands of North Korean and Chinese jailers, a few of them had become public critics of the war. The press and the general public in the United States wondered “what had gone so terribly wrong for American prisoners of war in Korea?” (142). Many faced investigation and harassment by their own government. However, as their time in Korea receded from memory, most veterans “put the war behind them and forgot that they were ever vets at all” (219). Regardless of their race, they did well economically (220–21). In time, especially after Vietnam, they organized and lobbied the federal government to address their needs: for example, recognition by the VA of frostbite injuries. Ultimately, a memorial of the Korean War was built in Washington, and, as their numbers dwindled in the twenty-first century, the veterans began to look back and think “we did a good thing” (225).

The book rings true. Having myself interviewed many Korean War veterans, I can attest that Pash presents the war as many of them see it. Still, two issues may trouble readers: the first concerns the use of oral history materials and the author’s relationship to her sources; the second involves her broader conceptual framework. Pash deploys the stories of veterans in a pointillist way: dozens of quotations about combat, for instance, are packed together on the page regardless of the service or phase of the war they apply to. The result is a leveling of the incidents to a kind of generic narrative. Readers would have been better served by more developed vignettes—a smaller-scale version of S.L.A. Marshall’s *Pork Chop Hill*.¹

Pash seldom probes beneath the surface of the stories of the interviewed veterans (she seems not to have conducted any interviews herself) or challenges their sometimes improbable memories of events. Two examples come to mind: in the first, she reports that marijuana grew wild around the prison camps and that most of the men sampled it; she conjures a made-for-TV image: “everyone would lie there laughing and hollering” (157). Would “brutal” camp guards actually have tolerated this? The second features “beautiful girls in bathing suits” (183) boarding ships and planting kisses on returning soldiers. Military ports must have worked differently in those days! More serious is her assertion that soldiers did not know why they fought. This cries out for analysis. Is it credible that, in the time of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, US soldiers, airmen, and Marines were unaware of (and uncommitted to) Cold War doctrine about international communism?

At the heart of Pash’s book is a myth. Veterans of the Second World War did not in fact return in units to celebratory music and parades; they came back as individuals just like Korean War vets. My own father turned up unannounced late one night at his parents’ semi-rural house after long hours in trains and buses (so he recalls). While the nation had mobilized with a will for World War II, domestic social stresses had not magically disappeared. In the Detroit area, conditions of life surrounding the Arsenal of Democracy seriously exacerbated racial tensions. Most opinion makers eschewed the rhetoric of a “crusade,” hoping to avoid the disillusionment that followed the First World War.² And, too, much of the combat experience of Korean veterans, as Pash relates it, is strikingly similar to that of other wars, ancient and modern.³

How, then, should we think about the war in Korea? Perhaps it is best understood as one in a long tradition of limited wars fought in distant lands by western powers. One thinks of Britain’s wars in southeast Asia or Africa—or even North America in the eighteenth century. Fighting thousands of miles from home in conflicts scarcely noticed by civilians, soldiers underwent the horrors and transcendent moments of war and had to rely on professional pride, not public support, to make sense of them. Most of these wars *were*

1. Subtitle: *The American Fighting Man in Action, Korea, Spring, 1953* (NY: Morrow, 1956; often reprinted).

2. See John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), and William L. O’Neill, *A Democracy at War: America’s Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (NY: Free Pr, 1993). Pash cites neither book.

3. See, e.g., Gerald Linderman, *The World within War: America’s Combat Experience in World War II* (NY: Free Pr, 1997), for many parallels.

forgotten; certainly, only the greatest victories were commemorated by martial statues in parks. For soldiers and their families, as for politicians and the public at large, this constituted the norm. But the wars were fought mostly by small professional armies. The real tragedy of the Korean War is not that the suffering of its veterans went unrecognized, but that policing the world in the American Century required the services of millions of ordinary citizens who neither fully grasped nor shared in the traditional rules governing such wars.