



American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam (Modern War Studies)

By Peter S. Kindsvatter

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Some warriors are drawn to the thrill of combat and find it the defining moment of their lives. Others fall victim to fear, exhaustion, impaired reasoning, and despair. This was certainly true for twentieth-century American ground troops. Whether embracing or being demoralized by war, these men risked their lives for causes larger than themselves with no promise of safe return.

This book is the first to synthesize the wartime experiences of American combat soldiers, from the doughboys of World War I to the grunts of Vietnam. Focusing on both soldiers and marines, it draws on histories and memoirs, oral histories, psychological and sociological studies, and even fiction to show that their experiences remain fundamentally the same regardless of the enemy, terrain, training, or weaponry.

Peter Kindsvatter gets inside the minds of American soldiers to reveal what motivated them to serve and how they were turned into soldiers. He recreates the physical and emotional aspects of war to tell how fighting men dealt with danger and hardship, and he explores the roles of comradeship, leadership, and the sustaining beliefs in cause and country. He also illuminates soldiers' attitudes toward the enemy, toward the rear echelon, and toward the home front. And he tells why some broke down under fire while others excelled.

Here are the first tastes of battle, as when a green recruit reported that "for the first time I realized that the people over the ridge wanted to kill me," while another was befuddled by the unfamiliar sound of bullets whizzing overhead. Here are soldiers struggling to cope with war's stress by seeking solace from local women or simply smoking cigarettes. And here are tales of combat avoidance and fraggings not unique to Vietnam, of soldiers in Korea disgruntled over home-front indifference, and of the unique experiences of African American soldiers in the Jim Crow army.

By capturing the core "band of brothers" experience across several generations of warfare, Kindsvatter celebrates the American soldier while helping us to better

understand war's lethal reality—and why soldiers persevere in the face of its horrors.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Command Historian at the U.S. Army Ordnance Center and Schools, Aberdeen Proving Ground, and a retired Army lieutenant colonel, Kindsvatter offers a phenomenological history of the hearts and minds of Army ground troops. Using a comprehensive spectrum of printed and unprinted sources from the subtitle's eras, Kindsvatter argues that soldiers of those times began with unreal images of war that allowed them to memorialize conflict by fictionalizing it. But despite military training, nothing could prepare them adequately for the modern battlefield with its harsh physical environment and extreme emotional stress; the typical progression was from initial confusion through relief at surviving to a period of peak effectiveness. Comradeship was important to that process. So was belief in "America" and "America's cause"; if those constructs vanished as ideals, nothing could replace them. The excitement of battle was also engaging. Besting the enemy was a challenge, allowing pride in a job well done. American soldiers, Kindsvatter finds, were neither too frightened nor too guilt-ridden to kill. Some were reluctant; some enjoyed it; few hesitated to pull their triggers when necessary. Eventually, however, for most combat veterans some event or emotion, usually accompanied by physical exhaustion, triggered loss of confidence or nervous collapse. While improved therapeutic methods made it possible to return many breakdown cases to the line, the best treatment was preventive: relief, temporary or permanent, from combat's alien environment. Much of this book is geared toward commanders or scholars looking to understand troops, but its fascinating, unsentimental arguments about the minds of soldiers are ripe for magazine adaptation.

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From [Booklist](#)

Thoroughly mining twentieth-century foot soldiers' memoirs and novels, Kindsvatter integrates this literature of personal experience into a generalized assessment of what combat was like and how men reacted to it. The author was a U.S. Army officer for two decades but does not discuss his own war experiences, if any; however, he plainly brings to his task an understanding of military life and death. It all starts, in all wars, with turning a civilian into a trained killer, the jolt of boot camp being just the initial step in acclimating soldiers to the radical differences between peacetime and wartime. Most of the soldiers Kindsvatter quotes admit some awe about the literally incandescent, surreal spectacle of the combat zone, followed by profound intimidation born of realizing the pitiless randomness of death. Kindsvatter's illuminating work is about coping with that fear at the foxhole level, and it (via soldier-writers such as William Manchester or Tim O'Brien) powerfully conveys the psychology and military sociology of combat in the draft-era armies.

Gilbert Taylor

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Review

"A must read for every military leader."—**Peter Mansoor**, author of *The GI Offensive in Europe* "A superb, compelling analysis of twentieth-century American combat troops that never loses sight of the individual soldier. An important, meticulously documented contribution to our understanding of men-at-arms."—**Rick Atkinson**, author of *An Army at Dawn* and *The Long Gray Line* "Kindsvatter's book is based firmly on the first-hand accounts of combat by American soldiers and Marines of the World Wars, Korea, and Vietnam. He is a sensitive, skillful mediator between those writers and us."—**Russell F. Weigley**, author of *The American Way of War* "A vivid portrayal of the savagery of war and its human dimensions."—**Michael D. Doubler**, author of *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944–1945*

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