

BOOK REVIEW

WITH THE OLD BREED, AT PELELIU AND OKINAWA.

BY E. B. SLEDGE. (NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007.)

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The author of *With The Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*, Professor E. B. Sledge, served in the United States Marine Corps during World War II and fought in the battles of Peleliu and Okinawa in the Pacific Theatre. This autobiographical work is written from personal experiences in training and in combat with Company K, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division during the Peleliu and Okinawa campaigns. In the preface of his book, Sledge states his purpose for putting the events of Peleliu and Okinawa into words for the world to read: “In writing it I’m fulfilling an obligation I have long felt to my comrades in the 1st Marine Division all of whom suffered so much for our country.” (11-12) This regiment and division of the Marine Corps remains the oldest standing company, with more battle flags attached to its banner than any other. Sledge continues to explain the purpose of this work by dedicating the book to these marines by writing, “We owe those Marines a profound debt of gratitude.” (12) E. B. Sledge concludes *With The Old Breed* by discussing how war “is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste” leaving “an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it.” (321) Sledge’s book brings to life the horror and sacrifice this company went through during the war as a way to show the dedication of the soldiers he fought with and to honor them.

World War II was one of the most devastating losses of life in the history of the world, with over 400,000 American lives claimed. In *With The Old Breed*, Sledge focuses on the valor and dedication of the 1st Division marines who fought against the Imperial Japanese Army in the Pacific theatre at the campaigns of Peleliu, Operation Stalemate II, Okinawa, and Operation Iceberg. His personal accounts of these events are enriched with resources from the Historical Division of the Marine Corps and stories published by other comrades. Sledge is proud of those he served with and continuously reiterates that these marines “did their duty so a sheltered homeland can enjoy the peace that was purchased at such a high cost.” (12) His first-hand accounts bring to life the extremely horrendous conditions that marines faced, as well as their loyalty and spirit, which he argues

sustained them through the nightmare of war.

As all troops during the war, the marines of the 1st Division suffered many casualties and were subjected to extreme living conditions. Sledge tells the story of one young man who was afflicted with mental illness while serving in the Pacific Theatre, Sledge recalls that this marine's "tragically tortured mind had slipped over the brink." (118) After several attempts at silencing the man's screams, another member of the battalion had no choice but to end the soldier's life. Sledge wrote of the event and the men involved: "They had done what any of us would have had to do under similar circumstances. Cruel chance had thrust the deed upon them." (118) According to the author, this unenviable task was carried out for the greater good of the company. Beyond casualties, the troops suffered through horrible living conditions, including living among their dead and suffering from trench foot at Okinawa due to the torrential rains. However, even through all this the marines of Company K, kept their sense of spirit and duty.

Sledge begins this story with his decision to enlist and his experience at boot camp. Sledge writes, "Marine Corps training taught us to kill efficiently and to try to survive. But it also taught us loyalty to each other— and love. That esprit de corps sustained us." (321) He continues to focus on the fact that camaraderie kept his company moving through the turmoil of war. He cites the morale and preparation of the company as the reasons for his survival: "I'm convinced that our discipline, esprit de corps, and tough training were the ingredients that equipped me to survive the ordeal physically and mentally..." (169) While he believed that his military duty with his comrades was a privilege, he also felt compelled by his company's dedication and patriotism.

Despite witnessing the horrors of war, the men of Company K preserved the morality and strength of the unit. Sledge's memories of the soldiers he served with and the events they experienced are successfully incorporated in his memoir. The author also includes an honor roll at the conclusion of the book, which lists the twenty-six marine survivors of the Battle of Peleliu. Sledge's in-depth personal account can be helpful to both students and those interested in the history of the Pacific Theatre because the work offers a unique perspective from one marine who participated in these notorious events.