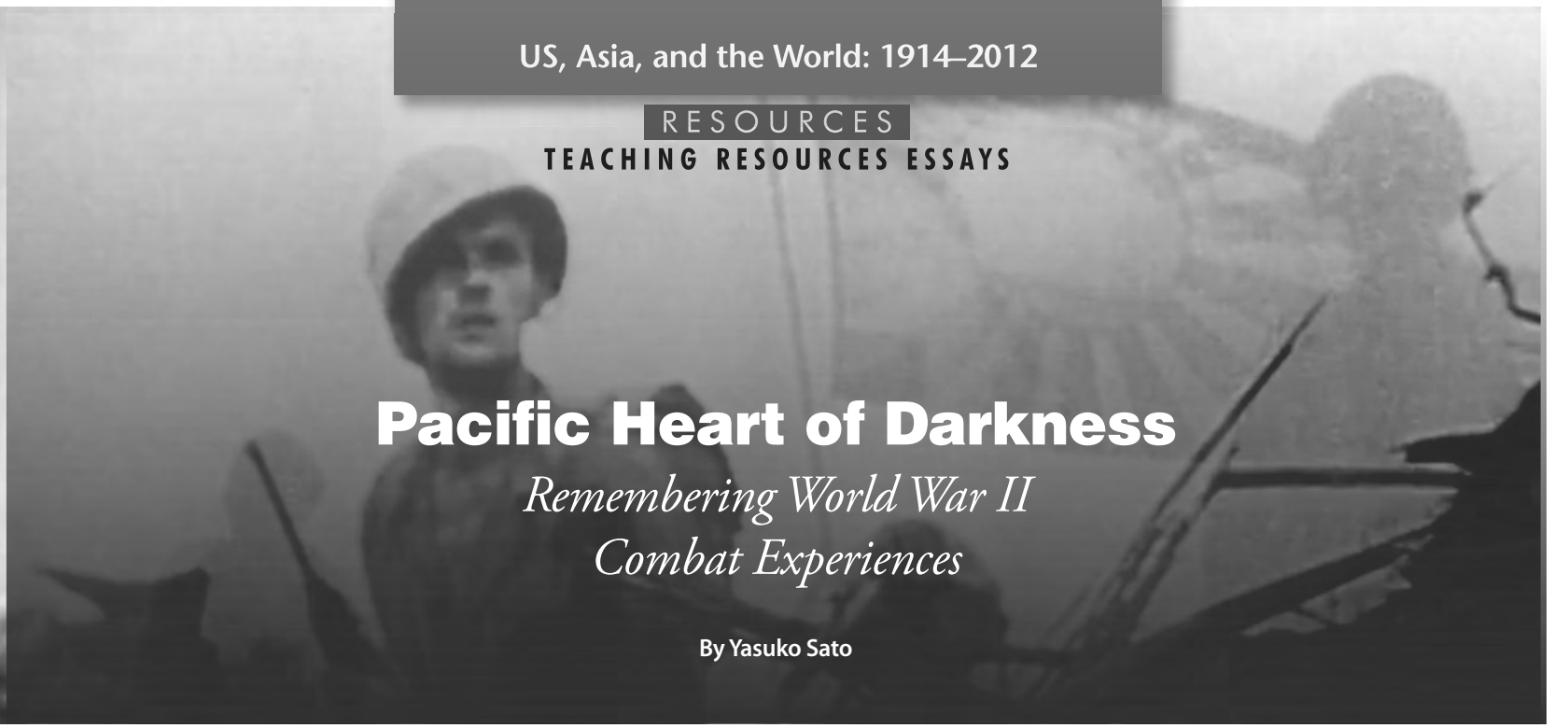


Pacific Heart of Darkness

Remembering World War II Combat Experiences

By Yasuko Sato

Screen capture montage of two scenes from part three of *Sledgehammer—Old Breed Marine,* a History Channel documentary on Eugene B. Sledge. Source: http://tiny.cc/6g88mw.

Author's Note: All the teaching materials recommended in this essay are available in English at reasonable prices. The Japanese books are translated into English, and the Japanese films come with English subtitles. While the complete series of *The War* (PBS) and *The Pacific* (HBO) are released in DVD box sets, this article concerns only selected episodes, which are reasonably priced and can be purchased from Amazon Instant Video. The focus is also primarily on the scenes available in YouTube video clips.

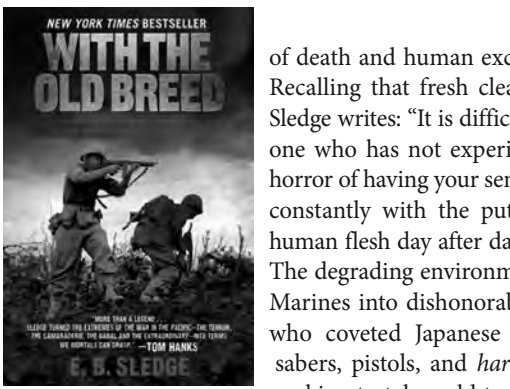
World War II was a two-front war, and the Pacific has long been marginalized as the second theater. While the European theater remains decidedly popular, the complexity and perplexity found in the Pacific theater equally merit our attention, as exemplified by the release of the HBO mini-series *The Pacific* in 2010. It is a companion piece to the channel's 2001 mini-series *Band of Brothers*, a portrayal of the European theater from the perspective of a company of airborne infantry. Stress and trauma in war zones are the focal point of these immensely successful series. The agony of fighting on the Pacific front is definitely worth examining from the standpoint of "those who have borne the battle."[1]

This essay explores educational resources concerning the specific horrors experienced by American and Japanese combatants in the Pacific, often for insignificant islands. The phrase "Pacific Heart of Darkness" appears in James Bradley's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000), a compelling story of Iwo Jima.[2] American narratives are emphatic about how Japan, a non-Western enemy, fanatically fought by different rules, including guerrilla tactics and suicide attacks. Bringing both perspectives into the discussion enables us to diminish the otherness of the opposing force and develop a humanistic understanding of the war's tragedy.

BOOKS

Eugene B. Sledge's (1923–2001) memoir *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981) is what famed documentarian Ken Burns regards as "a profound primer on what it actually was like to be in that war."[3] The insanity of the war in the Pacific involved terrifying D-Day beach landings during the Allies' island-hopping campaign toward Japan. Amphibious assaults were not limited to the fabled Normandy landings on June 6, 1944. The Japanese attack on the invading American forces at Peleliu was uncompromisingly ferocious. The next day, Sledge's company was ordered to carry out an attack across the open airfield under ever-increasing enemy fire, which turned out to be an "assault into hell."[4] Denouncing the infantryman's war as the "Meat Grinder," he was furious about the expendability of enlisted men in combat zones.

Tremendous physical discomfort arose from fresh water shortages, unbearably high temperatures, personal bodily filth, and the appalling stench of death and human excrement everywhere. Recalling that fresh clean air was a luxury, Sledge writes: "It is difficult to convey to anyone who has not experienced it the ghastly horror of having your sense of smell saturated constantly with the putrid odor of rotting human flesh day after day, night after night."[5] The degrading environment turned ordinary Marines into dishonorable souvenir hunters who coveted Japanese gold teeth, glasses, sabers, pistols, and *hara-kiri* knives. While seeking to take gold teeth out of a Japanese soldier who was still alive, a Marine sank his knife deep into the victim's mouth and cut his cheeks open. Equally repulsive was a Marine officer who would urinate in the mouth of a Japanese corpse. Meanwhile, US troops encountered hideously mutilated American bodies, including a dead Marine with his private parts stuffed into his mouth. Sledge blamed the maelstrom of war for reducing decent human beings to unimaginable barbarity.

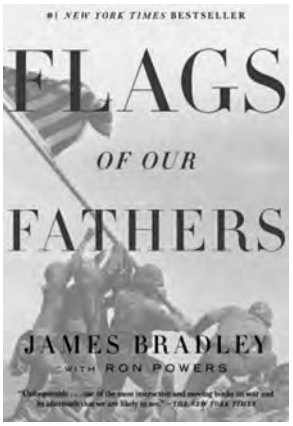


With the Old Breed was famously adapted in *The War and The Pacific*. Source: http://bit.ly/SX4aFu.

Japanese soldiers singing in the last drinking party before their imminent suicide attack in *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths*. Source: http://tiny.cc/9586mw.

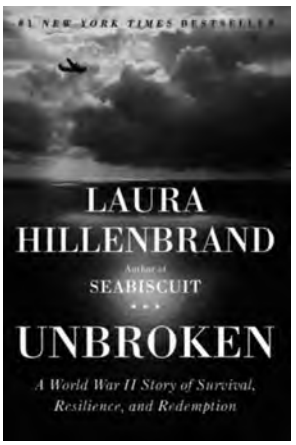
The perception of the Pacific War as a living hell is similarly applicable to Japanese war stories, such as Oda Makoto's novel *The Breaking Jewel* (Gyokusai, 1998).[6] Mizuki Shigeru's graphic novel *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* (1973) is fictionalized but based on his wartime experiences on New Britain Island in Papua New Guinea. He lost his left arm but survived the Imperial Army's *gyokusai* (suicide charge), whose horrific results are graphically depicted at the end of the novel. From its outset, he relentlessly demonstrates acute grievances and senseless

deaths among common soldiers in absurd war situations, especially under abusive superior officers. An overwhelming sense of entrapment and powerlessness pervades the entire story. "Why am I stuck working this shitty job?" is a forlornly pathetic line from "The Prostitute's Lament," one of the songs the soldiers sing loudly.[7]



James Bradley describes this Iwo Jima flag-raising image as "the most recognized, the most reproduced, in the history of photography."
Source: http://tiny.cc/dc88mw.

James Bradley's *Flags of Our Fathers* concerns the iconic image of flag-raising during the Battle of Iwo Jima (February 19–March 26, 1945). Joe Rosenthal took the photo of the six flag-raisers on Mont Suribachi on February 23 after the terrible carnage of the beach landing and the fall of the seemingly impregnable mountain. Calling into question the attribution of American heroism to this photograph, the author audaciously inquires into how three of the six men did not survive the battle and how the other three refused to be celebrated as national heroes. James is the son of John "Doc" Bradley (1923–1994), a US Navy corpsman and one of the flag-raising survivors. James notes that his father was utterly silent about Iwo Jima, with "no copy of the famous photograph hung in our house."[8] For tormented war veterans, traumatic combat memories persisted long after the war was over.



Unbroken has been selected as one of the "10 Books to Pick Up Right Now" on Oprah.com.
Source: http://tiny.cc/ed96mw.

The war's aftermath forms an indispensable part of Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (2010). It is an inspirational biography of Louis Zamperini (1917–) with useful information on the formidable difficulty of aerial maneuvering in the sprawling Pacific theater. After participating in the 1936 Berlin Olympics as a distance runner, he enlisted in the US Army Air Force in 1941, had a plane crash in the center of the Pacific in 1943, remained adrift with two other survivors for more than a month, and became a prisoner of war under a sadistic Japanese overseer. Zamperini's survival story is mind-blowing, but it is his homecoming that makes the book truly worth being called *Unbroken*. In the early postwar years, under the effects of PTSD, he chronically abused alcohol and almost strangled his pregnant wife. Such an agonizing life, however, was completely turned around after he remembered the long-forgotten promise he had made with God while drifting on a raft: "If you will save me, I will serve you forever."[9] The book has a chapter titled "Coming Undone" in which the author briefly describes the particularly tormented and often ruined lives of approximately 85 percent of former Pacific POWs.[10]

Painful, atrocious war memories were hidden and repressed in Japan, and "the war experience was largely shoved out of public view, buried beneath private pain."[11] Haruko Taya and Theodore F. Cook's *Japan at War: An Oral History* (1992) is a collection of dozens of interviews with Japanese who lived through the Asia-Pacific War (1931–1945). The hellish experiences of Japanese World War II veterans are featured in part four, "Lost Battles." Unspeakable acts included cannibalism, as seen in Ōoka Shōhei's novel *Fires on the Plain* (1951).[12] Adapted into a film in 1959, it is a haunting story about a Japanese soldier wandering in the Philippine jungles to lose his sanity.

Only by immersing ourselves in the dreadful realities of war can we fully understand the plight of ordinary infantrymen coping with nightmarish situations.

Episode one in Ken Burns' *The War* is entitled "A Necessary War." Source: http://tiny.cc/p886mw.

FILMS AND TV MINI-SERIES

Ken Burns's PBS documentary *The War* (2007) approaches World War II as a "necessary" rather than "good" war, as Pacific veteran Sam Hynes observes at the outset: "I don't think there is such a thing as a good war. There are sometimes necessary wars."[13] "Peleliu," in episode five, represents the abhorrent conditions of life on the front. In "American Anthem," part of episode one, Nora Jones' husky singing voice stunningly enhances the dramatic effects of heartbreaking as well as heartwarming footage of US soldiers.[14] The refrain "America, America, I gave my best to you" is first dedicated to a dead Marine half-buried in the volcanic sand on the beach of Iwo Jima. For classroom teaching, I play the song with its lyrics on a PowerPoint slide and then show the video, which usually leaves some students teary-eyed.

Based on historical scholarship and memoirs, *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* approach the credibility of documentary film with largely unknown actors and interviews with World War II combat veterans.[15] An "Education Guide" on *The Pacific* is downloadable from the HBO website. Episode four dwells on the horrifying effects of combat in Cape Gloucester, including the shocking suicide of a naked and deranged Marine. Available on YouTube are horrendous fight scenes, such as the Iwo Jima and Peleliu beach landings, the crossing of the Peleliu airfield, the US attack on a Japanese bunker, and face-to-face confrontations between American and Japanese fighters, along with Sledge's postwar breakdown. Overall, *The Pacific* unflinchingly portrays moral collapse and monstrous savagery on both sides.

Perhaps the best-known cinematic comparison of both sides of the Pacific are Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*. These 2006 companion pieces sympathetically convey the harsh realities of war for

Bridging the immense gap between soldiers in combat and civilians at home, memoirs, biographies, novels, and films are excellent educational materials that overcome the incommunicability of war experience . . .

Eugene B. Sledge, in a photo (left) and as played by Joseph Mazzello in *The Pacific* (right). Source: http://tiny.cc/9d88mw.

Saigō and his pregnant wife in *Letters from Iwo Jima*. Source: http://tiny.cc/pga7mw.

both American and Japanese servicemen. The demystification of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima is accompanied by the nightmarish flashbacks of the three surviving flag-raisers, who are anguished over their fallen comrades, even when touring the US and promoting the sale of war bonds.

Around the time when the American flag is gloriously placed atop Mount Suribachi, members of the Japanese unit defending the mountain blow themselves up with hand grenades. Such a deadly scene is part of *Letters from Iwo Jima*, which highlights the poignancy of Japanese struggles under Lieutenant General Kuribayashi Tadamichi (1891–1945), a deep admirer of the United States. Especially through such relatable characters as Private Saigō, a conscripted baker who has a beloved wife and a newborn baby at home, the film demonstrates that the bitter enemy of America is equally human. The recognition of common humanity is also represented by the friendly conversation between Colonel/Baron Nishi Takeichi (1902–1945) and Sam, a gravely wounded GI from Oklahoma carrying a letter from his mother. Figuratively, "letters from Iwo Jima" are forgotten lessons from history, that is, letters addressed to us all.

DVD cover for *Under the Flag of the Rising Sun*, which represents the terrible weight of an unexplained wartime death. Source: http://tiny.cc/6f88mw.

In Fukasaku Kinji's *Under the Flag of the Rising Sun* (1972), a war widow is grief-stricken over the unexplained death of her husband in New Guinea. Twenty-six years after the war's end, she searches out four men who belonged to his unit. Her investigation is similar to Kurosawa Akira's *Rashōmon* (1950), where all four testimonies about the same murder are starkly different from each other. In *Under the Flag of the Rising Sun*, all four men confess the wretchedness of their mental states without ever being able to overcome the trauma of war. One of them is a visibly broken man who dwells in a garbage dump on the outskirts of Tokyo and keeps himself away from the public like an outcast. He is burdened with the monstrosity of cannibalism, along with the stigma and shame of having betrayed his fellow soldiers, including the widow's husband, for his own survival. What the film accentuates, however, is not the survivor's loathsome wartime behavior, but his quiet postwar suffering.

ORDINARY MEN: MORE PRECIOUS THAN HEROES?

Bridging the immense gap between soldiers in combat and civilians at home, memoirs, biographies, novels, and films are excellent educational materials that overcome the incommunicability of war experience, especially in a psychologically remote place like the Pacific. In particular, recent works delve into the experience of being a soldier and the specific horror of war.[16] Only by

immersing ourselves in the dreadful realities of war can we fully understand the plight of ordinary infantrymen coping with nightmarish situations.

In *Flags of Our Fathers*, Bradley voices his bitterness regarding the term "hero" and ascribes his father's self-imposed silence to this "misunderstood and corrupted word."[17] James regards the flag raisers of Iwo Jima not as "immortals" but as "boys of common virtue," emphasizing that they were "ordinary men" who fought just to protect their war buddies.[18] The final scene of the film *Flags of Our Fathers* is the flag raisers cheerfully stripping down and running into the sea, which the dying John Bradley implies is his happiest memory at Iwo Jima. If this is what *Flags of Our Fathers* teaches us to think about war, nothing would be more humane than to cherish the very ordinariness of America's sons and daughters. ■

NOTES

1. This phrase is the main title of James Wright's *Those Who Have Borne the Battle: A History of America's Wars and Those Who Fought Them* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012).
2. James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006), 137.
3. Ken Burns, "Praise for *With the Old Breed*," in *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa,* E. B. Sledge (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007), i.
4. The phrase "assault into hell" is the title of chapter four in *With the Old Breed*.
5. Sledge, 153.
6. Makoto Oda, *The Breaking Jewel*, trans. Donald Keene (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
7. Shigeru Mizuki, *Onward Towards Our Noble Deaths* (Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2011), 26, 233, 350–51, 356.
8. Bradley, 5.
9. Laura Hillenbrand, *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2009), 375. On the sixth day without water, Zamperini vowed to serve God if He would quench the thirst of the three castaways. The following day, the sky miraculously opened up and poured rain, 152.
10. Ibid., 346–47. The Bataan Death March in the Philippines, for example, is chronicled in Michael Norman and Elizabeth M. Norman, *Tears in the Darkness: The Story of the Bataan Death March and Its Aftermath* (New York: Picador, 2009).
11. Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore F. Cook, "Introduction to a Lost War," *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: The New Press, 1992), 15.
12. Shohei Ooka, *Fires on the Plain*, trans. Ivan Morris (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2001). The film version is Ichikawa Kon's *Fires on the Plain*, which is available from the Criterion Collection.
13. For another challenge to the idea of the "good war," see John Bodnar, *The "Good War" in American Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).
14. The video is on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRv7PXU-l2E.
15. *The Pacific* is based on Robert Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow: From Parris Island to the Pacific* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010) and Sledge, *With the Old Breed*.
16. Notable books include William Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002); John Wukovits, *One Square Mile of Hell: The Battle for Tarawa* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2007); Gail Charfield, *By Dammit, We're Marines! Veterans' Stories of Heroism, Horror, and Humor in World War II on the Pacific Front* (San Diego: Methvin Publishing, 2008); R.V. Burgin and Bill Marvel, *Island of the Damned: A Marine at War in the Pacific* (New York: NAL Caliber, 2011).
17. Bradley, 396.
18. Ibid., 503, 531, 533–34.

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Joe Rochefort's War

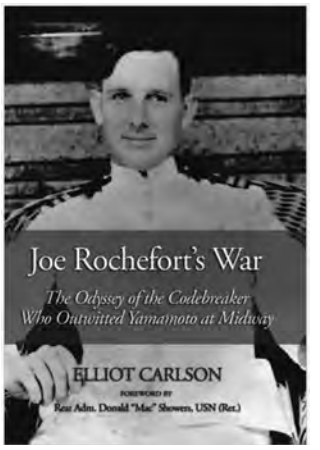
The Odyssey of the Codebreaker Who Outwitted Yamamoto at Midway

By Elliot Carlson

Naval Institute Press, 2011

616 pages, 978-1612510606, hardcover

Reviewed by Shelton Woods



Elliot Carlson's *Joe Rochefort's War: The Odyssey of the Codebreaker Who Outwitted Yamamoto at Midway* is a literary masterpiece. This is a long overdue biography of an individual who helped shape the events of the Pacific War following Japan's raid on Pearl Harbor. It is not a light read, as each of the 456 pages is packed with first-rate research and brilliant analysis. Carlson's online audio and video descriptions of his book are helpful for teachers and the general reader. But for this reviewer, it is best to understand this lengthy biography by following the three main themes Carlson weaves in and out of the thirty-chapter narrative.

From the outset, Carlson presents Rochefort as an individual who eschews convention. Ignoring his parents' desire that he become a Catholic priest, Rochefort quit high school in 1917, lied about his age so he could enlist in the US Navy, and subsequently took another year off his age to be eligible for special training. He married a Protestant (ignoring his parents' protests) and became a naval officer, despite his meager formal education. Rochefort also exposed professional incompetence—even of higher-ranking officers, calling them "clowns" and "stuffed shirts." Still, Rochefort dramatically progressed in the navy until, in 1941, he found himself in charge of the decryption unit in Pearl Harbor known as Hypo Station.

In Carlson's narrative, the bombing of Pearl Harbor opens chapter thirteen—almost 200 pages into the book. Thus, almost half of the book is devoted to introducing Rochefort and the history of code-breaking. Yet, Carlson's prose keeps the reader engaged, and one wishes for even more information before the volume turns toward the Battle of Midway.

The great mystery of Carlson's book is not how Rochefort and his team broke the Japanese code (known as JN-25-b), but rather how it was that within months of America's victory at Midway, Rochefort was unceremoniously removed from his position and reassigned to a dry dock in San Francisco. In short, the second theme of Carlson's book is the war within the war, i.e., US naval politics. Rochefort was an atypical US Navy officer. He did not receive a commission by attending a college, and he remained an outsider to the fraternity of Naval Academy-educated officers. Such officers viewed someone like Rochefort as a maverick who had not paid his dues in proper colleges where the future officers' rough edges were chipped away through the discipline of academic and military training. Rochefort openly acknowledged that his mouth got him in trouble,