

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON WORLD WAR I

The School of Hard Knocks: Combat Leadership in the American Expeditionary Forces

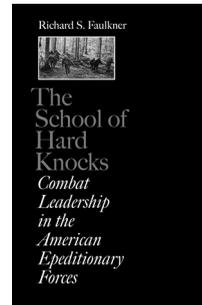
By Richard S. Faulkner

Reviewed by Colonel Dean A. Nowowiejski, PhD, United States Army, Retired, whose dissertation analyzed the American military governor of the Rhineland, MG Henry T. Allen, who previously commanded the 90th Division in the AEF

With *The School of Hard Knocks*, Shawn Faulkner has made a long overdue and critical addition to the historiography of American combat in World War I. He joins the recent contributions of Mark Ethan Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I*; Edward G. Lengel, *World War I Memories: An Annotated Bibliography of Personal Accounts Published in English Since 1919 and To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918, The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War*; and Mitch Yockelson, *Borrowed Soldiers: Americans Under British Command, 1918*, in substantially expanding our understanding of just what happened to the United States Army in World War I. Faulkner's emphasis is on the development and performance of small unit combat leaders during World War I, and his analysis is so thorough, the ultimate story so depressing for those who have led American soldiers, that the result is compelling but tragic. Faulkner mines his sources thoroughly and excellently, and covers all aspects of junior combat leader development, from training before commissioning through leadership of small units on the battlefield. His focus is on captains, lieutenants, and sergeants at the tip of the spear, principally infantry leaders of platoons and companies. Faulkner's exegesis really falls into two parts. The first is a very thorough explanation of how combat leaders were selected, trained, and sent to Europe. The second is about what happened to them when they arrived.

Faulkner begins by analyzing the legacy of officership in the American Army leading into World War I. He lays bare the ineptitude and class prejudice of the Regular officer corps, who were not prepared for the rapid expansion of the Army, and imparted to officer trainees pride in their rank and disdain for enlisted soldiers. Though Regulars readily adopted the ideals of progressivism, they did not know how to lead citizen soldiers in a mass Army. Similarly, the officer corps never learned to overcome the inherent tension between initiative by subordinates and control by superiors. Control by senior officers won out, and imaginative, competent junior leadership died.

This legacy passed through the various officer training programs into the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Faulkner explores in depth the commissioning programs, the Officer Training Camps (OTC) and Central Officers' Training Schools (COTS) that produced the bulk of the infantry lieutenants for the AEF. He gets inside the life experience of the recipient through cogent analysis of demographics of the training population and schedules. Faulkner reveals that these programs produced officers who really did not know what they were doing. The Army's makeshift officer training system produced combat leaders neither technically



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nor tactically proficient because of shortages in instructors, equipment, and facilities, exacerbated by flawed tactical doctrine.

Part of what makes this book unique is that Faulkner goes inside the doctrinal literature of the time, successfully tracing important evolutions in tactical concepts, but giving the explanation from the standpoint of training's effect on the receiver. He reveals the contradictory and confusing nature of the tactical doctrine of the AEF, beginning with officer training stateside, and ending with updated concepts that were attempted in the Meuse Argonne. What reveals is that there was no uniform doctrine, formation, or common understanding for infantry companies and platoons regarding how to fight. One of his best chapters is on the combat physics of World War I. To succeed would have required infantry leaders who knew how to properly employ their machine guns, mortars, and cannon as supporting weapons. They would have had to adjust artillery while attacking, because this was what the physics demanded. They did not possess the means to do so.

A principal contribution of this work is Faulkner's ability to take present-day understanding of what is required to lead men in combat, and then details how American leadership in World War I failed to meet those standards. What he reveals is what one would expect to contribute to unit cohesion in forces today. Care for soldiers, identification and respect between leader and led, common identity forged through shared hardship, and simple leader competence, all failed in the American forces. Incredible turbulence meant that American soldiers in combat often did not even know who their officers were. The AEF's elaborate school system disrupted the development of unit cohesion while contributing little to tactical competence, as it robbed junior leaders from units repeatedly and at the wrong time. Officers cared for themselves before their men, and did not know the basics of leadership and tactics. Fear of failure and a leadership climate where officers did NCO business condemned all to failure. Faulkner lays bare the problem of straggling in the AEF and why it existed. The end results of all these problems were needless casualties while officers bungled to find their way toward the basics of leadership.

Faulkner's prose is clear and often elegant. His research is meticulous, and his explanations so thorough as to be sometimes exhausting. If there is one salient suggestion for this work, it is that any future editions will add a bibliographic essay so that the tale of how Faulkner mined his sources and how he broke the code of variety and depth in World War I materials can be told. He clearly is a master of the extensive literature and source material. Most of the photographs in the book are from the author's personal collection. He must have collected these strikingly appropriate images over time, and that in itself might be part of the bibliographical tale.

This book is essential reading for professional Army officers because of its revelations about flaws in our institution, for those with interest in the history of leadership and World War I, and for national defense policymakers to know what organizational mistakes never to repeat when mobilizing the nation for war.