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Bayonets and Bougainvilleas

Robert Wallace Blake
1st Books Library (Dec 1, 2001)
Unknown $12.50 (164pp)
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Bayonets and Bougainvilleas is the memoir of a son paying homage to his father, and it is unfortunate that Brigadier General Robert Blake is no longer alive, for it would surely bring a tear to even an old Marine's eye to know just how proud his son was and is of his father. As the story of a family and as a history of what it was to be a Marine in the twentieth century, Robert Wallace Blake's text is an excellent primary-source document, one that should be in every post library and on every ship where United States Marines are stationed.

Blake shares many memories of growing up as a Marine Corps brat, and many are quite charming—having been set down for a nap on his father's bunk aboard a battleship, for example, is priceless. The snippets of a life spent following the fleet (when his father was in command of Marine detachments aboard warships) and moving about from base to base, city to city, or even country to country in the interwar years give the reader a good feel for what it means to belong to a military family. For most readers, these recollections of Blake's childhood and teenage years will be what they most take away from the book.

As for the principal character, Blake's father, the author provides a detailed litany of the postings, promotions, duties, and medals that punctuated his father's career. While a good, solid piece of historical writing, Blake chronicles rather than tells the story of his father, and in that regard the book is fairly dry. Blake does not, for example, provide much information about the key exciting episodes of his father's wartime service.

The elder Blake was at Belleau Wood during World War I, chased down the bandit/rebel leader Sandino in Nicaragua in the 1920s, and fought in the Pacific in World War II. These were exciting, bloody times. The author relates some of the official reports and offers an outline of these events, but does not give his readers much more than a small taste of what his father went through during those battles and campaigns. The only exception is a brief if telling admission by the elder Marine to his now Navy aviator son in the closing days of the Pacific war: "he told me one night he was not really sure whether or not there was a God, but he was positive there was a devil."

Bayonets and Bougainvilleas screams out for more experiences of combat, and insight into how it affected Blake's father and other Marines. While many veterans of the Second World War are still reluctant to relive the hell they went through, Blake should have put more effort into getting to the heart of the story. Had Blake done so, what is a good chronicle and a solid piece of Marine Corps history also could have been a great book, and an even more fitting memorial to a valiant soldier.

MARK MCLAUGHLIN (November 1, 2012)

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