

Crossing the Sauer: A Memoir of World War II

Charles Reis Felix

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In three simple words, the author beautifully summarizes what many war memoirs stumble over: “Chance dictates everything.” A self-described “bespectacled college boy,” Felix found himself advancing across Germany at the front lines of Patton’s Army as a radio operator. His recollections of this paramount experience in his young life are vibrant, hilarious, descriptive, and, most importantly, real. They strike the reader as something that happened to an actual person. This is a story told by a man who has had the opportunity to reflect, for over fifty years, on why Chance decided to let him survive.

The richest aspect of this memoir is Felix’s description of the landscape that he traversed (mostly bleak, honest descriptions, sometimes involving graphic description of dead and dying). Among the characters are the promiscuous and boastful Berseglaria, the irrational and high-strung Hillbilly, and the quiet, stereotypically reserved Hopi Indian called Chief. Of the three commanding officers that Felix writes about, one stands out as the most brash and ridiculous: Major Pusey. When Pusey takes himself and Felix to the front of a caravan and nearly gets them blown to bits, Felix describes how Pusey was struck with a “fleeting case of MacArthur Vainglorius, as it is known to students of psychiatry, a mental condition characterized by pathological self-importance.” In fact, it is Felix’s ability to deglamorize the war and his commanding officers, while highlighting the truly human moments of his experience, that makes this memoir so accessible.

At one point, Felix was relieved from a fifty-three-hour-long duty by a fellow radio operator named Folenius. An hour later, an enemy shell struck the abandoned German command post where they were stationed, and the radio operator and an officer were killed. Felix struggles with the question of why he had the fortune to survive, while others in his exact position did not. He is able to put it in perspective, and in this way, pay tribute to his fallen brothers, while not glorifying warfare. After three months at the front lines, Felix was transferred out due to yellow jaundice. He appreciates that he was able to experience the rest of his life, describing what Folenius missed: “He was deprived of life, of loving someone, of holding his child in his arms, of lying in bed Sunday morning reading the paper, of nectarine, of walking down a quiet country lane, of all the thousand-and-one pleasures of life. If he could talk, would he say to me, I died. You lived. Why? And I have no answer to that.”

Felix returned home in 1945, graduated from Stanford, became a high school teacher, raised a family, and savored much of the simple experiences that Chance allowed him to have.

KRISTIN PUTCHINKSI (May / June 2002)

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