

My Comrades and Me

Al Brown

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"In combat you do not live and learn," quips World War II veteran Al Brown, "you learn and live."

Fortunately for the then-20-year-old Floridian, in 1944 Brown learned and learned quickly. Many of the soldiers he met and wrote about in his memoir, *My Comrades and Me*, did not. Their tragic and not always heroic fate fills many pages in this very candid account of men at war.

From naïve young private nearly drowning as he hits the beach at Anzio to grizzled staff sergeant struggling to guide his men past snipers and booby traps at Zweibrücken a year later, Brown matures as a soldier and as a man. His episodic and anecdotal telling of what he states "are not just my stories but my comrades' stories as well" is often grim, sometimes humorous, and always honest. He focuses on the daily grind of war as experienced by the "Dogface Soldiers" of his much-decorated Third Infantry Division.

"Generals are frequently raving about the 'Glory' on a battlefield," writes Brown. "During my approximately 360 days of combat status, I have yet to see one incident of 'Glory.'"

While Brown saw little "glory" he did witness many incidences of courage, bravery, and self-sacrifice. He honors the men who performed those deeds, some of whom he gratefully acknowledges allowed him to make it through his trial alive.

Getting out of the hell of war alive, Brown frequently reminds the reader, is the single most important thing on the mind of every combat soldier. Those who forgot that, even for a moment, never made it home.

"What does it take to survive combat?" asks Brown. "Mostly luck." Relying on luck, however, is not enough, adds the former sergeant, who himself was wounded by German bullets.

Many of the more than seventy very short chapters in *My Comrades and Me* describe brushes with death. Best read in small batches rather than in lengthy sittings, Brown's meaty snippets tell the reader what it looks, sounds, and feels like to be shot at—and not just by the enemy.

He chillingly relates the sight of a tank round coming at him. He rages with anger at being strafed by his country's own planes, but calmly explains how to tell when an incoming barrage is going to hit your position rather than pass overhead to bombard someone else. "If you hear it, it has already passed you," explains Brown, noting that the shell from an 88-millimeter German gun travels at four times the speed of sound.

My Comrades and Me, however, is not all grime, gore, and grit. "I learned you could take humor into battle if you chose to," recalls Brown, who incorporates that lesson into his memoir. The result is an engaging, authentic, and very human story. As such, it would not be out of place on a shelf with the works of Leon Uris, Robert Leckie, Norman Mailer, and other honest chroniclers of infantry combat in World War II.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (June 3, 2011)

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