Clarion Review

General

The Great Hour Struck
Gary Varner
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Four Stars (out of Five)

Military fiction is one of the oldest genres—look at Homer. Societies keep engaging in new wars so writers willing to do the necessary research have lots of material to mine. Soldiers and sailors supply them with real heroes cowards and officers good and bad on whom they can model their characters. Gary Varner thus joins a long list of earnest authors determined to show us war "as it really was."

Nothing indicates that Varner ever served in the military but he's done his research. His recreation of paratroopers' lives during the World War II invasion of Normandy rings true. The theme that stretches through this volume however seems new: how does God fit into the lives of combat soldiers? How would a young man steeped in philosophy and not quite sure about religion kill enemy fighters or deal with the loss of men he leads to nearly certain death? Those thoughts haunt Lt. Sam Henry throughout this story.

Nearly all war novels include a streak of romance—periods of relief from the bursting of bombs or dreams of a woman left behind—and the main character lives to tell his story. So it is with this one; the first half of the novel follows Sam Henry from his arrival in England through his falling in love with a charming English woman and his building a platoon of very young soldiers into a worthy fighting group. Then he boards a C-47 transport plane drops out over Normandy and lives through a series of clashes with a fierce and determined enemy.

Varner writes well. His characters live and he shows the positive and negative aspects of every soldier he deals with; most are brave a few are not and officers run from outstanding to worthless. The setting feels real. There's just enough about Sam's German opponents to show that they're also human:

"The tone snapped Hans back to military order. 'Jawohl Herr

Obersarfuhrer Behr.' He trotted over and handed Behr a Red Army identification booklet.

"Behr's mind automatically sounded out the Cyrillic characters. Federova Anya Igorovna. The instant he knew the name he regretted the knowledge. A name in combination with a face became a person. A sergeant same as me. Yet nothing like me. Just another Slav…. He jumped out the exit and headed west toward German lines."

This volume is the first in a series; we'll have to wait for Sam's ultimate clash with Sergeant Behr and a solution to his spiritual quandary. Nonetheless this first volume is worth reading on its own. Like Odysseus Sam has a long and terrible road to travel.

Carter Jefferson