

Wings of the Bullet

Rudy Depaola

Xlibris (February 2010)

Softcover \$10.00 (123pp)

978-1-4134-9816-5

Avid readers are familiar with the nonfiction novel genre. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* is the most celebrated. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is a more recent example. Like that book, Rudy De Paolo's story, *Wings of the Bullet*, is about war and the young men who are sent to fight it.

DePaola often used his war experiences as classroom material in his teaching career. Former students commented favorably on his stories, and so, he says, "Now that I have more time I have decided to write the book." He adds, "Yes, most of it is true—the lost barracks bags, the ten thousand ants, the ride in the general's staff car, the pressure chamber, the ten wooden coffins all in a row—but not other things."

Wings focuses on Ralph Di Beri, member of the class of 1943, who enlists in the US Army Air Corps. Ralph wanted to join the Navy, but the recruiter's promise is pilot training. With this, the author strikes one of the book's themes. He writes, "His future in war had been directly affected by this one chance meeting that changed the direction of his life. What other decisions lay ahead?"

Ralph's story continues through basic training, diversion to aerial gunnery school when the needs of the military change, and finally into Pacific theater combat. The author includes some ribald sex scenes and a few of Ralph's letters home; there are also notes from gunnery school, personal photographs, and maps as guides. Much of that material comes from the author's personal collection.

Ralph, a B-24 bomber tail-gunner, is waylaid in California by illness, which offers De Paola a chance to write about isolation and loneliness. He later meets up again with his crew. From islands near New Guinea, Ralph flies "practice" bombing runs over Japanese-held Rabaul, but then enters regular combat in support of the invasion of the Philippines.

Due to the poor quality of the writing, *Wings* cannot be classified as literary. There are holes in the narrative; some scenes and characters are not fully drawn; and there are internal contradictions.

These flaws will keep readers from wanting to know how the saga of young Ralph will end. This is unfortunate, since the end contains the dark heart of the novel: war's devastating effect on young men. Ralph's B-24 is damaged during a bombing run over Corregidor and crash lands on Mindanao. The crew is eventually rescued, but Ralph suffers a bad head injury, a physical trauma that exacerbates his depression over seeing a bomber crew burn to death and his best friend killed. A flight surgeon eventually says, "You have finally been classified with manic-depressive psychosis, and you will soon be shipped back to the good ole US of A."

Given that this novel is based on a true story, readers will be left with questions that might have been better answered better in a straight-forward memoir. All the same, they will also realize *Wings* is a positive contribution to history.

GARY PRESLEY (May 18, 2010)

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