

The GI War Against Japan: American Soldiers in Asia and the Pacific During World War II

Peter Schrijvers

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World War II has been described by some Americans as “the Good War” and many books and movies have been made depicting not only the courage and heroism, but also the gruesomeness and meaninglessness of war. Interpretations and reinterpretations have been discussed, debated and studied, with some going to the extreme. For example, one American veteran responded to the debates by writing his own book, entitling it *This was My War; I’ll Remember it the way I want to*. Certainly, many books have been published on the various battles, campaigns, and aspects of the War, and in particular the war against Japan. And yet, despite the volumes that have been published, there are still new angles to pursue. This book presents a new and significant approach to the war in Asia and the Pacific.

As World War II was being fought, attempts on all sides were made to document it, aside from the usual official reports and documents. These involved photographs, documentaries, magazine articles and even books frequently written by journalists but also by the soldiers, sailors and airmen themselves. Historians were at the scene to document events as they happened, with an eye to writing more formal and balanced histories after the tide of battle had ebbed. In the process, the War has been depicted as a series of battles and campaigns, the names of which soon became public knowledge. In the Asia-Pacific theater, these included Bataan and Corregidor; the Battles of the Coral Sea, Midway, Leyte Gulf; the invasions of Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Leyte, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. This view of the War as a series of campaigns and battles is important and continues to be studied as the military, tactical and strategic aspects of the fighting still bring out many angles which have not been told fully.

Occasionally, other aspects of the war have been drawn out: logistics, medicine, economic mobilization and production, psychological warfare and so on, but these have generally paled in comparison with the accounts of combat. To this day, there are books published every year about specific battles and campaigns even though many of them are rehashes and offer little that is significantly new.

Peter Schrijvers' book, *The GI War Against Japan*, offers a different view of the war, one which transcends the battles and campaigns and even its military tactical and strategic aspects. It seeks to look at the war as a complex experience—psychologically, technologically, culturally—and to look at it from the perspective of the common fighting man, the GI.

The GI was typically a white civilian with some education (usually a high school but, on occasion, a college graduate) who enlisted or was drafted during the war. Thus, the perspectives here start with civilian views thrust into the military way of life and into battlefields that were far from home, and were populated by people with cultures very different from that of the continental US. (Blacks were segregated and usually kept in the rear; Filipinos and Japanese-Americans were kept in their own units in the army, and Filipinos in the US Navy seldom rose above the position of mess boy).

The book is in three parts. The first part focuses on the American soldier's perceptions of the Asia-Pacific world he was entering for the first time. He saw the new lands and peoples as a pioneer (continuing the tradition of the pioneers of the American west); as a romantic (spellbound with the beauties of the Orient, as fed by Hollywood movies); as a missionary (with a goal of converting the locals to American ways); and as an imperialist (seeing the economic potentials of postwar Asia and the Pacific). Part II covers the GI's coming to grips with the reality of the Asia-Pacific battleground—how it could not be changed despite American intents, resources and capabilities. The result was a growing frustration over the terrain; diseases; flora and fauna; the peoples who had lifestyles and values which he could not comprehend; his own frame of mind which was constantly shifting and changing as a result of his encounters with nature, peoples and an unfathomable foe. Some GIs who could not take it went "Asiatic"—they adapted local ways while losing some of their own, or they became psychiatric cases. Part III shows how this frustration was translated in war: it turned into the desire to kill and destroy not only the Japanese but also anything else that posed a challenge to the GIs: insects,

germs, jungle, coral and, at times, even the local people. The last part also describes the industrial might behind the GI and the weapons he used to break the will to fight of the Japanese.

In discussing the viewpoints of the American soldiers, Schrijvers dramatically shows how their psyche changed from a romantic or optimistic view to an increasingly frustrated and angry state of mind, their rage limited only by the capability of the weapons available to them. He explains how the flamethrower, napalm and incendiaries were put to indiscriminate use against the Japanese, occasionally victimizing the locals including Filipinos. Even the bulldozer became a tool of death and destruction, sealing the Japanese in caves after they had refused to surrender.

The wonder and shock of many an American in these foreign lands is well presented, as well as his growing frustration and rage at the same peoples and lands he had looked at in a more positive light. The experience of killing for the first time is also recounted: an experience which, once crossed, dulled many of the peacetime senses. (Warriors on all sides had similar reactions; in the case of the Japanese, one can turn to Cook and Cook's *Japan at War: An Oral History*).

The war is shown here in its totality, and not just in combat. The clash of cultures, the effect of frustration on the environment, peoples and the Japanese enemy, plus the use of weapons of mass destruction—all of these changed the individual GI's outlook and behavior on war, morals and life. Dehumanization is an oft-used word, but this is one book which examines in concrete terms how that dehumanization comes about and how it is manifested.

A soldier once wrote, "War is mostly waiting." In the three and a half years of war in Asia and the Pacific, much of the time spent was in waiting. The reality of boredom and the non-fighting aspects of war are brought to life in sharp detail.

Schrijvers brings out many things that are not generally known: Americans shooting Japanese POWs (or reluctance to take POWs); GI rape of Japanese and local women; destruction of the environment; excessive use of force; racism and discrimination; psychological and psychiatric cases; use of drugs (local or medicinal, with the same effect); waste (garbage generated by the military—reminiscent of Angeles' junk shops; Clark and Subic). He mentions the genuine fear of many Americans that some GIs

might “slip back” into more primitive lifestyles (although there was another genuine fear that Americans would become too used to guns and violence that they might carry this trait home). Many GIs, Schrijvers points out, recognized the irony of their starting out as liberators but turning out as colonizers, or their using the same methods they criticized the Japanese for using. Indeed, the war in Asia and the Pacific was a complex one, and the war against Japan was but one of many wars being fought in the region. Many GIs realized that they were in a changing world—and one which they saw they were part of whether they were liked or not.

The subject matter is huge and daunting, but the author is able to keep within limits and stays in control of the subject matter. It is always difficult to write a one-volume history of the war in Asia and the Pacific and particularly one such as this which deals with the war as a total experience and seeks, as the author points out, to “point to patterns of perception, experience and behavior.” (A companion volume to this, to understand the battles and campaigns, would be Ronald Spector’s *Eagle against the Sun*—but even this, as a one-volume history of the US armed forces against Japan—came out very late, after specialized works had been published). *The GI War Against Japan* continues the discussion on ground-breaking traditions as found in Akira Iriye’s *Power and Culture*; George H. Roeder Jr.’s *Censored War*; John Dower’s *War without Mercy*; Christopher Thorne’s *Allies of a Kind*; and John Keegan’s *The Face of Battle* (vis-à-vis the more conventional flag waving accounts of Stephen Ambrose and others), and should be a classic in its field.

Schrijvers carefully documents his work and in many cases lets the GIs speak for themselves by quoting from diaries and letters. Enriching this book is the author’s experience in writing a similar book on the GI in the war in Europe, which allows him to compare perceptions and behavior in both theaters.

Of particular interest are the many comments by GIs on Filipinos, ranging from very positive to degrading. The GIs found Filipinos easy to identify with because of their American education and Christian background, but then found it baffling that many Filipinos said yes to everything even if they did not really understand the situation; or that they did not respect agreements even if these were documented; others found many Filipino girls a source of venereal disease. Some of these comments can still be heard nowadays.

The book is researched exhaustively and contains most of the important works in its bibliography. It is heavily based on diaries, letters, memoirs and other primary materials, much of which have not been published. Diaries were, as a rule, discouraged if not banned, by some of the US armed forces, and thus some were written in hiding. Some GIs managed to write their deepest thoughts, which were very personal and subjective, of course, because they depended on the writer's intentions and motivations. Letters expressed very personal views, too, but these were subject to censorship and may have been written under limited conditions. Schrijvers uses a lot of good material and mined them well, but he does not cite any interview with a living veteran. While he may have had his reasons for doing so, interviews with veterans could have added another dimension to the written sources, particularly since some of them were written under widely varying conditions.

As in any book of this magnitude, some topics are not discussed: the role of leadership (some examples of bad leadership and their effect on the men are given, but little presentation is made on good leaders and how they could motivate their men); attempts to keep morale high (mention is made of sending the men on liberty trips ashore, of prostitutes and so on but not of the role of the United Service Organization, or the importance given to mail, V-Discs, GI editions of books and magazines). Although he tries to cover all the services, there is little discussion of submariners (although some diaries are cited in the bibliography) and how they felt when sinking Japanese ships and seeing their crews drown; aircrews' views of the destruction they caused (e.g., the massacre in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea; fire raids over Japan which made the men sick). There is no mention of service rivalry which contributed to hastening (or delaying) the various campaigns. But then, a book on this scale cannot include everything.

The book has some mention of Japanese atrocities and how they fuelled the hate GIs felt for the Japanese. The author makes clear the distinction of how many GIs actually witnessed such atrocities and how many simply heard about them. But not too emphasized is the impact of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and how this galvanized the American population into fighting a war they considered a just one. While the war was basically over two major powers fighting for control over resources, the nature of the Pearl Harbor attack—which came to symbolize treachery and duplicity—motivated Americans to join in the fight, as it did in the Philippines. News of the Bataan Death March and subsequent treatment

of American Prisoners of War in the Philippines which was made public in early 1944 further steeled the resolve of GIs not to take mercy on the Japanese. This is not mentioned in the book, but news that the Japanese division defending Leyte was the same one that had participated in the Death March made returning GIs more vengeful. Also, as the campaign against Japan evolved, more and more cases of Japanese “not following the rule”—such as waving a white flag and then shooting Americans who came out into the open; playing dead and then shooting soldiers from behind after they passed; posing as women or civilians and then exploding grenades after passing through American lines occurred,— which further heightened the rage and frustration. Japanese torturing and executing of POWs, although perhaps not seen first hand, was well known and disseminated through manuals or “lessons learned” pamphlets. The escalation of violence thus started with Pearl Harbor and was fanned by Japanese ways of war.

While perhaps nitpicking, the reviewer found a couple of typographical errors which disappointed me for a book of this quality. On page 192 the experience of a Counter Intelligence Corps officer with local Huks in Central Luzon is cited, but the area is mistakenly identified as northern Luzon. This is, however, a minor point.

Since the book is on the GI war, it does not deal much with the professional soldiers who were in the battlefield when the war started, who had different experiences from the GI although they shared initial perceptions and responses. Shrijvers does, however, point to pre-war military life in Hawaii and the Philippines and draws parallels between World War II in the Pacific and the Fil-American War.

The GI War Against Japan should be required reading by policy makers who see war as a limited affair to achieve political ends because the effects of war are always far reaching and complex. The book should also be read by professional soldiers and officers as well as anyone interested in the study of war. One’s understanding of Vietnam, the Fil-American War, the Gulf War, and other wars, including the Mindanao and Sulu campaign, is deepened after reading this book. Whoever reads this book will have his eyes opened to the many facets of war not previously studied in detail, and will realize how war is so much more complex than one realizes.

However, the book is largely from the point of view of American soldiers. Views of the Japanese, Filipinos, and some local

people come out from time to time; but perhaps, since war involves two or more countries, a similar book might also be written about the Japanese—and the Filipinos—in WW II to balance out the perspective.

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