

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gerald A. Meehl. *One Marine's War: A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012. 288 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61251-092-7; \$34.95 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-61251-093-4.

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The Pacific theater was characterized by some of the most intense fighting of the Second World War. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Pacific Fleet and the US Marines waged an island-hopping campaign to overtake the territory the Japanese had amassed in their quest for power. In *One Marine's War: A Combat Interpreter's Quest for Humanity in the Pacific*, Gerald A. Meehl describes the experience of Bob Sheeks, a combat interpreter who served with the 2nd Marine Division during the bloody campaigns on the islands of Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian. While the traditional attitude of marines was to destroy the enemy at all costs, Sheeks attempted to talk with the Japanese, enticing them to surrender before the marines attacked. In a war where there appeared to be no sense of humanity, he tried to instill it in both the marines he served with and the Japanese soldiers he tried to save. Eventually, he was awarded the Bronze Star for his efforts in saving countless American and Japanese lives.

Meehl takes an interesting approach to his story of Sheeks's life. He begins with the story of how he came to meet Sheeks while on vacation. Then he tells the story of how Sheeks wound up learning Japanese at the US Navy Language School, first in California, and then in Colorado. In nine chapters, Meehl takes the reader through the different stages of Sheeks's life from childhood to service in the Pacific during World War II. Throughout the story, the reader gets a glimpse into the multitude of experiences that colored Sheeks's outlook on the Japanese people. Harboring an initial hatred of the Japanese for the atrocities he witnessed as a boy in China when the Japanese invaded, Sheeks's opinion transformed when he met Japanese instructors at the US Navy Language School. He ceased to find a reason to hate and looked toward finding humanity in a world enthralled in war.

Meehl is more than qualified to portray the events of Sheeks's life. He has traveled to every major Pacific Island battlefield, has published his work in over two hundred articles in journals and periodicals on scientific and historical studies, and was a member of a science team that won the Nobel Prize. His background in research is unquestionable and clearly demonstrated in the sources he uses to complement the stories told to him by Sheeks. His chance meeting on the beaches of Sabah in north Borneo with Sheeks, and the stories that ensued, have been transcribed into this account.

While the stories contained in this monograph are an interesting rendition of one man's life, they are important to the historical record of World War II for a number of reasons. The study of war is not a mere presentation of major battles, strategies, and famous leaders associated with a given conflict. It encapsulates a myriad of issues related to experience on the part of everyone involved. Meehl's story highlights the emotional struggles Sheeks faced throughout the war, including the nature of the fighting on Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian; the feeling of meeting a girl while in Hawaii and having to say goodbye again when deployed; and the struggles he faced trying to change the mind-set of fellow marines and Japanese soldiers. In many ways, this personal history also shows the difficult relationship between the military and the civilian population, both when Sheeks was a boy witnessing the Japanese atrocities against the Chinese people that he had grown up with and the civilian populations he encountered as a marine. The book belongs on the shelf of any historian searching for information about the Pacific theater of the war and social experiences of warfare, and any World War II enthusiast looking for a story about the nature of combat on Tarawa, Saipan, and Tinian.

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