
PERSONAL CHOICE

Quartered Safe Out Here. George Macdonald Fraser. Harper Collins 2000. £5.99 pp 368 ISBN No: 000-710-593-2

*You may talk of gin and beer
When you're quartered safe out here
An' you're sent to penny fights an' Aldershot it,
But when it comes to slaughter
You will do your work on water,
An' you'll lick the bloomin' boots of 'im that's got it.*

Rudyard Kipling, Gunga Din

This is a wonderful book, and I urge you to read it today. Essentially it describes clearly and frankly the experiences of a private soldier fighting in Burma in the Second World War. This is all that the author declares it to be in the rather self-effacing foreword but even if it were that simple you still couldn't put it down. It starts the day he joins the men of nine section in the build up to the capture of Meiktila, and then continues through his war until he is sent to the officer board in Chittagong. He describes beautifully the feelings and thoughts of a man new to a job, new to a group, and new to a country as he struggles through his first encounters with "Jap". Later he is the old hand as new faces arrive, and it is hard to tell where the change from fearful novice to sun-beaten veteran takes place.

The style is crisp and the pace is varied so that the reader's attention is firmly held throughout. More, the absurdities and strangeness of the land and events around him are utterly absorbing. Hearing a wounded man crying "The dirty rats, they got me!" and thinking that it reminded him of Clark Gable in a movie seems ridiculous to people brought up on Hollywood dramatizations. Nonetheless, these recollections of sights and sounds linked with the way they made him feel gives a sense of immediacy. The whole scene is always vivid and unpredictable, essentials to the story and trivia intermingled at random.

His feelings about the Army and his colleagues will evoke great sympathy in any soldier past or present and it is somehow reassuring to know that in essence the substance of the Army, its people, haven't changed all that much. His experiences as part of a multi-national

task force are repeated still, as in the Gulf and Bosnia. The origin of much of the army jargon in use today (such as *Basha*) is made clear, and this use of personal language reaches out to the reader. His feelings about his kit and its shortcomings will also bring a wry smile to the face of anyone who has seen service, and it is this appeal to those who have shared some of these experiences that makes such compulsive reading.

His resentment about the way the media use soldiers, and in a sense determines for them how they should feel and react comes through clearly, occasionally in quite sustained and emotional passages. There is a feeling that the young man of today may have been conditioned "to indulge his emotions" in a way that his generation had not, and that this has resulted in a "spiritual hypochondria". Certainly he is a strong opponent of post-traumatic counselling... He also addresses other changing social perspectives such as racism, in a frank and no-nonsense manner. His views on the Japanese are undisguised, but he is also aware of the fact that time has rendered them distasteful to younger people. He is acutely aware of this paradox, having "difficulty equating (them) with those neat, eager, apparently polite young men whom I see in airports and tourist centres..." The concepts of Honour and Duty feature heavily, tempered with the eternal soldier's pragmatism, hence he wisely points out that "Honour hath no skill as a surgeon - which is why you are perfectly entitled to be scared". These interludes do not interrupt the flow of the book, but rather periodically remind you that these experiences are from decades ago. This gives the reader a strange feeling of being then and now at the same time.

All in all, *Quartered Safe Out Here* is a lovely book examining far more than simply the historical events in Burma. It looks closely and lovingly at the people and country, painting them in colours familiar to the reader, and so generating an easy yet thoroughly memorable read.

Just as "Defeat into Victory" by Field Marshall Slim has been described as the best general's book of the Second World War, "Quartered Safe Out Here" which describes the same campaign, must have a strong claim to being the best private soldier's memoir.

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