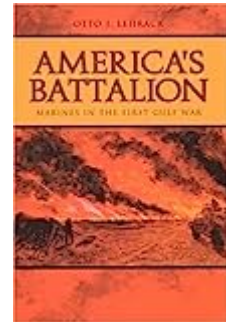


Otto J. Lehrack. *America's Battalion: Marines in the First Gulf War.* Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. ix + 236 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1452-1.



Reviewed by Keith Kopets (U.S. Marine Corps)

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Keep Your Seabag Packed, Marine

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein sent three Republican Guard divisions into Kuwait on August 2, 1990. A hemisphere away, the advance elements of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment returned to Hawaii from deployment in the Far East. The Marines barely had time to unpack. A corporal from the operations section thought the deployment seemed “unreal,” while an artillery lieutenant attached to the battalion had thought that, in event of war, the Marines “would go in sometime after the Girl Scouts” (p. 12).

“There is something special about 3/3,” according to Lt. Col. John Garrett, its commanding officer (p. 7). The battalion has mustered its share of talent. The moniker, “America’s Battalion,” gathered momentum in the early 1980s during the command of Charles C. Krulak who later served as the thirty-first Commandant of the Marine Corps. Garrett made colonel and commanded a Marine Expeditionary Unit in Somalia. His second in command in the book, Major Craig Huddleston, and three of his captains—Sam Jammal, Doug Stilwell, and Joe Molofsky—are serving colonels. The author, Otto Lehrack, a retired lieutenant colonel, commanded one of the battalion’s ri-

fle companies in Vietnam (1967-1968). This is his third book.

Before the United States called on the Girl Scouts to fight Saddam and his million-man army, Lieutenant Colonel Garrett and the battalion made it to Saudi Arabia and advanced with the coalition forces to Kuwait City, where the fighting ended. Considering the build up, it was a short war, with the ground fighting lasting less than a week. It was, however, the largest single operation for the Marine Corps, which had more than 90,000 Marines in the theater expecting a fight against the Iraqi Army, the fourth largest in the world. The quick conclusion of combat left some Marines “disappointed,” according to Major Huddleston because “they wanted to mix it up a little more” (p. 204).

America’s Battalion, is a collection of oral histories gathered between August 1990 and March 1991. Each chapter is based on an interview, with chapter titles taken from the subject of each dialogue. However, Lehrack edits himself out of the book, preferring to let the Marines do the talking rather than presenting a discussion between author and Marine. Their language is what you

would expect from the infantry: blunt, honest and sometimes coarse, and always without ornamentation. For instance, Corporal Uskoski described the eve of battle when the unit was “waiting to get a shot at Hussein,” and “no one was sure they really wanted to do it, so they talked amongst themselves to keep themselves going” (p. 67).

They admit when they were scared, when they were bored, when they surged on adrenaline, and when they felt that strange surrealistic detachment that comes when peacetime training yields rapid cognition and action in war. A sergeant remembers moving through the breach into Kuwait ahead of the battalion: “I looked down and I had stepped on a mine. Luckily, it was an antitank mine, which requires quite a bit of pressure to set it off. I was kind of relieved” (p. 169).

There is plenty of fog and Clausewitzian friction, but there is no dissenting opinion or argument. The book is not critical. In fact, we hear from no one outside the battalion, with the exception of the regimental and division commanders. This is a double-edged sword. While effective at recreating the interplay of the men—especially during the deployment to Saudi Arabia, the clash with the Iraqis on the border at Khafji, and through the breach into Kuwait—the book does so at the expense of historical inquiry. The Marines worked closely with Arab forces in the coalition, for instance, and there is much on the subject in the text, but the only perspective of their performance in the book is that of the Marines. Readers can

look to *America’s Battalion* for impression, but should look elsewhere for interpretation.

Its publication, also, feels calculated. More than one Marine in the book expresses disappointment at the outcome and predicts they will have to return to overthrow Saddam Hussein; in March 2003, twelve years later, coalition forces went into Iraq and did just that. Lehrack, in the last chapter, gives in to the temptation to pronounce the recent overthrow of Saddam as a bookend to the events of 1990-91.

Whether the task of removing Saddam from power was one coalition forces should have accomplished in 1991 or by force later is an argument beyond the scope of the text. Characterizing the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a coda to Hussein and his attack on Kuwait in 1990 is an oversimplification, even if upon first glance it gives credence to what the Marines in the book predict. The shooting has not stopped. In the combat since the fall of Baghdad, in Anbar Province alone, the Marines have suffered more battle deaths and casualties than the coalition suffered in the first Gulf War and the attack of 2003 combined. In light of these events, the most prescient remarks in the book come from one of the reconnaissance sergeant, William Iiams: “I feel cheated that Saddam Hussein’s still in power. But going back to my studies, who are you going to put in there? A Kurd leader? Do you put in an Islamic leader? Who’s going to make things better” (p. 215)?

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