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Hollis D. Stabler. *No One Ever Asked Me: The World War II Memoirs of an Omaha Indian Soldier.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xvii + 183 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4324-8.

Reviewed by Mark Van de Logt (American Indian Studies Research Institute, Indiana University)

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A Missed Opportunity

This is an important, although not entirely satisfying book. It is important because few Native American memoirs of World War II have ever been published, even though the Native American perspective is significant. More than one-third of all able-bodied American Indian men between the ages of eighteen and fifty, about 25,000 in all, wore the uniform during the war. Most of these were volunteers. Another 40,000 found employment in war industry in cities around the nation. In addition, several hundred American Indian women served as nurses. In short, American Indians made significant contributions to the war effort, far out of proportion with their small number in American society. Their stories merit attention.

Hollis D. Stabler, whose story is told in this book, is an Omaha Indian. During the war, Hollis fought in campaigns in Morocco, Tunisia, Sicily, at Anzio, and in southern France. During his service he sustained a severe leg injury and lost some of his hearing. He received numerous decorations, including four Bronze Stars, one Silver Star, and the Purple Heart. In 2001, historian Victoria Smith (assistant professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln) began to record Hollis's experiences. Smith describes her approach as "collaborative biography," in which her role was limited to that of "collector-editor" (p. xii). In practical terms, this meant that Hollis provided her with the materials, which Smith then arranged into a flowing chronological narrative. Smith's editorial interjections are merely intended to contextualize Hollis's story. They do not provide much analysis. In other words, this is the way Hollis wanted the story to be told–with as little interference from the editor as possible.

Hollis was born in 1918 in Hampton, Virginia, where his father attended an Indian boarding school. Although his parents were well educated and considered "progressive" Indians, Hollis was raised with a strong sense of pride in Omaha culture and history. At a young age he became a dancer in the emerging powwow circuit. He also received an Omaha name, *Na-shin-thia* (Slow to Rise). He attended a variety of Indian schools and after graduating in 1938, he traveled around the country in search of work. Wishing to "take care of myself" (p. 24), he decided to enlist in 1939. His first choice, the Navy, had already met its quota and he was told to come back

later. Too hungry to wait, he enlisted in the Army instead. After a brief stint with the 11th Cavalry, he was assigned to the 2nd Armored Division, 67th Armored Regiment. He became a crew member on an M3 Stuart tank. In November 1942, his division landed in Morocco. He took part in Operation Torch, the capture of Casablanca, under Gen. George Patton. Shortly thereafter, Hollis's unit was sent to Tunisia where he fought his first battle against a German armored division. In July 1943, he participated in Operation Husky, the invasion of Sicily. After the fall of Sicily, he joined the Rangers as a radio operator on the front lines during Operation Shingle, the invasion of the Italian mainland at Anzio. In this battle he received a serious leg wound, for which he was awarded the Purple Heart. After his discharge from the hospital, he joined the 1st Special Service Force and in 1944 he participated in Operation Anvil, the invasion of southern France, before returning home later that year.

Although he was often in the thick of the fighting, Hollis had only a limited view of what was happening around him. His accounts remind the reader that the view of the enlisted man on the ground was quite different from the "bird's eye" view of the commanding generals and, later, of historians. The battlefield experience of the ordinary soldier in World War II was more confusing, chaotic, and foggy. But, as John Keegan pointed out in *The Face of Battle* (1976), these perspectives are nevertheless important if we are to understand what actually took place. Hollis's recollections touch upon the chaos of battle: in the tank battle in Tunisia his tank got stuck in a lake; during the invasion in Sicily, he lost his unit and spent much of his time searching for his friends on a German motorcycle he found by the side of a road; he missed several battles while in the hospital suffering from infected feet and an ingrown toenail; during the Anzio campaign he lost his helmet and gun, and even fell asleep in the midst of the battle. Although some of his battle descriptions have a certain slapstick flavor to them, Hollis's accounts also graphically depict the horrors of war. The loss of his brother at Anzio, although told with detachment, is one of the most moving and powerful episodes in the whole book.

Unfortunately, after reading the book, one is left with the feeling that Hollis is only telling us part of the story. Whenever events get really interesting or controversial, he abruptly breaks off the narrative and moves on to other topics. As a result, the narrative often appears superficial. Important topics such as racism, fear, loneliness, homesickness, fatigue, stress, and other aspects of the experiences of men in war are often implied but never discussed or analyzed in any detail. There is no personal reflection on his experiences comparable to J. Glenn Gray's World War II "memoir" *The Warriors* (1998). For example, we learn that there was racism in the Army, but how this racism expressed itself precisely and how it affected Hollis personally is never adequately explained. He watched African American soldiers being abused by white troops, but refrains from commenting further. His encounters with women behind the front lines are always couched in innuendo. Stabler also refrains from commenting on the men he met in the war (his commanding officers, his fellow unit members, the enemy), as if he feared he might offend them. We can only guess Hollis's real opinion of General Patton, for example. Instead of dwelling on the unpleasant aspects of his service, he relishes stories about amusing incidents in the Army.

The failure to discuss certain issues more deeply reveals a significant shortcoming in Smith's "collector-editor" approach. Smith was apparently too reluctant to press Hollis for clarifications and details such as the ones mentioned above. While it is laudable to let someone tell the story the way he or she wishes to, in this case it has resulted in numerous missed opportunities. For example, after Hollis's return to civilian life, he had trouble with alcohol. Did these troubles result from his military service? Did they spring from the things he saw or did in the war? Or were they the result of postwar pressures? Hollis's experiences as a schoolteacher after the war further illustrate the problem of Smith's approach. Hollis noticed that Indian children were "entirely different than the kids in public school ... it was hard to get [them] motivated" (pp. 137-138). Why it was harder to get them motivated, or what exactly explains the differences between these students is never addressed.

These are just a few examples of the opportunities Smith missed. To be sure, not all of the blame should be placed on the editor. In many cases, World War II veterans are reluctant to share painful, embarrassing, or traumatic experiences with others. Nevertheless, Smith's failure to address basic issues seriously limits the value of this memoir as an historical document. There are too many loose ends, and too many unanswered questions. Fundamental questions, such as Hollis's thoughts as to why the war was fought, are not even asked. Consequently, we only get a small glimpse of what it was like to be an Omaha Indian soldier in World War II. In light of these problems, the title of the book is somewhat ironic. One could only wish that Smith had asked Hollis some more questions.

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