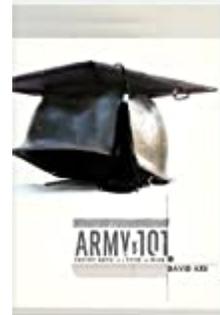




David Axe. *Army 101: Inside ROTC in a Time of War.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007. 111 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-660-6.



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Not Quite Ernie Pyle

We have all seen those “Bad Hemingway” contests that pass through our email accounts from time to time. Think of this book as a medal winner in a “Bad Ernie Pyle” contest. The idea behind the book is noble enough. David Axe, a freelance journalist and graphic novel memoirist, set out to follow the experiences of several members of the Gamecock Battalion of Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadets from the University of South Carolina. He purportedly wanted to see why they joined and get a sense of how their lives differed both from their non-ROTC peers and cadets at the United States Military Academy (USMA). He developed a certain sense of admiration for the cadets and the tasks they must complete, but the book ultimately fails to achieve any of its stated aims.

Although a number of journalists have made names for themselves writing history, this book suffers from a common problem journalists experience when dealing with the past. The “history” portion of the book is limited to a few pages replete with generalities and broad-brush history. According to Axe, nothing in history was “complicated” until September 11, 2001. As part of this

uncomplicated pre-9/11 history, Axe claims that ROTC was born on the battlefields of World War I. It is true that the enabling legislation that created ROTC was signed in 1916, but Americans had yet to declare their belligerency in the war, let alone see a single battlefield. This error is indicative of a lack of any serious attempt to understand the book’s central subject. The Reserve Officer Training Corps, and the ideal of the citizen-soldier in America more generally, have rich and illuminating histories that might have provided some important perspective, but the book has no real research and no footnotes.

The book’s style obviously is designed to make for light reading. Most of the time, the style is too light and breezy. Several paragraphs are formed with one sentence, in some cases only a single word. Tenses change frequently, there is an annoying tendency to use fragments, and an unnecessary habit of using profanity in order, one presumes, to add a dose of realism through the inclusion of soldier’s language. The end result, however, is unsatisfying. We also get descriptions like the one of a helicopter’s arrival sounding like “the world’s largest grandmother beating the world’s largest dirty rug in fast

forward” (p. 17) and a crass description of the mothers of cadets fanning themselves in a hot student union during a graduation ceremony as being “like fat hummingbirds” (p. 109).

Most fundamentally, however, this book misunderstands ROTC and its differences from USMA. Axe’s description of ROTC is a “boys (and sometimes girls) will be boys” world of booze-filled partying, challenging military training, and the difficulties of adjusting to the capricious and arbitrary nature of Army life. Axe admires the men and women who endure these hardships, but he does not seem to know that none of these characteristics is unique to ROTC, as any student or faculty member at the nation’s military colleges can attest. Instead of a sober analysis of how ROTC cadets are (or think they are) different from their West Point peers, we get a series of vignettes about the challenges of ROTC and how a handful of its students deal with them.

If a breezy style and a half-considered history of the ROTC program were the book’s only faults, *Army 101* could be dismissed as too short and too light for a serious comparison of commissioning sources. But there are much deeper flaws. With his wide brush, Axe tars ROTC graduates of traditional military schools such as the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), Virginia Tech, and the Citadel as not being true citizen-soldiers like the grad-

uates of the University of South Carolina’s ROTC program. Instead, they are all “reactionary brutes without the benefit of West Point’s high standards of professionalism” (p. 42). African American women are depicted as unable to perform the physical tasks demanded of them, although there is no analysis to back the assertion (p. 70). Worst of all is the dismissal of the Abu Ghraib scandal as a function of the fact that the military’s “definition of fun doesn’t always gibe with everyone else’s” (p. 30), a statement that is an insult to service personnel (ROTC and service academy products alike) who see a lot of things in Abu Ghraib, but not humor. After all, ROTC is supposed to provide an exposure to civilian norms that prevents its graduates from completely adopting the military mindset and all of its less pleasant associations.

Ernie Pyle, whose style is an obvious influence on Axe, made his name with touching, personalized descriptions of American soldiers in the Second World War. Perhaps it is then fitting to conclude this review by noting that whereas Pyle was careful to let his readers get a sense of GIs and the places they came from, Axe changed names and created what he calls composites out of several of his characters. The ensuing picture struck one Gamecock Battalion cadet as so inaccurate that he posted a stinging rebuke on the Internet. If imitation is the highest form of flattery, Ernie Pyle deserves better.

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