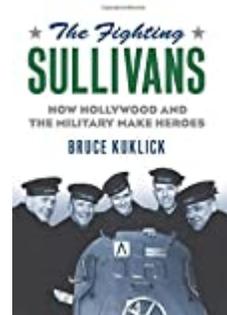


Bruce Kuklick. *The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. 224 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-2354-9.



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How does culture, or government, decide who constitutes a hero? Are heroes only those recognized for distinctive valor or can average individuals in life become glorified in death? Historian Bruce Kuklick seeks to answer these and other questions in his latest book, *The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes*. Using the vehicle of a biography, Kuklick describes how the US Navy and the Hollywood film industry transformed the five Sullivan brothers of Waterloo, Iowa—all killed when the light cruiser USS *Juneau* sank in November 1942—from marginal young men in life to national heroes in death in order to support the American war effort. The core of his study is to better understand how the government manufactures heroes, and how narratives of the heroic are constructed and why we need them (p. 3).

Chipping away the lustrous veneer of patriotism and martyrdom, Kuklick describes an unambitious, uneducated, and checkered family that the citizens of Waterloo did not necessarily love before, during, or after the war. Central to the Sullivan transformation is the 1944 film *The Fighting Sullivans*, which presented audiences with a polished view of a white, middle-class, God-fearing family whose stoic courage and noble martyrdom on behalf of the nation stands as a model of American democratic ide-

als. A functional alcoholic father and depressive mother become sober, strong-willed models of courage under extreme duress, and their disreputable five boys are remade into educated, good Catholic, red-blooded Americans. A film about family, brotherly comradery, and meaningful sacrifice for the nation's defense provided the Navy with a viable means to construct a narrative glossing over the loss of *Juneau* and neglect of her crew (only ten survived).

The book has a logical progression, with brief chapters providing biographical information on the immediate family, the brothers' naval service and deaths, defense production tours by Mr. and Mrs. Sullivan on behalf of the Navy, and the construction of myth through the film. Kuklick explores the genesis of the film, its production and editing—reflected in the change in title from *The Sullivans* to *The Fighting Sullivans*—and its postwar legacy for the men, their family, and Waterloo. Fifteen pertinent, carefully selected illustrations and four maps dot the manuscript. Curiously, the author includes only two stills from the film itself and not a single photo of the *Juneau* or of the Navy's carefully orchestrated production tour made by the surviving family in 1943. Said photos certainly would be appropriate for the reader and would nicely enhance the text.

Attempting to break through the myths and heroic visage of the Sullivan sacrifice is in some respects a Herculean task. The author draws on archival materials at various institutions in Waterloo, Iowa; from Naval History and Heritage Command; from the National Archives; and from cinema archives in Southern California. An array of secondary books and published articles supplements these primary sources. Kuklick, the Nichols Professor of American History Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania with diverse publications in the political, diplomatic, and intellectual history of the United States, leverages his career's work to the reader's advantage. Recognizing the dearth of records on the brothers and the family's prewar relations with the community, the author maximizes his analysis of existing materials and constructs the Sullivan worldview, at least within a realm of probable logic. Furthermore, Kuklick vigilantly watched *The Fighting Sullivans* and complements his analysis with primary production materials and secondary source materials to deconstruct how Hollywood polished the factual history of the family for filmgoers (p. 202).

Scant primary source material of the Sullivan family and its relations with Waterloo induced Kuklick to exploit the abduction form of logical inference. In the bibliographic essay, he explains his use of presumption to make intelligible much otherwise sparse and fragmentary evidence from the earlier period (p. 198). Military historians may take issue with Kuklick's inexperience with military history when discussing the Sullivans' naval service, and perhaps express amusement at his referring to Naval History and Heritage Command as the "Naval Historical Center," an obsolete sobriquet for over eight years. Likewise, film scholars may express umbrage at the author's admission as a "novice to cinema studies ... overwhelmed by the enormous literature, although I have tried to sample it deeply" (p. 200). Do these admissions fatally undermine the work? They do not, but scholars of any one field incorporated into the manuscript may subsequently take issue with Kuklick's conclusions. Collectively, they do not pose cause for concern.

While Kuklick's approach is scholarly, his clear and precise writing makes his material accessible to readers of all backgrounds and specialties. Concise and informative endnotes provide insight into the author's analysis or supply sources for further research. A bibliographic

essay highlights scholarship consulted in the research of the work, with a solid blend of recent publications and noted classics. He freely admits that his biography of the Sullivans warrants wider debate and he opts occasionally to write in the first person to acknowledge his doubts about veracity or interpretation.

In examining this story of sacrifice, Kuklick invariably challenges and refutes myths, making elements of his findings controversial to the community and immediate family. The author compares and contrasts the economic health of Waterloo with the reputation of the Sullivan family. As one side enjoys healthy growth and the other stagnating, the dynamic shifts during and after the war. Ultimately, the city employs the Sullivans' heroism as a resource when deindustrialization ravages its economic health. It is perhaps for this reason that in the author's acknowledgements he details his trips to Waterloo, visits to the old Sullivan stomping grounds, and pleasant interactions with townspeople, yet nevertheless is compelled to write, "I have no friends in Waterloo" (p. 175). This includes rebuffs to his attempts to speak with Kelly Loughren Sullivan, granddaughter of Albert Sullivan. His relations with community and family notwithstanding, Kuklick balances respect for the tragic wartime loss with objectivity to seek to determine the true state of the two's relationship. If nothing else, he humanizes both parties, bringing their stories to a level with which a majority of Americans can empathize and relate.

Short lives, scarce primary records, faded memories, the politics of community leadership, and the overpowering imagery of the film have all enabled the Sullivan story to rise to the pantheon of American heroism. "Truth is supposed to break myth. But nothing has penetrated the shell of invention that has enveloped the Sullivans," concludes Kuklick, adding, "To obtain heroes we habitually commit ourselves to the false or the impossible or the pretend" (p. 173). To elevate individuals to such heights of adulation despite basic truths of imperfection, individuals—individually or collectively—will impart corrections. To ennoble the loss to the nation—to the mutual benefit of the Navy Department, Waterloo, and the family—shades of fiction enable a heroic story to exist, inspire, and enshrine societal ideals. Wartime America therefore lionized the Sullivans for their collective sacrifice rather than individual valor.

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