

William March and Eugene B. Sledge: Mobilians, Marines, and Writers

AARON TREHUB

AT FIRST GLANCE, WILLIAM MARCH (1893–1954) AND EUGENE B. Sledge (1923–2001) would appear to have had little in common. March was a businessman, bachelor, world traveler, and professional man of letters who was at home in the literary and artistic circles of New York, London, and New Orleans. Sledge was a scientist, family man, lifelong Alabama resident, and university professor. March was an enigmatic man of apparent contradictions who took great care to shield his private life and deepest beliefs from public scrutiny and whose family and literary executors scrupulously honored his reticence in this regard. “William March was a private person,” the trust officer of the Merchants National Bank of Mobile wrote to March’s biographer, Roy S. Simmonds, in 1977, “[h]e did not indulge himself with confidants, and retained no scrap of written [sic] documentation of intimate quality.” “His work will stand on its own,” she concluded, “and his private life will remain his own. For all practical purposes, he took it with him.”¹ By contrast, the main elements of Sledge’s personal history and opinions are in the public domain, and he has posthumously become a celebrated public figure with his family’s support and endorsement.

Despite these differences of circumstance and temperament, however, there are interesting similarities between the two men.

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¹ Letter from Lillian R. Jackson to Roy S. Simmonds, February 2, 1977, William March Vertical File, The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama (emphasis in the original typescript).

March and Sledge were both born in Mobile. They both served in the same regiment of the United States Marine Corps, March in France in World War I and Sledge in the Pacific in World War II. They both wrote well-known books based on their war experiences. And they were both haunted for the rest of their lives by what they had seen and done in battle. Although one book is fiction and the other is a memoir, March's novel *Company K* (Smith and Haas, 1933) and Sledge's memoir *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (Presidio Press, 1981) are recognized today as classics of their type, distinguished by their graphic, unsentimental depiction of combat, war atrocities, and the physical and psychological effects of battle. Proof of these books' enduring appeal is the fact that both works have been used in feature films, documentaries, and a television miniseries. *Company K* was turned into a feature film by Alabama-born filmmaker Robert Clem in 2004, while Sledge's *With the Old Breed* figured prominently in Ken Burns' World War II documentary *The War* (PBS, 2007) and is one of two World War II memoirs (the other is Robert Leckie's 1957 memoir *Helmet for My Pillow*) that served as the basis for the Home Box Office miniseries *The Pacific*, which aired in 2010.²

In examining March's and Sledge's books, I will look for common themes as well as differences, and will discuss the degree to which their works were informed by their southern heritage and by what is widely but controversially perceived as a distinctively southern military tradition. This piece is a preliminary examination of the factors that led two men from the same city but very different circumstances to join the same branch of the armed forces and produce two iconic works on the same subject: men, violence, and what Dwight D. Eisenhower, in his farewell speech as president, called "the horror and the lingering sadness of war."³

March and Sledge came from very different backgrounds and social circumstances. William March was born William Edward Campbell

² *Company K*, Waterfront Pictures Corporation, Stone Ridge, New York, 2004; *The War*, The Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Arlington, Va., 2007; *The Pacific*, Home Box Office, New York City, New York, 2010.

³ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People," January 17, 1961: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=12086&st=&st1=> (last accessed February 10, 2013).

on September 18, 1893 in Mobile, “on the corner of Broad and Conti Streets,” as the late literary scholar and March specialist William T. Going put it.⁴ March was the second of eleven children. His father, John Leonard Campbell, was the orphaned son of a Confederate soldier and worked as an itinerant timber cruiser in the lumber towns of south Alabama and the Florida panhandle. March’s mother, Susan March Campbell, was the well-born daughter of Mobile gentry. The family was poor, and William March left school at fourteen to work in the office of a Lockhart, Alabama lumber mill.

At sixteen, March moved to Mobile, where he took a job in a law office to earn money for school. He spent a year obtaining his high school diploma at Valparaiso University in Indiana and a year at the University of Alabama studying law. He then moved to New York City in 1916, where he settled in Brooklyn and took a job as a clerk with a Manhattan law firm. March enlisted as a private in the U.S. Marine Corps in June 1917, less than two months after the United States entered World War I. Assigned to Company F, 2nd Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, he embarked from Philadelphia on the same transport ship as Marine officers and future literary figures John W. Thomason (*Fix Bayonets!*) and Laurence Stallings (*What Price Glory?*, *Plumes*) and arrived in France during March of 1918. March was wounded for the first time by shrapnel at the Battle of Belleau Wood in June 1918, spent part of that summer in hospital, and returned to the line in time for the battles of Rheims-Soissons in July and Saint-Mihiel in September 1918. Promoted in rapid succession to corporal and then to sergeant, March received France’s Croix de Guerre, and the U.S. Marine Corps’s Distinguished Service Cross and the Navy Cross for his actions during the Battle of Blanc Mont in October 1918, when he left a dressing station to recover wounded men under fire and, despite being wounded himself, helped to repel a German counterattack. Although March recovered physically from his war wounds, the psychological trauma of having experienced hand-to-hand combat plagued him the rest of his life.

March returned to Mobile in 1919 and began working for the

⁴ William T. Going, “William March: Regional Perspective and Beyond,” *Papers on Language and Literature* 13 (1977): 430.



William Edward Campbell at age sixteen, Lockhart, Alabama, 1909. Image Courtesy of Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama

Waterman Steamship Corporation, a recently established shipping firm headquartered in that city. He proved to be an astute businessman and a canny investor, working his way up from freight agent to vice president and holding assignments in Mobile, New York City, Memphis, Hamburg, and London. He began writing seriously in the late 1920s as a diversion and a form of self-therapy. His first published short story, "The Holly Wreath," appeared in the October 1929 issue of the literary magazine *Forum* under the pen name "William March," the name he published under thereafter and by which he is known today. *Company K*, his first novel, was published by Smith and Haas in 1933. March retired from the Waterman Steamship Corporation in 1937, settled in New York City, and devoted himself full-time to writing. His four novels—*Company K*, *Come in at the Door* (Smith and Haas, 1934), *The Tallons* (Random House, 1936), and *The Looking-Glass* (Little, Brown, 1943)—and three short story collections were published between 1933 and 1947, before he suffered a nervous breakdown and returned to Mobile. In 1950, after his breakdown, he moved to New Orleans and published *October Island* (Little, Brown, 1952) and *The Bad Seed* (Rinehart, 1954), his most famous and remunerative work. March died in May 1954 at age sixty at his home in New Orleans, stricken in his sleep by a heart attack. He is buried in Tuscaloosa in Greenwood Cemetery. A final collection, *99 Fables*, was published six years after his death by the University of Alabama Press.

If March's family was poor and his education haphazard, Eugene Sledge's upbringing was solidly upper-middle-class; indeed, by Depression-era standards, Sledge's family was privileged. Eugene Bondurant Sledge was born in Mobile on November 4, 1923. His father, Edward Simmons Sledge, was a respected local physician with undergraduate and medical degrees from The University of Pennsylvania, and his mother, Mark Frank Sturdivant of Selma, was the daughter of Ellen Rush Sturdivant, the dean of women at Huntingdon College in Montgomery. The younger of two boys, Sledge spent his late childhood and adolescence in Georgia Cottage, an antebellum house on the outskirts of Mobile once owned by the nineteenth-century novelist Augusta Jane Evans Wilson. Two of

Sledge's great-grandfathers served as Confederate officers during the Civil War, and he maintained a lifelong interest in that conflict.⁵

Sledge graduated from Murphy High School in Mobile in 1942 and entered Marion Military Institute in Marion, Alabama in the fall of that same year. He enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at Marion in December 1942 and was eventually assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment, 1st Marine Division (William March's old regiment), as a 60-millimeter mortar man. Sledge saw combat for the first time on the island of Peleliu in the central Pacific in September–October 1944. By his own account, it was the pivotal experience in his life. After rest and rehabilitation in the Solomon Islands, Sledge's unit went into combat again on Okinawa on April 1, 1945. Sledge was in the thick of the fighting on Okinawa for eighty-two days, until the island was declared secure in June 1945. Despite heavy casualties in his unit, he survived the war without having been physically wounded. It took him years, however, to recover from the psychological aftermath of combat.

After the war, Sledge attended Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University) and received a bachelor's degree in business administration in 1949. After a desultory career in Mobile's insurance and real estate business during the early 1950s, he returned to Auburn University in 1953 to pursue a graduate degree in botany. Sledge received his doctorate in biology from the University of Florida in 1960 and lived and worked in Gainesville until 1962, when he accepted a faculty position at Alabama College (now the

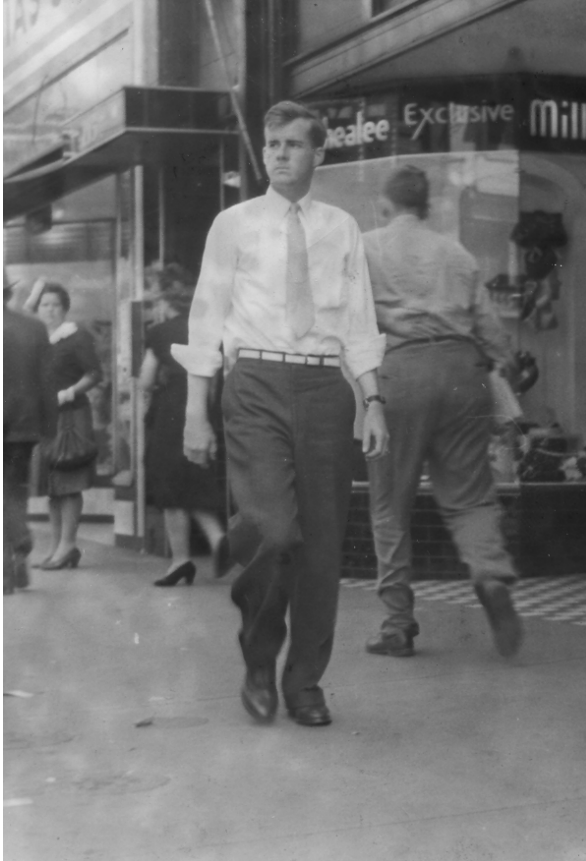
⁵ In a letter to his mother from the island of Pavuvu in June 1944, Sledge wrote: "Sid [Phillips] + I are planning a trip, post war, to the eastern battlefields of the Civil War. We want to get a Model 'A' Ford and make our destination [sic] Bannerman." (Letter from E. B. Sledge to Mary Frank Sledge, June 22, 1944, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.) The reference is to Bannerman's Island Arsenal in Fishkill, New York, a famous dealer in Civil War-era military memorabilia. Forty years later, Sledge responded to an inquiry from a reader about one of his great-grandfathers: "To date, I have not been able to find out in which Reg't. of [Confederate General Patrick] Cleburne's Div. Dr. W. H. Sledge, C.S.A., served. [...] Unfortunately, all his letters were lost. On my mother's side, fortunately, we have numerous letters from her grandfather, Capt. John Wesley Rush, C.S.A., C.O. of Co. C., (The Macon Rifles) Fourth Infantry, C.S.A. [...] He upset the family when he went into the Army as a line officer instead of being a chaplain." (Letter from E. B. Sledge to Dr. Harris D. Riley, January 18, 1985, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries).



Sledge family at Georgia Cottage, Mobile, August 1942, E. B. Sledge third from left. Image courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

University of Montevallo). In 1970 he achieved tenure as a professor in the Department of Biology at the University of Montevallo and held that position until his retirement in 1990. Eugene Sledge died at home in Montevallo in March 2001 and is buried in Pine Crest Cemetery in Mobile.

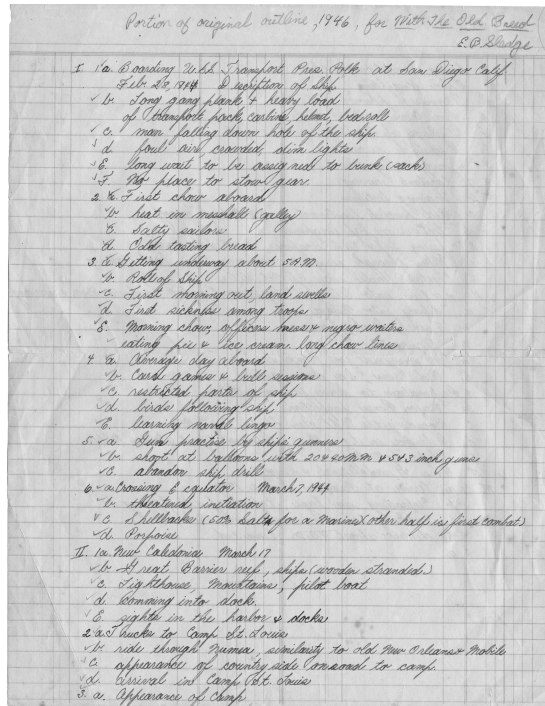
Although *With the Old Breed* was published almost forty years after the experiences it described, its composition began during and soon after the war. Sledge kept clandestine notes during the fighting on Peleliu and Okinawa in the margins of a pocket edition of the New Testament that he had been issued during his stateside training, and his personal papers include a 1946 outline of the book that eventually became *With the Old Breed*. He drew on these and other materials when he started writing the memoir in earnest in the late 1970s. According



E. B. Sledge, Mobile, late 1940s–early 1950s. Image courtesy of Auburn University Libraries.

to his son John, Sledge wrote the memoir at high speed, as if he were “taking dictation,” and would get up in the middle of the night to work on it, “very unlike him otherwise.” “He was truly driven to do it,” John concluded.⁶ Sledge originally wrote about his war experiences for his family but was persuaded by his wife to seek publication. His second memoir, *China Marine* (University of Alabama Press, 2002),

⁶ John Sledge, email message to author, January 24, 2008.



Sledge's original outline for *With the Old Breed*, 1946. Image courtesy of the Auburn University Libraries.

describes Sledge's postwar service in Beijing, his return to Mobile, and his gradual readjustment to civilian life. Like William March's *99 Fables*, Sledge's *China Marine* was published posthumously by The University of Alabama Press. According to his wife Jeanne, at the time of his death Sledge was working on a memoir about his childhood and youth in Mobile.⁷

William March's military career embodied many of the ambiguities and contradictions alluded to earlier. The historical record does not indicate why March enlisted in June 1917, or why he chose specifically to enlist in the Marine Corps. According to Simmonds, much

⁷ Jeanne Sledge, email message to author, January 17, 2008.

of March's wartime correspondence was lost or destroyed, including the letter-diary to his older sister Margaret on which *Company K* was based.⁸ That may be true, but it is not entirely the case, as Simmonds avers, that "[n]o personal record of March's service overseas is accordingly available, other than those he fictionalized in *Company K*."⁹ A few of March's letters from that period have survived and can be found among his papers at the W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library at The University of Alabama. The surviving letters give some idea of March's motives and state of mind during this crucial time.

In a letter March sent from Brooklyn, New York to his younger sister Marie in May 1917, just a month after the United States entered World War I, he seemed more concerned about the cost of living in New York City than the war. He wrote that "[e]verything, except clothes, is higher here than anyplace I have ever seen, and as soon as I get what I came for [presumably, money to continue his studies in law school] I'm coming back South where the only *real* people in the world are." Rallying to the colors appeared to have been far from his thoughts when he wrote that "I hope to be able to come home next Christmas [i.e. 1917] & I will surely be glad to see all the family." The war was an afterthought, and his attitude to it was fatalistic rather than fervent. "If I am called out [i.e. drafted] before that time of course I'll be along sooner," he continued, "as I will get a furlough, probably before being sent to France."¹⁰ If March was moved to enlist by a swell of patriotic sentiment and a sense of duty, he did a good job of concealing it. Indeed, there is circumstantial evidence that he enlisted because he assumed he was about to be drafted anyway. Whatever his reasons, March enlisted in the Marines in June 1917 and soon found himself in boot camp on Parris Island, South Carolina.

In an August 1917 letter to Marie, he asked her to send him a photo of herself "as I have a place to keep it at present & will have

⁸ Roy S. Simmonds, *The Two Worlds of William March*, (Tuscaloosa, 1984), 328–29.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Letter from William Edward Campbell to Marie Campbell, May 22, 1917, William March papers, 1912–1954, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.

until I go into actual field service, an event which is not very likely as a Marine is generally stationed on some battleship.”¹¹ The possibility of being stationed on a warship instead of sent to the trenches surfaced again in a letter from September 1917, in which March expressed concern about his performance on the rifle range and said that he hoped to score at least at the sharpshooter level when his unit fired for record later that month, especially since Marines who qualified as expert riflemen earned an extra \$5.00 per month and landed billets as gun pointers on warships.¹²

One gets the impression from these early stateside letters that March was not eager to get into the fighting. His tone changed once he arrived in France and saw combat during the summer and fall of 1918. In a series of letters to his maternal aunt Harriet March Taylor in Mobile, March displayed a more bellicose side. Addressing his aunt as “Dear Old Scout” in an especially revealing letter dated September 21, 1918, March described the recently concluded Rheims-Soissons and Saint-Mihiel campaigns and boasted about his unit’s skill in hand-to-hand combat: “We did some wonderful work there [in the Rheims-Soissons drive]. The German dead and captured were unbelievably large. Their fear and hatred of our outfit is well founded and justifiable. [...] The boche won’t stand up to our bayonets, and we have some of the best bayonet men in the world right here in our company.” March also wrote his aunt about losing his peacetime illusions: “you would find it impossible to reconcile some of the things that I could tell you, with what you know of my moral and mental make-up of a year or two ago. I have no illusions left about a ‘I am holier than thou’ method of warfare and the Galahad method of procedure and the ‘other cheek’ theory are ‘pas bon.’”

Finally, he described the plight of the French war refugees and showed that he had acquired what military officers euphemistically

¹¹ Letter from William Edward Campbell to Marie Campbell, August 18, 1917, William March papers, 1912–1954, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.

¹² Letter from William Edward Campbell to Marie Campbell, September 9, 1917, William March papers, 1912–1954, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.



William Edward Campbell in Marine Corps uniform, with decorations, 1919. Image courtesy of Hoole Special Collections Library, the University of Alabama.

call “the will to close with the enemy.” A warlike tone began to appear: “It is sights like this that give us strength to go after them through literal sheets of machine gun bullets and terrific barrages of shrapnel when we are almost ready to drop from exhaustion. [...] I’d do it all over again gladly, under the same circumstances (of which I shall tell you someday) should the occasion ever arise.”¹³ It is of course possible that March was laying it on thick for the folks back home. Still, the bellicosity of this and other letters to his aunt is difficult to square with his later attitude towards military service, which appears to have been one of weary contempt. Even more difficult to reconcile with his later views is a letter March wrote to Harriet from Segendorf, Germany, on December 29, 1918, more than a month after the Armistice. Responding to news of her husband’s premature death in Mobile, March wrote:

I have lived in the land of sudden death for so long that any personal distaste I might have had has long since been dispelled. It is the ones whom we leave behind who suffer—the ones who must put their grief away, and ‘carry on’. I have seen men, hundreds of them, die with smiles on their lips and a brightness in their eyes that can mean but one thing. If I ever had any doubts on the question I know now. A very personal and present God exists.¹⁴

Again, March may have been writing against his own true beliefs in order to assuage a favorite relative’s grief and his own disillusionment. Simmonds contemplates just such a possibility, speculating that March may have been “endeavoring to persuade himself, even against his better instincts, that this was indeed the great truth, that

¹³ Letter from William Edward Campbell to Harriet March Taylor (Mrs. Grover A. Taylor), September 21, 1918, William March papers, 1912–1954, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama. Harriet March Taylor (1888–1969) was the half-sister of March’s mother, Susan March Campbell (1871–1946). Harriet was born to Susan’s father, William March (1839–1902), and William’s second wife, Sarah Ann Markham.

¹⁴ Letter from William Edward Campbell to Harriet March Taylor (Mrs. Grover A. Taylor), December 29, 1918, William March papers, 1912–1954, W.S. Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.



Envelope from Harriet March Taylor (“Aunt Hattie”) to William Edward Campbell, ca. 1918-1919. Image courtesy of Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.

the war was essentially a religious struggle of good versus evil, with death as the reward rather than the ending.”¹⁵ Whatever the reason for this expression of religious faith, it appears to have been unique in March’s life and is strongly at variance with the treatment of war and religion in his literature and comments made later in life.

In contrast to March, Sledge’s family had long a tradition of military service, and Sledge was afraid that the war would end before he could get into it. As was mentioned above, two of Sledge’s great-grandfathers served the Confederacy during the Civil War. One, John Wesley Rush, was captured during the battle of Island Number Ten on the Mississippi River in March 1862 and spent the rest of the war in an Ohio prisoner of war camp.¹⁶ Captain Rush’s letters home were preserved by the family and, given the young Eugene Sledge’s interest in the Civil War, it is likely he read his great-grandfather’s letters, or at least knew of them. Sledge’s father, Dr. Edward Simmons Sledge,

¹⁵ Simmons, *The Two Worlds of William March*, 26–27.

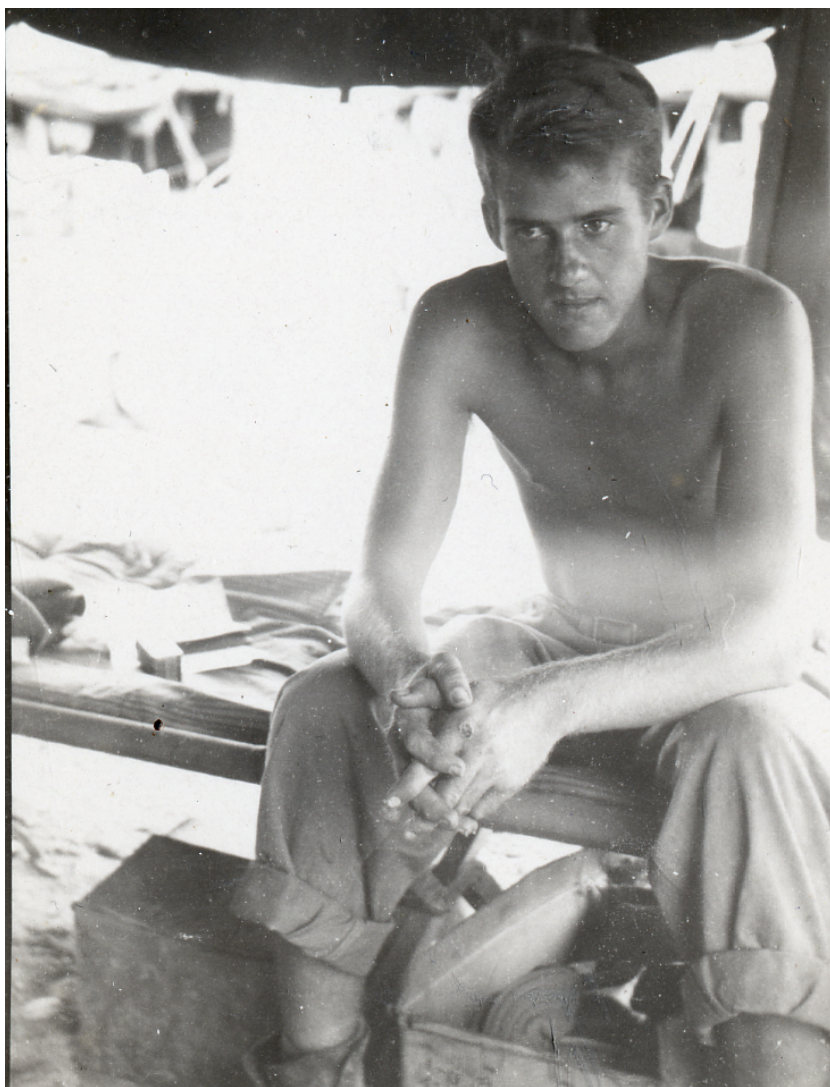
¹⁶ John Sledge, “Common Soldier: The Lots of War,” *Blue & Gray Magazine* 2, no. 1 (August–September 1984): 55–58.

served as a medical officer with the Alabama National Guard during General Pershing's punitive expedition to Mexico in 1916–1917. Dr. Sledge then served with the U.S. Army during World War I, where he treated soldiers suffering from “shell shock” (combat fatigue). Sledge's older brother, Edward Jr., graduated from the Citadel, was commissioned in the U.S. Army, and served with an armored division in Europe. Sledge's boyhood friend and high school classmate from Mobile, Sidney Phillips, enlisted in the Marine Corps the day after Pearl Harbor and saw combat with the First Marine Division on Guadalcanal and at Cape Gloucester.¹⁷ Inspired by family tradition, Phillips' example, and Lt. Col. John W. Thomason's colorful stories about the Marines in France during World War I, Sledge enlisted in the Marines in December 1942, halfway through his freshman year at Marion Military Institute. According to his wife Jeanne, Sledge was afraid he would miss out on the war. “He decided that the war might end before he could get over there,” Jeanne Sledge recalled, “and so he wanted to join the Marines.”¹⁸ Apparently at the urging of his older brother and his parents, Sledge initially signed up for the Marine Corps' V-12 officer training course at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta but flunked out at the end of his first semester—whether deliberately or not is unclear—in order to serve in the enlisted ranks. Like March, Sledge witnessed war at its worst, enduring months of combat on the front line at Peleliu and Okinawa. Unlike March, he did not win any medals for bravery or otherwise distinguish himself officially in combat. He did, however, earn the respect of his comrades, some of whom had wondered how a doctor's son from a sheltered background would comport himself in battle.

Company K and *With the Old Breed* follow a similar three-part structure. Each book addresses pre-war innocence, the crucible of combat, and postwar alienation and disillusionment. However, March's vision is more bleak than Sledge's, devoid of the compas-

¹⁷ Sid Phillips, *You'll Be Sor-ree! A Guadalcanal Marine Remembers the Pacific War*, (Thornton, Colo., 2010).

¹⁸ *Profiles of the Pacific: Eugene Sledge*, from the video documentary supplement to *The Pacific*. Motion picture. Home Box Office, New York City, New York, 2010.



E. B. Sledge on his bunk following the Battle of Okinawa, 1945.
Image courtesy of the Auburn University Libraries.

sionate leadership and *esprit de corps* that sustained Sledge and enabled him to keep his sanity.

March's novel consists of 113 brief first person narratives by the men of his fictional Company K. The novel opens on a peaceful June evening after the war, with an apparently tranquil domestic scene between ex-Private "Joseph Delaney" and his wife that foreshadows the novel's ugly centerpiece, the execution of twenty-two German prisoners of war. Having given us a taste of what is to come, March goes back in time and follows the men of the company as they go through boot camp, ship out to France, arrive on the line, take part in the terrible battles of the summer and fall of 1918, and try, usually with little success, to get on with their lives after the war. The book is filled with graphic descriptions of killing, most of it at close range. Prisoners are shot down in cold blood, and there is even a case of what would later be called "fraggings," although in March's book the officer is murdered with a bayonet, not a grenade. The novel ends on a subdued note, with a depressing postwar visit by one of the men to the old training camp, probably at Quantico, Virginia, outside Washington, D.C.

In his introduction to the 1989 edition of *Company K*, Philip Beidler called March's novel a "brave and terrible gift" that bears "direct witness, first and foremost, to what actually happens to ordinary men in modern, mechanized, mass combat." "Individual soldiers come relentlessly forward," wrote Beidler, "one after the other, the living and the dead commingled, to offer grim first-person testimony; and in narrative after narrative, there is mainly just one fundamental fact of modern warfare: the fact of ugly, violent, obscene death."¹⁹ The book's overarching theme is summed up by ex-Private Delaney in the very first chapter, when he reflects on men's "unending cruelty to each other." There is plenty of cruelty in Sledge's memoir as well. *With the Old Breed* is characterized by unflinching descriptions of infantry combat and its physical and psychological aspects, especially the debilitating effects of living in constant fear, fatigue, and filth.

¹⁹ William March, *Company K*, (Tuscaloosa, 1989), xv.

The war in the Pacific was notoriously nasty. In historian John Dower's words, it was a "war without mercy."²⁰ And Sledge wrote forthrightly about the mutual hatred that characterized the fighting between the Marines and the Japanese, a hatred that found expression in the desecration of corpses by both sides. "This was not the dispassionate killing seen on other fronts or in other wars," Sledge wrote; "[t]his was a brutish, primitive hatred, as characteristic of the horror of war in the Pacific as the palm trees and the islands."²¹ Sledge described Marines "field stripping" (i.e. looting) dead Japanese soldiers, and, in one case, a severely wounded but still living Japanese soldier, for gold teeth and other trophies. The moral turning point of Sledge's memoir occurs when Sledge is dissuaded from pulling gold teeth from a Japanese corpse by his unit's medical corpsman, who warns him that they might carry disease. Sledge later reflects that the corpsman was trying to help him retain some of his humanity.

Despite its emphasis on the horror and waste of war, *With the Old Breed* is distinguished by Sledge's pride in his military service and his admiration for the bravery and sacrifices of his comrades. Nor did Sledge's attitudes about the war and the Japanese mellow with age. Far from it. In the epilogue to his second memoir, *China Marine*, Sledge wrote that he was proud of having killed enemy soldiers with his mortar, rifle, and submachine gun and regretted those he had missed. "There is no 'mellowing' for me—that would be to forgive all the atrocities the Japanese committed against millions of Asians and thousands of Americans," Sledge wrote on the last page of *China Marine*. "To 'mellow,'" he concluded emphatically, "is to forget."²²

I have not been able to determine whether Sledge ever read *Company K*, either as a teenager in Mobile or as a Marine combat veteran after the war, or, if he did, what he thought of it. We do know that Sledge read and enjoyed a book by another World War I Marine. He was fond of Lt. Col. John W. Thomason's *Fix Bayonets!*, published in 1926. In a letter to fellow Marine veteran and military historian

²⁰ John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, (New York, 1986).

²¹ E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, (New York, 1990), 34.

²² E.B. Sledge, *China Marine*, (Tuscaloosa, 2002), 160.

George B. Clark in 1982, Sledge wrote that he admired the fiction of Kipling, Dickens, and John W. Thomason: “I’ve read a great deal of all three—many of their works several times.”²³ Like Sledge, Thomason was a southerner (he was born in Huntsville, Texas) and the son of a doctor. Thomason’s ancestors also served with the Confederacy during the Civil War, as did Sledge’s. Indeed, Thomason’s maternal grandfather, Thomas Jewett “T J” Goree, was one of General James Longstreet’s closest aides, and his and other relatives’ stories inspired Thomason’s Civil War novel *Lone Star Preacher* (Scribners, 1941). A gifted draughtsman, Thomason studied art in New York City and worked as a journalist in Houston. He enlisted in the Marine Corps on April 6, 1917, the same day the United States entered the war, and fought with the Marine Brigade in France in the same battles as William March: Belleau Wood, Rheims-Soissons, Saint Mihiel, and Blanc Mont. Thomason drew on his combat experiences in writing *Fix Bayonets!*, which promptly became a best-seller after it was published by Scribner’s in 1926. According to Sledge’s son Henry, Thomason’s book figured in his father’s decision to enlist in the Marines in 1942.²⁴ It seems likely that the young Eugene Sledge, who spent part of his early adolescence bedridden with rheumatic fever, also read a series of Kiplingesque short stories by Thomason about the adventures of a Marine sergeant in China that appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* in the late 1930s.²⁵ Sledge retained his high opinion of *Fix Bayonets!* and used the book’s description of the “old breed” of Marine at the beginning of his own memoir.

²³ Letter from E. B. Sledge to George B. Clark, March 16, 1982, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.

²⁴ Henry Sledge, interview by Aaron Trehub and Dwayne Cox, Auburn, Ala., June 4, 2010.

²⁵ These stories included “The Sergeant and the Spy,” *Saturday Evening Post* 208, issue 21 (November 23, 1935): 8–79; “The Sergeant and the Bandits,” *Saturday Evening Post* 208, issue 24 (December 14, 1935): 12–56; “The Saddle of Jenghiz Khan,” *Saturday Evening Post* 208, issue 31 (February 1, 1936): 12–76; “The Way to Promotion and Pay,” *Saturday Evening Post* 208, issue 38 (March 21, 1936): 12–93; “The Sergeant and the Siren,” *Saturday Evening Post* 208, issue 50 (June 13, 1936): 14–94; and “The Sergeant Runs Away,” *Saturday Evening Post* 209, issue 7 (August 15, 1936): 14–60. The serialized stories were collected and reprinted in John W. Thomason, *Fix Bayonets! and other stories*, Marine Corps Association, 1978. According to the bookplate, the copy of this book in the Auburn University Libraries was donated by Dr. Eugene B. Sledge, Class of 1949, which suggests Sledge read these stories as an adult, if not as an adolescent in Mobile.

If Sledge liked Thomason's work, he probably would not have enjoyed *Company K*. Thomason's stories about the Marines are jaunty and inspiring, but March's are grim and depressing. Thomason glides almost casually over the horrors of the fighting in France, while March describes them in graphic detail. Thomason comes across as being somewhat callous about the evil and cruelty of war and he certainly doesn't dwell on it. March is acutely sensitive to it. Thomason's Marine officers are gallant, high-spirited fellows. The officers in March's book are without exception stupid, vicious, and incompetent. "Lt. Thomas Jewett" of *Company K* ignores his sergeant's advice and sends a squad into "no-man's land" on what is clearly a suicide mission, in the course of which the men are killed in an artillery barrage. "Lt. Archibald Smith" is hunted down and bayoneted by one of his own men. "Capt. Terence Matlock" (called "Fishmouth Terry" by the men), a store manager in civilian life, orders the killing of the German prisoners and then hypocritically orders the company to attend church services.

Sledge had some bad officers (the characters he referred to as "Mac" and "Shadow" come to mind), but he revered Capt. Andrew Haldane and First Lieutenant Edward "Hillbilly" Jones, respected the chain of command, and seems to have had faith in the wisdom and competence of his superiors. Sledge does not flinch from describing the ugliness of war, but the ugliness is offset by examples of nobility, comradeship, and common decency. Indeed, the pathos of Sledge's memoir arises in large part from the collision of his boyhood notions of martial glory with the squalid reality of the battlefield and his subsequent attempt to salvage something positive from his experience. There is nothing positive, no *esprit de corps*, to use one of Thomason's and Sledge's favorite expressions, in March's war. Instead, there is brutality, waste, and pointless cruelty. "I wish the lads who talk about the nobility and comradeship of war could listen to a few general courts," says "Private Andrew Lurton" near the end of March's book. "They'd soon change their minds, for war is as mean as poor-farm soup and as petty as an old maid's gossip."²⁶ Another veteran, "Private Colin Urquhart," reflects after the war that "there should be a law,

²⁶ William March, *Company K*, (Tuscaloosa, 1989), 205.

in the name of humanity, making mandatory the execution of every soldier who has served on the front and managed to escape death there.”²⁷

It is ironic that March, the highly decorated war hero, seems to have had no positive memories of his service in the Marine Corps and made no effort to keep in touch with men from his unit after the war. Indeed, he rebuffed such contacts and did not respond to letters from old buddies that were forwarded to him by his publisher. “What good would it do?” he asked a friend in New Orleans years later; “I would only get involved in needless correspondence.”²⁸ This is in contrast to Sledge, who was proud of having served in the Marine Corps, closed his letters with the salutation “Semper fi,” attended reunions of his unit and kept in touch with old comrades until his death. Sledge also responded to requests for information that mothers of Marines killed on Peleliu sent to the Marine Corps magazine *Leatherneck* shortly after the war, and preserved this poignant correspondence among his personal papers.

One thing March and Sledge would have agreed upon is the impossibility of conveying the moral atmosphere of combat to those who have not experienced it. Responding in 1932 to criticism of an early short story about the killing of the German prisoners, a story that later became the pivotal episode in *Company K*, and aspersions on his character and service record, March wrote, “I resent bitterly any inference that because I have written such a story I lack either patriotism or physical courage. [...] It is futile and it is hopeless for any man who has actually served on the line to attempt to make well-meaning, romantic folk share his knowledge: there is, simply, no common denominator.”²⁹ Sledge would have agreed. “Time had no meaning; life had no meaning,” he wrote about being on the front line; “[t]he fierce struggle for survival in the abyss of Peleliu eroded the veneer of civilization and made savages of us all. We existed in an environment totally incomprehensible to men behind the lines.”³⁰

²⁷ March, *Company K*, 254.

²⁸ Simmonds, *The Two Worlds of William March*, 71.

²⁹ Simmonds, *The Two Worlds of William March*, 54.

³⁰ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 121.

Sledge touched on this point again in a 1984 letter to his friend and fellow combat veteran, the late literary historian Paul Fussell: "I, too, have always contended that there are two types of people in any war: Those who fought on the line, and everybody else. Only the former know what you and I know. The latter read and write books about it, and, in the end, usually miss the point, glorifying the whole horrible mess."³¹

Thousands of works of history, fiction, and personal narratives have been written about war. Many of them are forgotten or unread today. *Company K* and *With the Old Breed* are exceptions to this rule. The appeal of these books seems to have grown with the passage of time, thanks in large part to their intrinsic literary and narrative power, as well as enthusiastic advocacy by other writers and by historians.

March's and Sledge's books also merit study because the authors were southerners and Alabamians, born and raised in the shadow of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Lost Cause. Despite this common background, however, the two men appear to have had very different attitudes toward their shared cultural heritage. March was a conflicted southerner: he left Alabama at the earliest opportunity and lived for almost twenty years in Europe and New York City. Apart from one postwar episode set in a Birmingham hotel lobby (at the "Tutweiler [sic] Hotel"), there is no allusion to or acknowledgement of his southern origins in *Company K*, and his other fiction is not flattering to Alabama and the South, portraying his native region as a place rich in natural beauty but rife with poverty, cruelty, and hypocrisy. Perhaps it was March's ambivalence about his heritage, as well as his cosmopolitan personal history, that led Alistair Cooke, a perceptive critic and one of March's earliest champions, to argue that March was not identifiably a "Southern writer," at least as that term was understood in the middle of the twentieth century. "Any notable indifference to Southern chauvinism," Cooke wrote, "is remarkable in a Southern writer, for all of them are weighed down by the pride of shabby-genteelism." Noting that more than half of March's work is set in the fictional town of Reedyville, Cooke pointed

³¹ Letter from E. B. Sledge to Paul Fussell, December 5, 1984, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.

out that “even a devoted reader might not gather for some time that it is in Alabama.”³² Writing some years later, March scholar William Going endorsed Cooke’s “shrewd observation,” saying that although “the actual locales are quite plainly drawn [...] the spiritual and personal locales are so valid that the plantation, crossroads store, sawmill village, and county seat are where they are in each reader’s unconscious geography.”³³ March was not only indifferent to what Cooke called “Southern chauvinism.” He mocked it, albeit obliquely. As Rod Andrew Jr. has written, Confederate Memorial Day celebrations and the cult of the Confederate soldier were staple features of post bellum southern life.³⁴ March had no use for the high-flown rhetoric and florid tributes that accompanied such ceremonies. His attitude to such events can be deduced from his irreverent short story “A Memorial to the Slain” (1937). The story opens with the narrator’s observation that “[A]t least Reedyville is unusual in one way... There’s no war memorial.”³⁵ It goes on to describe the unveiling of an anatomically explicit nude statue of one of the town’s casualties of World War I, a notorious ne’er-do-well and womanizer, and the statue’s subsequent emasculation (with a cold chisel, after hymn-singing) and quarantine by the local anti-vice society. Although the story deals with the aftermath of World War I, not the Civil War, one can infer from it and other stories that March’s views on the earlier conflict would probably not have been in accord with those of his fellow southerners.

Despite his apparent disillusionment with his native region, March drew throughout his literary career on his years in Alabama for inspiration. Indeed, his last and most famous novel, *The Bad Seed* (1954), is recognizably set in Mobile. March also impressed acquaintances as being distinctly southern in his affect and manner. His friend and

³² Alistair Cooke, “Introduction to William March,” *A William March Omnibus*, (New York, 1956), x.

³³ William T. Going, “William March’s Alabama,” in *Essays on Alabama Literature*, (Tuscaloosa, 1975), 110.

³⁴ Rod Andrew Jr., “Soldiers, Christians, and Patriots: The Lost Cause and Southern Military Schools, 1865–1915,” *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 4 (November 1998): 677–710.

³⁵ “A Memorial to the Slain,” *Trial Balance: The Collected Short Stories of William March*, (New York, 1945), 306–15.

confidant, the New York art dealer Klaus Perls, referred to March repeatedly as a “Southern gentleman.”³⁶ It is surely significant that March returned to his native Mobile from Manhattan after his nervous breakdown in the late 1940s and spent several years living there before moving to New Orleans, where he died in 1954. The young Mobile native and World War II combat veteran Herndon Inge, Jr. grew up on Government Street. He met March, who had an apartment on that street, in the late 1940s or early 1950s. “My father was born at 956 Government Street in 1890,” Inge wrote to Simmonds in 1988, “and I lived there most of my life until I left to go to college.” Describing the encounter, he says:

William March, who was my father’s contemporary, lived there probably in the late 40’s and early 50’s. I remember meeting him one time when I was visiting my parents and he passed on the sidewalk on his way to the drugstore at the corner. My father introduced me to him. It did not register on me at that time that he was the author of Company K. I later read Company K and was absolutely enchanted by it since I had been in the Infantry in combat in Germany during World War II. I believe that it is the best book to come out of World War I.³⁷

Eugene Sledge was also in Mobile in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and it is interesting to speculate on whether the young Marine veteran and March might have crossed paths in their native city at that time. If they did, no record of it has come to light. In any case, the fact that March chose to return to the South and especially the Gulf Coast during a time of psychological crisis suggests that his emotional connection to his native region was still strong.

In contrast to March, Eugene Sledge proudly identified with the South and was not at all conflicted about his southern heritage.

³⁶ Simmonds, *The Two Worlds of William March*, 225–28.

³⁷ Letter from Herndon Inge, Jr. to Roy S. Simmonds, November 10, 1988, William March Vertical File, The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama. Born in 1920, Inge was one of the World War II veterans interviewed in Ken Burns’ documentary *The War* (PBS, 2007). Interestingly, he attended Murphy High School with Sledge’s older brother Edward (http://www.pbs.org/thewar/detail_5173.htm (last accessed February 10, 2013)).

Indeed, he referred to it repeatedly in his published works and private correspondence. Apart from his service in the Marine Corps and the years in Florida during and just after graduate school, Sledge spent his entire life in Alabama. In a letter written from Pavuvu in December 1944, after the battle of Peleliu, he thanked his father for having sent him a packet of dirt from Georgia Cottage in Mobile: “The latter I sprinkled around my bunk & I feel like I’m once again on family ground,” he wrote.³⁸ *With the Old Breed* is full of references to Sledge’s southern background and his pride in the South’s reputation for military prowess. “I didn’t neglect to point out to my Yankee buddies that most of the high shooters in our platoon were Southern boys,” he wrote about rifle qualification day in Marine Corps boot camp.³⁹

Ex-Marine Robert Leckie also wrote about the rivalry between southerners and northerners on the boot camp rifle range in his memoir *Helmet for My Pillow* (Random House, 1957). Describing a cold winter morning on the range at Parris Island in South Carolina, the New Jersey-born Leckie devoted a passage to the southerners’ taunts: “‘Hey Yank—Ah thought it was cold up Nawth. Thought you was used to it. Haw! Lookit them, lookit them big tough Yanks’ lips chatterin’.’” Almost eighty years after Appomattox, the legacy of the Civil War lived on in the banter of Leckie’s Georgia-born drill instructor:

[Sergeant] Bellow was so tickled he lost his customary reserve. “Ah guess youah right,” Bellow said. “Ever time Ah come out heah Ah hear teeth chatterin’. And evra time it’s nawth’n teeth. Ah dunno.” He shook his head. “Ah dunno. Ah still cain’t see how we lost.”⁴⁰

“All the southerners could shoot,” Leckie wrote. “Those from Georgia and the border state of Kentucky seemed the best.”⁴¹

³⁸ Letter from E. B. Sledge to Edward Simmons Sledge, December 7, 1944, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.

³⁹ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 13.

⁴⁰ Robert Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, (New York, 1957), 14–15.

⁴¹ Leckie, *Helmet for My Pillow*, 19.

Not all the high shooters on the range were southern boys, however. Massachusetts native and future writer William Manchester scored the highest rating on rifle qualification day in Marine Corps boot camp, an achievement that won him a spot in Officer Candidate School. Like Sledge, he promptly flunked out and was assigned to a combat unit on Okinawa, where he was badly wounded and invalided back to the States. Like Sledge, he later wrote a book about his war experiences titled *Goodbye, Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War* (Little, Brown, 1980). And like Sledge and Leckie, Manchester, the son of a northern father and a Virginia-born mother, wrote about regional rivalries in boot camp and mentioned the disproportionate number of southerners among the Marine Corps' noncommissioned officers. "Our Platoon was number 618," Manchester wrote of boot camp on Parris Island, "and our DI was a leathery corporal from Georgia named Coffey":

The Marine Corps had always recruited a disproportionate number of men from the South, where the military traditions of the 1860s had never died. [...] Coffey was typical: tall, lanky, and fair haired, with a mad grin and dancing, rain-colored eyes full of shattered light. [...] In combat these Southerners would charge fearlessly with the shrill rebel yell of their great-grandfathers, and they loved the bayonet. How my father's side defeated my mother's side in the Civil War will always mystify me.⁴²

Manchester's book was published a year before Sledge's memoir appeared and received mostly positive reviews. Unlike Sledge's memoir, Manchester's is self-consciously literary in style, as perhaps befits a work by a professional writer. Also unlike Sledge, Manchester devoted a large part of his memoir to a re-telling of the major campaigns of the Pacific War, interspersing chapters on battles he was not present at, Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Peleliu, and Iwo Jima, with his own experiences in boot camp and on Okinawa. Sledge disparaged Manchester's book in his private correspondence, criti-

⁴² William Manchester, *Goodbye, Darkness*, (New York, 1980), 123.

cized Manchester for writing about events he had not personally witnessed, and implied that Manchester had exaggerated and embellished his combat record.⁴³

In content and purpose, Sledge's memoir most resembles an earlier, little-known memoir by another Massachusetts-born Marine. Russell Gerard Davis' *Marine at War* was first published in 1961, twenty years before the publication of *With the Old Breed*, by Little, Brown and Company and re-issued in paperback by the Scholastic Book Service in the 1960s and 1970s for the middle-school market. Like Sledge some years later, Davis wrote *Marine at War* for his family. He explained in the foreword that:

My sons have asked me many questions about war. I have always tried to answer their questions, but sometimes the answers weren't true, and sometimes they weren't complete. [...] It is very hard for a father not to make himself seem braver and wiser to his sons than he really was. And war is so many different things all jumbled together. [...] There is the way I dreamed I fought, and the way I wish I had fought. There is also the way I think I fought, and that is the story I have told here.

The same plainspoken honesty can be seen in Davis' own assessment of his performance as a Marine:

As a Marine infantryman I was no better than average. I served through two major campaigns, Peleliu and Okinawa, and I was under fire in a few other patrol actions. I was wounded twice,

⁴³ Sledge to Paul Fussell: "I don't want anyone thinking I fictionalized anything! No—one has ever implied I did—but some authors we've both read regarding WWII have done so. If you should use *Goodbye Darkness* by Manchester, I urge you to discuss it candidly with Brig. Gen. Ed. Simmons. Manchester may be a friend of yours, I'll say no more." (Letter from E. B. Sledge to Paul Fussell, December 5, 1984, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.) Sledge to Stephen P. Folan: "Also, many historians, mainly British, continue to quote the likes of Wm. Manchester, who doesn't seem to know fact from fiction." (Letter from E. B. Sledge to Maj. Stephen P. Folan, USMC, August 8, 1988, Eugene B. Sledge Collection, Auburn University Libraries.)

cited for bravery once, and two times I was too frightened to do the job to which I was assigned.⁴⁴

Marine at War was written for young people and was published several years before the Vietnam War and its televised images of death, destruction, and atrocity. Compared with Sledge's memoir and other World War II memoirs, Davis' account seems toned down and sanitized, which may help to explain why this modest but affecting book has not received the attention it deserves.

Although they describe the same battles, *Marine at War* and *With the Old Breed* are different kinds of books, written at different times in the country's history and for different audiences. They also reflect different historical and regional sensibilities. Here we approach two controversial and much-discussed questions. The notion that there is a distinctly southern military tradition is deeply rooted in the American imagination, as is the notion that there is a uniquely southern preoccupation with, and perhaps an affinity for, violence. Some historians, sensing unfounded regional stereotypes, have challenged the historical basis for these popular conceptions. Building on work by Marcus Cunliffe and other scholars, R. Don Higginbotham has argued persuasively that New England had an even more pronounced military culture than the South, especially during the first fifty years of the country's history.⁴⁵ Pointing to King Philip's War in the late 1600s between English settlers and the Native American inhabitants of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Maine (a vicious conflict characterized by atrocities on both sides that killed a greater proportion of the population than any other war in American history), New England's prominent role in the French and Indian Wars and the Revolutionary War in the 1700s, and the popularity of state militias and military titles in Massachusetts and other

⁴⁴ Russell Davis, *Marine at War*, (New York, 1965), v–vii. In addition to participating in and writing about the same battles, Davis and Sledge followed similar postwar career paths. Like Sledge, Davis became an academic, holding a professorship in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. He died in 1993.

⁴⁵ Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America, 1775–1865*, (New York, 1968); Robert E. May, "Dixie's Martial Image: A Continuing Historiographical Enigma," *Historian* LX (February 1978), 213–34.

New England states, Higginbotham concludes that “the connection between regionalism and military prowess initially revealed itself in New England” and that New England’s martial reputation was “more credible than that of its southern counterpart.”⁴⁶ Noting that twenty-three of the first one hundred graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point were Vermonters, Higginbotham asks “Should we speak of a martial Vermont?”⁴⁷

The question is of course rhetorical. We do not speak of a “martial Vermont,” and yet we continue to speak of the militant South. Ironically, by expertly undermining the historical foundation for the idea of a uniquely southern military tradition, Higginbotham succeeds in highlighting the idea’s enduring potency in spite of its dubious provenance. Myths are no less powerful for being myths. Indeed, they may be all the more powerful for being so. “If myth, southern militarism has certainly been an operative fiction with considerable impact upon the region’s historical experience,” wrote Robert E. May in his entry on the “Fighting South” in *The Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.⁴⁸

Whatever its historical origins or validity, the notion that the South has a special relationship to the military history and culture of the United States is widely accepted, and the identification of the region with militarism and violence has a long pedigree. In the 1920s and 1930s, W. J. Cash wrote about “the perpetuation and acceleration of the tendency to violence which had grown up in the Southern backwoods” and which “reached its ultimate incarnation in the Confederate soldier.”⁴⁹ “The thing that sent him swinging up the slope at Gettysburg on that celebrated, gallant afternoon was before all else nothing more or less than the thing which elsewhere

⁴⁶ R. Don Higginbotham, “The Martial Spirit in the Antebellum South: Some Further Speculations in a National Context,” *Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 1 (February 1992), 12 and 23. For casualty figures in King Philip’s War, see Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity*, (New York, 1999), xi and *passim*.

⁴⁷ Higginbotham, “The Martial Spirit in the Antebellum South,” 22.

⁴⁸ Robert E. May, “Fighting South,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, (Chapel Hill, 1989), 1108.

⁴⁹ W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South*, Vintage Books edition, (New York, 1960), 44–45.

accounted for his violence,” Cash wrote in a much-quoted passage on the Confederate infantryman, namely, “his conviction, the conviction of every farmer among what was essentially only a band of farmers, that nothing living could cross him and get away with it.”⁵⁰ The idea that there was a distinctly southern military tradition also appears in academic works by military sociologists and political scientists in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In his classic work *The Soldier and the State* (1957), political scientist Samuel P. Huntington described the crucial role the South played in the formation of the American military profession before the Civil War. Huntington affirmed that “[a] ‘Southern military tradition’ existed in a way in which there was never a New England, Middle Western, or Rocky Mountain military tradition.” “The roots of American military professionalism,” Huntington concluded, “go back to mid-nineteenth-century Southern conservatism.”⁵¹ The South’s influence on the American professional military continued into the twentieth century. Sociologist Morris Janowitz analyzed the regional and social composition of the U.S. military’s officer corps in the first half of the twentieth century and discovered that the South was disproportionately represented in all of the services except the Air Force.⁵²

The southern military tradition and propensity for violence have figured prominently in works by other writers. In the 1950s, John Hope Franklin wrote about the pervasiveness of personal violence in the antebellum South, the popularity of dueling, the large number of military schools and militia companies, and the rhetorical celebration of martial glory. “Violence was woven into the most fundamental aspects of life in the South,” Franklin wrote, “and constituted an important phase in the total experience of its people.”⁵³ A few years later, journalist-turned-novelist Ward Just described the southern military tradition at work in the Vietnam-era U.S. Army officer corps.

⁵⁰ Cash, *The Mind of the South*, 46.

⁵¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1957) 211–14. This is precisely the argument that was challenged later by R. Don Higginbotham and other southern historians.

⁵² Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait*, (New York, 1971), 87–89.

⁵³ John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 13.

Just observed that “much of the Army tradition in 1970 seems almost quaint, stemming as it does partly from the Southern military tradition in America. It is reflected now in a certain courtliness of manner among the Southern soldiers, of whom William Westmoreland [born in South Carolina] is an excellent example.”⁵⁴ More recently, journalist Robert Kaplan has written about the southern character of the post-9/11 U.S. military. In a 2004 article on the first Battle of Fallujah in Iraq, Kaplan wrote, “So it is that the martial evangelicalism of the South and the Bible Belt gives the military its true religious soul, along with its compassion for innocent civilians—a phenomenon I had seen in Afghanistan, the Philippines, and other places, and would see again in Fallujah.”⁵⁵ Kaplan’s description of a Marine officer directing combat operations is worth quoting in full:

I last saw Captain Jason Smith in the middle of a street in Fallujah that was popping with small-arms fire; his expression was hardy and purposeful. T. E. Lawrence called doubt “our modern crown of thorns;” Smith betrayed none. He was enunciating orders through the ICOM, and conferring through the battalion tac: “Blackhawk, Apache, Crazy Horse...” His rawboned visage might have been the subject of an oil portrait by Frederic Remington, of a nineteenth-century cavalry officer fighting the Plains Indians, or of an officer of the old Confederacy that still inhabited the soul of the U.S. military, invigorating its fighting spirit.⁵⁶

Kaplan amplified on this point in *Imperial Grunts*, his book on the post-9/11 Army and Marine Corps. Echoing Huntington’s argument that the strong military ethos of the South distinguishes it from other parts of the United States, Kaplan contrasted “the world of beer,

⁵⁴ Ward Just, *Military Men*, (New York, 1972), 133.

⁵⁵ Robert Kaplan, “Five Days in Fallujah,” *Atlantic Monthly* 294, no. 1: (July/August 2004): 116–26.

⁵⁶ Kaplan, “Five Days in Fallujah,” 126. If the tableau described by Kaplan could have been painted by Remington, then this passage could have been written by Col. John W. Thomason. Captain (now Major) Jason E. Smith, USMC, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana was awarded the Silver Star for his actions in this battle: <http://militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=3800> (last accessed February 22, 2012).



William Edward March late in life, ca. 1950. Image courtesy of Hoole Special Collections Library, The University of Alabama.

cigarettes, instant coffee, and chewing tobaccos” on military bases in the South with the gentrified world of his neighbors and friends in the Northeast. “The divide between a media clustered in the Northeast and a military clustered in the South and the heartland brought regional and tensions to the surface,” Kaplan concluded.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Robert D. Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts: The American Military on the Ground*, (New York, 2005), 259-60.

Perhaps the keenest insight into the South's military tradition can be found in a work by a non-American. In his 1995 book *Fields of Battle: The Wars for North America*, the late British military historian John Keegan, one of the first prominent champions of Sledge's memoir, reflected on almost forty years of travelling around the United States and came to the conclusion that he felt most at home in the South: "Oddly I came to like the South and still like it more than any other part of the United States. [...] I have often tried to analyze why I should have a sense, however slight, of being at home in Dixie. Class system, yes; history, yes; but more important, I suspect, the lingering aftermath of defeat. [...] Victorious America has never known the tread of occupation, the return of beaten men. The South is the exception. Its warrior spirit, which supplies the armed forces with a disproportionate flow of recruits, is a denial of the decision of 1865." "Pain is a dimension of old civilizations," Keegan concluded: "The South has it. The rest of the United States does not."⁵⁸

In this passage, Keegan hit on the essential point and identified one of the elements that may account for the enduring popularity of March's and Sledge's works. The Civil War and the legacy of Reconstruction haunt the American South in the same way that World War I and the battlefields of Flanders haunt Great Britain, or the memory of Stalingrad and Kursk haunts Russia. This is not surprising. The Civil War was fought predominantly in and through the South, and the South suffered the decades-long consequences of defeat. C. Vann Woodward argued in *The Burden of Southern History* that the experience of military defeat and the ensuing occupation is what distinguishes the South from the rest of the United States. He says that "Southern history, unlike American, includes large components of frustration, failure, and defeat. It includes not only an overwhelming military defeat but long decades of defeat in the provinces of economic, social, and political life."⁵⁹ "The South's preoccupation was with guilt, not with innocence," Woodward continued, "with the reality of evil, not with the dream of perfection."⁶⁰ In the same collection of essays, Woodward quoted Katherine Anne Porter,

⁵⁸ John Keegan, *Fields of Battle: The Wars for North America*, (New York, 1997), 41.

⁵⁹ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History*, (Baton Rouge, La., 1960), 19.

⁶⁰ Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, 21.

who wrote in 1944 that “I am a grandchild of a lost War, and I have blood-knowledge of what life can be in a defeated country on the bare bones of privation.” Porter spoke of the “limitless deeps of bitter memory” associated with the Civil War and with “the period euphemistically described as Reconstruction.” “My elders all remained nobly unreconstructed to their last moments, and my feet rest firmly on this rock of their strength to this day,” she wrote.⁶¹

March, the grandson of a Confederate war casualty, saw and experienced “the bare bones of privation” in the sawmill towns of south Alabama in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sledge shared Porter’s “blood knowledge” and “bitter memory” through his family’s Civil War experiences. In March’s works, the southern experience of war and war’s aftermath is implicit rather than explicit. One can detect it in the attention he devotes to the effects of the war on the French villages the Marines pass through and the plight of the French war refugees, as well as in his somber depiction of the war’s aftereffects on the survivors and their struggles with Woodward’s trinity of “frustration, failure, and defeat.” It also informs March’s lifelong “preoccupation with the reality of evil” and the tragic sensibility that pervades *Company K* and his other novels and short stories. It is this sensibility, as well as the immediate, almost conversational quality of March’s writing and his honest depiction of war’s atrocities, that distinguishes his novel from other World War I novels. For his part, Sledge refers to his southern heritage and the southern experience explicitly throughout *With the Old Breed*. Indeed, he echoes Porter almost word-for-word in his description of the war-ravaged farms and agricultural land on Okinawa: “I understood then what my grandmother had really meant when she told me as a boy that a blight descended on the land when the South was invaded during the Civil War.”⁶² Recounting the Marines’ final drive on the main Japanese line of resistance on Okinawa, Sledge wrote:

Earlier in the morning [of May 29, 1945] Company A, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines had attacked eastward into the ruins of

⁶¹ Katherine Anne Porter, “Portrait: Old South,” in *The Days Before*, (New York, 1952), 155.

⁶² Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 197.

Shuri castle and had raised the Confederate flag. When we learned that the flag of the Confederacy had been hoisted over the very heart and soul of Japanese resistance, all of us Southerners cheered loudly.

“The Yankees among us grumbled,” Sledge concluded, “and the Westerners didn’t know what to do.”⁶³ That seems like an appropriate last word on the subject of regional military traditions.

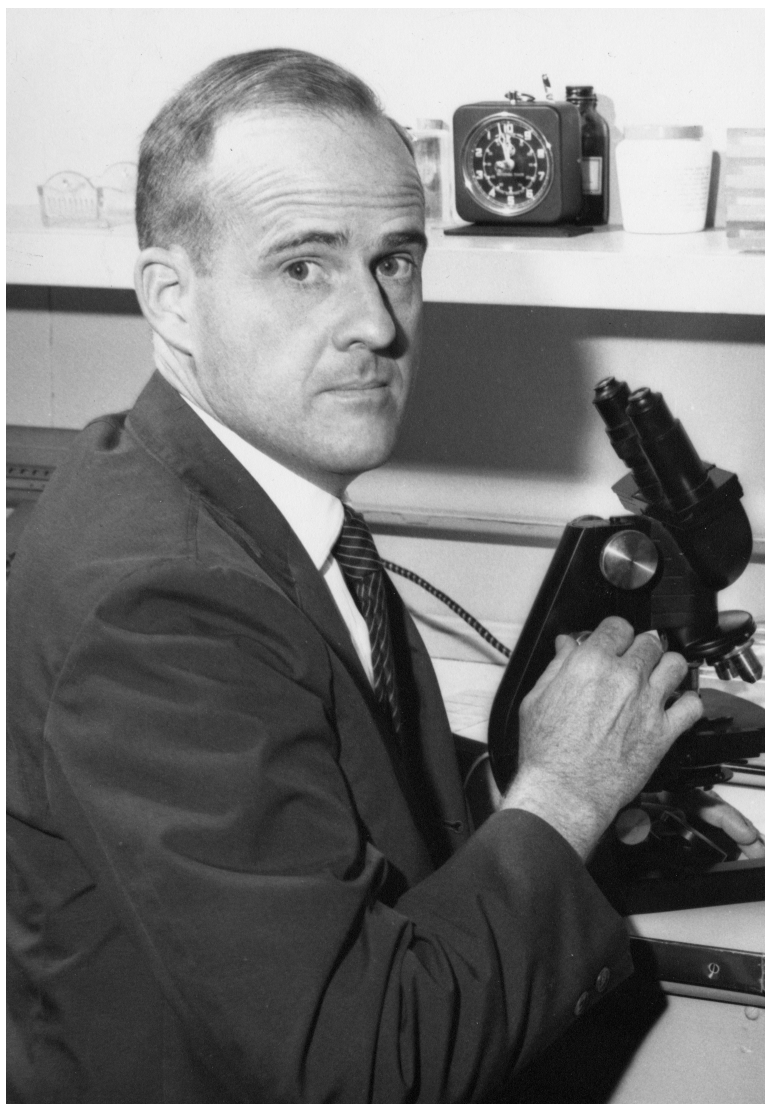
What Eisenhower called “the lingering sadness of war” was not a uniquely southern phenomenon. As the carefully preserved letters from bereaved mothers in Dr. Sledge’s personal papers show, the sadness of loss permeated small towns and big cities across the United States in the years after World War I and World War II. “The seventh-grade teacher had been wounded in the Pacific in the war, though none of the wounds was visible,” Ward Just wrote in a short story set in a small town in central Illinois:

He was at the school only one year, a small man with light wispy hair and china-blue eyes: he did not look the way we expected Marines to look, even ex-Marines. [...] I remembered him vividly, standing in front of the window and staring into the playground, his fingers working by rote on the cord. God knows what his thoughts were. Of course he seemed very old and worn then, but he was probably in his early twenties, twenty years younger than I am now.⁶⁴

Alabamians William March and Eugene Sledge spoke for that young ex-Marine, and for the tens of thousands of other men who brought their visible and invisible wounds from Belleau Wood, the Argonne Forest, the Bulge, and the Pacific back home to towns across the country. In doing so, the two men drew on their shared southern

⁶³ Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 274–75.

⁶⁴ Ward Just, “Honor, Power, Riches, Fame, and the Love of Women,” *The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert: 21 Stories and Novellas*, (New York, 1998), 49–50.



E. B. Sledge in his laboratory at the University of Montevallo, 1963. Image courtesy of the Auburn University Libraries.

heritage, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. In March's work, this heritage manifested itself in a highly-developed sensitivity to cruelty and "the reality of evil" even in the most outwardly peaceful surroundings. In Sledge's, it took the form of an overt identification with his family's military tradition and pride in the South's military history.

Sledge was not a bellicose man by nature and his memoir derives its poignancy in large part from his depiction of war's brutality. Like March, Sledge was disgusted and appalled, even traumatized, by his war experiences. "Gene (Sledge) was fine in combat," his boyhood friend Sidney Phillips recalled for an HBO profile, "but combat didn't interest him, it horrified him." The same was true of March. Both men suffered from what would now be called post-traumatic stress disorder. The memories of what they had seen and done in battle haunted their dreams and blighted their lives. March experienced several nervous breakdowns and episodes of hysterical blindness caused by his memories of hand-to-hand combat, and sought psychiatric help when he was living and working in London in the 1930s. Sledge had nightmares for decades after the war and wrote *With the Old Breed* at least in part in an attempt to exorcise his memories and put them to rest. In his son John's words, Sledge thought of himself "as a simple scientist with a love of the natural world, who had endured something unspeakable and wanted to convey that to later times and other people, and the best way to do that would be through simply recording what he had observed."⁶⁵ March too felt the need to convey his war experiences to "later times and other people." Thanks at least in part to their shared heritage, March's novel and Sledge's memoir have an authoritative quality that ensures that they will be read and re-discovered for as long as war remains part of the human experience—which is to say, for a very long time indeed.

⁶⁵ Sidney Phillips and John Sledge, interviewed for *Profiles of the Pacific: Eugene Sledge*.

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