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News & Updates

Gole, Henry G. General William E. DePuy: Preparing the Army for Modern War. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008.

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Henry G. Gole notes in the preface to his biography of General William E. DePuy (1919-1992) that he asked himself two questions before setting out on his task: Was there was a need for such a biography? And if so, was there was sufficient evidence to do a proper job? Happily, he found the answer to both questions to be “yes,” and the product of his labors is a noteworthy addition to the historiography of the U.S. Army. In many respects Gole’s contribution bears striking resemblance to Ronald G. Machoian’s William Harding Carter and the American Army: A Solider’s Story. Both Gole and Machoian trace the intellectual growth and reorganization of the United States Army through the lives of the men who had a profound influence on that development.

Gole’s narrative begins in South Dakota, where DePuy spent the early portion of his life and attended South Dakota State College. Through interviews with childhood friends and acquaintances, Gole finds early evidence of the intellectual, diplomatic, and leadership traits that would be the hallmarks of DePuy’s character for the rest of his life. In college, he was a member of ROTC, and in 1941, he sought a commission in the United States Marine Corps but was denied. This prompted him to seek and receive a commission from the U.S. Army, thus beginning an influential military career that spanned four decades, and was central to the reorganization of the U.S. Army following the Vietnam War.

DePuy served in combat both during World War II and in Vietnam – he missed out on serving in Korea due to a leg injury. In addition, he had a memorable stint as a military attaché in Hungary (where he broke his leg), and served for two years in the developing CIA (where he met his second wife). There is evidence that DePuy could have made an easy transition into the intelligence community, but he always viewed himself as a soldier. Therefore, as his career progressed, DePuy avoided any position that might take him away from a combat role.

His formative combat experience came in France during World War II. It was an experience that Gole sees as having a profound and permanent impact on DePuy. As an infantry battalion commander and regimental operations officer, DePuy grew disgusted with the low level of education and training for infantrymen, and the low quality of leadership. In the years that followed the Second World War, DePuy stressed professionalism and effectiveness. In practical terms, it meant that DePuy became a

demanding and hands-on leader, especially in combat, with little time for those he viewed as incompetent or inferior officers. The units he commanded were known for their effectiveness, but his brusque manner and quick dismissals of officers in Vietnam caused friction and almost ruined his career.

The combat record of DePuy is deserving of attention, especially during World War II. His ultimate value to the U.S. Army, however, was in his influence on doctrine and training. His final command was that of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in 1973, which put DePuy in a position to make a personal stamp on the trajectory of the U.S. Army into the 1980s and 90s. While at TRADOC, DePuy rewrote the Army's warfighting philosophy in an unprecedented doctrinal innovation called "Active Defense." This was a top-down, intellectually developed doctrine that sought to abolish the linear, frontal, attrition type warfare the Army had embraced. It caused enormous controversy and sparked debate in the Army as well as the USMC. This intellectual overhaul of Army doctrine and its warfighting philosophy – along with the debate it stirred – constitute DePuy's most significant contribution to military professionalism.

Gole gives great weight to the importance of the Yom Kippur War on DePuy's thinking as well. The lethality of that conflict was a stark reminder of the need for highly trained and effective troops (he remained faithful to infantry squads and platoons throughout his career) in order for the U.S. Army to be successful. DePuy strove for the next four years to revitalize education and implement training that avoided the pitfalls he witnessed thirty years earlier on the battlefields of Europe. Gole argues that the result of these ministrations was the modern U.S. Army that we have today.

On the whole, General William E. DePuy represents an excellent example of biographical work. Gole avoids the trap many biographers fall into of being either too laudatory or too critical of their subjects. Gole is sympathetic to DePuy, but not blind to the fact that he had his faults. In the end, his depiction of DePuy on a personal level is that of a complex man, who was capable of separating his professional and personal self. In the professional setting of combat, DePuy could be faulted for his quick trigger to dismiss those he deemed inferior. When assigned to non-combat positions, however, he urged others to respect the work and effort of their inferiors. In his personal life, he is presented as an excellent father who managed to play a significant role in the lives of his children despite a heavy workload and time spent abroad.

For historians interested in the contemporary U.S. Army, or the development of military organizations, General William E. DePuy is well worth reading. The work fits nicely into the growing historiography that is granting ever greater attention to the intellectual development of military organizations, while at the same time casting light on an officer with a long shadow.