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# There is Much to Learn From War Memoirs: Dissecting With the Old Breed as a Historical Source

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*With the Old Breed* by Eugene B. Sledge is a war memoir of the Second World War; its personal account of war should be used as a reliable historical source. Typically, military memoirs have been seen as capricious sources of history because of the emotion, trauma, and personal affections that soldiers take from a battlefield. Sledge describes these attachments to battle and the experience of combat during the conflicts of Peleliu and Okinawa. He describes the actuality of war and how it wears on a soldier's spirit, mind, and body. This allows the reader to personalize the war experience. The description of war through a memoir can be used as an accurate account of what war is on the personal level. Historians can use war memoirs to understand what war is, without the ultimate experience of being in combat. It is a more accurate expression of what war is, on the ground and in the foxholes, than the typical history textbook that discusses a war's causes, courses, and consequences. These generalizations of war are suitable for learning the politics and maneuvers of war, but do not help historians gain an idea of what the battlefield is like for a soldier in combat. To assess the reliability of *With the Old Breed* as a historical source one must assess the memoir's weaknesses and strengths.

One weakness in using *With the Old Breed* as a historical source is that it is impossible fact check everything that Sledge writes about in his memoir. His story is a personal one and historians cannot go back in time to check if he saw exactly what he is writing in his memoir. For example, when Sledge discusses the incident where his lieutenant played a practical joke on him and his fellow soldiers, his lieutenant threw a grenade that he thought to be empty into a crowd of soldiers to scare the young men. However, the grenade was still somewhat full and threw some shrapnel at the soldiers. This incident cannot be fact checked by historians, mostly because it was an event that did not involve many people and an event that involved an officer acting incompetent, to say the least. Not many soldiers will jump at the opportunity to discredit a higher-ranking soldier and this would make it difficult for historians to gain more information on the episode.

However, just because a historian cannot validate every tale that Sledge discusses in his memoir does not mean that they cannot be used as a historical source. Historians must be able to derive truth from personal accounts of war. Since, Sledge is an eyewitness to the episodes he discusses in his memoir, historians can assume Sledges accounts are credible. Historians can use *With the Old Breed* as an accurate perception of the war through Sledge's eyes. Samuel Hines discusses that to establish credibility in a war memoir, a historian must identify, "whether the book speaks with a voice that is stubbornly distinct, telling us what it was like, for this man, in his war." Sledge does speak with a voice that is distinctly unique in *With the Old Breed*. He tells us what it was like for him in his war and therefore can be seen as a credible recollection of his view on his life during the war.

Another shortcoming that can be argued is that *With the Old Breed* does not deal with the bigger picture of World War II. *With the Old Breed* only discusses two major battles that Sledge was personally a part of, Peleliu and Okinawa. Sledge does not talk about any other battles or events that would be part of a broader discussion of World War II. For example, he does not discuss any part of the war effort in Europe or anything about the role that the home front played in the war. Sledge only discusses the parts of the War that of which he was personally a part, so this limits the perspective one would acquire from reading Sledge's memoir. This characteristic of memoirs certainly distinguishes them from typical history books; that is not to say memoirs fail to contribute from a historic perspective.

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Typical history books deal with the larger scope of a war than *With the Old Breed* addresses; nevertheless this does not discredit what a historian can derive from Sledge's memoir. Traditional history books such as Allan Millett and Peter Maslowski's *For the Common Defense* deal with the broader scope of wars in history. For instance, when Millett and Maslowski discuss the battle of Peleliu they focus on the reasons for fighting, the casualty numbers, and gains the United States acquired after the battle. This approach to writing history is known as the "outcome" approach. This style of narrative history, as John Keegan notes, has as many limitations as Sledge's memoir does. Keegan argues that this typical approach to war does not accurately portray what war is really like. He states that the "causes and results" to military history does not fit in the discussion of actual combat because the soldiers that are doing the fighting at the time are just trying to survive and do not care about the larger scope of wins and losses. In some ways Sledge's memoir is a more reliable source for what war is like, than the typical history text because of the personal portrayal of war that Sledge composed.

Another reason that a historian could question the reliability of *With the Old Breed* is that war is traumatic and it changes the people who experience it. Like most soldiers before him, Sledge was changed by warfare. Therefore he is writing his memoir as someone different than the person that actually experienced the fighting. Samuel Hynes discusses this paradox in his book. He states that a war memoir is like an autobiography, but cannot be defined as one. He articulates that a war memoir cannot be an autobiography because the same person that experienced the war does not write it. Sledge experienced the war as a young man trying to get through the war with his life. Sledge wrote his memoir as an old man looking back on this separate life through a lens of safety and maturity. This paradox leads a historian to question the authenticity of *With the Old Breed* and war memoirs in general.

The enigma of war changing people should not persuade historians to dismiss *With the Old Breed* as a reliable historical source. People change through out their lives. Just because individuals can argue that someone is not the same person after a war does not mean that they cannot accurately remember what it was like to experience war. Historians should be able to use war memoirs for the simple fact that war is traumatic and does change people, so they should be able to remember what it was like for them vividly. Sledge discusses the traumatic experience of watching a marine deploy a flamethrower into a pillbox occupied by Japanese soldiers. Sledge listened as the Japanese soldiers screamed with agony until the silence of death swept through the area. Such a traumatic experience no doubt shaped the rest of Sledge's life and changed the person Sledge was. However, Sledge recalls this incident with detailed accuracy. This goes to advance the assumption that the trauma soldiers experience during a war add to the validity of a war memoir.

The final argument against *With the Old Breed* as a historical source is that it probably contains falsities and exaggerations. Sledge did keep a notebook during his time in battle but it would have been impossible to record experiences directly after they had happened. War is too chaotic and too unpredictable to stop and write down everything the memoirist is seeing in present time. Samuel Hynes argues that a memoir should be given special leniency. He states that war memoirs cannot be completely truthful because every person experiences the trials of war differently. He notes that memoirists, such as Sledge's, might have had temporary lapses in truth because of the inhumane experience of being in battle.

On the other hand, Hynes argues that war memoirs cannot be truthful unless they contain some amount of falsities. He states that, "memoirs speak each with its own human voice, as history does not, and they find their own shapes." Hynes is expressing that memoirs are written through a personal scope because it is a unique experience for that one person. *With the Old Breed* must contain some misrepresentations of truth, but they cannot be a reason to dismiss it as unreliable. Sledge did not intend on misrepresenting anything, he simply told the story that he experienced. Historians must use memoirs as a reliable source for the representation of a unique soldier in his or her unique experience of their war.

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The concluding reason of why *With the Old Breed* is a reliable historical source is the simple point that war is tremendously alien to the normal citizen. Samuel Hynes states that the ordinary man has little authority in discussing what war is like. Men that did not experience war have no appreciation of what war was like and they could not begin to imagine what it was like for the people who experienced it. Hynes says, “war cannot be comprehended at second-hand, they say; it is not accessible to analogy or logic.” For this reason historians have to use war memoirs, like *With the Old Breed*, as the best way of trying to understand the experience of war.

In summation, Sledge’s memoir cannot be validated with specific facts, but it has to be seen as an accurate depiction of his unique experience. Sledge might not discuss the bigger picture of World War II, but he did not intend on explaining the whole war, he simply intended on explaining his war. Sledge might not have been the same person that he was when he wrote his memoir, but the trauma he experienced was still seen vividly in his mind. Sledge’s account might contain some untruthfulness, but it is the only way to portray such an alien experience to the non-combatant person. All the weaknesses that can be found in Sledge’s memoirs reliability can be overshadowed by the strengths it presents as a historical source. Therefore, *With the Old Breed* is a reliable historical source.

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