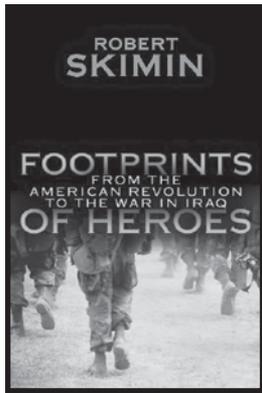


Book Review

By Mrs. Susan Groth



Footprints of Heroes: From the American Revolution to the War in Iraq by Robert Skimin. Prometheus Books, Amherst, New York, 2005, 328 pages, ISBN 1-59102-281-9, list \$26 (hardcover).

“The word hero became practically a dirty word during and after the Vietnam conflict. The same was true for patriotism. Together the words were castigated and nearly removed from popular lexicon. Athletes and rock stars were presented as heroes, even if the most heroic act they ever performed was staying out of jail, maligning the true meaning of the word for our young.”¹

We live in a society that is inundated by the media and popular culture and—as a result—influence our personal, political, religious, and ethical beliefs. As Robert Skimin asserts in the above quote from his book *Footprints of Heroes: From the American Revolution to the War in Iraq*, they have also influenced society’s image of the hero. Too often, the word *hero* comes with an image of cultural idols. For many of our youth, heroes are measured by the number of albums sold or the number of sports records broken, not by the true measures of heroism—courage, honor, pride, responsibility, and most importantly, self-sacrifice. It took an infamous act—11 September 2001—to remind America that freedom is a gift that must be earned and appreciated, and with this reminder the image of the hero resurged. We were reminded that those who sacrifice themselves for our freedom every day, and who too often are forgotten or taken for granted, are the true heroes of our society—our firefighters, our policemen, and of course, our military heroes.

In his book, Skimin takes a unique look at military heroes throughout history, many of whom are unknown to most people. Through anecdotes and vignettes, Skimin tells the stories of the heroic acts of these military men and women. Skimin revisits the lives of our well-known heroes, such as George Washington, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, George S. Patton, Douglas MacArthur, Audie Murphy, and John McCain, just to name a few. And while it is important to know and be reminded of their accomplishments, the stories that stand out and overpower this book are the stories of the men and women whose names are not remembered or recognized for their heroic acts, such as the average Soldier of the Revolutionary War, the farmer who put aside his responsibilities at home to take up arms for freedom, the

drummer boys who beat cadence and orders in the Union Army, and the nurses who worked on the battlefields. Even Bob Hope, who brought laughter to American troops through every conflict from World War II to Desert Storm, is paid tribute to in this book. Throughout military history, there have been thousands of unknown heroes who put aside their personal needs in order to provide us with the freedom that we enjoy today—people without whom our well-known heroes and leaders would not be known. For in the words of General Norman Schwarzkopf, “It doesn’t take a hero to order men into battle. It takes a hero to be one of those men who goes into battle.”²

And who could forget our engineer heroes. The paths cleared by the Army engineers throughout history brought victory and made heroes out of average men and women. Engineers have played an integral part in the fight for freedom. Engineers like those who took a struggling South Vietnam and constructed the ports of Cam Ranh Bay, Nha Trang, Qui Nhon, Vung Tau, and Vung Ro. Engineers who constructed millions of storage facilities, miles of roads, millions of square yards of airfields and heliports, and numerous base camps during conflicts. And certainly Skimin did not neglect to pay tribute to Sergeant First Class Paul R. Smith of Bravo Company, 11th Engineer Battalion, whose actions killed 20 to 50 enemy soldiers, allowing our wounded Soldiers to be evacuated and saving surrounding elements and possibly 100 American lives. His heroic actions were recognized on 4 April 2005, when he became the first service person in Operation Iraqi Freedom to be awarded the Medal of Honor—*Lead the Way*.

If there ever was any question as to what defines a hero, *Footprints of Heroes* answers that question. Skimin—a former paratrooper, Army aviator, and artillery officer—presents American military history through the lives of its heroes. Although his story does not overlook the famous, it is mostly about the ambiguous, unknown fighting men and women of yesterday and today. It is a tribute to those who sacrificed for us, and it serves as a source of inspiration for us and for future generations of heroes.

Endnotes

¹Robert Skimin. *Footprints of Heroes: From the American Revolution to the War in Iraq*. Prometheus Books, 2005.

²H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Peter Petre, editor. *It Doesn’t Take a Hero: The Autobiography of General H. Norman Schwarzkopf*. Bantam, 1993.

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