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Review of Tim Brady, *A Death in San Pietro: The Untold Story of Ernie Pyle, John Huston, and the Fight for Purple Heart Valley*

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Recommended Citation

Dockery, J. (2015). Review of Tim Brady, *A Death in San Pietro: The Untold Story of Ernie Pyle, John Huston, and the Fight for Purple Heart Valley*. *Michigan War Studies Review*, 2015 (061), 1-2. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/history-polsci-facpub/3>

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2015-061

Tim Brady, *A Death in San Pietro: The Untold Story of Ernie Pyle, John Huston, and the Fight for Purple Heart Valley*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013. Pp. viii, 286. ISBN 978-0-306-82214-8.

Review by Jared Dockery, Harding University (jndockery@harding.edu).

Capt. Henry T. Waskow, commander of Company B, 143rd Regiment, 36th Infantry Division, was killed by German shrapnel on 14 December 1943, near the Italian village of San Pietro Infine. Waskow was but one fatality among the 405,399 American dead of the Second World War,¹ but his death stands out in the public consciousness because it was the subject of a memorable dispatch written by famed war correspondent Ernie Pyle. Nor was Pyle the only journalist reporting on the 36th Division's harrowing experience at San Pietro. Director John Huston was also there, attempting to capture the stress of battle on film; his resulting documentary, *The Battle of San Pietro*, appeared in 1945.² Historian and journalist Tim Brady³ has now skillfully woven together the stories of Waskow, Pyle, and Huston into an engaging narrative. Though this book is not a true unit history, it nevertheless provides a vivid glimpse of the struggles of the 36th Division, as it slogged its way from its landing beach near Salerno to San Pietro and beyond.

The most compelling figure of the story, and the man whose death gives the book its title, is Waskow, who was just twenty-five years old when he was killed.⁴ Although he was slightly built, his men admired his earnestness. His last letter to his family, which Brady quotes in its entirety, reveals much about Waskow's character. In ruminating on what it means to die for one's country—"the most honorable and distinguished death a man can die"—he frankly admits he would prefer to *live* for his country. He has thought of heaven ("the other world") and assures his family he has "lived a life with that in mind all along." He also writes of the "honor" of leading his men and hopes he has "proved worthy of their faith, trust and confidence." He reassures his family members that he loves them and closes by asking them to "live a life of service" (172-74). Waskow was carrying this final letter on his person when he died.

Ernie Pyle, meanwhile, is a fascinating figure in his own right. Mired in a dysfunctional marriage, inclined to melancholy and the bottle, he doubted the quality of his own writing, including his piece about Waskow. He was also "deeply ambivalent" about the bigger issues of the war (5). Ironically, Pyle's misgivings led him to the distinctive writing style that so endeared him to the American people. Brady argues that Pyle's indifference to "higher causes" allowed him to focus instead on the intimate details of the GIs' lives:

few details of a soldier's life were too picayune or prosaic for him to ask and write about. He told what they ate and how they ate it; how they set up camp after terrifying and exhausting days of battle; he described how they shaved and how they bathed; how they talked to one another and what they said in quiet moments when the war seemed as far away as their homes back in the States. (11)

Pyle's unique style shines through in his piece about Waskow, whose body was carried down Mount Sammucro lashed to the back of a donkey. The war correspondent could not help but notice how deeply moved Waskow's men were at the sight of their slain leader's shrapnel-torn body. Soon the nation read Pyle's account of "The Death of Captain Waskow," which proved to be the journalist's most memorable dispatch from the war. Brady quotes it in its entirety. "In this war I have known a lot of officers who were loved and respected by the soldiers under them," Pyle began his column, "But never have I crossed the trail of any

1. Nese F. DeBruyne and Anne Leland, "American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics," *Congressional Research Service Report* RL32492 (2 Jan 2015) 2. Available online - www.miwsr.com/rd/1512.htm.

2. Available online - www.miwsr.com/rd/1513.htm.

3. Brady has contributed to *History Channel Magazine* and Public Broadcasting Service documentaries, and has published a previous book, *Twelve Desperate Miles: The Epic World War II Voyage of the SS Contessa* (NY: Crown, 2012).

4. Rick Atkinson, *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944* (NY: Holt, 2007) 288.

man as beloved as Capt. Henry T. Waskow, of Belton, Texas” (219). The piece was an instant sensation and appeared in newspapers across the country and in *Reader's Digest*; it was broadcast by Arthur Godfrey on CBS radio.

Who knows where the power of the piece came from? It was obviously built out of the miseries, frustration, and horrors of the previous month's engagement in the mountains and valleys of Italy, but Pyle had seen other hard moments in this war. He had never met Henry Waskow in life, but Pyle knew him in the way that he knew hundreds of other brave young men who were climbing this war's mountains, only to be carried home on the backs of mules. Regardless, its impact was deep and immediate. Simple, stately, steeped in respect and empathy—of all the stories Pyle wrote during World War II, none would have a greater force than this one (219)

John Huston, director of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), succeeded in crafting a forceful documentary about the fighting at San Pietro. In December 1943, he was following the 36th Division, determined to obtain combat footage for a documentary about the war in Italy. He and his crew soon found themselves under enemy fire from the nearby hills. For all Huston's pluck in pressing close to the front lines, footage of actual combat proved elusive. The war was not very photogenic, Brady explains, because its soldiers were too spread apart or fought at night or in small patrols. Mortar and artillery rounds were too sudden and unpredictable to capture on film. In the end, Huston resorted to recreating the battle scenes in *The Battle of San Pietro*, something he never admitted (223–25). Nevertheless, in 1991 the National Film Preservation Board deemed the documentary worthy of preservation in the National Film Registry (246).

The 36th Division was also known as the Texas Division because it was primarily composed of Texas National Guard units. Though Brady's purpose is not to write a complete unit history of the 36th, he does provide a useful summary of its stateside training, its landing in front of the Greek ruins at Paestum (near Salerno) in September 1943, its assault on San Pietro (near Cassino and the Gustav Line) in December, and its failed attempts to cross the Rapido River in January 1944. The latter operation cost the 36th more than 2,100 casualties, which certainly justifies the author's use of the term “disaster” (241).

Brady cites his sources rather sparingly (just over one endnote per page) and includes a three-page bibliography. Besides the relevant secondary sources,⁵ Brady has drawn on some primary sources, including Pyle's published dispatches, as well as the firsthand accounts of members of the 36th published in newspapers during the war. But, despite the promise of the book's subtitle, much of the story has in fact been told elsewhere: neither the struggle at San Pietro, nor the death of Captain Waskow, nor the anxieties of Ernie Pyle are unknown to students of the Second World War.⁶ Brady's particular innovation is to have blended these various stories together into a book-length account. Structurally, he often shifts back and forth between different storylines, but this is both appropriate and unavoidable, given his purpose. He is a good writer, but the book needed better proofreading to correct its many typographical errors. On a brighter note, the volume's three maps and twenty-two black-and-white photographs are valuable enhancements.

A Death in San Pietro is more a popular than a scholarly history. Although historians interested specifically in Henry Waskow or the 143rd Regiment should take note of it, the book is better suited to casual readers and World War II buffs, or perhaps genealogists researching individuals who served in the Texas Division. Additionally, anyone fortunate enough to undertake a World War II tour of the Naples-Cassino area will find Tim Brady an informative and engaging guide.⁷

5. All nine endnotes in chapter 12 refer to either Atkinson's *Day of Battle* (ibid.) or Martin Blumenson's official army history, *Sa-lerno to Cassino* (1969; rpt. Washington: US Army Ctr of Military History, 1993).

6. Blumenson (ibid.) devotes a chapter to San Pietro; Atkinson (note 4 above, 285–93), too, refers to the fighting there, as well as to Waskow, Pyle, and Huston; and James Tobin mentions the Waskow story and quotes Pyle's column in toto in *Ernie Pyle's War: America's Eyewitness to World War II* (1977; rpt. NY: Free Pr, 2006) 133–39. Brady cites all three works.

7. Brady mentions that the 36th Division came ashore in front of the famed ancient Greek ruins at Paestum; there is a historical monument at the beach marking the precise landing site. A small but nice museum at San Pietro commemorates the 36th. Visitors may also view the ruins of several structures destroyed in the fighting. I myself had the privilege of visiting both the landing site and the ruins at San Pietro with college students in fall 2011.