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Gyrene: The World War II United States Marine

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Jones, Wilbur D., Jr. *Gyrene: The World War II United States Marine*. Shippensburg, Penna.: White Mane, 1998. 322pp. \$29.95

Anyone who expects to lead Marines in combat will find reading *Gyrene*, despite its faults, a useful exercise. This is a history of the men who enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II, how they fought, lived, and survived. It is a family history, without pretense or prudery.

The professional reader will learn nothing here of strategy or tactics but may gain some understanding of the young men who are asked to carry out those abstractions and win the battle on the ground.

The author, Wilbur D. Jones, Jr., is a retired captain in the Naval Reserve who was too young to serve in World War II. He idolized the Marines while growing up in North Carolina near Camp Lejeune.

Jones scoured a hundred collections of personal papers in the Marine Corps Historical Center archives, conducted 250 face-to-face interviews, and received two hundred returns from a survey. He even attended ten reunions of World War II Marine veterans organizations. His sample is hardly scientific, but he concludes that these Marines were "a self-made generation that built America, the likes of which will not pass this way again."

His writing is often awkward and repetitious: no one would seek credit for the editing. The photographs too often look like fuzzy snapshots taken by someone's mother or girlfriend, and in fact they frequently were.

The brief introduction by General Raymond G. Davis, USMC (Retired), World War II combat veteran and Medal of Honor recipient in the Korean War, puts a Marine stamp of approval on *Gyrene*. Davis says, "This book is about my friends, my comrades, 'my men.'"

Who was the World War II Marine? Why did he enlist in the Corps? It was out of patriotism, because his friends did, because he was in trouble with the police or school authorities, or because he liked the dress blue uniforms. A good number sound like losers before they joined up. For example, after Pearl Harbor one arrived in New York City, without a dime, to enlist in the Army. He got in the shortest line and found he was a Marine.

A Marine veteran told Jones, "They had come out of the Depression years and they knew what it was to get something to eat. We did what we were told when we were told to do it. We had some slackers—not all of us wore halos."

Jones sums it up, "As a citizen-soldier he was human and therefore imperfect. Thus the prototype Marine was afraid under

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fire, no braver than the next man Under fire, the majority of men did only what they had to do.”

Whatever the Marine was when he joined, the Corps molded him and taught him to go forward in the face of enemy fire. He did a lot of that. A Marine sergeant wounded by a sniper on Peleliu remembered, “A million thoughts raced through my mind. Did my archangel save me again in battle? Why was I spared? This was the third time I had been wounded in this war.”

The book bristles with no-holds-barred discussions of the poor conditions on troopships and in the field. As Jones says, official histories duck such crucial matters as field sanitation, but *Gyrene* even explains how a Marine moves his bowels while in combat and how they got drunk or laid in San Diego, Honolulu, or Auckland. Always, in the shadows, there waited the next battle.

What kept them going? Said a company commander who won the Medal of Honor on Peleliu, “There was a certain confidence we were the best.”

By 1944 and the battle for Saipan, a former squad leader said, most of the men thought their chances of making it through the war were next to nothing. Many fighting there had been on the ‘Canal or Tarawa, and for some it was their third campaign. The call to

expose themselves to enemy fire never seemed to end.

Marines prayed, whether they had been devoted to religion all their lives, or, as one said, “I just prayed for my butt.”

Long after the war, Jones asked author Leon Uris what kind of Marine he had been. Uris replied, “I was a good Marine, an ordinary Marine.” That is what this singular book is about.

J. ROBERT MOSKIN
author of *The U.S. Marine Corps Story*, and *Mr. Truman's War*

Kohnen, David. *Commanders Winn and Knowles: Winning the U-boat War with Intelligence, 1939–1943*. Krakow, Poland: Enigma Press, 1999 (available in the United States from Classical Crypto Books, Londonderry, N.H.) 168pp. \$20

Since its public revelation twenty-five years ago, the Allied breaking of the German U-boat cipher during World War II has become a historical staple. The British and American navies, armed with the uniquely valuable intelligence dubbed ULTRA, thwarted the German effort to cut the Atlantic supply lines. Specialized histories on the subject have generally focused on the technical ingenuity behind the code breaking. While often fascinating, these works give the impression that once the German codes were