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Toward The Flame: A Memoir Of World War I



Synopsis

Considered by many to be the finest American combat memoir of the First World War, Hervey Allen's *Toward the Flame* vividly chronicles the experiences of the Twenty-eighth Division in the summer of 1918. Made up primarily of Pennsylvania National Guardsmen, the Twenty-eighth Division saw extensive action on the Western Front. The story begins with Lieutenant Allen and his men marching inland from the French coast and ends with their participation in the disastrous battle for the village of Fismette. Allen was a talented observer, and the men with whom he served emerge as well-rounded characters against the horrific backdrop of the war. As a historical document, *Toward the Flame* is significant for its highly detailed account of the controversial military action at Fismette. At the same time, it easily stands as a work of literature. Clear-eyed and unsentimental, Allen employs the novelist's powers of description to create a harrowing portrait of coalition war at its worst.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The strength of Hervey Allen's "Toward the Flame" as a war memoir lies in its being a first-person narrative, with all the seeming immediacy and honesty that firsthand experience affords. We remember George Santayana's deliberately hyperbolic warning against the more academic third-person alternative: "History is a pack of lies about events that never happened told by people who weren't there." Hervey Allen was there. Allen allows a "you are there" window into the daily life of WWI combat (Second Battle of the Marne) during six summer weeks in 1918. Missing is the familiar focus on stalemated trench warfare that characterized other battles. For most of the memoir,

Allen is actually on the move through once-picturesque hilly regions of France, but usually in the more peaceful wake of front-line units. The end of the memoir finds him in the intense "Flame" of Fismette fighting. Allen's matter-of-fact tone owes something to the blunting effects of memory (the book was published in 1926) but perhaps also to a healthy skepticism about fighting a war largely within European nations and their colonies. Christendom was attacking itself, with the YMCA standing-in for the ineptness of the church itself, "selling gum drops and cakes when civilization hung in the balance." Allen contemptuously notes that "As a matter of fact, there was little else it could do, and that in itself was a great comment." It is to Allen's credit that he doesn't allow later research and speculation about the larger picture to infiltrate his direct experience account. There is no mention, for example, of WWI's other (and some would argue more significant) battlefield: the fight against militaristic Islam represented by the Ottoman Turks. After all, the war started in the Balkans.

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