

## An Extraordinary Biography and Full Frontal view of war

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Reviewer: Grady Harp, Amazon.com

Author and film producer, Jim Prosser, has created a richly detailed, raptly written, devastatingly powerful book about the life of American War hero, John Basilone. This book is especially pungent at this time in history because it revives a lost tradition of the country's view of maritime heroism. Since the atrocities of the Vietnam mistake to the present harrowing details of a similar (or worse) war in Iraq, the concept of war is now very much in a negative light. Even the words "war hero" seem an oxymoron, so strident are the feelings about America's latest aggressions. But to appreciate this fine book requires a return to the mindset of the US during World War II when not only was Europe under the vile threat of Hitler and Mussolini, but the Japanese warriors were annihilating China, Korea, and ultimately the Philippines in the mission to own the Pacific Ocean. And even in those early years, the threat seemed frightening but distant until the Japanese successfully decimate the US Pacific Fleet on December 7, 1941. That incident unified the country, creating a fighting force and support system at home that eventually resulted in the defeat of the massive evil outside the borders of the USA.

Given that atmosphere of over a half century ago, author Prosser has created one of the most convincing portraits of a military hero in literature. And the intensively researched and detailed approach results in a biography that fully restores the ambience of WW II. John Basilone was a nice Italian boy from Raritan, New Jersey, a lad who quit school to follow his recurring visions. He caddied for Japanese businessmen at a country club, seeing in his prophetic mind that some day he would be at war with Japan. After trying multiple jobs, he finally enlists in the Army, makes the best of boot camp by gambling and boxing, and is shipped to the Philippines where he spent time waiting, boxing (becoming a champion nicknames "Manila John"), running a little bar with his Island sweetheart, and finally returning home. Frustrated once again with the boredom of work and the embarrassment of not having finished his education, Basilone finally returns to the military by signing on with the USMC, trains hard at Quantico, Cuba, and other US training camp swamps, and finally is shipped to Guadalcanal where his brilliance and dedication to his commanding officer ("Chesty" Puller) through one of the most devastating battles in the Pacific arena earned him not only the respect of his men, but also the Medal of Honor – the highest commendation offered by his country. Returning home from this mission, he rode the waves of adulation from the American people, only to be shipped out once again to the Pacific where he is killed in action in the battle for Iwo Jima.

The amazing (that is, ONE of the amazing) aspect of this book is that Prosser has elected to write it in the first person of John Basilone. Everything is told as Basilone perceives it, lives, feels, and survives it. Rarely has a story been written with such clarity and perception; we truly feel that Basilone has written his memoirs. The language of the period is exactly right, the descriptions of the various battles and conditions of being a soldier under tremendously adverse conditions are vivid, and the soldiers' mentality of being in the thick of war are written with such bulls-eye focus that no matter what the reader's opinion of War might be, this book makes it all understandable from the point of view of the soldiers who fought. Some of the battle passages are tough to read: "on October 23, a light tank and infantry attack across the mouth of the Matanikau ran right into the teeth of Vandegrift's defenses. It was chewed up in short order with over 600 Japs killed, many of them trapped in a jungle clearing where US tanks just drove over them instead of wasting ammunition. They ground the poor bastards up like sausage under the tank treads until the entire clearing was covered in gore and left to rot in the sun." And a soldier's impressions: "we all heard a lot about the bravery of the Japanese soldier before we got to the island. They were supposed to be the most fearless warriors ever to fight. But I kept thinking what kind of bravery it was that sent them, one after the other, right into the same guns that mowed down dozens before them. I don't know if that was bravery. I don't know what it was. Either they were crazy or they just didn't care. So I didn't care either. They weren't even men anymore. They were dumb animals who wanted me dead and had killed all my friends."

Prosser very cleverly weaves snippets of Iwo Jima from the opening of the book to its finish, which in an act of brilliance makes the whole story more pungent in retrospect. There is little doubt the Sgt. John Basilone was an extraordinary soldier and military hero along with the thousands of others who lost their lives in the incomprehensibly vast WW II. I think this is a very important book that everyone should read, and I say that as a pacifist, as a Vietnam Veteran convinced that war on any level is simply not an option. This book is vastly important, well written, and contains a story and moment of history we all should face and incorporate. And perhaps, then we can all better empathize with soldiers from throughout history to the very present. Recommended without reservation!