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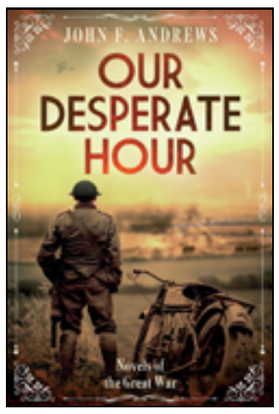

Our Desperate Hour: Novels of the Great War

by John F. Andrews
46 North Publications

book review by Mark Heisey

"A Hun gas mask below an American helmet rises above the foxhole… gives me a thumbs up gesture… I'd laugh if anything here was funny. I hope nobody shoots him by mistake."

Ab Johnson is an Army man through and through. When his son, Jack, joins the Marines to go fight in WWI, the two men have a heated argument about Jack's choice of service. Later, Ab realizes those may be the last words he has with his son. To reconcile, the aging Ab volunteers to return to the Army and go to France. He promises his wife he will stay far from the front and work in a supply position. However, he is soon on the frontlines, witnessing the chaos around the Battle of Belleau Wood, the Army's poor attitude towards Marines, and the incompetence of some French commanders. In addition, the story follows a medical corpsman trying to keep the wounded alive, a Marine eager to get into the fight rather than serve as an officer's assistant, and an arrogant Navy surgeon who thought he was coming to conduct research, not work on casualties.

World War II fiction appears to have experienced a surge in popularity over the last decade or so. Andrews' work focusing on WWI, or the Great War, is a nice change of pace. Based on an actual battle, this novel of historical fiction includes real figures who were there as well as fictional characters used primarily as protagonists. There are many comparisons to be made to both fiction and non-fiction works based on WWI, but nothing stands out so much as Remarque's classic title, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It also makes an interesting comparison to Andrews' book, as Remarque's work comes from the perspective of a German soldier. The similarities between the American soldier's experience in Andrews' book and that of Paul Baumer, the German soldier who is Remarque's protagonist, are uncanny. Both authors vividly describe the raw destruction of artillery and its effects on soldiers, the difficulty getting enough food, sleep, and supplies, the dirty, cramped, confused fighting, and the randomness of who lives and dies. Where they differ is that Andrews includes a bit more of the heroics, whereas Remarque refuses to move away from the gritty and pragmatic realism he is focused upon. Andrews' offering has more of a Hollywood blockbuster feel, while Remarque's work is better suited to an arthouse production.

The historical research Andrews has done for this novel is ever-present and skillfully woven throughout the narrative in ways that are completely natural. This alone is a difficult assignment for an author. In addition, the compelling protagonist and the story of the surgeon, Beck, are thoroughly engaging. Beck has a great character arc where we see his character completely transformed. Additionally, having part of the focus on the medical corps' experiences, as well as the technology and means of treatment available, is fascinating and something not often seen. There are minor issues: the main being that the chapters about the other two stories, composed of the corpsman and Marine, are often so similar in tone that it can be difficult to remember which character is currently the chapter's subject. Still, anyone who enjoys historical war stories will love this book. Moreover, this novel transcends its genre and will likely have wide appeal.

RECOMMENDED by the US Review

The 2025 Eric Hoffer Book Award **Historical Fiction** First Runner-Up

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