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William March. *Company K*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989.

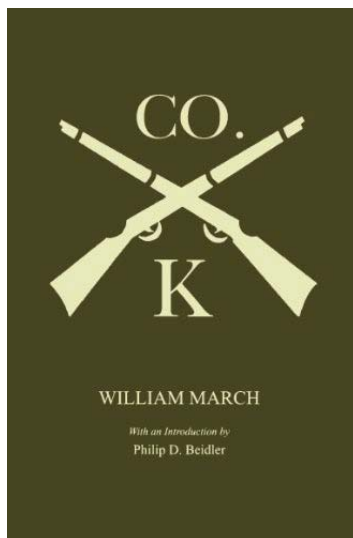
Book Review

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Jeff Ballard

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*Company K* is the most significant work of historical literature to come out of America's Great War experience. The book includes one-hundred thirteen chapters. The chapters are anecdotal first-person accounts of life in the American Expeditionary Force, which the United States sent to France in 1918. Members of the fictitious United States Marine Corps Rifle Company "K" tell each story, and their character's name is the title of each chapter. Each narrative is a fragment of one Marine's experience, with no single chapter telling the complete story of any one rifleman. Many Marines appear in second-person as a different Marine narrates his account of a shared event. The intertwined story lines are never fully resolved, adding to each story's suspenseful character.



The book begins after the war has ended with Private Joseph Delany presenting his wife with a manuscript he has written about his infantry company's experience in France. The next six chapters sample the motivations for each Marine's enlistment. Logically, the book concludes with six chapters that survey of how each Marine's wartime experience shaped the remainder of his life. The intervening one hundred chapters describe how the Marines lost their innocence and humanity in wartime through theft, desertion, murder, suicide, fratricide, body mutilation, and insanity with callous brutality. Additionally, they describe the horrors of war and death or mutilation by bayonet, bullet, gas, and shrapnel. More disturbing are stories told from the viewpoint of the dead.

Even those accounts that express a Marine's humanity are tinged with irony, like that of Private Phillip Wadsworth who loses his virginity only to be court-martialed and sentenced to a labor battalion for contracting a venereal disease. Another episode describes Private Colin Wiltsee's beautiful vision of Christ ascending to Heaven, just as the reader realizes that Wiltsee is dead.

Loss, hardship, and the randomness of mass-produced death in the First World War form the thematic center of *Company K*. The daily monotony endured by the Marines sharply contrasts with the horrors of combat. March does not romanticize the actions of the Americans or the Germans. The descriptions of modern warfare are violent and obscene. The experiences March's characters describe are universal to men in combat regardless of the age—fright, despair, bravery, and sacrifice.

Although *Company K* is a work of fiction, it adds substantially to the historian's understanding of a soldier's life in combat, regardless of era. Every character one would expect to find in a war story is present in the book. March provides honest descriptions of incompetent officers and fatherly sergeants, slackers, wound-prone privates, and innocents caught in the most lurid moments of their lives.

The book draws heavily on the author's personal experience. William March participated in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, Belleau Wood, St. Mihiel, and Blanc Mont campaigns. Roy S. Simmonds, March's chief biographer, unearthed a number of facts about the author and offered them as evidence that the stories told in *Company K* are not entirely fictitious, but based on fact. For example, Simmonds believes that March's own experience is the basis for the story of Private Manuel Burt. Burt stabbed a young German Soldier in the mouth with his bayonet and killed him. Later, the ghostly visitations from the young German soldier drive him insane. After the war, and until his death, March suffered from "hysterical conditions related to both his throat and eyes."<sup>1</sup>

Just as likely autobiographical, was the murder of the twenty-two German prisoners ordered by Captain Terence Matlock. March contrasts Private Walter Drury, the only Marine who refused to participate in the massacre and who runs away only to be court martialed for desertion, with the blind obedience of Corporal Clarence Foster. The latter justified the killing by saying he read in the paper the Allied propaganda that "[Germans] burn churches and dash out the brains of babies."<sup>2</sup> Private Everett Qualls felt such guilt over the execution he believed that the blight on his family farm was God's retribution for his acts and committed suicide. Private William Nugent, whose description of the massacre includes seemingly random proclamations of his hatred for "preachers" and "cops," killed a policeman after returning home and died in the electric chair. Simmonds also claims that the character of Private Joseph Delaney likely represents March. After the war, Delaney presents a chronicle of his wartime experience to his wife. Her suggestion to "take out the part about shooting the prisoners" is probably a criticism of editors who considered the manuscript for publication.<sup>3</sup>

*Company K* was written by William Edward Campbell (1893-1954) under the pseudonym William March. It was initially serialized in magazines from 1930 to 1932, before being published in January 1933. The 1989 printing, reviewed here, contains an introduction by Philip D. Beidler, Professor of English at the University of Alabama and author of *Rewriting America: Vietnam Authors in their Generation*. Readers, new to *Company K*, any of March's other works, or the genre of historical fiction, will appreciate the insights in Beidler's updated introduction. However, modern readers, like this reviewer, used to the storytelling tradition where plots are resolved by the story's end, will be bothered by March's linear, rather than circular narratives.

March fought in France during World War I and served courageously with the Fifth Marine Regiment until the Armistice in 1918. He earned the French Croix de Guerre, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Navy Cross for his valor during operations in the Blanc Mont region 3-4 October 1918. *Company K* does not mention the historical events that earned March the Distinguished Service Cross, our nation's highest medal for valor after the Congressional Medal of Honor. This omission further attests to March's understatement of his own heroism.

Beidler observes that *Company K* was "written by a man who had been to war, who had clearly seen his share of the worst of it, who had somehow survived, and who had committed himself afterward to the new bravery of sense-making embodied in the creation of major literary art."<sup>4</sup> Other critics have compared *Company K* to Erich Maria Remarque's classic anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*. However, Simmonds maintains that because March based the content on real-life events, readers should not view it as an anti-war novel but "as an affirmation of life."<sup>5</sup>

The opening page of the narrative March anticipates the reader's question: why are the stories told in *Company K* relevant a century or more after the war it depicts? Through Delaney, March's alter ego, he muses: "I have finished my book at last, but I wonder if I have done what I set out to do? This book started out to be a record of my own company, but I do not want it to be that, now."<sup>6</sup> In fact, March has told the story of every soldier, in every company, in every war, past, present, and future and so doing laid bare the nature of war itself.

## Notes

1. William March, *Company K*: with an introduction by Philip D. Beidler (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), xii.

2. *Ibid.*, 127.

3. Roy S. Simmonds, *William March: An Annotated Checklist*, 1st ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1989), 190-192.

4. March, xii.

5. Simmonds, 192.

6. March, 13.