

The dirty 'Devil Dogs' who won the war in the Pacific

BOOKS

By Simon Heffer

DEVIL DOGS

by Saul David

624pp, William Collins,

£25, ebook £14.99



★★★★★

Until near the end of the Second World War, once the defeat of Nazi Germany was certain, the war in the Pacific against the Japanese was entirely America's struggle. Specialising as they did in amphibious operations, the US Marines played a vital part in taking the fight directly to the enemy: one heavily fortified and unfortifying island after another had to be flushed clean of Japanese soldiers, as the Americans made their advance towards the home islands of Japan.

Saul David's page-turning new book focuses on K Company, 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marines, part of what the author calls the "legendary" 1st Marine Division, or "The Old Breed". In their brief appearance during the Great War in 1918, they fought so ferociously that the Germans called them *Typhel*.

Hunden, or "Devil Dogs", and they carried the name into the next war.

For K 3/5, or King Company, that next war was a far longer, bloodier and tougher one, with a high rate of casualties and, for the men concerned, more than a fair share of horror. David chose this unit of men because it was in action from the beginning to the end of the Pacific war: from Guadalcanal, on the outer limit of Japanese expansion and a relatively short hop from the north coast of Australia, in August 1942, to Okinawa in the summer of 1945 via New Britain, off New Guinea, and

Peleliu, east of the Philippines. The narrative is one of attritional, sickening fighting. One of the many problems the Marines had is that the closer they came to the "Motherland", the more fanatically the enemy fought to defend it.

David decided to tell the story of the Pacific this way – about one unit fighting all the way through – following the example of Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*, which looked at the progress of a unit from the D-Day beaches through to victory against Germany. As with Ambrose's work, there has already been a television dramatisation of the events in David's book – HBO's *The Pacific* – but here the details and personalities are set out in a chronicle that is part Hollywood film script, but never less than rigorously researched history.

David has a claim to be our finest living military historian, with a string of highly acclaimed books about a range of conflicts behind him. For this work he has combed US government papers and accounts written by the men themselves both at the time (even though it was against regulations to keep a diary) and afterwards.

He draws heavily on the memoir of Eugene B. Sledge, or "Sledgehammer", who saw most of the fighting that David describes and who became, effectively, the unit's official chronicler. Sledge struggled to find a publisher for his memoir when he first tried in the late 1970s: now that just about everyone is dead (though a gratifying number of the survivors lived well into their 90s), their astonishing bravery and endurance are nearly incomprehensible to a generation whose principal concern is paying their gas bills, and such recollections have a rarity value that makes them highly prized.

Sledge and his NCO comrade RV Burgin are the two threads that run more or less through the whole book:



GETTY IMAGES

they were lucky enough to survive (Burgin sustained a minor wound to his neck on Okinawa; Sledge was a rare Marine to see years of fighting and come home without a Purple Heart).

Otherwise, a parade of cheerful, courageous and heroic young Americans, from one-horse towns across the country, marches through the pages of this book: the officers are mainly men the other ranks would follow anywhere, the other ranks are mainly tough-as-hell street-fighters who want to blast what they invariably call "the Japs". It is like all those films you have seen of the Pacific war, but

this is a scholarly work, and the copious footnotes refer the reader to the accounts showing that these remarkable events really happened. Those who fought in the Pacific had two enemies: "the Japs" and the conditions. On some islands it hardly stopped raining, men and material had

In Guadalcanal, the US Marines saw a river awash with the body parts of their comrades

Band of brothers: US Marines drink coffee aboard a Coast Guard assault transport, after fighting to take Eniwetok Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1944

code of honour. From that point, they take hardly any prisoners. Although their own bravery is conspicuous – officers and men will expose themselves in the open to try to flush out snipers, for example – there remains a sense of astonishment that the enemy continues to go on its own suicide missions when it knows the battle is lost. Running into a fusillade of the Marines' machine-guns is an honourable form of death, and David recounts a succession of Japanese commanders committing *haru-kiri* – ritually disembowelling themselves before being beheaded – because of the defeats inflicted on them.

The author never fails to remind us of the various realities of death – the stretch, the entrench, the maggots, the dried blood – and that many of those who experienced this were still teenagers, many of the other ranks what the Americans call "grunts".

But David is alert to the shortcomings on the part of the righteous: an unpopular officer shows cowardice in the face of the enemy, as does an equally unpopular sergeant, raising the question of how such people ever rose to positions of authority in an elite corps in the first place. There is the shock one Marine feels at seeing another pulling the gold teeth from a Japanese corpse, and the even greater shock of a Marine contemplating taking a severed Japanese hand home with him as a souvenir. Brave though they are, many grunts behave like well-grunts.

Although David superbly recreates every aspect of the atmosphere of this war short of exposing his readers to the actual physical danger, some readers may find the extensive recreations of American banter rather tedious: but that is a small price to pay for so superb a history.

To order your copy for £19.99, call 0844 8711514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk