



Steven James Hantzis. *Rails of War: Supplying the Americans and Their Allies in China-Burma-India.*

Potomac Books, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 2017. pp. xiii + 199. Maps. Illust. Notes. Bibliog. Index. Hb. £23. ISBN 9 7816 1234 8537

The *Rails of War* was clearly a labour of love by Steven James Hantzis. His father served alongside other railroaders during the Second World War, battling in horrendous conditions in the China-Burma-India theatre. Hantzis attempts to describe this heroic struggle. He succeeds magnificently.

Unsurprisingly, given his heritage, Hantzis has an extensive knowledge of this area of conflict. He is able to describe events vividly as well as analyse them. “Indian railroads were an instrument of British power” succinctly summarises one aspect of this issue without taking one side or being controversial. The whole book is a good mixture of analysis and earthy description. Some facts were so stark that they stood on their own as a tragedy of epic proportions. “From 1891 to 1941 twenty-five major famines claimed between thirty and forty million Indians in Tamil Nadu to the south, Bihar to north, and Bengal to the east.”

Hantzis moves easily from one tone to another. One chapter begins with “Have you seen this crap”, which immediately jolts the reader from analysis, evokes our curiosity and plunges us into the day-to-day life of the average GI. In the chapter about the battle of Kohima, the tone changes again when, as Hantzis describes, “The stench of the dead and dying grew overwhelming. The wounded were being wounded again, a second and third time. Some of the wounded defenders began asking for their pistol as final insurance that, should Kohima be overrun, they would not be used for bayonet practice, the standard Japanese employment for wounded captives.”

The author lightens the mood with such observations as the fact that during the maiden trip of the Red Cross Trainmobile its crew handed out 30,000 doughnuts over 30 days.

Hantzis skillfully uses such light tones on several occasions, otherwise the unremitting gloom of the plight of the protagonists would be difficult to take. For example, he refers to mongooses as “wily critters”, describes the train’s braking system as “crappy” and calls General Miyazaki Shigesaburo, leader of the Japanese forces at Kohima, a “tough son of a bitch”. It would be wrong, in my view, to criticise the writer for using inappropriate language or adopting the wrong tone.

Hantzis uses telling statistics to good effect. For example, the Ledo Road cost the lives of 1133 men during the road’s construction, making the human cost roughly a man a mile. The author puts its construction in context by referring to the desperately poor workers whose ranks included Mahratta, Madrasis, Bengalis and Hindu and Muslim Punjabis. From the hill folk and tribes the Americans hired Chamars, Orias, Bihari aborigines,

Garos, Nepalese and Gurkhas. The diverse workforce was described as “an anthropologist’s dream but a mess sergeant’s nightmare”.

Hantzis does not ignore the bigger picture and places the China-Burma-India theatre in the context of world news. He refers to the Soviet Union’s capture of Warsaw and its quickening advance on Berlin. At this time, public attention was also, as Hantzis points out, riveted on the US and British efforts to contain Hitler’s counteroffensive in the Battle of the Bulge.

To sum up, this was a theatre of war, as is explained in the dust-cover, long forgotten and barely even known at the time. The author brings this period of history to life by drawing on his own heritage. At fewer than 200 pages and with a good selection of black and white photographs, it is an attractive book. It is made fascinating by the author’s research, background and consummate skills as a narrator.

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