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Battle Cry Revisited: “Don’t Worry, Mom, Everything is Going to be All Right”

Of the many hundreds of American novels about the Second World War, none has equaled the popular success of ex-Pfc. Leon Uris’s *Battle Cry* (1953), a spirited celebration of the U.S. Marines in the Pacific—in love and war, in combat and out. An indifferent student from an unhappy family background, Uris dropped out of high school in Baltimore early in 1942 to enlist in the U.S. Marine Corps at the age of seventeen: during the ‘50s and ‘60s he became one of the top-selling American novelists in publishing history. As a radioman with Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines, Uris served at Guadalcanal and Tarawa before bouts of dengue fever and recurrent malaria resulted in his evacuation to Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in California; after an appropriate convalescence, he worked on war bond projects till the end of the war. *Battle Cry*, his first novel, was published in January, 1953, to immediate popular acclaim. As the book climbed the national bestseller lists, Uris told the press that he’d begun working on it in 1950, about four years after leaving the service. In the years since the war he’d worked at several jobs, most notably as home-delivery manager in the circulation department of the *San Francisco Call-Bulletin*. Ex-sergeant Merle Miller, a journalist, who had covered Eniwetok and Kwajalein for *Yank: The Army Weekly* and published a realistic novel, *Island 49* (1945), about a Pacific invasion, hailed *Battle Cry* in the prestigious *Saturday Review of Literature* as “a wonderfully

different kind of war novel,” which he hoped would be the start of a “whole new and healthy trend in American war literature.”²¹

As critics William Darby, Philip Beidler, and Kathleen Shine Cain have observed, *Battle Cry*—dedicated “to the United States Marines, and to one in particular, Staff Sergeant Betty Beck Uris,” the author’s wife—is “wonderfully different” from its blockbuster war-novel predecessors in several ways. It was, notably, the first bestseller of its day to focus on the U. S. Marine Corps. A realist-romantic rather than a naturalist work, it lacks almost entirely the cynicism that pervades *The Naked and the Dead*, *The Young Lions*, and *From Here to Eternity*, all bestsellers and all critically, though not universally, acclaimed. Related to the novel’s general optimism, however, is a fatal flaw from the standpoint of criticism: *Battle Cry* is long, long on sentiment but short, short on insight. Worse, an independent reading tends to support Darby’s impression that *Battle Cry* “uses the characters, clichés and dialog one finds in World War II propaganda films”; like Beidler after him, Darby singles out the still-popular John Wayne vehicle *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) as an obvious adumbration. But the similarities between the two Marine epics are more generic than particular, typical of World War II movies: there’s the tough but solicitous sergeant, the ethnically representative platoon, the arduous but perfectly achieved evolution of the unit into an efficient fighting force. In its box office combination of sentiment, humor, and violence (the big three of Hollywood entertainment for decades) *Sands of Iwo Jima* is as easy a target of jaded scorn as *Battle Cry*. But though *Battle Cry* mixes similar ingredients, Uris’s novel of the war in the Pacific is less comprehensively purged of the disagreeable details of military service. A further distinction, which critics have quite failed to notice, is the absence from Uris’s novel of strong elements of patriotism and idealism, qualities which many claim to find there in abundance. There will be more to say on this interesting point.

Battle Cry combines a surface realism with a thoroughgoing sentimentality. Ingenuous fans of earlier bestsellers that do the same—Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind* is an excellent example—undoubtedly found some of the language and situations of *Battle Cry* disturbing, even shocking, when it appeared in 1953; according to amateur online reviews, even some current readers are offended. (Unlike squad leader John Wayne, the drill instructor in *Battle Cry* greets his new charges with the common cliché, never publicized in wartime propaganda movies, “Remember this, you sonofabitches—your soul may belong to Jesus, but your ass belongs to me” [31]; from the same trove of NCO phrases comes “Drop your cocks and grab your socks” [456]). But Darby’s and Beidler’s claim that Uris

found his inspiration in war movies is incomplete: possibly no American war novel of comparable scope and ambition employs a style so skewed toward, so faithful to, so completely accepting of, the conventions of pulp fiction, soap opera, and movie melodrama generally. Perhaps it is cheating—perhaps not—to note that the 1968 Bantam reprint, published at the height of the Vietnam War, devotes 95% of its blood-red back cover to six huge all upper-case words: “ITS [sic] GOT GUTS, GORE AND GLORY.” And quite true it is. *Battle Cry* by now has sold several million copies in eleven languages and is still selling after sixty years (a new mass-market edition appeared in 2005 and was in its fourth printing by 2010), and the sanitized 1955 film version (with a screenplay by Leon Uris) has entertained millions. It is safe to say that no private citizen, including John Wayne, has done more than Leon Uris, in print and on screen, to publicize and glorify the United States Marine Corps. The enduring popularity of *Battle Cry*, aided by Uris’s personal authority as a Pacific War veteran, is the chief source of its literary significance.²

Unlike *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Norman Mailer’s trend-setting and deeply pessimistic bestseller about Pacific combat, *Battle Cry* employs an intimate, first-person narrator who, though a secondary character in the novel, is as impossibly omniscient as Melville’s Ishmael, and he immediately introduces himself with the same informality: “They call me Mac.” This was a generic form of address among enlisted Marines in World War II that was almost as widely used as “man” or “dude” is today. Mac’s real name, however, is “unimportant”; it’s his service record and his presence as a living symbol of the Marines that matter: Mac has “thirty years in the United States Marine Corps” and wears the six stripes of master technical sergeant. He immediately launches into the colorful details of a thrill-packed career:

I’ve sailed the Cape and the Horn aboard a battlewagon with a sea so choppy the bow was awash half the time under thirty-foot waves. I’ve stood legation guard in Paris and London and Prague. I know every damned port of call and call house in the Mediterranean and the world that shines beneath the Southern Cross like the nomenclature of a rifle.

I’ve sat behind a machine gun poked through barbed wire that encircled the International Settlement [in Shanghai in 1937] when the world was supposed to be at peace, and I’ve called Jap bluffs on the Yangtze Patrol a decade before Pearl Harbor. (1)

Mac’s seabag is full of equally evocative images that unashamedly glorify the Corps even as they conjure an interwar world where a ubiquitous American

military, by implication if not in fact, acted swiftly and decisively against its future adversaries. A veteran of the “slick brown hills of Korea” during the war of 1950-53, Mac wows readers by alluding casually to the little-known landing of Marines in Korea in 1871: “fighting in Korea is an old story for the Corps” (1). Kathleen Shine Cain locates Mac’s tough, self-consciously colorful manner in the “hardboiled detective novels of the 1930s and 1940s,” but this, once again, is too specific, for the style also typified mass-circulation pulp magazines like *Argosy* and *Adventure*, whose greatest heyday, along with specialized war-adventure pulps like *Wings*, *War Stories*, *Battle Stories*, and *Dare-Devil Aces*, was in the ‘20s and ‘30s. By Mac’s second paragraph the thunderous promise of the book’s title is already being fulfilled: we’re escaping—there’s no other word for it—into a masculine world of battle and excitement. It is a world, moreover, whose chief values will turn out to be toughness, competence, experience, pride, aggressiveness, steadfastness, teamwork, and absolute loyalty to people who deserve it. These, of course, are military virtues widely recognized in the modern world, if less consistently endorsed in serious literature. Of equal importance to the novel are healthy slugs of the popular values of sentiment, camaraderie, and confrontation, with nearly as much sex as the early ‘50s would countenance in a novel aimed at the “general reader” (by today’s standards, that’s very little). *Battle Cry*, in other words, is not the Marine Corps of disillusioned writers of World War I like Thomas Boyd or William March, or of an uncomplicated realist like John W. Thomason, Jr. The personal experience behind *Battle Cry* has been fully processed by a sensibility almost wholly formed and nurtured by popular culture. One might turn, for a somewhat comparable mixture of the real and the conventional, to the Reconstruction Era’s *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* (1867), with the vast difference that John W. De Forest, who’d been an officer in the Union Army, came from the opposite direction: he wrote at a time when popular fiction was not used to incorporating unsavory aspects of real life without explicitly condemning them, no matter how processed and enhanced. De Forest added an innovative realism to an established sentimental frame. Uris, on the other hand, reorients a naturalist tradition back toward sentimentalism. At one point Uris’s Marines sarcastically evaluate the on-screen foolishness of John Payne and Maureen O’Hara in *To the Shores of Tripoli* (1943); yet *Battle Cry* exploits like few other novels the romanticized Corps of fast-paced fiction and realistic-romantic war movies like *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943) and *Pride of the Marines* (1945). That world, rather than the less confident world of naturalistic fiction, is what *Battle Cry* initiates us into—as if any such initiation were necessary for frequent consumers of popular culture.³

Uris's overseas service notwithstanding, his treatment of character and incident seems to owe little to the introspective assimilation of real experience. It is a world of romance, and in a world of romance everything and everyone conforms to type. Any depth or subtlety one might have hoped for in a novel of 175,000 words is thus forestalled by endless theatrical and familiar incidents and innumerable dialogues of limited originality or interest. As Mac characterizes the communications platoon of the battalion self-characterized as "Huxley's Whores," anyone who's been inside a movie theater or read formula fiction in the *Saturday Evening Post* will recognize the cast:

We had our cowards and our heroes. And we had guys in love and so homesick they near died of it.

There was the company clown, the farmer, the wanderer, the bigot, the boy with the mission, the Texan. ...

And there were the women. The ones who waited and the ones who didn't. (2)

The literary issue isn't whether the prototypes of such characters exist in real life; it's the authorial readiness to pour them onto the page and keep them two-dimensional. (Mailer's characters—the Texan, the liberal, the redneck, the Jew, the hobo, the autocrat—might also be described as belonging as much to central casting as to reality, but Mailer saves them from stereotyping by granting each one considerable history and interiority.) Uris brings other well-worn types on deck too: a high-school football hero and a clumsy blond Swede, a reformed delinquent and a comic Indian who says "Me no like um white man's war," Spanish Joe Gomez ("the biggest thief, liar, and goldbricker in the Marine Corps") and a hapless battalion orderly known only as Ziltch. The women of *Battle Cry*, are, if possible, even flimsier creations than the men: the teen-age sweetheart, the warm-hearted "good girl" prostitute, the adulterous Navy wife, and the lonely, loving war widow. Yet, to habitués of pop entertainment, such familiar labels don't invite yawns: they reveal personality.⁴

Mac, Uris's ideal NCO, is a drinking, whoring, two-fisted leatherneck who is devoted to the "kids" of his radio squad. Major Huxley, Uris's ideal commander, is a contentious glory-hunter, a "crazy bastard" who nevertheless knows all eight hundred "boys" in his battalion personally. Most of the other characters are similarly heart-of-gold types, including of course Rae, the red-headed prostitute

who is reformed by Pvt. Marion Hodgkiss, the teenage intellectual equipped with *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and a Classical record collection. Gomez, a comic sociopath, is “civilized” by his unlikely buddy, the same bookish and protective Hodgkiss, who also happens to be, secretly, a boxing champ. Aside from the civilian crooks (“stinking vultures”) who prey on the lads in San Diego, the worst “villain” is the arrogant Lieutenant Bryce, who was never cut out to be a Marine—but he has a psychotic breakdown before he can do much harm, and he is more pitied, even by Huxley, than he is reviled. The avuncular Pvt. Norton, an Ivy League instructor, explains Susan’s betrayal of Ski, and Elaine’s betrayal of her cipher husband, as caused by the upheavals of wartime that make some women “act crazily.” But more than balancing these failures of trust are the good bad-girl Rae; the supportive New Zealand widow, Pat; and the prim but passionate schoolgirl sweetheart Kathy.

A third of *Battle Cry* is devoted to recruit training at Camp Elliot, Marine Corps Base San Diego, early in 1942. The DIs humiliate the recruits (whose stock characteristics Uris exploits to the hilt), whack and poke them with swagger sticks, and hand out punishments such as sleeping with a rifle strapped to one’s leg or double-timing three miles with buckets of salt water. It’s reasonably accurate and it remains possibly the most comprehensive picture of basic training in American fiction; but in accordance with the conventions of the day, the vulgarity and brutishness of 1940s boot camp is considerably played down (though sadistically humorous possibilities are emphasized, and the famous “This is my rifle, this my gun...” verse is given for the first time in American literature). More disturbing to the naïve reader may be the judo instructor’s graphic lesson in bare-handed killing, perhaps also a literary first; but his “youse guys” diction replaces discomfort with comedy and classes him with the slapstick gangsters of movie farce. By the time the recruits have graduated from advanced radio training, all are conventionally eager to get into action; yet the war, despite the early reported death of Norton, a voluntary transfer, is still chiefly vague and faraway. Until the squad sees its first American dead on Guadalcanal, the Japanese are little more than rumored adversaries who exist simply to be met and defeated, no more formidable and no less beatable than a team of gridiron challengers.

From San Diego, Mac’s untried platoon moves to Guadalcanal under the battalion command of Major Sam Huxley. Huxley, indeed, is the novel’s most interesting character, a “hell of a good man,” Mac assures us, “tougher than a cob..., always at the head of the column” (4). He’s tough all right: once overseas he can’t wait to spearhead an amphibious assault, and later, while training in New Zealand, he leads his command on an agonizing but record-shattering march of sixty hilly

miles in heavy packs to embarrass rival battalions and boost the men's morale for having done it. Just as importantly, the march will prepare the Marines for worse hardships than Guadalcanal. Mere moments after threatening to see Huxley court-martialed for driving his troops into the ground, the battalion surgeon sighs predictably, "Thank God the Marines are filled with crazy officers like you" (344). Part of the point, however, is that Huxley himself is marching too, not riding, and not faltering either. And real officers like Huxley, even sane ones, are expected to heed the Chinese proverb—to make their troops "sweat in peace," the less to "bleed in war," and *Battle Cry*, with its graphic descriptions of the dead floating in the lagoon at Betio Island ("In two wars...the most frightful thing I have seen," wrote USMC artist Kerr Eby at the time) leaves no doubt that bleeding in war is the destiny of Marines.⁵

Sanguinary conflict certainly is Huxley's goal. In New Zealand, he tells one private's sweetheart that "[t]he happiness of every one of my boys concerns me, Pat" (315). But two related incidents show that professionally he is less concerned about their personal survival.

The first unlikely confrontation comes shortly after the Sixth Marines have arrived on Guadalcanal. Huxley—a junior officer by three grades—defiantly tells the Army general in command that his highly trained Marine battalion is "too good to waste" on "mopping up" (228); he wants to invade another island right away. The general, unlike Huxley, wants to secure Guadalcanal first, conserving American lives by relying as much as possible on artillery rather than infantry to grind down the Japanese. To Marines like Sam Huxley and Leon Uris, this shows just how soft the Army really is. Huxley finally explodes: "General Pritchard...you can take the whole goddam army and shove it you know where" (229). After Huxley has stormed off, Uris shamelessly boosts the Corps by having Pritchard remark to an aide, who's been allowed to remain present during the showdown, "[I]f I was on the lines fighting for my life and I had my choice of whom I wanted on my right and on my left, I'd call for a couple of Marines" (230).

The scene is replayed in Hawaii nearly a year later as Huxley, promoted to lieutenant colonel, browbeats a Marine general into assigning his battalion to the first wave in the coming Saipan landing. Like the other battalions, they've been mauled at Tarawa and are riddled with dengue fever and malaria. Thus, hoping to improve the odds of victory through the use of rested, veteran troops has nothing to do with it: Huxley unabashedly seeks glory for his somewhat weakened but resolute battalion even though he knows it means significant casualties among his "boys." To stay in reserve is to rest on their laurels, which is almost a defeat in itself.

Uris pays no attention to the certainty that by playing a key role in the assault, Huxley will also enhance his own reputation. General Snipes, who proudly calls himself “the meanest sonofabitch in the Corps” and has just threatened Huxley with a court-martial for insubordination, quickly gives in, because “It’s crazy bastards like you that make the Marine Corps” (450). (In Joseph Heller’s much later satire *Catch-22*, official “craziness” is a menace; in the realistic romance *Battle Cry*, it’s a virtue.) When the general tells Huxley he should be “quite proud” of his successful pleading, Huxley’s emotional about-face comes straight from the melodramatic repertoire: “As proud as a man could be when he’s dug the graves for three hundred boys.” (450).

Those graves, according to the half-logic of *Battle Cry*, are Huxley’s personal tragedy and no one else’s. As in all sentimental fiction, we are expected to take the depth of his feelings on trust and to have no interest in even his stated internal conflicts. The three hundred prospective fatalities are merely a signal to the reader to feel sad while awaiting developments.

Huxley’s demand to lead the way at Saipan must startle and repel readers unfamiliar with the professional psychology of a combat commander in wartime—and by the norms of civilized life their repugnance is justified. But as fiction and nonfiction have shown repeatedly, the military in wartime is not much like civilized life. Casualties would be more or less comparable for any experienced battalion coming ashore in the slot Huxley demands: the real issue for the reader is Huxley’s knowledge that he’s sacrificing his own men for the sake of fame—including his own. Here Uris identifies, but declines to examine, the perennial symbiosis of willful manslaughter and military glory. Uris examines none of the contradictory humanist issues of motive and morality implicit in Huxley’s combination of combative zeal and fatherly love for his “boys.” He is content instead to portray Huxley as just one more intrepid Marine hero, and he leaves us to cheer the man’s guts rather than reflect upon the uncomfortable implications of either his profession or his psychology. (Nor does the novel encourage the idea that Huxley’s motive is primarily idealistic, a blow for democracy or the Constitution.) Like most characters of romance, Huxley simply does what he does, and it is not his creator’s job to wonder why. Huxley dies on Saipan in extreme cinematic circumstances. “Skipper, I can’t leave you,” says Mac as Huxley ties up the bleeding stump of his own severed leg. Instantly Huxley pulls a .45 and orders Mac back to his post: “If I’m not there in ten minutes, tell Wellman he’s got a battalion” (460-61). It is as stagey in its modern way as the noble death of the hero Roland in the

eleventh century, who, however, cared so little for his Frankish men-at-arms that their existence is scarcely mentioned. But like Roland's, Huxley's death in battle absolves him of any possible "sin."

The banality that defines the characters and situations in *Battle Cry* naturally encourages banal responses. And most interesting of these is the confident assumption that Uris's Marines are dedicated idealists, determined to fight for freedom or the flag or democracy or the American way of life or at least to punish the Japanese for Pearl Harbor. In a brief notice, *Time* magazine called the novel "crude" but praised Uris's Marines for having "the virtue—refreshing in fiction—of knowing what they were fighting for."⁶ But Uris tells us, repeatedly, that they don't know—not that he finds that any more interesting or troubling than any other issue that a war story inevitably raises.

The American serviceman of World War II was not known to be a voluble, patriotic idealist; but *Battle Cry*, paying scant attention to motivations of any kind, avoids patriotism, as a topic of interest, almost completely. In this, of course, it resembles most British and American war novels. What makes patriotism a relevant issue is that many readers (including Darby, Beidler, and Cain) believe that the novel ringingly endorses, even propagandizes, America's war with Japan. Yet, though *Battle Cry* is worshipful of the military, patriotism—except as interpreted simplistically as serving at all—is hard to find. It is more accurate to say that, despite an occasional lapse, Uris's Marines are just good sports about being at war. All but Lieutenant Bryce clearly want to be Marines, or would rather be Marines than be drafted elsewhere. We know this because until 1943, the Marines were an all-volunteer service. (The late-arriving Pvt. Levin is hazed for being a Jew, but at least as much for being a draftee.) Nonetheless, just why these young men have enlisted remains opaque in almost every case. No one except Ski, who has joined solely for the regular paycheck that will take him from the slums with his girlfriend Susan—and the pharmacist's mate Rojas, who joined to escape racism in Texas and to learn medicine—appears to have had much reason at all; and that includes Huxley who, long before the war, sought an appointment to Annapolis after graduating from Ohio State. The "all-American" Danny Forrester feels only that going to college to play football as planned "doesn't seem right...with a war going on" (16); on the train to San Diego he asks himself, "Why did I join?...why?" Apparently only because others were doing the same. When Andy Hookans considers deserting in New Zealand, asking his new wife Pat, "Dammit, what do we owe this lousy war? What do we owe the Marines?" she replies only, "Each other" (353). Pat persuades Andy to go back not out of idealism or loyalty but because she's pregnant and will not live

as a fugitive. The avuncular Pvt. Norton, slightly older than the average enlistee, is no different. “What am I fighting for, Danny?” he says when asked. “That’s easy—peace of mind” (96). Norton doesn’t explain this mystery, which might have coaxed an entire novel from that more penetrating romantic, Joseph Conrad, but Danny agrees it’s a good reason. In line with the novel’s cliché psychology, Norton volunteers for a Pioneer unit that’s expected to get into combat promptly, because he believes that his gesture will help end the war quickly. That fatal gesture is as close to an expression of actual patriotism as any character—or reader—will get. Its place is taken by Huxley’s desire to win glory, the Marines’ reciprocity of comradeship, and the emotional support of sweethearts and wives—all, of course, influential forces in wartime. But the critical perception that *Battle Cry* is a flag-waving extravaganza of idealistic youth fighting for freedom like Washington’s Continentals is simply erroneous. Even Beidler assumes that the title alludes patriotically to George F. Root’s Civil War anthem, “The Battle Cry of Freedom” (1862). Yet the phrase *battle cry* appears only twice in the book: once in connection with the famous line said to have been uttered at Belleau Wood in 1918 (“Retreat, hell! We just got here.”) (3) and again as used sarcastically by Lieutenant Bryce—see below—and it has less to do with idealism than has Menelaus’ war cry at Troy.

In fact, Uris refrains from endorsing any attitude or ideology beyond a kind of military Norman Rockwellism. Rockwell’s signature art, which graced the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post* for decades, is noted—or notorious—for its great clarity of realistic detail in the service of a gently humorous sentimentality. This was long a standard formula for popular fiction as well, and one often gets a comparable feeling from *Battle Cry*: some of the ghastliness and terror of battle (rotting corpses, urine running down Mac’s leg) is adequately described only to be quickly subsumed by clowning and sentiment. Perfunctory attempts to address large abstract issues result in foolishness or unintentional parody. Mac says, with embarrassing inclusiveness, “I do not berate any man who carries a gun in war, no matter what his uniform” (2). Forrester, the only character to muse seriously about the war, asks Hodgkiss what they’re really “doing halfway around the world”:

“I know I’m a Marine and there’s a war. But just killing—it isn’t right, Marion. . . . I only hope I’m fighting for the right thing. . . .”

“You have to feel that way, Danny, or you can’t fight.”

“I suppose so. Anyhow...it’s too deep for [me].” (275)

And that's that. It unintentionally admits the unpatriotic possibility—hypothetical, but jarring anyway—that the Marines might conceivably be “fighting for the wrong thing.” When, the night before Saipan, Danny again seeks a fundamental justification for going to war, the supposedly intellectual Hodgkiss (again) has the final entertainment-inspired, nearly incoherent word:

“Every man on this ship will give you a different answer. His own piece of land, his own dream, his own woman, his own way of life. None of us has the same answer.

“. . . [D]on't let anybody tell you that you were a sucker. Something better has got to come from it all, it has to. . .

“. . . Don't let anybody tell you that we are going to hell. If we were, we'd have done so long ago. Just don't forget that this out here is only part of the fight.” (456)

While Uris is surely right to imply that armies and navies really are collections of vastly differing individual purposes and motives, both noble and otherwise, the private's words are not very cogent. They assure us that good of an unspecified, unpredictable kind will come of the war, that “we” won't “go to hell” (possibly referring to the American character, but there's absolutely no clue in context), and that the “fight” for something good is going on elsewhere too. And that's that again, except for the odd individual fighting “for his own [not the national] way of life,” whatever that means. Studies have shown that the average American of 1944 had little ability to discourse on what World War II was “about,” and no one expects a 20-year-old private, even if he listens to classical music and reforms a prostitute, to have all the answers; but even by Hollywood standards this kind of “patriotism” is pretty thin stuff. Wartime Hollywood tended to emphasize advancement of the Four Freedoms and vengeance for Axis crimes against peace as the basis for American involvement. Whatever Uris and his comrades-in-arms in the actual 2/6 radio squad understood about the origins and aims of World War II, one hopes it was a bit more than this. But their postwar expectations must have been as bleak as those of Norman Mailer's disgruntled G.I.'s. “The Golden Gate in forty-eight,” says one of Uris's Marines, “the bread line in forty-nine” (240).

On Guadalcanal Uris brings in a straw man solely to challenge the goodness of the Corps: this is the self-centered and effeminate Lieutenant Bryce, “the most pretentious, egotistical individual” Major Huxley has ever met—an assistant professor of English at Stanford who has no role in the story except to come onstage

as a bad example. When Huxley asks sarcastically, “Why did you join the Corps?” Bryce responds enigmatically, “I’d rather not answer that.” Pushed to anger, he whines pacifist platitudes:

“Blood, glory, whiskey and women. That’s the Marine *battle cry*. The deeper they wade in blood the better. Socially, spiritually, morally, you are nothing but professional killers—against every concept of democratic ideals.” (259; emphasis added)

Huxley tells him that the war and the island “aren’t ideals. They are very real. Killing Japs is real and we are going to kill them and save our ideals for future reference.” Here, most pointedly, Uris declines an opportunity to wave the flag, because patriotic feeling is irrelevant and perhaps even embarrassing. The Marines, as Huxley explicitly says, do not primarily dedicate themselves to democratic or any other civilian ideals. Their purpose as a military force is to fight wars at the discretion of the President and the Congress. Their special suitability for that role and their uniqueness as an elite organization have long been articles of faith in the Marine Corps, as famously, if somewhat hyperbolically, expressed in the mid ‘50s by Lieutenant General Lewis B. (“Chesty”) Puller: “Now, if you’re [a] Marine, you’re all Marine. You’ll put the Corps above your family, your country, even God and all else in some cases.”⁷ This is the way of the world in *Battle Cry*. Uris even includes an admirable minor character, General Foul Ball Philips, who “knew no God except the Marine Corps” (374).

Mac’s superficial inquiry into the mystery of valor is no more persuasive than Bryce’s canned tirade against the Marines:

On the Second Battalion the fate of the operation had hinged and like a lot of kids on a lot of other islands they had apparently been licked. But nobody got around to telling them so and it was that extra something nobody can explain that pulled them through. (469)

Is that really all there is to it? That “extra something”? The sports page diction? An unspoken tenet of art is that people are more complicated than that. One might protest that Mac’s cracker-barrel analysis is entirely appropriate because “that’s how an ordinary Marine would talk and think.” Possibly. But an obvious reply would be that exploring such issues is part of a serious novel’s job, especially when, as here, the novelist himself sets them up for exploration. Furthermore, to spotlight a

trustworthy narrator's opinion in this way certainly implies authorial endorsement; and *Battle Cry*, like all of Uris's novels, is at least intended to be serious. After the publication of *Topaz* (1967), his sixth book, Uris told Hal Boyle of the Associated Press precisely how he felt: "The novelist...has to expose himself to the filthy, the leprous, the ugly, as part of life. He can't take his eyes away from truth."⁸

But surely settling for an advertising cliché as an explanation of heroism does a disservice to the truth. (The Coca-Cola ad on the back cover of *Life* for Jan. 11, 1943, featured a beaming Marine in dress blues under the headline, "That *Extra* Something!...You can spot it every time.")

Uris is unmistakably serious too in his repeated rejection of ethnic prejudice, including knee-jerk prejudice against the Japanese. The "bigot" introduced in the Prologue turns out to be the Texan Speedy, though his bigotry against Mexicans and Jews is almost half-hearted compared to the anti-Semitism of characters like Gallagher in *The Naked and the Dead* or the Southerners in Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*. When Speedy says that the Japanese "ain't nothing but a bunch of monkeys," Hodgkiss looks up from a book on Oriental philosophy to correct him, at least according to popular conceptions of history: "On the contrary. Their civilization dates back to a time when all good Texans were living in caves" (254). Forrester, like many literary characters, is startled to find that his battlefield enemy engenders no hatred: "[W]hy does he want to kill me? Maybe he has a girl, a Jap girl, like Kathy....I'm not mad at him" (242). Forrester, like any normal person, cannot emotionally fathom killing someone in the absence of any sense of personal injury. At Tarawa he gives water to a grateful, wounded Japanese soldier, seeing him as "just another poor guy doing what he was ordered to do." When narrator Mac once refers to "fanatic little yellow men" (381), it applies to the defenders of Tarawa, not to the Japanese in general, and it is almost as appreciative of their tenacity as it is contemptuous of their seemingly inexplicable suicidal actions. (Elsewhere Mac calls the same Japanese "damned fine soldiers...[not] like those on the Canal" [398].) Speedy abandons his bigotry when he discovers the decency and extraordinary athletic skill of Levin (a pitching ace as well as a former welterweight champ) and the kindness and altruism of the Navy corpsman Rojas, the only Uris character besides Forrester to get a detailed personal history. At Tarawa too the squad encounters MacIntosh, a judicious and perceptive islander of mixed race, a reader of English books, who tells them that, for the most part, the occupying Japanese had been no more arbitrary and unfair than had been the British, who treated him "like a leper" in his own village. The insubordinate wild man, Captain

Max Shapiro, “looks like a rabbi” to Levin (357) but fights to the death at Saipan like a berserker, inspiring the men behind him to a superhuman counterattack (as they shriek, “*Blood! ...BLOOD!...BLOOD!*” in the novel’s most memorable scene [468].)

Though bittersweet, the novel’s conclusion is full of optimism and pride. Of the four central characters to survive Saipan, only the newly egalitarian Speedy comes away uninjured. Lighttower, the Indian, is deaf.⁹ Andy, who nearly deserted, has lost a leg and needs extensive surgery to “restore his face”—a prospect that seems not to be especially daunting. Danny, with similar good nature, can look forward to doctors “pulling shrapnel out of [his] back for ten years” (474). Mac, the rock-solid personification of the Corps, has needed only a “couple of quarts of blood” to fix him up (469). With Mac in attendance, Danny comes home to his family as the latest crop of draftees entrains for boot camp amid cheers and tears and shouted newspaper extras of the flag-raising on Suribachi.

National pride in the Marines has been a notable part of American mythology since the Battle of Belleau Wood in 1918, and one more reason for the enormous and enduring popularity of *Battle Cry* is its enthusiastic portrayal of the Corps in terms of its own legend. Kipling humorously described the Victorian Royal Marine as a “kind o’ giddy harumphrodite—soldier and sailor too,”¹⁰ but latter-day U.S. Marines are supposed to be rougher, tougher, coarser, more irascible, more resourceful, more tenacious, more aggressive, more courageous, and generally more manly than the members of any other service, singly or in combination. Marine drill instructors have done their share in spreading the word through recruit training, and Marine publicists have worked overtime until the average American might well believe that “the Marines” is virtually a synonym for “U.S. armed forces.” All by himself, the part-real, part-Hollywood, part-symbolic figure of Mac expresses Uris’s love of the Corps, just as Mac looks back with fatherly affection on Huxley’s “battalion of invincible boys” and “my kids, the radio squad” (3).

Battle Cry’s pop sensibility is unrelenting. Now and then, the novel is as realistic as any in its descriptions of the look, smell, and terror of modern combat; indeed, Danny’s bayoneting of a wounded Japanese and his hysterical bashing in of his head would not be out of place in the most harrowing naturalistic novel. In this as in several other passages, Uris refuses to flinch from raw violence, though in a few others (like Huxley’s death scene) he theatricalizes it. Yet combat in *Battle Cry* can suddenly become as thrilling and colorful as on any movie poster (recruiting posters were more muted):

Japs stacked up like cordwood in the rivers [of Guadalcanal] but on they came. Marine heroes born each minute. A blind man given instructions where to fire a machine gun by a paralyzed man. (221)

This is a fantastic variation on an incident on the Tenaru River, publicized in *Life* magazine of March 22, 1943, and later dramatized in the film *Pride of the Marines* (1945). On August 21, 1942, after machine-gunner Pfc. Johnny Rivers was killed in action, his team's ammunition carrier, Pvt. Al Schmid, manned the gun and continued to rake Japanese infantry trying to cross the Tenaru for three hours, assisted by the spotter, Cpl. LeRoy Diamond; when Diamond's arm was broken by a bullet, Schmid had to load and fire by himself while Diamond continued to help direct his fire to the right or left. A Japanese grenade blinded Schmid permanently, but fierce resistance up and down the line compelled the Japanese to abandon the attack; Schmid did not keep firing while blind, nor was Diamond, though bleeding and in pain, "paralyzed." All three men were awarded the Navy Cross for valor.¹¹

In a similar vein, Uris's Captain Max "Two-Gun" Shapiro (whose name comes, embarrassingly, from the title of a novelty song of the 1930s) is described as one of a handful of survivors of a spectacular exploit behind Japanese lines. This fictional episode is a wild exaggeration of the celebrated "Long Patrol" led by Marine Col. Evans Carlson in November and December, 1942. That successful and difficult operation lasted for an nearly thirty days of frequent hit-and-run combat and cost more than two hundred Marine casualties from malaria and other diseases; the patrol's total casualty rate, including thirty-five killed and wounded, was more than a third. Uris, fantastically once more, has Shapiro's platoon cut off from "Coleman's Raiders" and fighting aggressively against the Japanese on their own, not for one but for three months. Eighty percent of Shapiro's fictional Marines die, but the twenty-one of them altogether "are credited with killing almost five hundred Japs" (357)—as many as were killed by Carlson's battalion-strength force.¹² ("The story sounded fantastic indeed," says Mac; it may be that he doesn't believe it either, but that sort of subtlety seems not to be Uris's style.) Later, describing Shapiro's suicidal, one-man onslaught on Saipan, Mac paints him as a prodigious, romantically enigmatic figure:

Was he human after all? . . . Was it his God that sent him forward to sacrifice himself? Or was Max Shapiro merely a mad dog, full of a glorious madness? (468)

Mad dog? Human? Holy being? It's hard to say, but Uris seems to have covered all the bases.

Like Uris, most postwar American combat novelists rejected pre-war pacifism. Generally they expressed instead a Hemingway-style stoicism, sometimes accompanied by a fragile hope for a progressive postwar era. (James A. Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* (1947) is the best known example.) Unlike the First World War perhaps—they told us—the Second had been unavoidable and beyond compromise; victory, however, would bring with it new threats and difficulties, some of them critical and already foreseeable. (Miller's *Island 49* [1945] conveys as much uncertainty as optimism about the ultimate results of the war; *The Naked and the Dead* [1948] warns of quasi-fascistic autocracy; *The Young Lions* [1948], of anti-Semitism and cynicism; James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* [1951], of how hierarchies crush the nonconformist; even the rather conventional *Twelve O'Clock High* [1948], by Sy Bartlett and Beirne Lay, Jr., says that combat command is so fraught with responsibility that even the most stalwart may crack. And the progressive theme of Dan Levin's *Mask of Glory* [1949] is muted by grief for the human toll of victory.¹⁵) Uris, almost alone, rejects all such cautionary messages. Yes, war in *Battle Cry* is sometimes a bitter travail—but more importantly it is a meaningful personal adventure that will (almost certainly) turn out rather fine for you, though there will be great discomfort. The starry-eyed falsity of the message in light of the number of casualties racked up in the book's very own pages is undoubtedly the novel's worst failing: it transcends any argument that Uris is only interested in telling a good story.

Though infinitely less eloquent, intense, or provocative, Uris's position on war is, rather oddly, not too far removed from that of Ernst Jünger, in his romantic-heroic First World War memoir *The Storm of Steel* (1929). A deep political chasm exists between the aristocratic German and the democratic American, but like Jünger, if less overtly and insistently, Uris says that for all its horrors, war should be thought of as an opportunity for personal growth; except for the rare, complete misfit like Bryce, combat in *Battle Cry* builds character. There, however, the similarity ends. Jünger's work reminds us that a really serious romantic is no ingratiating sentimentalist. Uris reduces to nonexistence Jünger's heroic concept of doing battle with worthy opponents in a genuine clash of cultures and ideals. (Consider again Hodgkiss's inventory of likely motives for fighting in World War II; democracy and "the American way of life" are scarcely hinted at, though they are foundational, nationalist ideals that Jünger might have appreciated as worthy of American

allegiance for just that reason.) Heroism in *Battle Cry* is based not on any devotion to a cultural ideal but on the unreflective Marines' plain loyalty to one other, a loyalty not instilled from birth by their national culture, but created through the calculated rigors of Marine training. Uris and Jünger thus stake out two extremes of frontline behavior: at Jünger's Nietzschean end of the spectrum, there is killing and dying for a transcendent political ideal—but at Uris's Knut Rockne end, there is killing and dying simply because that's what's expected. Uris's view may be closer to the truth, but like "that extra something" it seems like a very sterile view. Mac describes the enlisted men's reaction to their commanders' promise on the eve of Saipan that they will be embellishing "the glory of the Corps and adding new battle streamers to our already glorious Regimental Flag":

We had cheered like boots when we heard this spiel before Guadalcanal; we were rather skeptical at Tarawa. This time it was good for a few laughs.
(453)

Such sentiments come as no surprise to readers of twentieth-century war literature, but they do belie the popular impression that Uris's Marine characters are as uncritically gung-ho as the novel they appear in.

Except perhaps to those few youthful readers who are poorly informed yet extraordinarily perceptive, *Battle Cry* suggests that the Pacific war was, principally, an adventurous interlude rather than a miserable, unavoidable, debasing, and extended ordeal with lasting consequences for those who survived the worst of it, as well as for those close to them. That darker view is, broadly, the underlying theme of most serious Pacific combat novels. By way of contrast, the average consumer of popular fiction or its cinematic adaptations, bred on optimism, platitudes, and happy endings in fiction and film, was likely to find *Battle Cry* to be fresh yet familiar, sometimes disturbing yet finally comforting: in other words, a nice read. It's that sheer facility that continues to make more experienced readers squirm. At the end of the book, none of the wounded—not Mac, not Danny, not even Andy—appears to be suffering from any emotional stress, not even insomnia or a desire to discover the meaning of their experiences. They're happy to be back. Life will resume where it left off in 1941. The future is bright. The wounds are not much. We feel pride in the new recruits heading for boot camp and, some, perhaps, ultimately to Okinawa; certainly the novel never suggests that we might fear for them or feel any regret that they have to go. Near the beginning of the book, Mac describes "my kids, the radio squad," as part of a "battalion of invincible boys." His words suggest

unwittingly just how facile Uris's sentimental take on war and combat really is: "They went through a wringer of physical and mental hell but still never failed to give each other that wonderful warmth of comradeship (2)."

The absolutely confident language, the blandness of "that wonderful warmth," the quick, cliché characterization of war with the Japanese as a "physical and mental hell," the pleasant implication that wartime "comradeship" eternally outweighs death and permanently disfiguring wounds—all these things combine, with the implied shake of the head and twinkling eye, to make Mac's claim *Battle Cry's* nearly perfect synopsis. It seems remarkable that a novel so realistically detailed and so apparently rooted in personal experience should subscribe so fully to the trite and the obvious. It may not be so remarkable that such a novel should be an international phenomenon. Its flat and familiar leading characters are warm-hearted and brave and able to overcome nearly insurmountable difficulties; most of the bit players are either amusing or base. The popularity of similar novels on innumerable subjects, ever since the genre took hold in the eighteenth century, might lead one to believe that most readers experience the world, of which war is a part, as trite and obvious. Yet one appreciative and influential reviewer in 1953 saw in Uris's depiction of the Marines not banality but the "the grandeur of man."⁴ For better or worse, Uris's production almost surely holds the title—enviable to some if disquieting to others—of "Greatest Feel-Good Novel of World War II."

From the perspective of literary history, *Battle Cry* reads (and keeps on selling) as though the angry antiwar novels of the '20s and '30s had never been written—or went unread. Its phenomenal sales suggest that even in the twenty-first century this essentially sentimental work may be the number-one war novel of the Western world in terms of international appeal—particularly if one discounts the tremendous boost in popularity given by school reading-lists to Remarque's pacifist *All Quiet on the Western Front* and to Crane's self-consciously artistic *Red Badge of Courage*. One imagines that *Battle Cry* has shaped the way millions of Americans understand both the Marine Corps and the Second World War. Its author upholds the United States Marines as an ideal fighting organization, tougher than any other, but a molder of character and heart-warming friendships. *Battle Cry's* chief claim to literary significance is neither its realistic surface nor its hackneyed sentimentalism. Its significance lies in its remarkably uncritical attitude toward war. Uris expresses almost perfectly the attitude of naïve populations who feel distant from "total" war's worst manifestations, that war must be one of life's most interesting "tests"—to be faced with confidence and a sense of pride in doing one's share. What would

be the purpose of “analysis” or “protest”? Unlike other significant American novels of the world wars, which tend to be either frankly antimilitary or else tragically stoic, *Battle Cry* registers no protests. Its insights into behavior and motivation are minimal and trite. It affords few warnings. It never suggests that war is intolerable or should be rendered obsolete. It seems to say instead, like one of the departing Marine recruits at Pennsylvania Terminal in Baltimore, “Now don’t worry, Mom, everything is going to be all right” (475). Coming on the very last page (though mercifully not the last line), that’s the glowing, comforting, ultimate theme of *Battle Cry*—for those who want to believe.

Notes

1. Few details have been published of Uris’s wartime stint in the Marine Corps; at Tarawa he appears to have been a private first-class. See Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Leon Uris, 78, Dies; Wrote Sweeping Novels Like ‘Exodus,’” *New York Times* (June 25, 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/25/arts/leon-uris-78-dies-wrote-sweeping-novels-like-exodus.html>; L. H. Whittemore, “Author Leon Uris and Wife: They Work as a Team,” *Parade* (May 9, 1976), 22, 24; “Marine Corps Vet Hits Jackpot with First Novel,” *Albuquerque Journal* (June 16, 1953), 14. Miller’s praise is quoted in a full-page ad reproduced by Philip D. Beidler, *The Good War’s Greatest Hits: World War II and American Remembering* (Athens: U. of Georgia Press, 1998), [pl. 12].

2. Leon Uris, *Battle Cry* (N.Y.: Putnam, 1953); all subsequent page references to *Battle Cry* are to the 1954 edition (N.Y.: Bantam Books). The novel has been described, in the context of the marketplace of the 1950s, by William Darby, *Necessary American Fictions: Popular Literature of the 1950s* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987) and by Philip D. Beidler, *Good War’s Greatest Hits*; Kathleen Shine Cain, *Leon Uris: A Critical Companion* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), offers a new-historicist reading. All three give detailed plot synopses of this long novel and its movie adaptation. Beidler concentrates on the sanitized movie; Darby’s discussion—the most detailed—is occasionally inaccurate (as when “Australia” replaces “New Zealand”), and Cain’s—shaky on the meaning of “regiment”—is the most sympathetic.

3. Mac/Uris commits an amazing historical error, not previously remarked, when he clearly confuses D-Day in Normandy with the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium:

How many times in World War II were American forces, aside from the Marines, asked to walk into crushing odds with the cold sea behind them and withering fire before them and only raw guts to pull them through? I remember only one other time, at Bastogne. (2)

Aside from the slip of the pen, the vivid and vigorous phrases make the scene come alive for those not bothered by clichés.

4. Cain in particular (30-31) describes the female characters and their hackneyed roles.

5. *Works by Kerr Eby in the Navy Art Collection*, <http://www.history.navy.mil/ac/artist/e/eby/eby5.htm>. Accessed July 3, 2010.

6. "Books: The Year in Books." *Time* (Dec. 21, 1953), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,890869,00.html>. Accessed Aug. 15, 2010.
7. Burke Davis, *Marine! The Life of Chesty Puller* (N.Y.: Bantam Books, 1964), 340.
8. Hal Boyle, "School Dropout Makes Big Time in Writing," *Ada* (Okla.) *Evening News* (Nov. 12, 1967), 7.
9. Many readers seem to believe that Lighttower is "the Navajo code talker." However, Uris gives no indication of Lighttower's tribe and Mac notes specifically that "the Indian...[is] not much of a code man" (452). The U.S. armed forces employed Native American "code talkers" in World War II from a number of tribes, though the Navajo contingent was the largest and has received the most publicity. The code talker project was classified until 1968.
10. Rudyard Kipling, *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth, 1994), 447.
11. Roger Butterfield, "Al Schmid: Hero." *Life* (Mar. 22, 1943), 40, 42, 44.
12. Jon T. Hoffman, *From Makin to Bougainville: Marine Raiders in the Pacific War* (Darby. Pa.: DIANE Publishing, 1995), 21-22.
13. Despite his novel's vivid and heroic portrayal of the Marine Corps, Levin's left-wing politics may have led to its obscurity during the McCarthy period. As a portrayal of Marine combat in the Pacific, *Mask of Glory* precedes *Battle Cry* and is generally more idealistic, artful, and convincing. Uris, moreover, may have been partially encouraged by Levin's book: *Battle Cry* includes a prominent character named Levin, and *Mask of Glory* includes one named Forrester.
14. Virginia Kirkus, quoted in Beidler, *Good War's Greatest Hits* [pl. 12].



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