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Some battlefield heroes are armed not with guns and bullets but with gauze and bandages. Combat medics who risk their lives to save others in the midst of intense battles are often relegated to the sidelines of military history. But when the shout goes up for “Medic!” they suddenly become the most important person in the world to that injured soldier. Despite their great importance in military history, very little has been written about them.

With that in mind, Scott McGaugh makes a significant contribution to the field with his book Battlefield Angels: Saving Lives under Enemy Fire from Valley Forge to Afghanistan. McGaugh’s popular history–style book traces the evolution of combat medicine in the United States military from the founding of the nation through the present day.

Instead of simply a dry history of facts and figures, McGaugh takes a unique approach to the subject by using profiles of various medics and corpsmen to tell the story of combat medicine. He begins with the story of Caspar Wistar, a pacifist Quaker nurse who served with Washington’s army during the American War for Independence, and concludes with the story of Private First Class Monica Brown, an Army medic awarded the Silver Star for her actions in saving fellow soldiers following an ambush in Afghanistan in 2007. (She became only the second woman since World War II to receive the Silver Star.) McGaugh covers the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, and Iraq. The lion’s share of the book focuses on World War II, with six of fourteen chapters. Five of those six deal with the Pacific Theater.

Through the various personal profiles, we also see the development of combat medicine—and with it, an associated advance in civilian medical treatment as the medical community learns lessons from the battlefield. We see the rudimentary first steps, which would only pass for first aid today, evolve into the highly sophisticated skills and equipment of the modern frontline medic. Along the way, McGaugh identifies important innovations, such as development of anesthesia techniques during the Civil War, improved triage procedures during World War I, the
ability to reconstitute dried plasma and give battlefield transfusions during World War II, air transport of wounded during the Korean War, and today’s ultra-modern frontline surgical units.

The advance of combat medicine has greatly impacted our society. McGaugh notes that prior to World War II, more US military members died of disease during war than from wounds received in battle. With advances in combat medicine during the Second World War, death rates for wounded dropped to 30%. Today, that number has been reduced to an amazing 10%. A soldier wounded on the modern battlefield is very likely to survive his wound.

As McGaugh noted in a June 2011 interview with TIME Magazine, “In some American cities today, the violent death rate per 100,000 is higher than that suffered by the American military in Afghanistan. War has never been more survivable, and never has it produced as many catastrophically disabled veterans as our nation faces today. We need to understand and appreciate both the benefits and challenges posed by advances in military medicine.” Helping these veterans cope with their sometimes horrific wounds remains an important challenge for our society.

As is the standard for Osprey, the book has high production values. It is well printed and well bound. There are two photo sections containing numerous photographs of medics and corpsmen in action, as well as photos of several of the people profiled in Battlefield Angels.

There are only two minor drawbacks. First, there are no maps. In a book covering such a wide period of time and location, maps would have been helpful to orient the reader. Second, as seems common in some popular history books, McGaugh occasionally displays a tendency to “get in the head” of his subjects, telling us what someone was thinking at a particular moment as if McGaugh knew the person’s thoughts as fact. This is a somewhat minor point, but it is a bit concerning since it seems to be a growing trend. Unless an author has first-hand documentation from the source, it is not good history to play “historic psychic.” Stick to the documented facts, please. However, the book does provide a very good bibliography for those seeking more information on the subject.

Overall, McGaugh has created an excellent book that should be well received by military history enthusiasts, especially for its much-needed contribution in shining light on the critically important but often overlooked work of combat medics and corpsmen.