

**A PRIVATE IN THE TEXAS ARMY: AT WAR IN ITALY, FRANCE, AND GERMANY WITH THE 111TH ENGINEERS, 36TH DIVISION IN WORLD WAR II**

BY JOHN A. PEARCE

State House Press, 2021  
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REVIEW BY BEARINGTON CURTIS

No other conflict grips the American imagination like World War II. As such, there is a vast historiography, yet there is always room for more voices to be heard. The place of this conflict in the public's minds has encouraged witnesses of the war to publish numerous memoirs and personal wartime accounts. John A. Pearce's publication of his father Frank Webster Pearce's war diary and letters home adds valuable insight. It provides the near-daily reflections of a combat engineer who enlisted in the 111th Engineer Regiment of the Texas National Guard before its federalization in 1940.<sup>1</sup> This microhistory provides what was at the forefront of the average soldier's mind during the twentieth century's most turbulent event.

As the anthologizer, John Pearce divided his father's war experience into sixteen chapters. Each chapter provides a historical summary of the events to

which the diary relates, such as the crossing of the Rapido in Italy. The volume lifts the fog of war surrounding the perspective of one enlisted soldier's fight. Although, this account focuses on a singular soldier, it maintains the value of the many individual soldiers that surrounded Frank Pearce. During John Pearce's exposition, he provides details to explain where and how each soldier of the 111th Engineers suffered injury and loss of life—exemplifying the human cost of war and the dangerous duty of combat engineers.

The beginning of the book provides details of Frank Pearce's life. Raised in East Texas, he spent his youth working odd jobs during the Depression. Part of what makes this account unique is that Pearce enlisted as a combat engineer in the Texas National Guard along with several local friends before the war. A month later, Pearce and the soldiers of the 36th Infantry Division were activated for federal service on 25 November 1940 (5). Although the Texas identity of the unit diminished over time with mounting casualties, Frank Pearce's writing maintains a local allegiance vital to his war experience and provides a tangible link to home even on the front lines.

The diary details are essential in establishing Frank Pearce's sustaining motivations, soldier comradery, and interactions with other soldiers and local civilians. Private Pearce is not a sardonic or eloquent writer as he details only a few matter-of-fact lines to the day's events. He is more like a sportswriter in his description of combat: "It was nip and tuck all day, in fact the worst we had . . . a sniper shot at me all evening but was a bum shot" (37). Such accounts of combat show the reader how accustomed men such as Pearce became to their harsh environment.

What sustains troops in the field are familiar to soldiers throughout history. Priorities that Frank Pearce reflects on is food, alcohol, weather, creature comforts, and the affection of loved ones through letters. The volume of their reoccurrence in his diary shows their importance to him. Furthermore, he demonstrates how these things grounded soldiers as they experienced little control over their lives. Pearce reflects on his condition to his family and to those few he considered

friends, the core of which seem to be from Texas.

His expression of comradery reveals the hard lessons of losing someone close to you and the nature of the individual replacement system that often failed to fully integrate new soldiers with their units before combat operations. "I make no efforts to cultivate a close friend as it doesn't pay in that way there is no deep hurt. I merely try to be like and like all the boys to a point where one can depend on each other" (191). This line, penned late in the war, betrays the callous nature of war on the soldier. The same line tells that his priority toward the group and theirs toward him is that they are dependable at their job, increasing his chance of survival.

As Pearce's outlook toward his fellow soldiers became more hard-boiled, his opinion on the many unfamiliar cultures he encountered reflected an outsider's judgment. His opinion on Africans, Italians, French, British, and Germans shows the complicated relations between soldiers and civilians. He was disgusted by the condition of North African communities and pitied the Italian civilians. He expresses a sternness toward the Germans whose homes he occupied.

Although some soldiers saw a meteoric rise in rank and responsibility, Frank Pearce remained a private through most of the war. He spent the war as one of the many doers, soldiers who bore the consequences of the strategic and tactical decisions of others. Only after the war does Pearce pen a true reflection of his experiences. He felt bitter toward the conduct of his compatriots in the immediate aftermath, wondering for what it was he fought. Pearce did not seek the conflict's meaning while overseas; he could only wrestle with the meaning of World War II after he returned home. He concludes his diary and literally closes the book on the war, with a note dated November 1945. He concluded that he had found peace and purpose in his war experience through the love of an understanding woman (whom he married) and in religion (256).

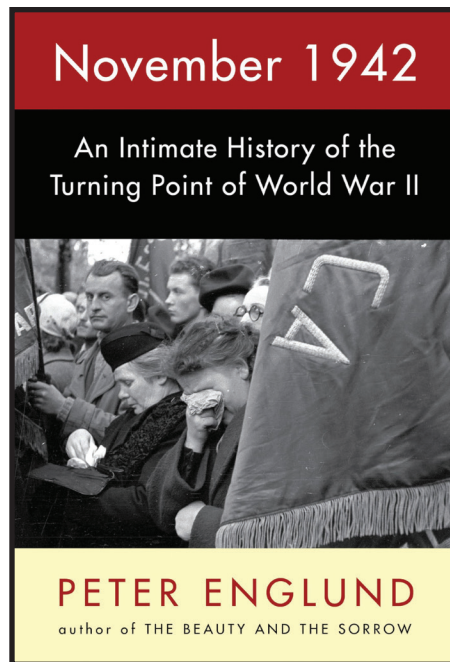
This detailed account of Frank Pearce's experiences should be of interest to those interested in a bottom-up understanding of the troops who fought World War II. The book peels back the layers of mythology that have crept into academia

and the national zeitgeist of the war. This excellent microhistory provides scholars with details on soldier motivations, and complex wartime relations between soldiers and civilians. For the general reader, the diary provides a human connection to the war. Frank Pearce is not a poet, a crusader, or a great man of history. Yet he, like so many others, answered their country's call to arms, and for this reason, this frank account of the conflict deserves a place on bookshelves.

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### Note

1. In 1940 the National Guard retained square divisions which incorporated an engineer regiment in its table of organization. When converted to the triangular division the engineer regiment was minimized to a battalion. The Texas-based 36th Infantry Division retained the 1st Battalion, 111th Engineer, reflagged as the 111th Engineer Battalion.



## NOVEMBER 1942: AN INTIMATE HISTORY OF THE TURNING POINT OF WORLD WAR II

BY PETER ENGLUND

Alfred A. Knopf, 2023  
Pp. xvii, 467. \$32

REVIEW BY NATHAN J. HOLCOMB

Peter Englund's new book, *November 1942*, a work of military and social history, examines the Second World War in personal detail, using a cast of forty characters whose voices lend a critical human element to the conflict. Englund received a PhD in history from Uppsala University in 1989 and is a member of the Swedish Academy, which regulates the Swedish language and selects recipients for the Nobel Prize in Literature. This book was translated from Swedish by Peter Graves, an honorary fellow at the University of Edinburgh following his retirement, and the recipient of several prizes for his translations. Previously, Graves translated Englund's 2011 book *The Beauty and the Sorrow* (Knopf, 2011), a similar personal history approach to World War I.

Rather than a traditional examination of the Second World War's turning points, Englund chose to focus on those who lived through it, and how they experienced the selected month. The forty individuals are mostly obscure, but several were famous authors: Ernst Jünger, Vasily Grossman,

Vera Brittain, and Albert Camus. None of his cast of characters are generals or politicians; the highest-ranking soldier is a Japanese destroyer captain. Twenty-two are civilians, and fourteen are women. Englund's selection of his cast covers all major theaters of war, as well as the German, British and American home fronts, and occupied areas in the Soviet Union, China, Paris, and Brussels. Several characters are near each other, for example, Japanese troops Tameichi Hara and Tohichi Wakabayashi are in proximity to Americans John McEniry and Charles Walker on Guadalcanal. It is unlikely these characters exchanged fire with each other. A few noncollective stories are also present: the completion and early reception of the American film *Casablanca*, and American *Liberty*-class ship S.S. *James Oglethorpe's* launching from Georgia's newly built shipyards in Savannah. Each character left behind a diary or memoir, which became Englund's primary sources.

Through the narrative, Englund divides the book into four parts: "November 1–8," "November 9–15," "November 16–22," and "November 23–30." There are no chapter divisions, each character lends their experiences that day, if available, and then all move on to the next day, and so on. Through this enormous tapestry of different voices, experiences, and ideologies, each person is a fully realized character. Englund's writing throughout the book is a masterpiece of historical storytelling. The reader experiences the war, but also the character's anxieties and dreams, the indignities they suffer, as well as the small comforts that lend them the strength to continue. Englund freely borrows from other parts of their memoir or other sources to fill in contextual gaps, as well as from secondary literature. He makes assumptions, based on the character's actions or mental state and the surrounding context, and states when he does so.

A few themes are present in all accounts. Because many characters are not frontline troops, Englund brings the immediacy of the conflict to each story. This may sound obvious to history consumers: the author directly ties Willy Peter Reese's experiences fighting near Rzhev, Russia, to the conflict. Less obvious is Dorothy Robinson, a homemaker on Long Island. However, Robinson's son is serving, her