

The Secret Of The Soldiers Who Didn't Shoot

Slam Marshall, who is regarded as one of our great military historians, looked into the heart of combat and discovered a mystery there that raised doubts about the fighting quality of U.S. troops. But one GI thought he was a liar...

-Fredric Smoler, American Heritage, March 1989, Vol 40, Issue 2.

When Col. Samuel Lyman Marshall came home in 1945, he was one of millions of Americans who had served in the Second World War. Perhaps a third of them had seen combat, and Marshall, as the European theater's deputy historian, had talked to an unprecedentedly large number of them. In a few months he began the little book that was to make him S. L. A. Marshall, a respected and highly influential military historian. In the 211 pages of *Men Against Fire*, Marshall made an astonishing assertion: In any given body of American infantry in combat, no more than one-fifth, and generally as few as 15 percent, had ever fired their weapons at an enemy, indeed ever fired their weapons at all.

From that day to this, S. L. A. Marshall is famous as a man who penetrated a great and terrible mystery. His writing on the refusal to fire—what Marshall called the ratio of fire—was the keystone of his achievement. While a fair number of people had always had an impressionistic sense of the phenomenon, Marshall had replaced anecdotal evidence with hard numbers.

Marshall, in the eyes of his many admirers, had shifted the history of war on its axis, turning it away from the annals of generalship toward the discovery of what men actually did and thought and felt on a battlefield. The admiration Marshall's discovery inspired is caught in the words of John Keegan, the dean of the school of military history that is deeply indebted to the tradition that Marshall dominates: Marshall "was touched by genius," Keegan wrote, a man who had brilliantly democratized the study of war.

Samuel Lyman Marshall was born with the century in the village of Catskill, New York. His father was a bricklayer and lay preacher, and the family moved repeatedly, ending up in El Paso, Texas, in 1914. El Paso was in those days a tough border town, with a sprawling red-light district and gunfights in the streets. It was also a window on the early days of the Mexican Revolution; across the river Pancho Villa was in control of the state of Chihuahua and spent a fair amount of time in Ciudad Juárez. In his memoirs Marshall said he once went across from El Paso into Juárez and ordered a hamburger and a beer in the Black Cat, a casino owned by Villa. The general walked in and bet a friend that he could shoot a comb off a waitress's head; the bullet struck her in the forehead, and she fell dead, her skull split open. Marshall claimed to remember both men laughing uproariously. It was, he said, his first sight of a shooting death; he was fifteen years old.

Marshall left high school in 1917 to enlist in the army. In his autobiography, *Bringing Up the Rear*, he speaks of participating in the Soissons, St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne, and Ypres-Lys campaigns, and writes: "I finished the war 11:11 A.M. on 11 November as a lieutenant of infantry in a foxhole not far from Stenay. It was the day that I had never expected to see. A brigade commander from the 89th Division, Col. J. H. Reeves, happened along.

Marshall claimed that no more than one-fifth of U.S. infantry ever fired their weapons at the enemy in combat.

"He said: 'Young man, have you anything to drink?'"

"I said: 'Water.'

"He said: 'Let us drink to it in water.'"

A footnote to this incident says that Marshall "was commissioned from the ranks and at age seventeen was the youngest commissioned officer in the AEF [American Expeditionary Forces]."

He spent the years between wars as a newspaperman, first in El Paso and later on the *Detroit News*, working as a reporter and reading about war. Sometime during these years he invented his sturdy nickname, Slam, an acronym made up of his own initials with another family name folded in to supply the vowel. In 1940 he published *Blitzkrieg*, the first of what would be thirty books on war. The following year he produced *Armies on Wheels*, and events were kind to both books; he thought that the French would collapse and that the Russians wouldn't, and both peoples obliged. When the United States entered the war, Marshall received a direct commission as a major and eventually wound up in the fledgling Army Historical Section.

He first investigated combat in the Pacific theater, covering the landings on Makin Island and Kwajalein, where he accumulated the experiences he would write up in *Island Victory*, and he emerged with the Combat Infantry Badge. When he boarded the cargo plane that would take him back from the front to Oahu in the summer of 1943, Samuel Lyman Marshall was a short, stocky man with a career as a newspaperman behind him and a few books on the early days of World War II to his name. When he sat down to write *Men Against Fire* three years later, he was clearly convinced that he knew more about combat than anyone in the world. He had pioneered a new investigative technique: the after-action interview.

On the field at Waterloo in Stendhal's novel *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the hero is frustrated because while he knows that he is present at some kind of stupendous battle, he can't make any sense of the course of events, even who is winning or losing. History rarely does cooperate in making its salient moments dramatically coherent to anyone present at the time. At Makin Island the chaos seemed impenetrable; after one climactic fight, Marshall said, "There was a general doubt that the tactical confusions of that strange night of combat would ever be clarified. Few of those who were closest to it, including the actual commanders in the battle, knew much more about it than that our men had behaved well in a difficult situation. None knew the relationship of any one combat episode to another. Even in these first hours after the fight we were already

mixing up parts of the story, and as rumor got about over the island, fable was rapidly being substituted for fact.”

Nevertheless, Marshall was not as pessimistic about the possibility of sorting it out as others were: “All of the actors were present, except the killed or badly wounded, and there had not been many of those. The one way to try for the full, detailed truth of battle was to muster the witnesses and see for once whether the small tactical fogs of war were as impenetrable as we had always imagined they were.”

After the commanders had assembled everyone at Makin who had survived the night combat, Marshall questioned them together. It worked like a charm, he reported: “By the end of those four days, working several hours every day, we had discovered to our amazement that every fact of the fight was procurable—that the facts lay dormant in the minds of men and officers, waiting to be developed. It was like fitting together a jigsaw puzzle, a puzzle with no missing pieces but with so many curious and difficult twists and turns that only with care and patience could we make it into a single picture of combat.”

Marshall was not alone in the estimate of his achievement. When the *Infantry Journal* published *Island Victory* in 1945, its editors wrote a glowing foreword: “Past books about combat have been chiefly personal narratives, the battle stories of individuals. ... For the first time in its history the *Infantry Journal* publishes in *Island Victory* a book that is a story of combat written by all the men who fought—and therefore a highly accurate account of exactly what happened. ...”

From Makin on, Marshall devoted himself to the group interview after combat. The early experiences in the Pacific set the pattern for what was to come. Lieutenant Colonel Marshall arrived in Britain in late June 1944. He interviewed members of the airborne divisions that had returned to England after landing in Normandy (the makings of his book *Night Drop*), then went to the Continent and during the months that followed interviewed units that had defended Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge and taken part in the fighting at Arnhem. At war’s end he was named chief historian of the European theater of operations. When, in 1947, *Men Against Fire* made its striking assertions about soldiers’ behavior in battle, it had the weight it did—and would make its author as famous as it did—because of the range and quality of evidence Marshall drew upon.

It was in the sixth chapter of *Men Against Fire* that Marshall made his assertions about what he called the ratio of fire. He was quite explicit: “a commander of infantry will be well advised to believe that when he engages the enemy not more than one quarter of his men will ever strike a real blow. ...”

“The 25 percent estimate stands even for well-trained and campaign-seasoned troops. I mean that 75 per cent will not fire or will not persist in firing against the enemy and his works. These men may face danger but they will not fight.”

With repetition, the assertion became stronger, and nonfiring edged up to 85 percent: “we found that on average not more than 15 per cent of the men had actually fired at enemy positions or at personnel with rifles, carbines, grenades, bazookas, BARs, or machine guns during the course of an entire engagement. . . . The best showing that could be made by the most spirited and aggressive companies was that one man in four had made at least some use of his fire power.”

Why wouldn't the men shoot? Marshall offered a number of speculations, some of them contradictory. “In the workshop or the office, or elsewhere in society, a minority of men and women carry the load . . . the majority in any group seek lives of minimum risk and expenditure of effort plagued by doubts of themselves and by fears for their personal security.” So it is on the battlefield: only a few “forceful individuals” are willing to “carry the fight”; the bulk lack “initiative” and “the desire to use a weapon”; they “simply go along for the ride.” Civilization also plays a part: “The fear of aggression has been expressed to him so strongly and absorbed by him so deeply . . . that it is part of the normal man's emotional makeup. It stays his trigger finger even though he is hardly aware that it is a restraint upon him.” It is not always a question of fear (“it must be said in favor of some who did not use their weapons that they did not shirk the final risk of battle”) but fear often is involved: “When the infantryman's mind is gripped by fear, his body is gripped by inertia, which is fear's Siamese twin. . . .”

Marshall repeatedly insisted that he had been the first person to notice the nonfiring phenomenon; even the soldiers themselves had no idea. “The fighting men do not know the nature of the mistakes which they make together. And not knowing, they are deprived of the surest safeguard against making the same mistakes next time they are in battle.” Only Marshall had pierced the veil of ignorance.

Alone among Marshall's books, *Men Against Fire* has at times the flavor of social science prose, and this may reflect the book's ambitions, for in mid-century America it tended to be that sort of prose that revealed secrets and proposed solutions to serious difficulties. But whatever its merits as social science, *Men Against Fire* had a tremendous, if subtle, effect as a work of current history. Because it sought in the collective experience of soldiery the causes of victory and defeat, it helped shift the focus of military history from an account of generalship to an account of the experience of common soldiers.

Men Against Fire proposed solutions to the difficulties it disclosed, solutions that Marshall said were eventually incorporated into U.S. Army training procedures. By the time of the Korean War, when Marshall also investigated the behavior of American infantry under fire, he reported that the ratio of fire had risen to 55 percent, tripling the World War II average.

In time Marshall became one of the most respected of American military historians. He lived until 1977. At the end, when he remembered the moment when he had first understood how he was to achieve his life's work, an image he had initially used in *Island Victory* recurred for the last time: “Piece by piece we put it together. The story of the night's experience came clear as crystal. It was like completing the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. At last I knew that, quite by accident, I had found what I had sailed west seeking.”

When Leinbaugh, an ex-infantryman, found historians using Marshall's data, he began to get angry.

It is not difficult to imagine the excitement that gripped the generation of scholars and historians who encountered Marshall's discovery. The truth, at first blush counterintuitive, suddenly seems overwhelmingly right, and we are let into a part of the great mystery of combat. In the eyes of his many admirers, Slam was deservedly famous. He had stripped a mask from the face of war.

Unfortunately, the fruit of Marshall's interviews, the astonishing insight, turns out to be a little too good to be true. In fact, it just may be that Samuel Lyman Marshall made the whole thing up.

Like Marshall, Harold P. "Bud" Leinbaugh came home from Europe in 1945. Leinbaugh had seen a lot of fighting. After ROTC training at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, he had attended Infantry Officers Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, and was commissioned in April 1944. Assigned to the 84th Infantry Division at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana, he commanded K Company, 333rd Infantry Regiment, during most of its time in combat between November 1944 and V-E Day.

After the war he joined the FBI, spending most of his career with the bureau as a supervisory official at headquarters in Washington, D.C. He retired in 1972, served at the White House as a deputy special assistant to the President, and is currently a business consultant. In 1985, with his college friend and wartime comrade John D. Campbell, he wrote *The Men of Company K*, a highly praised history of the rifle outfit he commanded during three campaigns. Leinbaugh was one of the very few men in his company to have made it through the war from start to finish; Campbell, more typically, came in as a replacement officer and went out with a Silver Star and a back full of shrapnel.

Leinbaugh and Campbell spent years conducting research on their book and on the war that had killed off so many of their friends. When Leinbaugh first came across Marshall's ratio-of-fire statistics, he dismissed them out of hand. "If you're over sixty," he says, "have earned the Combat Infantryman's Badge, and were lucky enough to survive a month without picking up a Purple Heart, you know Marshall's charges are absurd, ridiculous, and totally nonsensical. How many six-man patrols would have to be dispatched before Marshall's odds give you one or two men who are willing to fire their guns? Statistically it wouldn't be at all difficult for a rifle company to end up with a platoon entirely devoid of firers."

Leinbaugh talked to a number of former infantrymen, privates to four-star generals. None of them recalled any experience of failure to fire. One old K Company sergeant asked, "Did the SOB think we clubbed the Germans to death?"

K Company had entered combat with a strength of two hundred men and had turned over once by war's end—meaning that it had suffered two hundred casualties—and Leinbaugh believed these men, along with the other American troops he knew about, had tried hard to kill Germans: "Somebody had to persuade them to go back to Germany." But Leinbaugh had noticed that people who hadn't been in rifle companies had a number of eccentric notions about how wars are fought, and at first he didn't trouble himself about Marshall's misconceptions.

But when Leinbaugh read John Keegan's influential 1976 study of men at war, *The Face of Battle*, he was irritated to come across Marshall's ratio of fire. "Even in 'highly motivated' units," wrote Keegan, "and even when hard pressed, no more than about a quarter of all 'fighting' soldiers will use their weapons against the enemy."

Then Leinbaugh read Max Hastings's 1984 account of the Normandy invasion, *Overlord*, and discovered the author citing Marshall to the same effect: "American research showed that, in many regiments, only 15 percent of riflemen used their weapons in any given action."

It seemed to Leinbaugh that American infantrymen were being maligned. Richard Holmes, the deputy head of war studies at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, England, reported that "on average, only some 15 per cent of American infantrymen fired during actions in the Second World War." The American historian Russell F. Weigley reported in *Eisenhower's Lieutenants* that "the infantry on which they [American officers planning the 1944 campaigns] would rely as their main combat resource was not particularly aggressive" and repeated the ratio-of-fire assertions, adding: "Nor did these figures mean that 15 to 30 per cent of the riflemen fired continually throughout a battle. They indicated only the number who tried to shoot at the enemy at least once."

None of the writers cited any other source for the ratio-of-fire numbers; Marshall was all there was.

Leinbaugh admits to taking the charges personally. "Our company went into battle for the first time at Geilenkirchen in the Siegfried Line. We captured more than a hundred and fifty Germans in that brief initial battle. We must have killed or wounded another fifty. We fought more than three miles up the Siegfried Line, slogged forward in deep mud, spent sleepless nights in freezing water-filled foxholes, and lost more than half our company to nonstop German mortar barrages and machine-gun fire. Twelve men in K Company were killed during that one brief engagement.

"We did our job, and then Marshall comes along and, in effect, criticizes not only our efforts at Geilenkirchen but the performance of every American rifle company that did battle in World War II."

Leinbaugh's certainty that Marshall was wrong about the ratio of fire was rooted not only in his experience as a man who had led an infantry company in combat but also in his knowledge that K Company was in no sense an elite unit. "We came into line halfway through the European campaign, and we were as average as chance and the draft could make us." The 333rd had been mass-produced and was in no way distinguishable from the thousand-odd other American rifle companies that had fought their way across Europe.

There were many instances where not firing made perfect sense to Leinbaugh. "Tight fire discipline was enforced in most veteran outfits. In many tactical situations it was deemed essential that the line of defensive positions not be disclosed to the enemy. That's elementary,

basic frontline logic.” But the figure of 85 percent remained ludicrous, and Leinbaugh determined to discover its source.

He read through Marshall’s published work and began to notice a series of unconvincing details. In *Bringing Up the Rear* Leinbaugh was struck by an incident alleged to have occurred when Marshall and a colonel visited a forward position following the siege of Bastogne:

“A youthful paratrooper was walking past, covered only by the bank of a very thick hedge. As we came up he neither halted us nor saluted. . . .”

“I asked him: ‘Soldier, where is the German front line?’”

“He waved his arm toward the Longvilly road, which ran along a hill about half a mile away.”

”“Somewhere out there, I think.””

“I tried again.”

”“Look son, you see that head moving along behind that stone wall and something bobbing behind it that looks like a stick? (The wall was about a hundred yards away.) Don’t you realize that is a German walking sentry the same as you?””

“Bizarre,” Leinbaugh says. “Nobody ever ‘walked post’ in the front line with a slung rifle—and nobody ever saw a German doing it either.” Leinbaugh talked to the colonel—then a general—who Marshall says was with him. The man recalled no such incident.

With this in mind, Leinbaugh looked carefully at Marshall’s account of his service in the First World War. Along with a few disclaimers about the accuracy of memory, Marshall made a series of references to his military experience, several times implying that he had served as an officer in combat: he at one point remarked, “What I was taught as a child was confirmed by my teenage experience of leading troops in combat.” Some inner FBI alarm went off. Leinbaugh was convinced that Marshall was lying.

He eventually unearthed the surviving official documents. Marshall had not been commissioned until April 1919, long after the armistice, when very junior officers were required to take troops home, at which time he had been assigned to a port battalion. Even if this is what had been meant in the autobiography, it would have been impossible to state that he had ever been the youngest American officer in the AEF; records that would indicate such a thing did not exist, and the Pentagon seemed to think that they never had. There was no evidence other than Marshall’s bare assertions that the man had ever commanded troops in combat.

As far as Leinbaugh could make out, Marshall had not spent 11:11 A.M. on Armistice Day in a foxhole somewhere near Stenay, the last town taken by American troops in the war—he had been behind the lines attending an NCO school. Marshall had previously served with the 315th Engineer Regiment, at that time part of the 90th Infantry Division. “World War One records,” says Leinbaugh, “show that Marshall’s regiment was involved in road work and building

delousing stations. The sole entry on the November 10, 1918, morning report for his company, incidentally, reads, '1 Mule Killed by Kick from Mule. Drop from Rolls,' and on Armistice Day the morning report says, 'No Change.'"

One old K Company sergeant said of Marshall's theory, "Did the SOB think we clubbed the Germans to death?"

Marshall had at different times claimed to have fought with three infantry regiments in two different divisions and in three separate countries. The record contained no independent evidence that he had ever been in combat.

After pursuing the matter on his own for months, Leinbaugh got in touch with a military historian named Roger Spiller, with whom he had struck up an acquaintance after Spiller had written a warm review of *The Men of Company K*. Born in Texas, Spiller had served what he describes as a "profoundly undistinguished" hitch in the Air Force before going on to become a professional historian. He did his doctoral work under a famous political historian, T. Harry Williams, but the military history bug bit him and didn't let go. He is a founder and the deputy head of the Combat Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he has taught since 1978, taking time out for three years to serve as special assistant to the commander in chief of the U.S. Readiness Command. The CSI is essentially the history department for the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. Spiller was well aware of Marshall and his impact on modern military history, and he had been developing suspicions of his own.

Leinbaugh's intervention prompted Spiller to put his thoughts in order; some of the fruits of his investigation, "S. L. A. Marshall and the Ratio of Fire," appeared in England in the December 1988 issue of the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*.

Like Leinbaugh, Spiller went after the ratio-of-fire numbers systematically, combing through the available records in an attempt to locate their specific source. The nominal source was, of course, Marshall's group interviews after combat. How many had been conducted? The number fluctuated sharply. In *Men Against Fire* Marshall wrote of having interviewed "approximately" 400 infantry rifle companies. But in lectures he gave at Leavenworth, the number expanded to 603. By 1957 it had declined to "something over 500."

Marshall's announced standard for group interviewing involved two, three, or four days of interrogating an infantry company to debrief it on one day of combat. "By the most generous calculation," writes Spiller, "Marshall would have finished 'approximately' four hundred interviews sometime in October or November 1946, or at about the time he was writing *Men Against Fire*. This calculation assumes, however, that of all the questions Marshall might ask the soldiers of a rifle company during his interviews, he would unfailingly want to know who had fired his weapon and who had not."

Leinbaugh thinks this would make a great cartoon by the Daumier of the World War II foot soldier, Bill Mauldin. "There'd be an entire company of battle-weary Willies and Joes looking on incredulously while a pudgy little officer from the rear echelon with his clipboard asks, 'Pardon me, but which of you gentlemen fired your rifle today?'"

But suppose he had posed the question? The results, says Leinbaugh, would be problematic. “In a divisional assault—one by the book—one regiment is kept in reserve, two are committed in the attack. In each of the attacking regiments, one battalion is in reserve; in each battalion, one company is in reserve, and in each of the two assaulting companies one platoon is in reserve. Assuming rifle-company combat strength of 125 men, you come up with 1,500 men moving forward against the enemy out of a division of 13,000 men. That makes a possible 11,500 men in a day’s action who didn’t fire—because they would have had no occasion to.”

But in any event, the question of procedure seems moot. John Westover, Marshall’s assistant, who traveled across Europe with him and who was usually present at the interviews, does not remember Marshall’s ever asking about the refusal to fire. “Nor does Westover ever recall Marshall ever talking about ratios of weapons usage in their many private conversations,” writes Spiller. “Marshall’s own personal correspondence leaves no hint that he was ever collecting statistics. His surviving field notebooks show no signs of statistical calculations that would have been necessary to deduce a ratio as precise as Marshall reported later in *Men Against Fire*.” Moreover, none of the professional historians in the ETO has unearthed information that suggest a ratio of fire on the order of Marshall’s “discoveries.”

“I wanted to find something, anything,” says Spiller. “I just haven’t found any suggestion that he did company-level interviews anywhere. I am sure he talked with a lot of people, as a reporter might. Some of those talks might have been with squad-sized units, but I think how big the available group turned out to be was serendipitous.”

Spiller reluctantly concluded that there had been no interviews with four or five or six hundred ETO rifle companies, not the kind Marshall had conducted in the Pacific: “The systematic collection of data that made Marshall’s ratio of fire so authoritative appears to have been an invention.”

The only interview notes unveiled to date were found by Leinbaugh in an archive of a Maryland National Guard division. In them, GIs repeatedly testify to firing their weapons in action. The notes do not contain a single question about the ratio of fire.

Westover told Roger Spiller that Marshall was “contemptuous of people only interested in methodology” and that he considered statistics an “adornment” of belief. How plausible, then, are the beliefs Marshall seems to have adorned with his ratio-of-fire statistics?

Spiller’s assessment is “not very.” Marshall’s belief was that a good soldier could and should fire during any and every encounter with an enemy. In *Men Against Fire* soldiers never have a good reason for not firing; in reality, World War II infantry had a lot of them. But Marshall’s soldiers in *Men Against Fire*—although not in his other works—experience a particular kind of combat: a battle that is everywhere exactly the same. This utter uniformity of event makes statistical comparison and sweeping generalization possible when one assesses performance under its stresses. And this same uniformity makes it very different from the immense variety of encounters that constituted infantry combat in the Second World War.

In Spiller's summary, modern infantry combat is asymmetrical, the rhythms and tempo of battle governed not only by soldiers but by the types of weapons they employ and by terrain, and above all by the composition, deployment, determination, and intentions of the enemy; in the world of infantry combat, consistency is the last thing to expect. In his other books Marshall understood this too. It is strange that a reputation he would come to deserve was founded on his most irresponsible work.

Spiller's provisional verdict on Marshall distinguishes the "democratization of war"—the restoration of the history of battles to the men who did the fighting—from the misleading and indeed fraudulent ratio-of-fire arguments. Spiller thinks that Marshall's virtues as well as his vices are intimately related to his background as a journalist.

Twenties journalists practiced a more harum-scarum trade than their successors do today, and Marshall had needed a knack for self-promotion to make his way in it. He had a keen sense of himself as a bold and unequivocal writer, a man not afraid to speak his own mind, and he knew how to tell a good story. Spiller believes that the hyperbole and the recklessness of *Men Against Fire* may have their roots in an older journalistic culture. Marshall resorted to the professional habit of narrating complicated and violent stories as simply and dramatically as he could.

On the other hand, the technique of the group interview came naturally to Marshall for some of the same reasons, and his previous career was far better preparation for the task at hand than the academic training in history most of his co-workers had. "The man who had come to Makin to record the history of combat," writes Spiller, "was by professional upbringing and temperament a journalist above all. His career in a trade well-suited to the recording of chaos, mayhem, and human tragedy was the vital additive required to accomplish what his more traditionally trained colleagues in the historical division had thus far failed to do. ..."

"On Makin and Kwajalein, and later in Europe, Marshall drew upon the pre-war trade he knew so well. The approach to knowledge was the same: get to the scene quickly, survey the location, talk to the principal figures and as many survivors, singly or in groups, as can be found. Reconcile their accounts, withdraw, and compose the story at deadline speed."

Spiller says, "For all his faults Marshall made real contributions to an understanding of the military art."

Spiller guessed, reasonably enough, that Marshall would have taken whatever he found about the Makin Island fighting and applied it to every other battle in the war. So if ever there was combat where American infantry displayed Marshall's ratio of fire, it should have been on Makin.

But at the time of submitting his article to the *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, Spiller had not had a chance to examine the Historical Division's *The Capture of Makin Island*. This publication consisted of Marshall's manuscript edited and partially rewritten by two other men in the Historical Division, Maj. John M. Baker and Dr. George F. Howe. The text concludes by noting a problem that required correction: "Much aimless shooting by 'trigger-happy' men occurred. ... In the early morning its volume increased. Just after daylight a man from the 152nd Engineers ran along the lagoon shore from the direction of On Chong's wharf toward the 2nd

BLT CP, shouting ‘there’s a hundred and fifty Japs in the trees.’ A wave of shooting hysteria swept the area and men started firing at bushes and trees until the place was ‘simply ablaze with fire.’ When the engineer admitted that he had seen no enemy but merely ‘had heard firing,’ shouted orders to the men to cease firing proved ineffectual ... flat terrain and limited area made control of fire abnormally difficult.”

In short, the men shot too much.

Makin Island also provided ample evidence that skillful tactics did not demand the largest possible volume of fire, a point that mysteriously eludes Marshall in *Men Against Fire*. The document, for instance, outlines a routine developed for knocking out fortified strongpoints with grenades and bayonets. Makin demonstrated that a squad can courageously and skillfully engage the enemy without relying solely on rifle fire, and that green troops going into combat are at least as likely to fire indiscriminately as they are to refuse to fire.

So Marshall’s findings about combat in the one battle he really did subject to his famous scrutiny run exactly contrary to what he published in *Men Against Fire*. What came over him?

“He liked making heroes,” says Leinbaugh. “A colonel friend of mine called him the army’s Louella Parsons.” Flukes did happen, and Marshall remembered them. In an incident on Kwajalein one man did a lot of the killing, and a similar thing occurred in a celebrated moment during the Normandy invasion, when American paratroopers fought for their lives. Incidents of individual heroism are the stuff of epic—and of journalism—always memorable, and Marshall may have come to war wanting it to be a place where single heroes contended.

Spiller believes that Marshall enjoyed displaying physical courage. Marshall, said one writer who worked with him toward the end of his life, “loved to play soldier. He loved being more damn military than anybody else alive.” If anything, he overestimated the rarity of the knowledge of combat. He was too eager to be in sole possession of the secret. And had his ratio-of-fire theory been true, it certainly would have demonstrated that he knew more about battle than anybody else.

Spiller has a strong and sympathetic sense of Marshall and to a degree regrets the historian’s necessity of disproving his ratios. He feels that despite Slam’s peculiar hoax, the man’s influence has been positive. This was driven home to him not long ago when he took part in a seminar with members of the neuropsychiatry department at Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. “My conferees said, quite rightly, that even if Marshall did not do group after-action interviews, he popularized the technique that has been used by all sorts of military folks since then—battle commanders, combat psychologists, and the like. Some version of it is now used at the Army’s National Training Center in the California desert. Marshall, for all his faults, made real and lasting contributions to an understanding of the military art.”

None of this, of course, explains why the ratio of fire has been so widely accepted. As far as the military’s buying what would seem to be an unflattering theory, Spiller says, “Like everyone else, professional soldiers like to be talked about, and when they are discussed sympathetically, they tend to return the favor. I would hazard to say that most soldiers, if they know of Marshall,

have a favorable opinion of him because, simply, he paid so much attention to them and their troubles—and at least, because he wore a uniform too. I can't think of another military historian of Marshall's day who so identified with the military."

Of course, a lot of soldiers didn't believe Marshall at all. Leinbaugh contacted a number of senior commanders: Lt. Gen. Harry O. Kinnard, who participated in every one of the 101st Airborne's World War II operations (and who is singled out by Marshall in several books as one of the war's most distinguished combat leaders), says, "In both World War II and in Vietnam it never came to my attention that failure to fire was a problem at any level." Gen. Bruce Clarke, who led the defense of St. Vith and served as both commanding general-Europe and commanding general-Continental U.S., put it more strongly. Marshall's theories, he said, are "ridiculous and dangerous assertions—absolute nonsense." And Gen. James M. Gavin, who commanded the famous 82nd Airborne Division during World War II, says bluntly that Marshall's claim "is absolutely false." According to Gavin, "All of our infantry fired their weapons. I know because I was there and took part."

Why did professional historians have so little difficulty accepting the idea? "Intellectual sloth" is part of it, says Spiller. "The ratio of fire was an easy answer, one that seemed to promise entrée into the hidden world of combat. Facile constructions could be built upon Slam's answer, and were."

Leinbaugh has a straightforward, angry serviceman's explanation: "Most people who are writing the histories now have never been on a battlefield. As far as World War II is concerned, there's damn little good stuff around below the level of regimental records, so historians had to rely on Marshall." Leinbaugh remembers talking with General Clarke about the ratio of fire. "We've got to destroy this myth," Clarke said; "the record has to be set straight. Soon no one will be left who knows."

Leinbaugh is uneasy about a coming world in which no one will be left who knows. When no one knows, many things seem plausible. Spiller tells a story from Vietnam in 1971, when a green American lieutenant went out with an ARVN (South Vietnamese) patrol. An experienced NVA (North Vietnamese) detachment had laid a skillful ambush, and the seasoned ARVN troops had taken cover and were trying to get their bearings when the American lieutenant jumped up and began to fire off the magazine of an M-16. An American captain tackled the lieutenant and asked him what the hell he was doing. The lieutenant explained that in training he was told that in combat only a quarter of the troops fire and that the critical thing to do is to set an example, to return fire immediately.

But Leinbaugh's concern extends beyond Americans' going into future combat bewildered by lies. He has a powerful sense of loyalty to the men with whom he fought across Europe forty-five years ago, and he wants the record set straight. In his view, Marshall defamed their memory.

Slam's "discovery" has fascinated students of military history and tactics for forty years now. But Leinbaugh and Spiller—and the evidence—suggest the truth is more prosaic: In battle's hard school, ordinary people eventually discover, quite by themselves, the knack of skillful killing.