

Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles

By Anthony Swofford

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In his *New York Times* bestselling chronicle of military life, Anthony Swofford weaves his experiences in war with vivid accounts of boot camp, reflections on the mythos of the marines, and remembrances of battles with lovers and family.

When the U.S. Marines -- or "jarheads" -- were sent to Saudi Arabia in 1990 for the first Gulf War, Anthony Swofford was there. He lived in sand for six months; he was punished by boredom and fear; he considered suicide, pulled a gun on a fellow marine, and was targeted by both enemy and friendly fire. As engagement with the Iraqis drew near, he was forced to consider what it means to be an American, a soldier, a son of a soldier, and a man.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
A witty, profane, down-in-the-sand account of the war many only know from CNN, this former sniper's debut is a worthy addition to the battlefield memoir genre. There isn't a bit of heroic posturing as Swofford describes the sheer terror of being fired upon by Iraqi troops; the elite special forces warrior freely admits wetting himself once rockets start exploding around his unit's encampment. But the adrenaline of battle is fleeting, and Swofford shows how it's in the waiting that soldiers are really made. With blunt language and bittersweet humor, he vividly recounts the worrying, drinking, joking, lusting and just plain sitting around that his troop endured while wondering if they would ever put their deadly skills to use. As Operation Desert Shield becomes Desert Storm, one of Swofford's fellow snipers-the most macho of the bunch-solicits a hug from each man. "We are about to die in combat, so why not get one last hug, one last bit of physical contact," Swofford writes. "And through the hugs [he] helps make us human again." When they do finally fight, Swofford questions whether the men are as prepared as their commanders, the American public and the men themselves think they are. Swofford deftly uses flashbacks to chart his journey from a wide-eyed adolescent with a family military legacy to a hardened fighter who becomes consumed with doubt about his chosen role. As young soldiers might just find themselves deployed to the deserts of Iraq, this book offers them, as well as the casual reader, an unflinching portrayal of the loneliness and brutality of modern warfare and sophisticated analyses of-and visceral reactions to-its politics.
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From The New Yorker
In 1990, Swofford, a young Marine sniper, went to Saudi Arabia with dreams of vaporizing Iraqi skulls into clouds of "pink mist." As he recounts in this aggressively uninspiring Gulf War memoir, his youthful bloodlust was never satisfied. After spending months cleaning sand out of his rifle—so feverish with murderous anticipation that he almost blows a buddy's head off after an argument—Swofford ends up merely a spectator of a lopsided battle waged with bombs, not bullets. The rage the soldiers feel, their hopes of combat frustrated, is "nearly unendurable." Swofford's attempts at brutal honesty sometimes seem cartoonish: "Rape them all, kill them all" is how he sums up his military ethic. He is better at comic descriptions—gas masks malfunctioning in the desert heat, camels picked off during target practice—that capture the stupid side of a smart-bomb war.
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From Booklist
Swofford hated being a marine, but he was apparently a good and skilled soldier during his service. He was recruited from the ranks of grunts for a reconnaissance and sniping squad and was on the front line of the Gulf War's ground attack. In this memoir, Swofford's portrayal of the battlefield also contains flashbacks and flash-forwards of his personal life, which serve as platforms for his recurrent cynicism. Expressing it gives Swofford's prose an exaggerated style as he searches for variant descriptions for his anger over military decorations, girlfriends, civilians, and the purpose of the war he fought. Death lurks in Swofford's story, for he contemplated suicide, worried about being killed by enemy or friendly fire, and witnessed the deaths of Iraqi soldiers. Writing graphically and in the marines' defiantly vulgar argot, Swofford candidly exhibits his negative feelings--and his comradeship with buddies belly to the sand. *Gilbert Taylor*
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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