

Wil S. Hylton's "Vanished": a Review

Vanished, Wil S. Hylton's book about the search to identify and return servicemembers' remains to their families – no matter the obstacle – is a compelling read. It's a non-fiction account, something between a mystery and a history, and is very well written. It took me three days to finish, and I was going hard, as hard as one can given a Masters Thesis and several other writing obligations. Hylton gives readers a rare view into the obsessive world of the Joint POW/MIA Accountability Command, or JPAC, the military department responsible for tracking down all U.S. service members lost to the tides of war. Not surprisingly given the personalities and circumstances involved, the process costs everyone – the taxpayers (the search costs over a million dollars), the people involved (broken marriages and friendships), and the local communities that are forced to endure years (in some cases, decades) of disruption by Americans bent on finding the answer to ancient questions. Nevertheless, Hylton makes a compelling case for the project by introducing a critical character early in the story, B24 tail gunner Jimmie Doyle's son, Tommy. Tommy's life was disrupted and irrevocably changed by the disappearance of his father, a tail gunner in a bomber who is either shot down over a small island in the Pacific in 1944, or who may have managed to parachute out to safety. The fate of Tommy's father is unclear in part due to the unexplained rumor-mongering of his uncles.

This is a minor flaw in *Vanished*, and it is forgivable – the scope of the book is so great, so broad, that it's impossible for Hylton to avoid raising questions that he cannot answer. The search to find a body that's been lost for seventy years inevitably raises many mysteries and attractive sidebars, and 239 pages isn't enough room or time to adequately address them

all. The main storyline is sufficiently interesting to justify the proliferation of idiosyncratic subplots, and Hylton writes skillfully, incorporating them into the overarching theme – a single catastrophe, a human tragedy, echoes through history. The death of a young man does not occur in a vacuum.

One thematic difficulty that from *my* perspective *Vanished* doesn't do quite as well with is the overall issue of World War II nostalgia, which runs through the book like a virus. It's not Hylton's fault – or, if it is, it's as much Hylton's fault as it is Steven Spielberg's, or Tom Hanks', or everyone who's ever participated in the creation of a certain type of vision we hold of the Greatest Generation and what happened in World War II. Maybe it was inevitable, given the father-son storyline Hylton sets up in the beginning – a story that is better in the book than out of it. This isn't to say Hylton sugarcoats war – he doesn't. On the contrary he seems to go to great pains to humanize war, to explain how a thing like war can cost, what dread feels like. At the same time, World War II seems to occupy a special place in peoples' memory. MacArthur, Nimitz, Roosevelt – the Japanese – so much of the backdrop to the actual story is done with the broad brushstrokes of someone whose grandfather fought in World War II. I'm not saying I would've (or could've) written it differently – on the contrary, I'd probably end up falling afoul of similar transgressions – an understandable impulse to romanticize, to sentimentalize. After all, my mother's father was the Bombardier in a B-24 Liberator, over Europe. Regardless of the likely motivations and biases leading to Hylton's characterization of World War II as exceptional and lovely, it's impossible to *condemn* a person for something that affects so many – nevertheless, I didn't want to pass the topic by, without remark.



Jonathan Swift said that "Satire is a mirror in which a man sees everyone reflected but himself." If that's the case, then *Vanished* operates on two levels. The first, obvious level is as a mystery, a catalogue of challenges overcome by technology, doggedness, skill, and luck. The second, deeper level is as a satire – a mirror of ourselves, and how we choose to remember events. How we tell stories to make the past neat, and how some people cannot bear uncleanness or untidiness. How America must see World War II – perhaps any war – and, therefore, itself, as beautiful, and comprehensible. Ultimately, this is the epilogue we all decide, collectively, to embrace: *Dolce et Decorum est* – the memory of an event, told in such a way that in its recounting one can hear the tinkling of its future echo.

When all's said and done, the U.S. government finally delivers an answer to the question of "what happened to Tommy," and the answer seems to have had a human impact that was worth the effort. Hylton's investment – of time, of emotional energy, of his considerable talent – is well worth honoring by reading *Vanished*. It's a complicated book, but very well written, and anyone should find it to be well worth their money. I'd lend you mine, but have already passed it along to my roommate, who's reading it now.