

## The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes

Anna Thompson Hajdik  
*University of Wisconsin–Whitewater*

ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Thompson Hajdik, Anna. "The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes." *The Annals of Iowa* 77 (2018), 102-103.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12466>

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knowledge joyfully. These are not the pedantic notes of a critic, but the enthusiastic comments of a supportive scholar. No one with interest in the region should skip his footnotes. They testify volubly to the fact that descriptive writing and scholarly analysis have, in fact, continued in and about the Midwest even as it moved to what Lauck regretfully characterizes as “the ragged edge” of American culture.

*The Fighting Sullivans: How Hollywood and the Military Make Heroes*, by Bruce Kuklick. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017. xi, 212 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Anna Thompson Hajdik is a full-time lecturer in the English Department and Film Studies program at the University of Wisconsin–White-water. She is the author of “‘You Really Ought to Give Iowa a Try’: Tourism, Community Identity, and the Impact of Popular Culture in Iowa” (*Online Journal of Rural Research and Policy*, 2009).

Bruce Kuklick brings together various elements of biography, community history/memory, and the broader currents of twentieth-century American history through the lens of the “Fighting Sullivans,” five brothers who lost their lives together on the USS *Juneau* during the naval battle of Guadalcanal in November 1942. But this is far from a simple story. Rather, it is fraught with contradiction and controversy and lays bare the many tensions between nation and region, family and community, and even propaganda and truth. Ultimately, as Kuklick writes in his introduction, it is a book that “shows how narratives of the heroic are constructed and why we need them” (3).

Kuklick’s work is at its strongest when he places the Sullivans’ story in context with such topics as the shifting fortunes of the American war effort in 1943–44, Hollywood’s influence on the home front, and the postindustrial decline of Waterloo, Iowa. Chapters 8–11 are especially valuable, as Kuklick traces the history of Hollywood’s treatment of the Sullivan family, turning to such rich archival sources as correspondence among movie executives, the film’s director (Lloyd Bacon), various screenwriters, and family matriarch Alletta Sullivan. Script treatments and various promotional materials also prove to be especially rich archival documents. Ultimately, the film became much more of a home-front story, centering on an idyllic family and its strong Catholic faith, in stark contrast to the reality of the actual Sullivan family. As Kuklick argues, the persuasive power of Hollywood was much greater in the 1940s than it is now, shaping “morality, politics, and attitudes towards social problems” (96).

Much of the Sullivans’ story takes place in Waterloo, Iowa, the family’s hometown. The author chronicles the family’s working-class exist-

ence, heartbreak, and tragic notoriety from the early twentieth century to the present against the backdrop of the rising and declining fortunes of that blue-collar, industrial city. The book is a bit weaker when the author sets out to uncover just who the “real Sullivans” were, concluding ultimately and perhaps somewhat unconvincingly that prior to their entry into the war the majority of folks in Waterloo who actually knew them saw the five men as either unambitious louts or mischievous hoodlums. The reality of course is lost to history, as most of the Sullivans’ contemporaries are now gone. Kuklick’s actual evidence proves thin, consisting mostly of the town’s admittedly anemic response to the brothers’ deaths soon after the sinking of the USS *Juneau*. A more nuanced and balanced portrayal of the Sullivan brothers might have been appropriate. Still, Kuklick’s discussion of Waterloo’s response to the brothers’ collective sacrifice decades later is fascinating and worthy of attention.

In the 1990s, for example, Waterloo rode a wave of World War II nostalgia that resulted in the founding of a multimillion-dollar veterans museum named for the brothers. A highly engaged group of World War II veterans from across the country, along with more limited support from the city, helped make this possible. Steven Spielberg’s release of the World War II drama *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) furthered the legend of the Sullivan family’s collective sacrifice. Meanwhile, the city itself had hit some hard economic times, as postindustrial decline accelerated after the 1960s and resulted in the closure of meatpacking plants and other associated businesses. As Kuklick notes, “In the first part of the twentieth century, when the town was up, the family was down; at the end of the century, when Waterloo was down, the Sullivans were up” (166).

Ultimately, *The Fighting Sullivans* is a valuable work of cultural history. It spotlights a story that suffers tremendously from decades of calculated mythmaking and attempts to unpack and deconstruct those myths. It would be especially relevant as a text for courses that focus on Iowa history, World War II, or twentieth-century American history.

*Teacher Strike! Public Education and the Making of a New American Political Order*, by Jon Shelton. The Working Class in American History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017. xii, 274 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 hardcover, \$27.95 paperback, \$25.16 ebook.

Reviewer John W. McKerley is a research associate at the University of Iowa Labor Center. He is researching the Keokuk teachers strike of 1970 and the origins of Iowa’s Public Employment Relations Act.