

Book Review

General Lesley J. McNair: *Unsung Architect of the U.S. Army*, Mark T. Calhoun, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015, 412 pages, \$39.95.

A plethora of military biographies have hit the marketplace over the last few years about the “forgotten” American Army general officers from the World War II era. Many of these figures attained three- and four-star rank and made seminal contributions to the war effort, but their endeavors were often overlooked or not fully understood by an entire generation of historians. Thankfully, this 70-year trend has been reversed by a new class of historians who have uncovered new primary and secondary sources and have produced exceptional tomes like ***The Last Cavalryman: The Life of General Lucian K. Truscott Jr.*** by Harvey Ferguson and ***General Albert C. Wedemeyer: America’s Unsung Strategist in World War II*** by Dr. James McLaughlin, as well as the very readable ***Jacob L. Devers: A General’s Life*** by James Wheeler.

However, I believe one of the better books that have been produced during this spike of recent scholarship is Mark T. Calhoun’s ***General Lesley J. McNair: Unsung Architect of the U.S. Army***. It is an extensive look into the career of a man who played a pivotal role in the U.S. Army’s development during a critical time in the nation’s history. McNair, referred to by GEN George C. Marshall as “the brains of the Army,” was arguably one of the brightest and hardest-working officers serving in the U.S. Army during the first half of the 20th Century.

Superiors – including such luminaries like Marshall, GEN John Pershing and GEN Malin Craig – routinely selected him for critical and demanding jobs, and in all these postings, he left behind a legacy of innovation and scholarship that was second to none. Unfortunately, McNair’s relative obscurity is the result of him serving in primarily staff billets during most of his career and a lack of self-promotion. Yet, his extensive 40-year career saw him create and implement significant changes to Army doctrine and training, equipment development and unit organization.

There are many strengths in Calhoun’s narrative, but his exhaustive and impeccable use of primary and secondary documents to enhance his analysis of McNair’s contributions to the Army really stand out. Calhoun’s dynamic use of these sources enables the reader to not only gain a better appreciation of McNair’s talents, but also to gain a more thorough understanding of the challenges facing the U.S. Army officer corps during the interwar period.

Calhoun’s argument that American ground troops were victorious in World War II due to McNair’s efforts during the interwar period is a unique claim and well-substantiated. Calhoun writes: “These ideas guided the mobilization training and doctrine development that provided the foundation for America’s mechanized, combined-arms fighting methods, instilled in the psyche of the American soldier by the most effective premobilization training effort the nation has ever implemented.” Of particular interest to noncommissioned officers and officers serving in today’s force are solutions developed by McNair and his peers when dealing with diverse issues like combined-arms operations, professional education and physical fitness.

Calhoun’s book is a significant accomplishment, but it has a few flaws. One deficiency of the book is that it lacks organizational charts. There were many times I found myself wishing the author had included operational unit diagrams, especially when discussing the unique command relationships that existed between the various units McNair led during his service in World War II.

The other blemish is that the author doesn’t spend enough time discussing McNair’s relationships with officers who served under him. It would have enhanced the narrative if the writer had been able to insert more anecdotes about McNair’s leadership from the perspective of those who worked for him, especially during his time at Army Ground Forces (1942- 1944).

However, these criticisms aside, ***General Lesley J. McNair: Unsung Architect of the U.S. Army*** is remarkable biography, and its importance cannot be overstated. It will be a valued resource for World War II historians as well as any modern staff officer/NCO and is a significant contribution to the study of the U.S. Army. It deserves a spot on the shelf of any military professional.

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