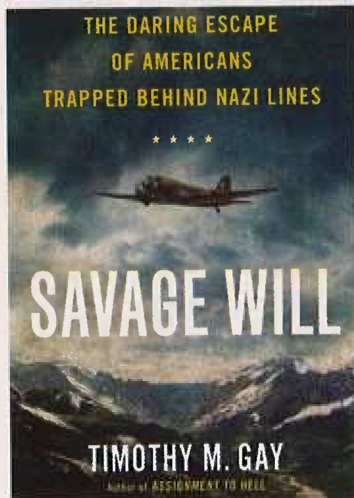
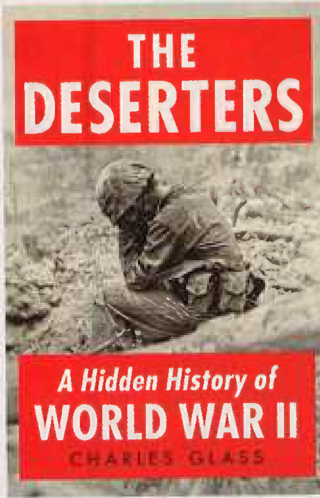
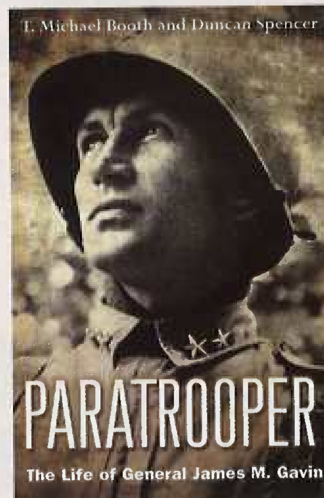
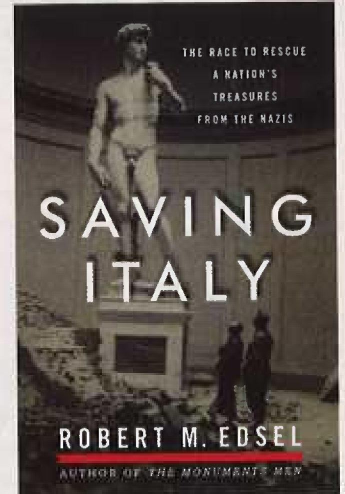
BOOKS AND MEDIA









Savage Will: The Daring Escape of Americans Trapped behind Nazi Lines,
by Timothy M. Gay, NAL Caliber, 400 pages, $26.95.

IN THE ANALYSIS OF a conflict as long, intricate, and far-flung as World War II, new stories will keep emerging until finally, in the distant future, every action report and every letter home has been studied by historians. Until then, new and surprising accounts like Timothy Gay's *Savage Will* are certain to appear. Gay's book is a true wartime tale of Amricans who get stuck behind enemy lines when their transport flight crash-lands in German-occupied Albania. Materially and psychologically, the 30 nurses, medics, and airmen on board are ill-prepared for the weeks of arduous travel that will follow through the wartime Balkan countryside.

The Americans are quickly picked up by a resistance chieftain who sneaks them from village to hamlet, relying on cash and cajoling to arrange so-so housing and worse food. British military liaisons learn of the Yanks' plight and begin machinations to extract them—no simple task for such a large group. After the Germans attack one large settlement, the Americans scatter. Eventually all reassemble except three nurses, who live under benign house arrest for months. The larger group is taken under the wing of an archetypally gruff, understated British commando, Gavan Duffy. Duffy relentlessly leads his charges over mountain ranges, greasing their way among the locals with guns and gold, finally turning them over to an American counterpart who completes their extraction. The three nurses follow later.

These heroic efforts would have been for naught had Albanian civilians not opened their homes every night to the uniformed fugitives, risking reprisals from both the Nazis and opposing resistance groups. One of the most interesting aspects of *Savage Will* is the description of separate, often conflicting resistance and bandit groups, some aligned with the Allies and others fighting as mercenaries for the Germans. The disconsolate people of the rock-poor countryside nervously endure both.

Duffy emerges as a true leader, while the Americans come off as not so strong. The pilot and crew neglect to get the day's air communications password and consequently cannot get navigational support when they get lost. They leave Sicily for nearby Italy and wind up, incredibly, in Albania. They are not prepared for survival. The pilot casually discharges his weapon into a flight of birds while under orders of silence. One of the medics pilfers a souvenir stone that turns out to have great religious significance for the people sheltering them. Another man grows distraught when his lucky loop of rope goes missing.

Adjustment to wartime Albania proves difficult. The entire group becomes sickened by local food. Dysentery and illness touch almost every page. The eating style, hygiene, lice, and extreme poverty of early 1940s Albania are hard to endure, even for these Great Depression folks. Gay's description of their travails is counterpointed with Duffy's understated but upbeat after-action reports. These invariably make for amusing reading.

Gay's account features memorable characters. Duffy is the star of the story, expressive even in his quiet angers. The pilot, C.B. Thrasher, is careless and often lacks situational awareness. Some well-known names make appearances, such as actor Anthony Quayle and peerless mountaineer and adventurer Bill Tillman. The book is better for their presence.

Amid the daily squalor and struggle, two set-piece accounts stand out. The first is the fall of Berat, when the widely separated Americans struggle to escape, assemble, and renew their trek amid sounds of distant gunfire and the panicked faces of heavily laden, fleeing Albanians. The most poignant moment occurs late in the

Americans' travels, when a laboriously organized airborne rescue is aborted—even though the planes are already in a landing pattern over a remote airfield—because Duffy notices German forces waiting with anti-aircraft weapons. His quick thinking prevents a bloodbath, but does little to endear him to his wards.

There is a larger, strategic context for the efforts to save the trapped Americans that is seldom far from Gay's mind. The plight of the nurses, medics, and airmen comes to President Franklin Roosevelt's attention during an international conference, and on the cruise back to the States, he calls a British officer to ask why more isn't being done. This continual pressure from above filters down to Duffy and others, who, while waging war, must at the same time wage rescue operations. The larger context of the British presence in Albania is well explained in the context of Allied politics.

Savage Will won't change the way you look at the war. But it will shed light on an area you have likely heard little about, and it tells a fine story, worthy of cinematic adaptation.

—Thomas Mullen
Flemington, New Jersey

The Deserters: A Hidden History of World War II, *by Charles Glass, Penguin, 380 pages, $27.95.*

In *The Deserters*, author Charles Glass delves deep into the uncomfortable subject of soldiers abandoning their posts during the Second World War. Although nearly 50,000 American soldiers deserted during the war, Glass found that very few studies exist on the subject. Those that do exist focus on extreme cases, such as Private Eddie Slovik, the only American soldier of World War II executed for desertion, and Private First Class Wayne Powers, who deserted in France early in 1945 and went on to raise a family of six kids with a French woman. Slovik and Powers were atypical. "The real story of Second World War deserters lay elsewhere," Glass writes, "and this writer's most important task was to find soldiers whose fates were more emblematic and less publicized."

To that end, Glass follows the paths of three soldiers: Private Steve Weiss, a decorated veteran of the 36th Infantry Division; Sergeant Alfred T. Whitehead, recipient of a Silver Star and two Bronze Stars, the Combat Infantry Badge, and the Distinguished Service Citation; and British soldier John Vernon Bain, a boxer and poet from the 5th/7th Battalion of the Gordon Highlanders.

As unlikely as it may seem, all three of those men deserted. Bain deserted three times, in fact. The first was in 1941, before he even shipped out for combat. With a string of boxing titles to his name, including Scottish Command Middle Weight Champion of 1941, the 19-year-old was no coward. Yet as Glass relates his history, it becomes clear he was "pathologically unsuited to soldiering." From his first combat experience at El Alamein in Egypt, Bain would remember that one of the "most memorable and nightmarish things is hearing the voices of the wounded, who have been badly wounded, the voices raised in terror and pain." Bain deserted the second time after the assault at Wadi Akarit in 1943, when he saw men from his section looting newly dead soldiers. He was deeply affected by the sight of his friends taking watches and wallets "off of their own people." Though he returned to combat in exchange for release from prison, he deserted again.

Ten percent of soldiers who saw combat in the European theater deserted, while only one percent of overall manpower deserted. Phrases such as "shell shock" and "battle fatigue," which came out of World War I, seemed to be an attempt to legitimize cowardice, writes Glass, "but psychological research between the wars found that the human mind suffered stress as did the body and acquired its own wounds." For Bain, it wasn't battle fatigue that prompted him to desert. It was a desire to "preserve his humanity."

Glass points out an ironic twist: while commanders lobbied for harsher punishment for deserters, desertion rates in any particular unit during World War II were directly proportional to command failures and logistical errors. This was Weiss's experience as a 19-year-old serviceman entering the war as a replacement in an established unit. This American private never had an opportunity to forge the relationships that sustain soldiers in combat. The men of his unit had already formed combat brotherhoods, suffered deep losses, and emerged battle-hardened and numb.

Instinctively, Weiss sought a mentor to increase his chances of survival. But his commander remained distant and aloof, issuing orders from behind the lines. After months of unending combat duty, Weiss broke when he felt that the effects of what is now known as post-traumatic stress disorder rendered him a danger to those around him. He deserted on October 28, 1944. When he surrendered two days later, he thought that if the MPs shot him, "It would be a relief...."

On the other side of the coin is Whitehead, who deserted in early January 1945. He had seen combat for six straight months, but it was appendicitis that paved the way to his downfall. While recuperating, he became enraged to learn he wasn't going back to his old outfit, but would be assigned to another unit. Whitehead decided to "go to Paris and live it up." He did just that, running a black market of stolen Allied military supplies. As soldiers on the front lines went without these necessary commodities, Whitehead turned a profit.

Talking about deserters from the Greatest Generation is risky. But Glass does it with admirable aplomb simply by revealing the facts. As a result, two of the three deserters he discusses emerge with their dignity intact. Glass delivers a well-researched and thought-provoking study that is long overdue.

—Allyson Patton
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Paratrooper: The Life of General James M. Gavin, *by T. Michael Booth and Duncan Spencer, Casemate, 495 pages, $32.95.*

There is a scene early in *Paratrooper* that provides great insight into James Gavin's character. Right before his plane takes off for the combat jump into Sicily (Operation Husky), a man appears at the door with a full barracks bag, explaining that it contains the proper paperwork for processing prisoners of war. Gavin is on the cusp of his first combat jump—and the first for his 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and for the 82nd Airborne Division. Having