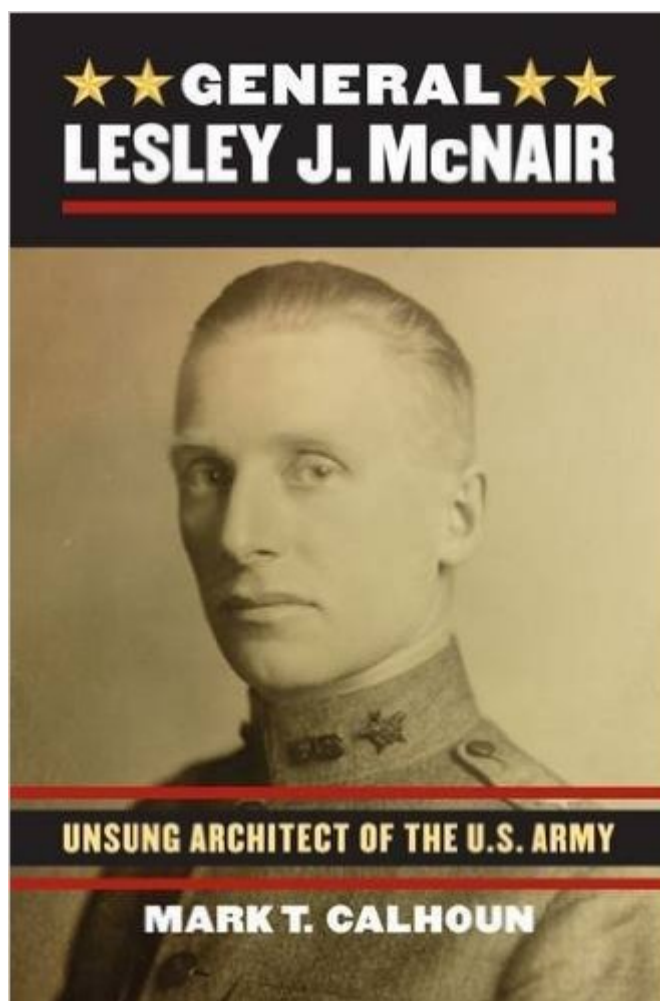


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General Lesley J. McNair: Unsung Architect Of The U. S. Army (Modern War Studies (Hardcover))



Synopsis

George C. Marshall once called him "the brains of the army." And yet General Lesley J. McNair (1883-1944), a man so instrumental to America's military preparedness and Army modernization, remains little known today, his papers purportedly lost, destroyed by his wife in her grief at his death in Normandy. This book, the product of an abiding interest and painstaking research, restores the general Army Magazine calls one of "Marshall's forgotten men" to his rightful place in American military history. Because McNair contributed so substantially to America's war preparedness, this first complete account of his extensive and varied career also leads to a reevaluation of U.S. Army effectiveness during WWII. Born halfway between the Civil War and the dawn of the twentieth century, Lesley McNair "Whitey" by his classmates for his blond hair graduated 11th of 124 in West Point's class of 1904 and rose slowly through the ranks like all officers in the early twentieth century. He was 31 when World War I erupted, 34 and a junior officer when American troops prepared to join the fight. It was during this time, and in the interwar period that followed the end of World War I, that McNair's considerable influence on Army doctrine and training, equipment development, unit organization, and combined arms fighting methods developed. By looking at the whole of McNair's career not just his service in WWII as chief of staff, General Headquarters, 1940-1942, and then as commander, Army Ground Forces, 1942-1944 Calhoun reassesses the evolution and extent of that influence during the war, as well as McNair's, and the Army's, wartime performance. This in-depth study tracks the significantly positive impact of McNair's efforts in several critical areas: advanced officer education; modernization, military innovation, and technological development; the field-testing of doctrine; streamlining and pooling of assets for necessary efficiency; arduous and realistic combat training; combined arms tactics; and an increasingly mechanized and mobile force. Because McNair served primarily in staff roles throughout his career and did not command combat formations during WWII, his contribution has never received the attention given to more publicized military exploits. In its detail and scope, this first full military biography reveals the unique and valuable perspective McNair's generalship offers for the serious student of military history and leadership.

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Customer Reviews

The accepted wisdom portrays Lesley J. McNair as a key figure in the fielding of the American Army that went on to defeat its German, Italian, and Japanese opponents in World War 2. Because the Americans started preparing for the war much later than the Axis or Allies, the US Army is portrayed as borrowing ideas from enemies, friends, and its experience from World War One. As a result, the US Army got some things right, some things wrong, with the blame or credit somehow always attributed to McNair. The disconcerting thing about that story line is that few of the historians who support that particular narrative cannot answer why McNair was allegedly at the center of things. Mark T. Calhoun, despite being counseled by many colleagues not to waste his time on researching McNair - who did not leave behind a collection of papers chronicling his deeds - has produced a wonderfully nuanced and impeccably researched view of the individual long identified as the father of the American Army in World War 2. By doing so, however, Calhoun clearly found himself in the position of explaining that the subject of his book did not have the sweeping authority to do many of the things he was credited with accomplishing (or screwing up). In fact, George C. Marshall not only allowed McNair very little initiative, but the machinations of Army Service Force's commander, Brehon B. Somervell and General Henry A. Arnold of the Army Air Forces often relegated McNair's Army Ground Forces to a distant third place when it came down to influencing the Army Chief of Staff.

As important a figure as Lesley McNair was, this is the first biography of him, and it is long overdue. McNair was in charge of the US Army Ground Forces during World War II, and he is frequently blamed for its flaws. The book's great strength is that it shows that McNair was not guilty of many of the things that he has been accused of. Tank destroyers, for instance, were not something that he dreamed up, and contrary to what is sometimes said, they were to be used as part of a combined

arms team and not as aggressively as their motto suggests - "Seek, Strike, Destroy" . Tank development was left largely to the Army Service Force, and the general consensus within the Army was that because of a scarcity of shipping, a medium tank was preferable to a heavy one. The discussion of the shipping issue could have been expounded upon, I thought. Early versions of what became the Pershing tank required twice the maintenance of a Sherman, so its introduction was delayed until too late in the war. The author shows that George C Marshall gave McNair little authority or initiative, and we are left wondering if Marshall is largely to blame for what many accuse McNair. One of the Army's great strengths during the war was artillery, and the author shows how McNair's reforms in the 1930s helped centralize the use and coordination of the artillery, allowing for quick support of the front lines. This fascinating and neglected topic perhaps deserves a book of its own. McNair also preferred the 155mm over the 105mm piece. The book is somewhat frustrating because it seems to have two aims, first to defend McNair from unfair criticism, which it does well, and secondly to defend the Army of World War II from charges that it was ineffective.

I agree with the previous reviewers that this book is most welcome and fills an important gap in our understanding of WWII--and, just as important, of the pre-war years. Calhoun has given us a corrective to the exaggerated criticisms of the US Army--and of McNair--that became fashionable starting some decades ago. Not that McNair was infallible--but he had to cope with unavoidable constraints, such as shipping shortages and a national policy that gave the infantry the lowest priority for quality manpower. I also agree that this book sometimes seems to be as much a defense of Eisenhower, and the Army as a whole, as it is a defense of McNair. I welcome all these defenses, but, alas, in this Life and Times opus the Life often gets swallowed up by the Times. As Calhoun explains, there just isn't much in the record to go on concerning McNair's personal life. The book is slightly marred by some curious mistakes. Some are mere typos, but others are more serious lapses, especially in chronology. For example, Calhoun refers to "...March 31, 1945--the date the war ended in Europe." Of course, it ended in early May, not March. Also, the Munich Conference did not endorse Hitler's "recent" annexation of the Sudetenland; rather, the Conference endorsed Hitler's DEMAND for the Sudetenland, which he THEN invaded, AFTER the Conference was over. More serious still are the many times Calhoun refers to General Malin Craig as "Secretary of War" and "Secretary of the Army." In fact, there was no "Secretary of the Army" until 1947, when the title "Secretary of War" got replaced by the title "Secretary of the Army."

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