Book Review: Theodore Mataxis Jr.'s *Ride to the Sound of the Guns: The Life of a Cold War Warrior*

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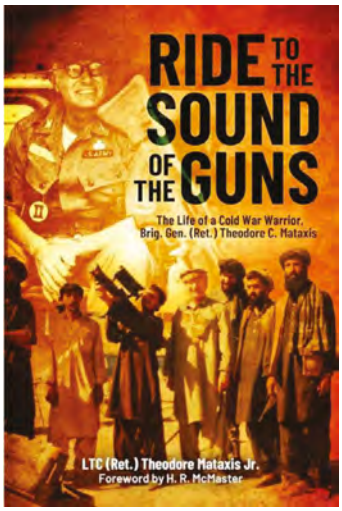

Mataxis Jr., Theodore. *Ride to the Sound of the Guns.* Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2025. ISBN 9781636245805 (Hardcover Edition). ISBN 9781636245812 (Digital Edition). Notes. Index. Bibliography. Pp. 272.

There are some who devoted their lives in service to their country. Brigadier General Theodore "Ted" C. Mataxis was one such person. *Ride To The Sound Of The Guns* describes the remarkable life of a man who served the United States for over 50 years. Written by his son, Lt. Col. Theodore C. Mataxis Jr. (Ret.), with a Foreword by Lt. Gen. and former National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, this book is a tribute not only to General Mataxis but a second hero, his wife and the author's mother, Helen. It is a must addition to every military history library. The author is himself a decorated Army veteran of the Vietnam War who had an exceptional career in Special Operations and served on the staff of the Special Operations Command. Upon retirement from the military, he served as a public school administrator and government contractor.

The author was indeed fortunate that he had access to a wealth of information, photographs, information, and stories from an individual who seemingly saw everything from the Second World War through the end of the Cold War. The descriptions of military life and its impact on family displays itself throughout the book and demonstrates how Helen Mataxis had to manage a family, initially with three small children, as her husband moved from assignment to assignment to all parts of

the world. With each assignment comes a detailed, analytical description of the time involved. The author is not a professional historian, but his in depth research and analysis of the history surrounding his father's career is indicative of one. From the problems experienced by new units deploying during World War II to the duties of an observer/advisor during the Cold War the reader does not just learn of General Mataxis' career, but the world events that shaped that career.

General Mataxis' remarkable career included fighting in three separate wars (World War II, Korea, and Vietnam), attending and instructing at various staff colleges (Indian Staff College, the Army War College, Valley Forge Military Academy), serving three years of occupation duty in Germany after World War II, two years as a U.N. Observer in Kashmir, decades as an advisor and consultant to friends and future enemies (Vietnam, Iran, Cambodia, Singapore, and Afghanistan), and two years as Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1962–1964, including the Cuban Missile Crisis). Each of those assignments is covered in detail, along with General Mataxis' role during those assignments and the impact on his family. The author repeatedly points out his father volunteered for most of the assignments. How those duties impacted his family were seldom at the front of his mind. The constant moves and deployments were hard for his family, as the author notes: "My dad's most significant shortcoming in life was abandoning my mother every time it came to a permanent change of station move or a chance to volunteer for an adrenaline-filled activity. He would volunteer and do a disappearing act. I always believed he used the wars as an easy out" (121)—that was the life of a professional American soldier after World War II. However, there were some assignments such as occupation duty in Germany, the years at Fort Benning, Georgia, and in Washington D.C. that the family loved, especially his wife. She enjoyed the social events, the ease of life in America and Germany, and the structure of being in one place for more than a few months. Then there was India, where Helen was appalled at the conditions she and the children had to live in. Helen became accustomed to being alone for extended periods of time. General Mataxis tried to explain why to his wife on his way to Korea in May 1952: "We've got to learn to live apart quite a bit, I'm afraid, because of the way I'm built. I feel guilty staying out of anything our soldiers are in. I feel guilty sitting up here at army headquarters in relative comfort while these poor buggers in the infantry live in the mud … " (101). The soldier all too often came before husband and father. Then Lt. Colonel Mataxis applied for two years to be sent to Korea before getting his wish in 1952.

The stories of the General's career infused with the author's keen insights into the relevant history surrounding those stories has produced a fabulous book. When sent to France during WWII, arriving the day before the start of the Battle of the Bulge, then Major and ultimately battalion commander Lt. Col. Mataxis saw his un-

prepared, underequipped 70th Infantry Division sent into battle immediately due to a shortage of men and a quick though desperate situation. His own personal experiences with the enemy (he credits a Sgt., the battalion commander's runner, with saving his life) and the desperate fighting and deplorable conditions of a wet, snowy winter in Europe show the impact of the war on the average American soldier. Yet they persevered and pressed on (the whole division did not arrive in Europe until 3 months after Mataxis landed) and were the first division to penetrate the Siegfried Line in March 1945. As with all the chapters dealing with his father's time in combat, the author presents his awards and citations, including a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars for Valor with the incredible number of 17 Oak Clusters and an Army Commendation Medal with three Oak Clusters. There were many more awards, all deservedly earned.

The stories continue throughout the book. At the onset of the Cold War, when tensions seemed highest, the author recounts his father's time in Berlin when American, British, and French soldiers interacted with their Russian counterparts. His father noted: "… the soldiers from Soviet combat divisions had established good relationships and interactions with their fellow combat veterans of other nationalities. The troops traded with each other for souvenirs and interacted" (68). Political divisions did not always extend to those who so recently had fought a common enemy. He returned to the United States and was assigned to Fort Jay on Governor's Island. For the next two years he would experience New York City while living at Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island. Lt. Colonel Mataxis, taking two separate ferries, commuted from Staten Island five days a week. As a Staten Islander myself, I can appreciate how tiring and frustrating that commute must be as I do a similar one every day (though not by ferry). He saw time in Kashmir as a UN Observer in the perpetual conflict between India and Pakistan. He participated during the Korean War in the famous battles for Pork Chop Hill, became the Army's expert and authored several articles on modernizing tactics for the potential atomic battlefield and was the Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor, from 1962 to 1964. He saw and consulted on America's growing involvement in Vietnam and those fateful two weeks in October 1962, during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He returned to command with the 82nd Airborne Division in Vietnam (Assistant Division Commander) and would follow with more Advisor/Consultant missions in Iran, Cambodia, Singapore, and finally Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion.

Before his last advisory role with the Afghan rebels between 1983 and 1989, Mataxis was the Commandant of the Valley Forge Military Academy (1975–1983). According to his son, he loved his time there, and stated: "These eight years at Valley Forge have been among the most gratifying of my life" (210). Lt. General McMaster was one of his cadets at the Academy and they formed a friendship that lasted thirty

years. That life was certainly interesting and one of constant movement. The book also shows the General's encounters with a host of famous people including a young Captain Hal Moore (his Operations Officer in Korea and of *We Were Soldiers* fame who became a lifelong friend), a young Major Norman Schwartzkopf (future commander of Allied forces in Operation Desert Storm), and the Duke John Wayne. The General escorted and consulted with Wayne while the actor was in Vietnam preparing his movie, *The Green Berets*. And there was Helen, who remained with Ted through it all until his death on March 8, 2006, at the age of 86. Helen passed away at the age of 91 on April 13, 2011.

Ride To The Sound Of The Guns should definitely be added to any military history library. There is little to find fault within this book. One may think that since the author is writing about his father's career it would be overwhelmingly positive. When it comes to the military aspects of his father's career, it is. The general did not make the decisions in his various assignments but implemented those made by superiors. Historical criticism of events and the decisions by those far above in the chain of command are numerous. The author also does not limit his criticism or sorrow about how his and the life of his family were impacted by this career. While highlighting his father's remarkable life and career, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Theodore C. Mataxis Jr. also blends history, political science, and diplomacy. The book is also enhanced by the human side of General Mataxis and the many lives he impacted. His father's sense of duty is something many today simply cannot grasp. As Lt. Gen. McMaster states in the book's Foreword: "Readers will, no doubt, note the contrast between Mataxis' embrace of danger—he received a Silver Star, three Bronze Stars with "V" devices for valor, and two Purple Hearts—with the "safetyism" that pervades much of American society." Such was another hero of America's greatest generation.

About the Author

Robert Young earned a Ph.D. in Military History and Modern European Studies from the C.U.N.Y. Graduate Center in 2003 and a master's degree in American History from Brooklyn College in 1994. He is currently a History and Military History professor at American Military University. A veteran of the United States Army, he has held various leadership positions in armored and cavalry units.