



Hugh Ambrose shares his family's passion for history with his book *The Pacific*

STORY BY CLAY SCOTT | PHOTOS BY ELIZA WILEY

"History," says Hugh Ambrose, "is not just for historians. It's something that affects all of us, that connects all of us."

Hugh fell in love with history—and with Montana—during the summers his family spent in the state. His parents would load up their five kids, two dogs and canoes, and they would float rivers, visit Indian reservations, wander prairies and hike mountains. The family's itinerary was often determined by the research being carried out by Hugh's father, Stephen Ambrose, the late historian and author of several books including *Undaunted Courage*, *Band of Brothers*, *Citizen Soldiers* and *D-Day*. For Hugh, those trips connected the past to the present in a visceral way. ▶



# In Step with History

This page: Hugh Ambrose at home in Helena. Facing page: Ambrose spends an evening on the Missouri River with his children.



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Hugh Ambrose

"When I was 10," says Hugh, "we hiked the Lolo Trail from Montana into Idaho, the same trail traveled by Lewis and Clark. And I had to carry my own gear, and it snowed, and it hailed, and it was pretty challenging for a kid. But I loved it, and something clicked for me. On another trip we were in Fort Benton, and I remember looking at the names of the streets, and realizing that the lives of the people on the Lewis and Clark expedition still reverberate today. As a young man, that awakens a powerful curiosity."



Ambrose's curiosity led him to the University of Montana, where he earned both undergraduate and master's degrees in history. That is also the time he began a fruitful working relationship with his father. It began simply with a few minor research tasks for *D-Day*, but that established a pattern of collaboration between father and son. Ambrose's role as a researcher was much more significant on *Undaunted Courage*.

"My father felt he could trust me with his work," says Ambrose, "and that is a more profound level of trust than, for example, a dad giving his son the keys to the car."

After receiving his B.A. from the University of Montana, Ambrose studied for a year in Salzburg, Austria. At the time, he was contemplating a degree in international diplomacy, and figured that mastery of a foreign language would be useful in that career. Instead, his fluency in German ultimately led to a fascinating research opportunity with his father.

"Dad called to say he was working on a book to pick up where *D-Day* left off," Ambrose says, "and that he had a very important assignment. He needed someone who spoke German who could spend several months in Germany ▶



Hugh Ambrose at work in the Lewis and Clark Public Library in the historical reference section that is named after his late father, Stephen.





Hugh Ambrose on the Missouri River near The Gates of the Mountains.

interviewing WWII vets. He asked if I happened to know anyone who might fit the bill, knowing full well that the job was tailor-made for me. Of course, I jumped at the chance. That book became *Citizen Soldiers*."

Ambrose later assisted his father on a variety of other projects, including the award-winning series *Band of Brothers*. "I will be the first to admit that I've been lucky," he says. "But I would like to feel I have made the most of the opportunities I've had."

That he certainly has. Hugh's latest accomplishment is the writing of a book to accompany *The Pacific*, the 10-part HBO miniseries that was nominated for 24 Emmy awards. He also served as historical consultant on the series, for which Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks were executive producers. In both the book and miniseries, the individual stories of five veterans are woven together skillfully to create a fluid narrative of the war in the Pacific.

"It all boils down to storytelling," says Ambrose. "That's what history ultimately is. Good narrative history engages the reader on important issues of cause and consequence and meaning, but it does it by bringing alive a time a place and cast of characters. And it does it in a way that the books might actually be read by non-academics!"

If the national bestseller lists are any indication, *The Pacific* is being read by more than a few non-academics. Ambrose is pleased with the success of the book and miniseries, but is modest about his own contribution.

"If you are interested in earning a steady living," he says, "you probably shouldn't get into history or writing. My biggest motivation for doing this is to find stories that shed light on the human experience, and to find ways to tell them. The story of the Pacific, for example, is one that needed to be told, and I feel we did it justice. It was a difficult chapter of WWII. But Japan is now one of our greatest allies, and that is a testament to the behavior of the U.S. And by honoring the history of the people who made sacrifices on our behalf, we are all ennobled."

Ambrose's work has taken him all over the world, and much of that work has dealt with war and conflict. But he doesn't see a contradiction between a career as a historian of far-flung wars and a quiet life in Helena.

"It is a mistake," he says "to assume that Montana is isolated from global events. Our state has always sent a very high percentage of men and women into military service, so a great number of our families know exactly what the cost of war is, what grief is, what separation means."

As for Ambrose's own family—his wife, Andrea, and children, Elsie and Brody—they are firmly rooted in Montana. "This is our home," he says, simply. "That's all I can say. This beautiful state is where our friends are. Where our family is. Where our adventures start. And where they end up." **M**

Clay Scott is a freelance journalist who lives in Helena.

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