

Book Reviews

Shiloh: Conquer or Perish by Timothy B. Smith, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014, 600+ pages, \$34.95.

Shiloh's 150th anniversary sort of came and went in 2012. Many shy away from it historically for a variety of reasons. It's not sexy like battles in the east (read: easily accessible). It didn't have the drama of Robert E. Lee (drama with Burnside?). The Army of Northern Virginia wasn't involved. It wasn't even Chickamauga, where you had Longstreet and his corps and Thomas, replicating Stonewall Jackson and becoming the Rock of Chickamauga. Those are all silly reasons. After reading Timothy B. Smith's ***Shiloh: Conquer or Perish***, you will wonder why you never paid Shiloh its due.

Smith sets the stage for Shiloh well in the American Civil War universe as being more than the West's version of First Bull Run, a disorganized brawl between two mobs. Grant's campaigns in Fall 1861 and the riverine campaigns of early 1862 meant the Union forces were truly no longer green. But for both sides, leadership in terms of handling the vast amount of men, compounded by the terrain of Shiloh, made this a complicated battle. This is where Smith's knowledge of Shiloh, based on his time and experience as a park ranger there, allows him to see the terrain vividly. What sets Smith's book apart is Shiloh was like Gettysburg and the Wilderness, a multiday battle. With Shiloh, however, the other works on it seem to find a Union victory a foregone conclusion and skim right past it. What this does is give you a *very* false picture of the battle. Smith corrects this and perhaps gives us a fresh interpretation – the best other book I've seen giving the second day its due was Jeff Shaara's ***A Blaze of Glory***.

Smith tends to look with a fresh eye on certain aspects of the battle that are well-known historical "facts." He gives Beauregard more credit for his efforts and believes the halting of the first-day attack was both sensible and done due to poor battlefield intelligence. As well, we see that Lew Wallace, later to be the hero of the Monocacy, did not deserve to be pilloried here as he was, fighting his division well and being critical to success on the second day. I was quite surprised. I was more surprised that the man who grew to be Grant's greatest nemesis due to his political intrigues, GEN John A. McClernand, showed himself to be competent and then some. Smith portrays nicely the growth of Sherman as a battlefield commander over the two days. However, Smith perhaps lets Sherman off a little easy for his lack of a meaningful picket line.

Maps? You want maps? ***Shiloh*** has 20 maps, and I found them quite helpful in moving and aiding the telling of the battle.

Smith does something else many books writing about battles fail to do: deal with the after-effects for the area and local economy. Shiloh, unlike Gettysburg, was in a more rural, less-developed area that had to deal with the impact of both the battle and the dead and wounded. Moreover, not only the battlefield itself but also the approach marches and line of retreat had a huge impact on the local habitat far beyond the immediate battlespace.

I will note Smith seems perplexed on how to assess the criticality of the Hornet's Nest. Historians are literally all over the battlefield in assessing its importance to the fight. I think Smith is perhaps unsure and straddles both camps. However, the Hornet's Nest sucked in Confederate brigade after brigade due to the importance of its terrain, though perhaps it could have been screened and bypassed.

Smith does simply a first-rate job, enough so you will want to find his other books on the Civil War's Western Theater. What ***Shiloh: Conquer or Perish*** did for me was rewrite in my mind the history of the battle and filled in the gaps. I knew the battle went on for hours the second day, but other sources have glossed over it. For that reason alone, ***Shiloh*** needs to be read by any student of military history. The only negative of the work is that the endnotes offer no explanation or explore other material; instead, they just cite sources. That's a small quibble when the work is slightly more than 600 pages. With that very small aside, Smith has written the new standard on Shiloh.

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Defending Fortress Europe: The War Diary of the German 7th Army in Normandy, 6 June to 26 July 1944; edited by Mark J. Reardon, Bedford, PA: Aberjona Press, 2012, 344 pages, \$24.95.

For the many of us who served on Army staff or other military staff, one of the critical elements in any unit was keeping the journal, the daily staff log. This staff log served as a historical record of everything the unit did and the actions it took. I recall days and late nights in an M111 Personnel Carrier in the tactical-operations center compiling my portion of this. Many young Armor lieutenants “back in the day” cut their professional-staff-work teeth on this task. So with great interest I reviewed this war diary of the 7th Army. The 7th Army was the major German combat formation from D-Day until the breakout with Operation Cobra across France in July 1944. What makes this fresh and useful is the editor is both a retired Armor officer as well as a very knowledgeable current military historian with extensive experience with the war on terror.

Reardon introduces the reader to the broad picture of the German army in the West prior to D-Day with two concise chapters. The two chapters setting the stage for the reader are both on how to prepare for the invasion – one on strategy and tactics, and the other on men and material. Reardon introduces each time period of the journal with editor notes that often puts the chapter in perspective, as well as including its place in the wider context of the struggle for Europe.

Defending Fortress Europe is not a reprise of the tactics and battles for control of Normandy. It is instead truly a view from the other side of the hill, written for the most part dispassionately about the ever-growing crisis facing the German army in the West. If there is any time the veneer of professionalism slips, it is usually about the lack of Luftwaffe support and some occasional sniping at the navy. What comes across time and time again in the pages is that the German army knew it was facing a point of no return in logistical matters. For a more modern comparison, in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Army was constrained in terms of repair parts since the “bean counters” had severely curtailed the amount of lines of repair parts that could go forward. In a conflict where more equipment was written off due to this and battle damage, this could have had tragic consequences.

Multiply this small item by 100 – the German army was hemorrhaging combat soldiers with a *de minimis* influx of trained replacements, fuel, equipment and ammunition. It is still rumored that V Corps went black in terms of ammo supplies at the Karbala Gap in 2003. Imagine the issue for the Germans: you had retooled Soviet, Yugoslavia and French artillery pieces. You had some arms from all over Europe. Your wheeled-vehicle fleet suffered likewise, as it was requisitioned from civilian economies all over Europe, presenting a nightmare for repair parts. If the reader somehow missed the importance of this, Reardon several times redirects them back to understanding this huge constraint on German offensive operations.

Two small caveats with the book. First, I know Reardon both personally and professionally, having worked with him at the U.S. Army Center of Military History. I was able to put aside any favoritism in reading and judging the book objectively. My second caveat was the book suffered not from a lack of maps but from referencing the reader back to the proper map in the front of the book. A good editor should have been on top of that omission.

Reardon stays focused on his topic with his commentary and, unlike many current history books, does not stretch teaching points by bandying about whatever is the current flavor of military buzzwords or concepts. For both the combat leader and the logistician, Reardon’s book is highly recommended.

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