

Reviews

Allied Armor in Normandy by Yves Buffetaut; Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers; 2018; 128 pages with photographs, illustrations and bibliography; \$24.95.

The Waffen SS in Normandy: June 1944, the Caen Sector by Yves Buffetaut; Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers; 2018; 128 pages with photographs, map, illustrations and bibliography; \$24.95.

Allied Armor in Normandy and ***The Waffen SS in Normandy: June 1944, the Caen Sector*** are the latest entries in the Casemate Illustrated series on battles and campaigns of World War II. Written by French author and historian Yves Buffetaut, these works address the employment of both Allied and German armored forces from the initial June invasion of Normandy to the breakout from the beachhead in late August 1944. Buffetaut describes the structure of each national armor entry in succinct detail. His writing is supplemented by a series of illustrations on the organization of each armored force.

Armored forces within the Normandy area reflected the diverse composition of the Allied nations arrayed against Germany. Within the British sector were armored forces manned and led by Polish and Canadian commanders. At the same time, 2nd French Armored Division fought in the American segment of the beachhead.

On the other side, German force structure was reflective of a single nationality but contained an assortment of equipment; having conquered all of Western Europe, the Germans had the booty of a dozen armies available to augment their basic equipment. Equipping and repairing this once-bountiful harvest of military equipment grew ever more difficult as the war progressed. Waffen panzer units contained several modified French tank chassis along with an assortment of artillery and anti-tank weapons. There were at least three types of tanks. These included the Tiger, Panther and Mark IV panzers. This variety of equipment required constant satisfaction of unique logistical and mechanical needs.

Buffetaut's description of the various force structures is accurately reflected in a series of colored illustrations. While British forces included several armored divisions, the bulk of the force structure consisted of armored brigades. These compact brigades ably supported offensive and defensive operations. The Americans employed three types of armored forces within their confined area. Prior to 1942, the U.S. Army armored divisions contained about 18,000 men in two armored regiments and one infantry regiment. Combat experience during the North African campaign of 1942, however, led to a restructuring of the divisional structure.

The author refers to these new formations as "light armored divisions." The revised formation of a 15,000-man force contained three battalions of armor, infantry and artillery employed under the leadership of three combat commands. The Americans also used a number of independent tank battalions, but their actions are generally not part of this narrative. Regardless of commanding headquarters, all American armored units reflected the same battalion organizational structure.

The Waffen SS units placed in Normandy operated primarily against the British and Commonwealth forces in the Caen sector. Here the Germans operated under a complicated command arrangement that failed to satisfy the need for offensive mass required to repel the Normandy landings.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel commanded Army Group B; his responsibilities included the beaches at Normandy. Having experienced the devastating attacks of Allied aircraft on his armored formations during the desert battles of 1942, Rommel appreciated that daylight movement of his armored forces would be seriously impeded by the Allies' air armada. Therefore he wanted these formations to be located close to the potential landing sites. The commander of Panzer Group West, GEN Geyr von Schweppenburg, wanted his armored units held in reserve behind the frontlines, ready to crush any Allied breakthrough. Their heated disagreement was brought to Adolph Hitler for resolution. As happened so often before, Hitler imposed a solution that satisfied none of the contending parties: despite the arguments, Hitler decreed that he would command the panzers, and they would only be

committed with his personal permission. As Buffetaut ably describes, this remedy allowed the Allies to establish and expand the beachhead, as the panzers were not committed to the battles for several days after the landing.

Throughout the book, thumbnail sketches of Allied and German commanders are presented. On the Allied side, these include such well-known personalities as GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower, Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery and LTG George S. Patton Jr., as well as less well-known armored leaders. This latter group consists of American LTG Courtney Hodges, British LTG Miles Dempsey and MG Percy Hobart, Canadian LTG Henry Crerar and French MG Philippe Leclerc.

Hobart commanded the British 79th Armored Division, a unique unit containing a number of specialized armored vehicles. Illustrations of these vehicles provide an interesting insight into the array of highly modified Sherman and Churchill tanks used to clear mines, lay bridges and assault enemy fortifications. One of the more interesting sections of the book deals with the employment of the duplex-drive Sherman tank. These vehicles were designed to leave a given landing craft and move toward the beach using a flotation curtain and a propeller-driven propulsion system. Once on the beach, the flotation cover would be lowered, and the tank would support the assaulting infantry forces. The successes and failures of this particular vehicle are described in exacting terms by the author.

The profiles of the German commanders include that of Rommel and several other less-well-known but prominent panzer commanders. This group includes Scweppenburg, GENs Sepp Dietrich and Kurt Meyer, and panzer ace CPT Michael Wittmann. As with the Allied vehicle array, this volume is profusely illustrated with photos and colored plates of German armored vehicles. While the German armored offensive was often lacking in decisive employment, the same cannot be said of their defensive efforts. Armored formations aggressively moved against the Allies in support of various blocking operations. A superb example of their success is provided by the detailed review of Wittmann's impressive engagement of Canadian armor encountered around the French village of Villers Bocage.

Several major Allied operations were conducted to not only preclude a German counterattack into the Normandy beach area but, more importantly, to break out of the narrow hedgerow Normandy countryside and conduct exploitation, then pursuit, operations across France and into Germany. These include the British-led Operations Goodwood and Epsom, as well as the American-conceived and -executed Operation Cobra. Both volumes address each operation in a concise and well-balanced manner.

Unfortunately, despite a vast amount of supporting organizational diagrams and vehicle illustrations, these works contain only one map of the Normandy area. A list of recommended readings, however, is provided for those seeking to enhance their understanding of the Normandy campaign.

These worthwhile works will secure the interest of maneuver commanders seeking to enhance their appreciation of the contribution of World War II American and Allied forces to battlefield success in Normandy. The many illustrations of Allied and German tactical and support vehicles are impressive. Maneuver commanders should also appreciate the shortfalls the Germans experienced due to a complicated forces employment that precluded the massing of panzer forces, the lack of rehearsals in support of repelling the invaders and the devastating effect naval gunfire and aircraft had on the Germans' movement into the beachhead area.

These two works provide a glimpse into the battles fought in Normandy from June to August 1944. They should encourage further study and discussion by combined-arms leaders. As reference material, these works augment more detailed works on the Normandy campaign. However, these books should appeal to those seeking a better understanding of the contribution of Allied and German armored forces in Normandy.

RETIRE COL D.J. JUDGE

Traumatic Defeat: POWs, MIAs and National Mythmaking by Patrick Gallagher, University Press of Kansas, 2018; 200 pages, \$29.95 (hard cover).

Like most children of the 1970s, I woke up early Saturday mornings to watch classic Looney Tunes cartoons. A common trope of the inevitable chase scene was Bugs Bunny holding a sign reading, "Is this trip really necessary?" I found myself reflecting on that phrase again while reading *Traumatic Defeat* as I remain uncertain on the purpose and historical accuracy of this book.

Author Patrick Gallagher's premise is straightforward: e.g., a comparative study of German and American national reactions to prisoners of war (POWs) and missing-in-action (MIA) soldiers in World War II and Vietnam leading to the so-called "secret-camp myth." For the uninitiated, the secret-camp myth posits that Soviet Russia and Communist Vietnam held untold numbers of POWs after hostilities as bargaining chips or simply because their governments were evil in nature. According to Gallagher, Germany and America used the secret-camp myth as a means of drawing the public eye away from their defeat and wartime atrocities.

The second half of the book contrasts how quickly Germany moved past the secret-camp myth, whereas it continues to draw believers in the United States today, as evident from movies like *Rambo First: Blood Part II* or the display of POW/MIA flags at your local Veterans of Foreign Wars hall.

I found several problems with *Traumatic Defeat's* narrative and intent. From my perspective, the book plays rather loose with history. The fact that the Soviet Union held German POWs until at least 1956, routinely provided conflicting POW numbers and frequently withheld communication from the men's families seems to validate the secret-camp myth. More egregiously, the introduction claims that "America's war in Southeast Asia included routine atrocity and massacre, despite a sort of collective amnesia that has since confined memories of such behavior to only well-publicized events like My Lai" but fails to cite factual evidence to support Gallagher's claim.

The same point is made in the book's conclusion – again without evidence. Let me be clear: U.S. Soldiers committed a repugnant war crime at My Lai. However, such broad unsubstantiated statements besmirch the reputation of the more than 2.7 million U.S. men and women who honorably served in Vietnam. Most concerning, however, is the argument that America used the POW/MIA issue to minimize national guilt over a war "it started." There is scant mention of Russian-backed North Vietnam aggression toward its southern neighbor and none at all of the Soviet Union seizing Eastern Europe, leading to President Dwight Eisenhower's domino theory explaining Communist aggression in Indochina.

My reading further points to a critical misunderstanding in the book's thesis on why the POW/MIA question still garners attention in the United States. Namely, America holds a long-standing promise of accounting for our fallen through formal organizations such as the Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency or powerful symbols like the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. Every U.S. Soldier learns of this promise in basic training through the Soldier's Creed, which reads, "I will never leave behind a fallen comrade." That phrase, more than any poorly constructed guilt argument, explains why the POW/MIA issue continues to resonate in America long after the end of the Vietnam War.

LTC CHRIS HEATHERLY

Vitebsk: The Fight and Destruction of the Third Panzer Army by Otto Heidkämper, translated by Linden Lyons, Casemate Publishers, 2017 (part of the Association of the United States Army's reprint of the *Die Wehrmacht im Kampf* series); 256 pages, hardcover \$18.99, Kindle edition \$15.89.

From May 1943 to June 1944, Otto Heidkämper was the chief of staff for Third Panzer Army as it fought an increasingly desperate battle as part of Army Group Center in modern-day Belarus. **Vitebsk: The Fight and Destruction of the Third Panzer Army** is his operational-level memoir of the collapse of Army Group Center due to failings in leadership, logistics and operational maneuver. The German army was designed around an offensive war of movement, and the attritional campaign it found itself in by 1943-44 played to Soviet strengths rather than German ones.

Heidkämper's memoir covers a time when Third Panzer Army, along with much of the rest of the German armed forces on the Eastern Front, saw their tactical and operational superiority fade as the Soviet Union's Red Army progressed and gained the upper hand. Placed on the seam between Army Group North and Army Group Center,

and originally holding a quiet area of the front, Third Panzer Army saw its reserves and front-line divisions shifted to other areas to counter Soviet advances. Also, it suffered the expected attrition of defensive fighting and skirmishing as well as weather-related casualties. As Winter 1943-1944 approached, these losses became increasingly dire as a Soviet offensive in the direction of Vitebsk, a crucial rail and road junction supporting Army Group Center, was in the offing.

The book focuses largely on the winter battles around the city of Vitebsk, where German actions were moderately successful in stemming Soviet advances and maintaining a relatively stable frontline in spite of the odds against them. Operations against partisans, divisional transfers and logistics problems also help paint the picture of the odds against Third Panzer Army. Disappointingly, the destruction of Third Panzer Army during Operation Bagration in Summer 1944 is rather quickly covered, despite the ferocity of the combat and its significant impact on the course of the war.

Vitebsk was originally published in West Germany in the 1950s as part of a book series on World War II from the German perspective. Heidkämper's writing is almost divorced from the combat itself. Absent, aside from occasional mentions of specific acts of valor, are the individual German soldiers fighting in an increasingly hopeless campaign. This is, after all, the view of an Army Group chief of staff and not a company-grade combatant. The factual voice, almost that of a narrator instead of a participant, gives the book a near-sterile feel. Nevertheless, the operational focus and voice of a general-staff officer is needed when looking to thoroughly understand operations on the Eastern Front.

Also, readers will find the all-too-familiar and usual "blame Hitler" and "blame higher" for the Army's shortcomings throughout the book. While Heidkämper and his superior, COL-GEN Georg-Hans Reinhardt, did repeatedly raise concerns about significant operational shortcomings in the German planning process, the tone taken in *Vitebsk* is one of somewhat hapless generals who were forced to accept dictates without any recourse. For those familiar with *Auftragstaktik* and the German army's concept of independence in commanders, this continual laying of blame elsewhere is difficult to process. (For more on the concept of *Auftragstaktik* in the Wehrmacht at this time in the war, see Robert Citino's *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944-45* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2017)). Also absent is any of the discussion of the atrocities committed by Third Panzer Army against civilian populations or Soviet prisoners, though the editor has included Heidkämper's 1946 statement on anti-partisan operations for the Nuremberg trials.

Vitebsk provides an operational-level view of a positional defensive fight against a numerical superior enemy. As such, it contains a variety of potential lessons for readers looking at large-scale combat operations. This said, it is one perspective and was written without the assistance of many of the archives now available, especially the Red Army's. For those interested in a deeper understanding of the Soviet side of battle, see Richard Harrison's translation of the Soviet General Staff studies on the campaign (*Operation Bagration, 23 June-29 August 1944: The Rout Of The German Forces In Belorussia* (Solihull, UK: Helion, 2017)). For those looking to place *Vitebsk* in context, see David Glantz and Jonathan House's masterpiece *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2015) or Citino's *The Wehrmacht's Last Stand*.

MAJ T.G. HECK
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Acronym Quick-Scan

MIA – missing in action

POW – prisoner of war