

Blitzkrieg manqué or a new kind of war?
Interpreting the Allied Victory in the Normandy campaign
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The successful Allied landings on the beaches of Normandy on 6 June 1944 stand as one of the defining events of mid twentieth-century history. D-Day ranks alongside the Marshall Plan, or the Manhattan project as one of the signal demonstrations of the potency of the Western democracies. The landings were as Churchill remarked to Eisenhower in awe-struck tones, “much the greatest thing we have ever attempted.”¹ For those who honor the sacrifice and courage of the “greatest generation”, the beaches are a site of pilgrimage, the holy ground from which the “Great Crusade” for a new Europe was launched.² Not for nothing, the annual commemorations, now including the Germans, have become a fixture in trans-Atlantic diplomacy. But why and how did D-Day succeed? The question has given postwar society no peace. For all the solemnity and the weight of historical meaning loaded on the event, for historians D-Day serves as a Rorschach blot, an open-ended, projective test of underlying assumptions and models of historical explanation. This review essay seeks not to reconcile or synthesize the contending views, but to explore the logic of this perpetuum mobile of interpretation and reinterpretation.

Beyond the triumph of the landings accomplished and the enemy defeated, the D-Day literature has never found complacency easy to come by. Some of the earliest commentators were scathing. Liddell Hart, J.F.C. Fuller, Chester Wilmont were all critical of both the generalship and the fighting power of the Allies.³ The 1950s and 1960s saw a wave of recrimination amongst the leading commanders of

¹ The New York Times’s commentary on the 50th anniversary “The Terrible and Sacred Shore” is a remarkable period piece: <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/06/opinion/the-terrible-and-sacred-shore.html>

² <http://www.usmm.org/ikedday.html>.

³ In lieu of a full bibliography see J. Buckley, *The Normandy Campaign 1944 Sixty Years On* (Abingdon, 2006).

the invasion forces, divided above all over by the retrospective posturing of Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery. At stake was more than Montie's status as a great commander, in his disagreements with Bradley and Eisenhower a more fundamental clash between hidebound British conservatism and the dash and glamour of American modernity was encapsulated. In 1983 Carlo D'Este's *Decision in Normandy* not only adjudicated this argument, but provided a compelling narrative of how the postwar myth of Normandy and the controversy around it had taken shape.⁴ By then, however, the currents in the wider historiography had moved on. The argument between the Allies was displaced by invidious comparisons drawn between all of them and their Wehrmacht opponents. Whilst the wider historical literature moved in the 1980s to an ever more determined "othering" of the Nazi regime on account of its radical racism, amongst the military intelligentsia the reverse tendency prevailed. For analysts concerned to hone the "military effectiveness" of NATO's armies in Cold War Europe, the Germans were not just different. They were better. As Colonel Trevor N. Dupuy the leader of the new breed of quantitative battlefield analysts put it: "On a man for man basis, the German ground soldier consistently inflicted casualties at about a 50% higher rate than they incurred from the opposing British and American troops UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES."⁵

Inverting the terms of the earlier debate about generalship, Max Hastings in 1983 arrived at the cruel conclusion that it was not Montgomery who had failed his troops, but the other way around. As Hastings put it: "Montgomery's massive conceit masked the extent to which his own generalship in Normandy fell victim to the inability of his army to match the performance of their opponents on the battlefield." "There was nothing cowardly about the performance of the British army in Normandy", Hastings hastened to add. But it was simply too much to expect a "citizen army in the fifth year of war, with the certainty of victory in the distance" to

⁴ Carlo D'Este's *Decision in Normandy* (New York, 1983).

⁵ T.N. Dupuy, *Numbers, Predictions and War*, New York, 1978

match the skill and ferocity of the Wehrmacht at bay.⁶ It is worth remembering that Hastings concluded his D-Day book shortly after participating as an embedded reporter in the Falklands campaign, in which the highly professional British army humbled a much larger force of Argentinian conscripts. And he did not hesitate to draw conclusions from D-Day for NATO in the 1980s. Given the overwhelming conventional superiority of the Warsaw Pact, the “armies of democracy” needed critically to examine their own history: “If a Soviet invasion force swept across Europe from the east, it would be unhelpful if contemporary British or American soldiers were trained and conditioned to believe that the level of endurance and sacrifice displayed by the Allies in Normandy would suffice to defeat the invaders. For an example to follow in the event of a future European battle, it will be necessary to look to the German army; and to the extraordinary defence that its men conducted in Europe in the face of all the odds against them, and in spite of their own demented Führer.”⁷

In the 1980s, whilst for liberal intellectuals Holocaust consciousness served to buttress a complacent identification with the “values of the West”, the military intelligentsia were both far less sanguine about a dawning end of history, in which their role seemed far less self-evident, and far more ambiguous in the use they made of the history of Nazi Germany. The most striking instance of this kind of militarist cultural critic was the Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld, who was not then the marginal figure that he was to become in the 2000s. His *Fighting Power* published in 1982 was at the center of the “military effectiveness” debates that were convulsing the American army in the wake of Vietnam.⁸ Why van Creveld asked had the German army not only fought better but held together in the face of overwhelming odds, why did it not “run”, why did it not “disintegrate” and why did

⁶ The morale of our troops Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). Overlord (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 3014-3024). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). Overlord (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 6551-6554). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Van Creveld *Fighting Power: German and US Army Performance 1939-1945* (Westport 1982) was cited approvingly, for instance, by Edward Luttwak in <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/23/books/with-the-boring-parts-left-out.html?pagewanted=all>

it not “frag its officers.” Crevelde’s answer was simple. The Germans fought well because they were members of a “well integrated well led team whose structure administration and functioning were perceived to be Equitable and just.” Their leaders were first rate and despite the totalitarian regime they served were empowered to employ their freedom and initiative wherever possible. By contrast the social segregation in America’s army was extreme. “American democracy” Crevelde opined “fought world war II primarily at the expense of the tired, the poor the huddled masses” “between America’s second rate junior officers “ and their German opposite numbers there simply is no comparison possible.” On the battlefield Nazi Volksgemeinschaft trumped Western class society.

If despite these devastating deficiencies, the allies had nevertheless prevailed, the reason was not military but economic. Overwhelming material superiority decided the outcome. *Brute Force* was the title chosen by John Ellis for his powerful summation.⁹ It was a conclusion backed up by economic histories that began to be published at the time. The Allies waged a “rich man’s war” against a vastly inferior enemy. In the mayhem of the Falaise Gap, the Allies were shocked to find the grisly carcasses of thousands of dead horses mingled with the Wehrmacht’s abandoned armor and burned-out soft-skinned vehicles. What hope did the half-starved slave economy of Nazi-occupied Europe have of competing with the Allies’ oil-fuelled, globe-spanning war machine?¹⁰

But it was not just the battlefield contest and its material background that were being reexamined from the 1970s onwards. So too was the methodology of military history and its mode of story telling. The juxtaposition of Carlo D’Este’s *Decision in Normandy* and Max Hasting’s *Overlord* published within months of each in 1983-1984 marks a moment of transition. D’Este offers a classic view from the top, focusing on the high command. Hastings assembles his history from the bottom up. His was, one is tempted to say, a social history of combat - organized around the category of experience, intimate, personal and graphically violent. In this respect

⁹ John Ellis, *Brute Force. Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War* (London, 1990).

¹⁰ See the complementary accounts in A. Tooze, *Wages of Destruction. The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London, 2006) and D. Edgerton, *The British War Machine* (London, 2012).

Hastings followed in the deep footprints left by John Keegan's path-breaking, *The Face of Battle* (1976). The image that Hastings painted was savage. The struggle waged in Normandy was no "clean war". Appalling death and destruction scarred the battlefield. Casualty rates in the frontline spearhead units of the Allied units ran well above 100 percent by the end of 1944. Hastings did not deny the atrocities committed by the German soldiers he recommended as an example for NATO. But he leveled the score by pointing out how frequently the Allies armies shot both prisoners and men trying to surrender. Savagery began savagery in a loop that was more anthropological than political.

And if violence was no longer taboo then this went for the civilians as much as the soldiers. Since the early 2000s, a powerful new strand of literature has sought to address the enormous collateral damaged produced in the course of the landings and the way in which "liberated" France struggled to come to terms with its profoundly ambiguous experience.¹¹ Ground and naval artillery, but above all air power wrecked French cities and claimed tens of thousands of lives. Tellingly this research took place in the context of a wider and highly critical investigation of the Allied strategic air war directed by Richard Overy. It was flanked by a more wide-ranging inter-disciplinary enquiry into liberal societies and war. In the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the legal questions posed by a new era of long-range and remote killing, the question hung in the air.¹² Was the use of force by the Allied forces in Normandy proportionate? Did it constitute a crime against the French civilian population? The ambiguity of liberation is brought home most recently by Mary Louise Roberts *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II* (Chicago, 2014). She describes how the bodies of French women were made the eroticized booty of the soldiers of the "Great Crusade".

In World War II, there was nothing like the conscientious objection movement on the Allied side that there had been in World War I. But given the scale of the violence that they were dealing out in the final stages of the war, it is not

¹¹ Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939-1945* (London, 2013) And C. Baldoli and A. Knapp, *Forgotten Blitzes: France and Italy under Allied Air Attack, 1940-1945* (London, 2012).

¹² H. Footitt and A. Knapp eds. *Liberal Democracies at War: Conflict and Representation* (London, 2013)

surprising that at least some people spoke out in protest. Opposition to the destruction being wrought ranged from outraged ethical criticism in the House of Lords to the shock of a corporal in the 4th Dorsets who later recalled the incongruity of bursting into a French home during house to house fighting: ‘There we were, wrecking this house, and I suddenly thought – “How would I feel if this was mine?”’¹³ In 1940 the British Expeditionary Force in France had been under strict instructions to avoid all damage to French property, including a prohibition on knocking loopholes in brick walls so as to create firing positions. Now the Allied forces were reducing entire cities to rubble. But horrific as the bombardments clearly were, research on the British side does not suggest that revulsion was the general response. The war had to be won and if firepower kept Allied soldiers out of harms way, so be it. Few allied soldiers apologize for the material preponderance they commanded. Many of them clearly relished the spectacle. For the commanders the war might be an end in itself, an opportunity to write their names into the annals of military history. For the vast majority of their troops it was a job to be accomplished. The Germans were to be defeated with whatever means and manpower was available to crush them. In so doing, the Allies may not have matched the military skill of the Wehrmacht. But it was not merely brute force. The Allied war effort had its own logic – political, strategic, operational, tactical and technical. Rescuing this logic from the damning but tightly circumscribed judgments of the “military effectiveness” literature, has been the purpose of two decades of revisionist scholarship.

This revisionism has been directed in three directions. Setting aside the question of whether Montgomery’s D-Day plan was executed as he claimed, the new work has sought to articulate the relationship that clearly did exist between grand strategy, the D-Day operation and the tactics of Allied war fighting. Especially crucial in this regard have been a variety of technical studies on the firepower and how it was brought to bear. And embracing both of these more specialized currents have

¹³ Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). Overlord (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 4598-4600). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

been more expansive social histories that help us to understand the men who fought in the Allied armies and the social relations produced and reproduced in the war. The revisionism has been general, including both the US and Canadian armies, but it has been most comprehensive with regard to the forces of the British empire, which thanks to their “failure” outside Caen and the malaise of postwar Britain have been the subject to the most withering criticism.

Both David French *Raising Churchill's Army: The British Army and the War against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford, 2001) and Alan Allport's *Browned-off and Bloody Minded: The British Soldier Goes to War (1939-1945)* (Yale, 2015) mount powerful critiques of the clichés that continue to dominate accounts of the British army. Both seek to overturn the stereotypes of Colonel Blimp that dominated both contemporary and postwar commentary. French does so by focusing on the professional logic that made the British army in the interwar period into an organization dedicated to sustained, if rather quixotic, modernization. If it was held back from full-scale military revolution it was due to budgetary constraints and the need to accommodate the demands of imperial policing. French does not deny the influence of Britain's all-pervasive class structure, but insists that what determined the history of the Army were not general social attitudes, but the evolution of a peculiarly rigid and unbending vision of military professionalism. It is telling, he points out, that officers at Sandhurst spent the vast majority of their time being drilled as exemplary private soldiers, rather than learning tactics or new technology. Building on French's insights into the inner workings of the officer corps, Allport tackles the class issue head on. Whilst military professionalism might dominate the thinking of the officer corps, once the Army began to expand dramatically from 1939 onwards and millions of men were pent up for years in base camps, class hierarchy simply could not be ignored. Whilst enormous economic disadvantage and inequality persisted, what the Army had to contend with was a society in flux.¹⁴ As the 1937 “Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales” reported: ‘All members of the community are obviously coming to resemble one another.’ Against

¹⁴ He draws on the new social histories of R. McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures. England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 2000) and S. Todd, *The People* (London, 2014).

this backdrop of increasing egalitarianism in terms of consumer tastes and lifestyles, wartime military life was a shock, “a reminder that this superficial democratization in tastes had done little to alter the fundamental hierarchies that divided up British society. Class structure ‘was duplicated so grotesquely in the services’, thought Anthony Burgess, that ordinary soldiers who had hitherto paid it little attention could not help but be awakened to its existence. Richard Hoggart too believed that the Forces ‘reinforced, repeated, set in their own amber, the class-determined definition of British life’ in a way that was too obvious to ignore and too obnoxious to defend.”¹⁵

Talk of serious unrest, of course, was exaggerated. In the British army in World War 2 and on the home front there was nothing to compare with the radicalism of 1916-1921. If the British army was largely made up of working-class men in uniform, it was a class that in the 1920s had suffered a historic defeat, was recovering from mass unemployment and found its trade union organizations firmly in control of the Labour Party as the junior coalition partner in the Churchill government. What was on display on the beaches of Normandy in 1944 was not subversive radicalism, but what Anthony Beevor has recently dubbed a “trade union mentality”, which upheld a bargained relationship with authority, discipline and the ultimate demands of the war.¹⁶

If there was one thing that all ranks in the army were united around it was the determination to avoid a repeat of the mass slaughter of the Somme or Passchendaele. As French puts it: “After 1918 senior British officers knew that never again would society allow them to expend their soldiers’ lives in the same profligate way that they had on the Western Front.” And as Allport showed this extended all the way down the ranks. Soldiers appreciated an energetic young officer, but not one whose courage and enthusiasm risked getting his men killed. The question was not one of out-right disobedience or refusal to follow orders, but a sense of proportion and reasonableness. Both soldiers and officers reacted badly to orders that were in the language of the time, ‘not on’. This, as Hastings put it, was “a

¹⁵ Allport, *Browned Off*, 288.

¹⁶ Beevor, *D-Day*, xxii.

fragment of British army shorthand which carried especial weight when used at any level in the ordering of war. Before every attack, most battalion commanders made a private decision about whether its objectives were 'on', and thereby decided whether its purpose justified an all-out effort, regardless of casualties, or merely sufficient movement to conform and to satisfy the higher formation. ... following bloody losses and failures, many battalion commanders determined privately that they would husband the lives of their men ... making personal judgements about an operation's value. as the infantry casualty lists rose, it became a more and more serious problem for the army commanders to persuade their battalions that ... tomorrow's map reference, deserved of their utmost. The problem of 'non-trying' units was to become a thorn in the side of every division and corps commander, distinct from the normal demands of morale and leadership...."¹⁷

Not that there was anyone in senior leadership who did not understand the need to husband manpower. Despite their overwhelming material advantage, none of the Allied armies was oversupplied with infantry draftees. The British army at D-Day started at 2.75 million men and dwindled from there. In May 1944 the American army disposed of only 89 combat divisions in all theaters, of which only 60 were available for deployment in Europe.¹⁸ Of these 16 were armored. This compared to c. 100 divisions in the Japanese army, c. 240 in the Wehrmacht and over 300 in the Red Army.

Conscious of their modest size and the need to limit casualties, the Allied armies sought to compensate with material and machinery. But what kind of machines did their armies need? Both the British army, with Imperial "small wars" in mind, and the US, with its legacy of the frontier wars and a strong cavalry tradition, gave priority to mobility not massive striking power. This did not stand the test of combat. From North Africa onwards, it was clear that motorization and mechanization were not enough. On the battlefield the ability to move without

¹⁷ Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). Overlord (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 2692-2697). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition. Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). Overlord (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 2685-2692). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ M. Matloff, "The 90-division gamble", at http://www.history.army.mil/books/70-7_15.htm

massive casualties depended on the suppression of the enemy's fire, which depended on establishing fire superiority. Ideally, this would have required heavier and better-armed tanks and more and better infantry small arms. But given development time lags, in 1944 the Allied armies had to make do with the botched results of several waves of misdirected modernization, which yielded both inferior infantry weapons and armor. The Westheer by contrast was benefiting in 1944 from a burst of new weapons development that had been energized by the Wehrmacht's shocking experience on the Eastern Front in 1941. In tanks, anti tank weapons, anti-aircraft and small arms this gave them a distinct qualitative edge. As a result the encounter in Normandy was strikingly asymmetric. Whilst the Allied armies enjoyed overwhelmingly material superiority in a macroscopic sense – with regard to air and naval power, petrol, ammunition and limitless supplies of new weapons – in any given tactical encounter they were more often than not at a disadvantage. In tanks the Allies could compensate through sheer weight of numbers. But in infantry firefights it was the Allies, not the Germans who tended to be out-gunned. Crucially, the Germans equipped their infantry companies with as many as 15 light machine-guns (as opposed to only 2 in the US army), allowing them to concentrate huge weights of small-arms fire. As a result of this mismatch, despite the commitment to husband manpower and to avoid any repetition of World War I, the casualty rates at the sharp end of the Allied armies were terrible.

These then were the parameters of allied war-fighting. They were sustained and haunted by the confident expectation of ultimate victory that many of those in the fighting line would not live to see. They faced a fearsome, skillful and well-equipped enemy, with forces of modest size and ample but mediocre equipment. Their soldiers were willing to fight and to sacrifice, but were skeptical towards the traditional hierarchies and the language of heroism. They were unashamedly interested in surviving to enjoy the victory that was rightfully theirs. It was out of this set of parameters that Stephen Ashley Hart distils an ideal type of Montgomery's mode of war-fighting as a perfect Clausewitzian synthesis.¹⁹ The

¹⁹ S.A. Hart, *Montgomery and Colossal Cracks* (Praeger, 2000).

Field Marshall's bold, even triumphalist talk helped to sustain the sense of the historic inevitability of Allied victory. At the same the operational conduct of the campaign was cautious, setting modest and attainable operational demands that helped to maintain morale and avoid a devastating setback that might have fractured the fragile belief in ultimate superiority. To square the circle the Allies deployed absolutely overwhelming long-range fire power. Not for nothing Hart's book is title *Colossal Cracks*, the phrase that Montgomery liked to use to describe his gigantic artillery barrages. It was not gratuitous desire for destruction or blunt tactical incompetence, but the very obvious technical inferiority of the Allied armies and the urgent need to minimize casualties that caused the British, American and Canadian soldiers to rely to such an unprecedented extent on long-range fire support: artillery, naval guns and every kind of airpower.

As the revisionist literature stresses, it is precisely in the orchestration of long-range fire support that Allied war-fighting was at its most skillful and innovative. Never before had naval artillery been used to such devastating effect in a land campaign. The awesome power of the strategic bomber was turned loose on the battlefield. The spectacle was overwhelming, the destruction was awful and the tactical benefits uncertain, but never before had a weapons system of such complexity – fleets of up to a 1000 aircraft guided by invisible electronic rays - been deployed on a battlefield. At the same time, tactical airpower assumed an unprecedented significance, with squadrons of fighter-bombers loitering over the armored columns as they advanced, in constant radio contact, ready to reconnoiter and strike targets ahead at a moment's notice. It was a distinctly futuristic vision of a new type of war. As General Pete Quesada, who headed IX Tactical Air Command commented triumphantly to his mother, "My fondness for Buck Rogers devices is beginning to pay off".²⁰ Even the artillery, the king of the battlefield since the dawn of the gunpowder age, was undergoing a dramatic and easily under-rated evolution. Orchestrated by an elaborate radio and field telephone system, linking forward and

²⁰ T.A. Hughes, *Overlord, General Pete Quesada and the Triumph of Tactical Airpower* (New York, 2010).

aerial observers to Fire Control Centers, British and American gunners were able within minutes to concentrate unprecedented weights of fire at key points on the battlefield. As powerful new histories of the Canadian sector West of Caen have shown, their ability to stop all armored counterattacks against the bridgehead in their tracks depended on the massing of devastating artillery firepower on any visible concentration of German troops.²¹

But if these are the elements of a far-reaching revisionist synthesis, the result is an increasingly evident tension between form and content. The new consensus on how the Allies fought the war is at odds with the narrative strategies inherited from the 1980s. This tension is quite pronounced in the most ambitious of the new synthetic accounts of the D-Day campaign, Antony Beevor's *D-Day* and Allport's *Browned Off*.

Both books are very much in the new mode of experiential military history, taking us close to the action and the hearts and minds of the men who fought. This focus on the reality of combat anchors the narrative in the frail bodies and tortured souls of the men at the sharp end. The lyricism of the literary testimony in *Browned Off* and the narration of battlefield horror in Beevor's *D-Day* set a new standard of intensity. Since the taboos on talking about death in modern combat were broken, unshrinking realism has become its own formula. Beevor's *D-Day* is a relentless parade of horrors - phosphorous burns, the incineration of tanks crews, decapitation, dismemberment, the smashing of bodies, faces, arms, feet and legs blown off, bowels eviscerated, wounded men burned alive in blazing fields and crushed by tank. As Allport puts it in his remarkable conclusion: "The human body was a frail thing to expose to fire and steel, shrapnel and high explosive, flying concrete and glass. Soldiers were shot, punctured with shell fragments, lacerated by shards of debris. They had their backs broken, their hands and feet scythed off, their limbs pulverized, their eardrums permanently shattered by concussive explosions, their eyes burned out of their sockets."

²¹ T. Copp, *Fields of Fire. The Canadians in Normandy* (Toronto, 2004) and M. Milner *Stopping the Panzers* (Kansas, 2014).

The men who experienced such violence most directly were in the infantry and armoured divisions. It is their memoirs and reminiscences that dominate Beevor and Allport's narratives, as they do the entire historical literature. But this is not only unrepresentative of the Allied armies in which 45 percent of the manpower was in rear area functions, as against 14 % infantrymen, and 6 % tank crews.²² More importantly, it cannot capture precisely what the revisionist literature is at pains to stress, namely the central importance to Allied war-fighting of long-range firepower. It was not by accident that the gunners made up the largest single group in the British army (18 % of the force in Normandy) and that by the end of World War II the Royal Artillery outnumbered the manpower of the Royal Navy.

This bias towards the immediate experience of combat distorts Beevor's account of military operations in D-Day throughout. The artillery and the bomber rarely appear in his narrative without doleful emphasis on their misdirection and the collateral damage they inflicted. Only in the final sections of the narrative does he begin to do justice to what was in fact a fully three-dimensional campaign. There is a grudging discussion of the role of airpower and artillery in the Cobra offensive and the repulse of the German counterattack at Mortain in August 1944. But airpower appears at this point in the narrative more as a *deus ex machine* than a concerted technological and tactical development. And even here, whereas Beevor extolls the resilience and bravery of the infantry of the 30th Division who suffered 300 casualties out of 700 men in holding Mortain, he goes on to attribute the destruction of the town itself to a "fit of pique" on the part of a staff officer far behind the lines, reinstating every cliché of the *Frontgemeinschaft* and obscuring the fact that the heroic stand of the "lost battalion" was made possible only by long-range artillery fire support. As memoirs make clear, by the second day of their encirclement, the infantrymen holding out on hill 314 had virtually no ammunition with which to return German fire directly. The radio was their only weapon.²³

In this clinging to a conventional personalized narrative of horror and

²² Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). *Overlord* (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 4284-4286). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

²³ Robert Weiss, *Fire Mission! The Siege of Mortain, Normandy August 1944* (Portland, 2002).

heroism, now supplemented by the anguish of bombed out civilians, the protocols of a bottom up history of modern war, and the emotions and ethical questions it poses, clash with what the revisionist history has established as the basic mode of Allied war-fighting in Normandy, namely its reliance on long-range firepower and the complex, anonymous and mundane logistical apparatus that delivered it. The tension is summed up in one of Allport's witnesses, who remarks that whilst the Allied artillery barrages were reassuring in their awesome firepower, it was troubling that such 'dispassionate acts of mechanical precision employed in killing' were set into motion by men who, moments after unleashing their murderous fire on the enemy infantry, would be calmly 'lifting mugs of tea and lighting cigarettes' in their dugouts miles behind the front."²⁴ As Hastings noted, the gap between individual and war machine was a problem haunting the Allied war effort: "The sheer enormity of the forces deployed in Normandy destroyed the sense of personality, the feeling of identity which had been so strong, for instance, in the Eighth Army in the desert. The campaign in north-west Europe was industrialized warfare on a vast scale. For that reason, veterans of earlier campaigns found this one less congenial – dirty and sordid in a fashion unknown in the desert. Many responded by focusing their own loyalties exclusively upon their own squad or company."²⁵ Characteristically, in the spirit of the 1980s military effectiveness argument, Hastings turns these observations about military alienation into an explanation for diminished fighting power. But is this not an evasion? Rather than flinching away from this disconcerting reality, rather than clinging to the visceral experience of the combatants who lived the war in the most unmediated way, should a history of modern war, and of Allied war-fighting in particular not take this mounting sense of dissociation as its central focus? What would a history of the Normandy campaign look like that took its own conclusions seriously and revolved around firepower rather than combat?

²⁴ Cited Allport, 208-209.

²⁵ Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). *Overlord* (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 4097-4100). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

This is not a new question in the history of war in the twentieth-century. It was already posed with dramatic force by World War I. And the fighting around Caen did seem to reawaken for a month or two the nightmarish memories of Passchendaele. The force of the traumatic memory of World War I tempts one to describe the shock of combat in Normandy in those terms - as winding back of the historical clock. The fast-moving armored warfare of the early war years had seemed to promise an escape from the horrors of trench warfare. In 1944 the armor-heavy landing forces of the Allies, were looking forward to waging their own Blitzkrieg across France. Normandy delivered something else. And it was disorientating to both sides. As one German commander said about his colleagues in the Panzer divisions: The moment for free-wheeling tank-on-tank clashes had come and gone. "They now had to wake up from a beautiful dream!"²⁶ The question is whether to think of this shock as a throwback to Passchendaele, or as pointing to the future. Rommel, who was not only amongst the first practitioners of Blitzkrieg but also one of the most innovative infantry commanders of World War I, warned his colleagues when he arrived on the Atlantic Wall that their encounter with the Allies would be different. What they would face would not be 1917, or 1940, or even the Eastern front. The volume, coordination and three-dimensional reach of Allied firepower - both artillery and air power - changed everything.

Perhaps rather than looking backwards to the trenches of 1916 or 1917, it is precisely to the strategic air war that we should look for models of how to write the history of the new kind of combat seen after D-Day. In the case of strategic air war, old models of combat clearly do not apply. To capture the strategic bombing campaign, authors such as Alexander Kluge, Martin Middelbrook and Joerg Friedrichs have experimented with dissociated, multi perspectival narratives, in which it is precisely the abstraction of large-scale organization, the labor of war and

²⁶ Beevor, D-Day, 355.

its complex mechanisms for delivering firepower, that are the focus as much as the visceral reality of combat.²⁷

An obvious starting point would be to trace the networks of communication and observation that animated the Allied firepower system and brought the mortars, guns and fighter bombers into play. Balkoski in his unit history of the 29th division, one of the two divisions that had the misfortune to be first ashore at OMAHA beach, gives a fascinating account of the command chain for artillery.²⁸ A fire request might start with one of the SCR-536 “handy-talkies” – one per platoon - or with a Forward Observer team equipped with a SCR-300 FM radio with a speaking range of 5 miles. How might the battle look if its history were viewed from the vantage point of one of the ubiquitous Piper Cub spotter planes (or its British equivalent the Auster), which hovered ominously over the German ranks?²⁹ What might we find if we dusted off the massive official histories of Army Signals during World War II, which recount the remarkable wire networks and wireless relay systems that the Allies spanned across France, including a radio relay atop the Eiffel tower?³⁰ How would our narrative of the war read, if we centered it in one of the Battalion Fire Direction Centers, an assembly of “ultra-modern communications equipment” crammed into a mobile shed little bigger than a closet, a cross between a “telephone exchange and a draftsman’s workroom”, laced with wires running to a “buzzing, flashing switchboard”, filled with bulky high-powered radio sets and officers hunched over maps “using compasses and protractors to plot artillery fire” in real time. By August 1944 Quesada’s centralized MEW/SCR-584 radar center, connected to fighter-bomber groups by 10,000 miles of telephone wire was able to direct strike missions even in the worst weather.

²⁷ J. Friedrich, *Der Brand* (Munich, 2002) caused a great sensation but was derivative in form from the pioneering efforts of A. Kluge, *Der Luftangriff auf Halberstadt am 8. April 1945* (Frankfurt, 1977) and M. Middlebrook, *The Battle of Hamburg: The Firestorm Raid* (London, 1980).

²⁸ J. Balkoski, *Beyond the Beachhead. The 29th Infantry Division in Normandy* (Mechanicsburg, 1989), 80-116.

²⁹ For the development of aerial observation see S. Bidwell, *Gunners at War. A Tactical Study of the Royal Artillery in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1970), 103-117.

³⁰ George Raynor Thompson and Dixie R. Harris, *The Signals Corps: The Outcome (Mid-1943 Through 1945)* (Washington DC, 1966).

From such vantage points the war could be experienced at the same time as very close and disconcertingly remote. Spotter planes flew no more than a few hundred meters above the ground and the barrages they called down often passed so close that they “jolted” the wings of the aircraft. At the same time, one pilot noted, “it was a very disembodied business,” “One day he was puzzled by piles of logs lying beside a road, until he saw that they were dead Germans.”³¹ It was not until he did a tour of duty as a forward air observer calling in strikes from inside a tank, remarked one Thunderbolt pilot that he gained any idea of “what it’s like down there”.³² A similar disjuncture marks the remarkable memoir of Lieutenant Robert Weiss, who commanded the forward observer group for 230rd Field Artillery Battalion and orchestrated the artillery fire that saved the American position on Hill 314 during the Mortain counterattack. During the battle between 7 and 12 August in a staccato series of radio messages clipped by fading battery power he called down no less than 193 fire missions from battalion and division level artillery. He had no other communication with higher echelon command. And, but for one brief breakthrough by a lone German tank, he never saw the enemy except at long range through binoculars. Positioned as he was, on a high vantage point, the battle was, as one colleague remarked “an artilleryman’s dream come true”. But what, Weiss asked, does an artilleryman dream of? “Are his conceptions those of glory and victory ... ? Does he dream of shooting soldiers and tanks as if they were on a make-believe battlefield? Or ... does he hear the scream and whine of shells, see men huddled against the earth shaking with fear?”³³ Even a soldier as close to one of the most intense battles of the Normandy campaign as Weiss, never overcame the sense of dissociation. And what of the gunners and mortarmen themselves? As one remarked to Max Hastings they felt themselves and their firepower to be a fungible resource: “We would suddenly find ourselves put with a different army [said Ratliff of his 155

³¹ Hastings, Max (2012-03-22T00:00:00+00:00). *Overlord* (Pan Military Classics) (Kindle Locations 4122-4129). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

³² T.A. Hughes, *Overlord, General Pete Quesada and the Triumph of Tactical Airpower* (New York, 2010) footnote 31.

³³ Robert Weiss, *Fire Mission! The Siege of Mortain, Normandy August 1944* (Portland, 2002).

mm battery], and we would more likely hear about it on the grapevine than from orders. Much of our firing was blind or at night, and we often wondered what we were shooting at. Nobody would say down the telephone: 'I can see this village and people running out.' We would just hear '50 short' or '50 over' called to the Fire Control Centre."³⁴

Devastating as the artillery firepower of the Allies was, what haunted the Germans was airpower. It was, commented Admiral Ruge Rommel's naval advisor, as if the Allies could open a new, vertical flank on any German position.³⁵ Alternatively, as Patton would demonstrate, tactical airpower could also be used in the manner of a cavalry screen, to close the exposed flanks of his army as it charged up the Loire valley. Yet, to a remarkable extent even the recent histories of the Allied campaign replicate the famously fraught lines between army and air force. Atkinson and Allport write histories of the American and British armies respectively.³⁶ Beevor and Hastings purport to provide general histories of the campaign, but actually repeat the conventional narrative of land warfare.

A history of the battle in three dimensions would not doubt feature moments of slaughter. Beevor quotes the "pitiless" testimony of an Australian Typhoon pilot who recalled making "cannon attacks into the massed crowds" of Wehrmacht soldiers trying to escape the Falaise pocket. "We would commence firing, and then slowly pull the line of cannon fire through the crowd and then pull up and go around again and again until the ammunition ran out. After each run, which resulted in a large vacant path of chopped up soldiers, the space would be almost immediately filled with other escapees."³⁷ But the recent literature on tactical airpower shows how untypical such situations of one-sided massacre actually were. In general, low-level ground attack mission were amongst the most dangerous assignments in the war. Though the Luftwaffe had been swept from the sky, the Germans had pioneered a new generation of small caliber automatic flak, which was lethal at

³⁴ Hastings, *Overlord*, xxx.

³⁵ Richard P. Hallison, *D-Day 1944. Air Power Over the Normandy Beaches and Beyond* (1994), 18.

³⁶ Rick Atkinson, *The Guns at Last Light* (New York, 2013).

³⁷ Beevor, *D-Day*, p. 466.

altitudes anywhere below 1000 meters. Altogether in the order of 20,000 flak batteries were deployed in Normandy. Beyond an average of 17 sorties, a Typhoon pilot flying low-level rocket missions was considered to be living on borrowed time.³⁸ Remote killing and visceral fear went hand in hand. Once hit, a Typhoon pilot, if he was lucky enough to regain control, had seconds to climb to altitude before attempting to bail out. If captured pilots could expect no quarter. Aware of the hatred they aroused, Typhoon pilots took to wearing army uniforms to avoid identification.

And behind the pilots and the gunners and the radio men and the spotters was a giant force, literally half the army, responsible for sustaining this modern, “rich man’s” war. In the American way of war, wrote one official Army historian, “it was hard to say which was more important – the gun that fired the ammunition at the enemy or the truck that brought the ammunition to the gun position.” Airmen were no good without air bases. As the front moved forward the Engineer Command of IX TAC built sixty new air bases across France in August and September alone. Each fighter group supporting 90 planes involved a ground staff of 1000 men and a wagon train of ground equipment.³⁹ Certainly never before had armies waged war with the material and logistical intensity that the Allies did in 1944, never before had the labour of war come so close to replicating that of an entire modern society on the move. If this was made the center of our attention, not as a object of critique and unfavorable comparison to more frugal, more focused armies, but as definitional of a new mode of war-fighting, the D-Day campaign could be understood not as a throw back to Passchendaele, or as a pale imitation of true Blitzkrieg, but as something more radical, as a step beyond land warfare as it had been hitherto conducted, towards a more all-encompassing orchestration of destructive force.

In 1944 German propaganda threatened the Allied soldiers that they would soon find themselves on the wrong side of the channel, cut off from their home base whilst “robot planes scatter over London and Southern England explosives, the

³⁸ Ian Gooderson, *Air Power at the Battlefield. Allied Close Air Support in Europe 1943-1945*(NY, 1998), 201.

³⁹ Gooderson, *Air Power*, 69.

power and incendiary efficiency of which are without precedent.”⁴⁰ It was a vain threat. The V1 and V2 may have pointed the road ahead. But their warheads carried only one ton each, landing sporadically over a period of months. In a major artillery concentration the Allies could deliver several thousand tons of shells either in a rolling bombardment over a matter of hours, or as a moving barrage ahead of the infantry. In a strategic bombing attack they could deliver more than 3000 tons of high explosives in a matter of minutes. And the scale of Allied firepower deployment did not peak in Normandy. It rose to a crescendo in the final offensives into Germany in 1945 and it did not stop there. If we make firepower not combat into the organizing thread of our history of Allied war-making then the obvious terminus is 6 August 1945, three months after Germany’s surrender, 13 months after D-Day, when a B29 dropped a single nuclear device over the city of Hiroshima. Exploding 580 meters above the city it delivered in a single devastating flash an explosive force of 16 kilotons, roughly three times the largest bombardment seen in Normandy.

Drawing a line forward from the firepower deployed at D-Day to the nuclear age may seem forced. But whether spoken out loud or not, it is one of the questions that hangs over the debate about the performance of the Allied armies in Normandy. What drove the preoccupation with “military effectiveness’ in the 1980s was precisely the search for an alternative to Mutually Assured Destruction. Writers like Dupuy, Hastings and van Creveld argued that if NATO’s Armies was to withstand the Warsaw Pact without massive use of nuclear weapons, they would have to repudiate the military history of Britain and the United States and take lessons from their enemy, the Wehrmacht. The Allied commanders after 1945 agreed, but they drew the opposite conclusion. Much as we tend to separate World War 2, as the last great conventional war, from the nuclear age, the line is in fact blurred. After Hiroshima, it was the victors of Normandy - Eisenhower, Montgomery, Bradley, Ridgeway – who remade themselves as the first generation of nuclear warriors and introduced “nuclear mindedness” to NATO’s ground forces.⁴¹ As early as 1947 Montgomery

⁴⁰ Hastings, *Overlord*, xxxx.

⁴¹ S.J. Moody, Was There a ‘Monty Method’ after the Second World War? Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery and the Changing Character of Land Warfare, 1945–1958’, *War in History* 2016, Vol.

conducted war games in which the invasion of Italy in 1943 was rerun, but this time with nuclear weapons. He was delighted with the results. After the formation of NATO, it was Montgomery as Deputy SACEUR to Eisenhower who would place the emphasis on fighting the Soviets in the North German plain, which he had seen as the principal zone of operations already after the breakout from Normandy and the ill-fated Arnhem operation. None of these generals were opposed to rearming Germany or improving “military effectiveness”. Especially in America’s 7th Army, reactivated in 1951 in Southern Germany, the influence of the Wehrmacht example of “mobile defense” ran deep.⁴² But NATO’s commanders knew the battlefield odds were stacked against them. The breakneck disarmament after 1945 confirmed what they already knew about the limited willingness of democracies to put large numbers of soldiers in the frontline. The answer, as in 1944, was firepower, air power now supplemented by the nuclear weapons.

It was under Eisenhower’s presidency in 1953 that the nuclear “New Look” strategy was first adopted. The first artillery regiment equipped with M-65 280 mm atomic cannon was deployed to Kaiserslauten in 1954, smaller 155 mm shells soon followed. Meanwhile, licensed by MC-48, Montgomery’s staff at SACEUR were rapidly incorporating tactical nuclear firepower into their vision of modern war. In 1954 in the Battle Royal exercise NATO simulated the effect of 10 nuclear shells on an advancing Soviet tank division.⁴³ A year later between 23 and 28 June 1955 under the code name Carte Blanche NATO played out a larger scale air war over Europe. This involved thousands of aircraft and the simulated explosion of 355 nuclear weapons, 268 of them in Germany. The civilian casualty estimate was 5.2 million, 1.7 million of which would be immediately fatal. When pushed by journalists to confirm that NATO was serious about the use of such weapons of mass destruction. Montgomery affirmed that: “We at SHAPE are basing all our planning

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⁴² Dieter Krueger, David T. Zabecki and Jan Hoffenaar ed. *Blueprints for Battle: Planning for War in Central Europe, 1948-1968* (University of Kentucky, 2012).

⁴³ Simon J. Moody (2015): Enhancing Political Cohesion in NATO during the 1950s or: How it Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the (Tactical) Bomb, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/01402390.2015.1035434

on using atomic or thermo nuclear weapons in our defence. . . . It is no longer 'they may possibly be used,' it is very definitely: they will be used if we are attacked." If one bore in mind the massive weight of firepower with which he had decided the battle in Normandy, there was little reason to doubt him.