

# MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Brigadier-General Denis Whitaker and Shelagh Whitaker, with Terry Copp, *The Soldiers' Story: Victory at Falaise* (Scarborough, ON: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd., 2000).**

Denis and Shelagh Whitaker's book is a fine addition to the literature on the Normandy Campaign. From the first page, the reader is gripped by the feeling of battle. The simple style in which the book is written makes it an easy read for the average reader as well as for the professional historian. The first half of the book provides an overview of the Normandy Campaign to August 1944. Interspersed are personal anecdotes from soldiers, which give the battles an intimate feel. The second half of the book deals with two individuals: Major David Currie, a Canadian recipient of the Victoria Cross, and Michel Gutkowski, a Captain in the Polish First Armored Division. Following on the heels of Stephen Ambrose's *D-Day* and *Citizen Soldiers*, this study reinforces Ambrose's contention that Allied soldiers performed better than we have been led to believe. It helps to demolish the myth (put forward by Max Hastings and others), that when Allied and German soldiers met on equal numbers the Germans always prevailed.

The book blends the tactical and strategic quite well, so that the reader can see the small unit operations in a larger context. The Whitakers provide anecdotes that are humorous and brilliant examples of English understatement, such as "the troop leader who, upon hearing German voices all around him, radioed to headquarters that they felt rather lonely." (61) Chapter 10, which deals with battle fatigue and morale, is an excellent chapter that gives the reader an explanation of what battle fatigue is and how it was treated. The chapter builds on Copp and McAdams' book *Battle Exhaustion*. The authors also touch on battle exhaustion on the German side, which is very rarely covered in the popular literature. Chapter Twenty deals with the little things that made the difference for the men in the field, such as food, hot showers and morale. We are shown how much these "niceties" meant to men who have not eaten a hot meal or had a shower, much less a hot shower in weeks.

This book contains more nuggets similar to these. For example, the authors discuss the personal animosity that existed among German generals, which affected operations in the field: such as when Lieutenant-General Gerhard Graf von Schwerin did his best to avoid having his division take part in the Mortain offensive. The reader also learns that SS officers served in Wehrmacht divisions, which was a new fact to the reviewer as well. It had been assumed that the SS and Wehrmacht divisions were totally separate formations with regard to personnel.

Terry Copp's excellent afterword centers this study well within the relevant historical and public debates. This section is very well written and should be of interest to the professional historian, military scholar and lay reader. While this book does not add anything really novel to the debate on the Normandy Campaign, it is a welcome addition to the existing literature for its balanced and insightful treatment of the soldiers' experiences during the closing of the Falaise Gap. The notes by the Whitakers are generally thorough, and their bibliography is extensive with an excellent combination of secondary literature, primary documents, and unpublished manuscripts. Brigadier-General (ret'd) Denis Whitaker, a WW II veteran who

was wounded at Falaise, and Shelagh Whitaker, a journalist with an experienced pen, have combined to bring the reader a clean and lively text. The amateur as well as the professional historian will enjoy this book.

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