

Wood, C.E. Mud: A Military History, Washington D.C: Potomac Books, 2006.

Adam Lajeunesse

The natural first impression when presented with a history of mud lies somewhere between amusement and curiosity. Have historians truly exhausted all other potential subjects and are now resorting to the study of moist dirt? Yet, if given more than brief consideration – and certainly after reading the book itself – the importance of mud to the history of warfare becomes obvious and undeniable. As Clyde Wood shows, the gooey substance has had a significant impact on the course of human conflict over the ages through its tendency to slow marching armies, wear down mechanized divisions and even ground air forces.

To begin the book, Wood assumes a task which no historian (to this reviewer's knowledge) has ever bothered to undertake. He categorizes mud into its various types based on depth and consistency while describing its qualities and composition. From these 'types' of mud Wood looks at the very different effects which it can have, depending on whether it is permanent as in the case of swamps, seasonal such as that created by the monsoons of Southeast Asia, or random mud created by flash storms. For each of these categories and sub-categories Wood provides an account of battles and wars that have been influenced by an army's inability to adapt to or foresee the impact of mud on their operations. The remainder of the book is divided up thematically, examining mud's historical impact on logistics, morale, health and fatigue. These issues are addressed using historical examples from the highest command level down to the

individual soldier, showing the all pervasiveness and ever-present importance of mud to the making of war.

Wood uses a very broad approach for his work. Geographically the book covers combat across North America, Europe and Asia while chronologically he employs examples and quotations stretching from Agincourt to the modern NATO occupation of Kosovo. The intent is clearly to demonstrate the timelessness and universal importance of mud throughout history, and this point certainly comes through. Yet in this broad approach lie pitfalls. For all that is gained, more is lost from a lack of focus. Mud is a short book of only 137 (undersized) pages and it simply lacks the depth to deal with so expansive a subject on so many fronts over such a vast period in a satisfying manner.

This lack of focus is certainly this work's greatest shortcoming. Wood never spends more than a couple thousand words on any one particular incident or example of mud having influenced combat and the result is that the reader feels tossed back and forth between different wars and time periods with only superficial detail given to any one case. The effect is wearing and creates a feeling of superficiality.

The means of substantiating the book's case unfortunately contributes to this feeling. Wood's approach is a simple one. A point is made, for example, that mud is detrimental to morale, makes it difficult to move motorized divisions, or hinders logistics. That point is then followed by a series of short quotations or anecdotes drawn from across history which demonstrate how Private Jones was indeed annoyed by having to live in a muddy trench or how Captain Smith did in fact have a hard time moving his armour across a muddy road. Very quickly these stories (which are necessarily very similar) begin to blend together and feel both highly repetitive and fairly superficial.

This format also gives rise to an odd criticism, that of under- and over-proving a point at the same time. Entire chapters detailing mud's effect on moral, logistics, health and movement seem to simply reach the obvious conclusion that mud did indeed impact these facets of warfare. Unfortunately there is too little in-depth analysis and far too many anecdotal quotations to back up assertions that really needed little support to begin with. For the historian there remains the essential question of *so what?*

Contrary to Wood's assertion that historians have traditionally ignored the importance of mud (129), the vital role of terrain and climactic conditions in military logistics, movement and moral is well understood. And, while other works of military history may only cover the subject in a more fragmented fashion when discussing broader campaigns, it is widely covered nonetheless. By the end of Mud, the reader is left with the impression that the book sought only to prove that mud has been an important element in warfare, a point which no historian would have considered arguing to begin with.

This subject may have required a more limited case study approach to have been effective. A small set of battles or campaigns could have been selected to demonstrate in greater detail the effect of mud. A thorough comparison of similar battles fought on similar grounds in different mud conditions would have been enlightening. A comparison of the march times of similar divisions along the same roads in different conditions or a closer look at *exactly* how badly mud slowed certain supply lines would also have given some quantitative support to the argument and done more to illustrate the role played by the sticky substance than, say, a quotation from a tank driver cursing the conditions of that road.

Some of the more important examples used by Wood could certainly have been expanded upon. For instance, a look at the role played by mud in the 1941 German advance into Russia would be a very useful addition to the historiography. Wood makes an interesting point in saying that the *blitzkrieg* was derailed by mud rather than cold (35) but does not attempt to marshal the evidence required to give this argument teeth. How much attention did the German high command spend considering the impact of the Russian *rasputzia* (mud season)? Wood says that there was little consideration of this factor, and while this may certainly have been the case, the evidence in support is underwhelming.

Mud is not likely to add much to a military historian's understanding of how muddy conditions have really affected operations. From an academic standpoint the conclusions seem rather obvious and the evidence appears to be more anecdotal than analytical. Yet this review has always assumed an academic audience. For the non-historian, Mud's conclusions and arguments might very well be a fascinatingly new

way of looking at the conduct of war. While this reviewer does not quite believe Wood's assertion that the subject has been widely ignored in military history, it can be said that the impact of factors like mud rarely get much attention in the more popular historical narrative. In this sense Mud does contribute an easy to read and well written new perspective on the study of armed conflict.

Adam Lajeunesse is a PhD Candidate in the department of history at the University of Calgary. His research focuses on politics, international law and military activities in the Arctic region during the Cold War.