

Hard Lessons In the Schoolhouse of War

Closing with the Enemy, by Michael D. Doubler. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence. 1994. 354 pages. \$40.00.

After a flood of new books last year on World War II, it's hard to imagine anything left unsaid, but this fine book is an exception. It is a history of the the U.S. Army in that war, but rather than retelling what our Army did in conventional narrative, Doubler focuses on how the Army learned and changed as the war progressed.

It should be an invaluable book for those entrusted with training, as it describes critical shortfalls and how the Army changed to meet these challenges. In each instance, covered in a chapter each, he describes gaps in preparedness — city combat, forest fighting, river crossings —and the measures taken to rectify weaknesses on the road to victory.

Incredible as it may seem, the brilliant planners who mounted the Overlord invasion of Normandy failed to anticipate the next step, the bitter fighting in the bocage hedgerows that stalled the drive eastward at a cost of thousands of casualties. One would think that in the careful invasion planning, with its emphasis on extensive aerial reconnaissance of coastal France, someone would have noticed that the battlefield ahead was a series of hundreds of compartmented, sunken farm fields, each separated from the rest and from neighboring roads by raised, wooded hedgerows — perfect terrain for an experienced German army on the defense.

Over the centuries, Norman farmers had encouraged this checkerboard of berms, heavily entangled with trees and bushes to moderate the winds off the Channel. Each wooded strip could conceal defenders and stymie the passage of tanks, but more important to an army on the attack, the berms separated each unit from others on its flanks, creating a series of isolated mini-battles where it was impossible to mass or maneuver.

Men attempting to cross the open fields would be mortared and machine-gunned by enemy units in the next hedgerow, and tanks attempting to go over these obstacles were vulnerable to antitank fire as the bellies of the tanks were exposed. Each field presented another identical challenge, creating new casualties and sapping the will of the men who, weeks earlier, had triumphed on the beaches. General Omar Bradley called the bocage "the damndest country I've seen."

Blundering into mortar attacks in pre-registered fields, kept down by machine gun fire grazing the tops of the berms, bedeviled by snipers, and still green in combat, the attackers were bloodied by a seemingly endless series of 300-yard firefights, field by field. They hadn't been trained for this, nor were tank and infantry units comfortable enough with each other to fight the kind of seamless combined arms combat that became routine as the same army moved toward Berlin later in the war. Armor units, especially, were stymied by this kind of fight: pushing through the fields was impossible, and outflanking the enemy on the sparse road network made the tankers perfect targets for long-range antitank guns.

The author proceeds from this point to answer the question, "Well, how come they still prevailed?" This is the core of the book — how the American Army developed the tactics, techniques, and procedures that solved these problems in the heat of combat, discarding doctrine when necessary and adapting to overcome battle-hardened defenders.

Improving tank-infantry cooperation offered the beginning of a solution. If the tanks' cannon fire could be brought to bear on the defenders, the infantry had a better chance. Several ways were developed to "bust the bocage." Blade-equipped dozer tanks could plunge through smaller berms, but there were only four in each infantry division's tank battalions. While they waited for more, other solutions emerged. The 29th Infantry Division experimented with using explosives to blow gaps in the hedgerows, then perfected a technique to emplace the explosives using their tanks. Six-inch diameter pipes were welded to the front slopes and the tanks rammed the hedgerow, removing a plug of roots and earth so that explosive charges could be placed deep in the obstacle. The charges were packed into empty 105-mm artillery shells for easy transport and to maximize the explosive effect. Another approach was developed in the 2d AD's 102nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron by Sgt. Curtis G. Culin, the sawtooth hedgerow cutters welded to the front of tanks. Pointing up the improvisational nature of the fix, the cutters were actually fabricated from steel salvaged from German beach defenses. The Culin devices had another advantage over explosives — they did not alert the enemy.

Ad hoc improvements in communication between tank crews and accompanying in-

fantry also helped the synergy of combined arms attacks, specifically the back deck telephone. And aerial forward observers learned to spot and adjust fire on defenders from a vantage point the ground troops wished they had.

While technology and better communications were making a difference, units began to develop new tactics and procedures, formalizing lessons bitterly learned. The 29th ID, again, pioneered a tank-infantry-engineer approach that allowed units to maintain momentum and kept defenders from regaining their balance as they retreated. The 3rd AD developed another approach, attacking the two fields adjoining a third, then moving in behind the center field once the hedgerows were penetrated.

The overall result, according to the author, was that "Forces that crossed the Normandy beaches in June had evolved a great deal by July. The greatest changes took place in combat units, where tankers, infantrymen, engineers, and artillery FOs became close-knit partners in a coordinated effort...By the end of July, First Army used on a routine basis a large number of combat techniques and procedures unheard of in the preinvasion period."

Each subsequent chapter outlines a battle problem similar to the challenge of the Normandy terrain — the difficulty of river crossings, the attack on heavily forested terrain like the Huertgen Forest, the techniques developed to speed attacks in built-up areas, the coordination of the ground-air team, the attack on the fortresses in Eastern France, and the hurried adaptation to the defensive at the Bulge.

The theme in each diverse chapter is adaptation under combat conditions, and the author's judgment is that this is what won the war. Ironically, our advantage was that we were an army of individuals from a nation that prized individuality and questioned authority. So, when doctrine failed, the solutions came from the bottom up, not the top down.

The conclusion might make us question our reliance on teaching doctrine, rather than encouraging a flexible, open architecture that presumes we will never anticipate everything, but can adapt to anything.

This is a superb book about warfighting, and everyone in the business of training soldiers ought to read it.

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