



After D-Day, Operation Cobra and the Normandy Breakout by James Jay Carafano, Lynne Rienner Publishers USA, 2000 ISBN 1555878857 £22.95, pp295

Review by Andy Grainger

Specialist treatments of even the larger operations of the US Army in Normandy are, strangely, very few in number. Until very recently, almost the only sources for the grinding struggle fought by Bradley's 1st US Army and then the breakout with Patton's 3rd were the US Official Histories. Carafano's book is, in fact, the only book specifically about Operation Cobra which does seem surprising, given the decisive nature of that battle.

Like Reardon's¹ more recent book on Mortain it is both thorough and workmanlike with well annotated sources. Both books are rather technical, not easy reading, and although the maps in Reardon are better than those in Carafano they both require a 50,000 or 100,000 sheet to hand if one wants to follow the detail or plan a battlefield tour.

I was pleased to read in Carafano what I had long suspected, namely that the hedgecutting Shermans did not make much of a difference to the operation and that the effects of the much vaunted strategic bombers were, as ever, grossly exaggerated. What was much more important was the sheer outnumbering of the Germans by the Americans although the bocage terrain, bomb damage and traffic congestion still allowed the Germans to buy time and, indeed, a good many of them got away - at least in the first week; they may have been rounded up in the next week!

The book also reveals that the Close Air Support technique of armoured column cover (similar to our cabrank system) as inspired by "Pete" Quesada of 9 US Air Force was new – just as the British had to engage in an intense institutional struggle with the RAF to get Close Air Support so the US Army had to do the same thing with the USAAF.

I did feel that the author seemed to have a need to create a degree of controversy in some areas. So whilst Bradley gets a clean bill of health generally he also gets the blame, rather unconvincingly in my view, for the short bombing on both 24 and 25 June. Both Lightning Joe Collins of VII Corps and Huebner of the Big Red One come in for severe criticism; being slow off the mark, missing opportunities or clogging the roads with too many troops.

The Germans are in a dreadful mess with far too few men, their communications cut and many of their commanders not knowing what is going on. There are also some good vignettes straight out of Hollywood where attacks are mounted and then cancelled (or vice versa) by whichever master race general happens to turn up. The chaotic story of the attempted counterattack by von der Heydte's Parachute Regiment 6 and elements of 2SS Panzer and 17SS Panzer Grenadier Divs in Chapter 11 is appropriately entitled "Battle Without Fronts". At one point an SS Panzer major declines to take orders from the Luftwaffe colonel and so the battlegroup withdraws into its component parts (p238). You sense that when this sort of thing

¹ Victory at Mortain: Stopping Hitler's Panzer Counteroffensive (Modern War Studies) by Mark Reardon, University Press of Kansas, October 2003 ISBN: 0700612955 pp 392.



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starts happening then the Germans are going nowhere - but then how come FJR 6 is still fighting - six weeks after D-Day.

If you are interested in Operation Cobra you have to read this book; there is no other. It will be well worth your while.