

REVIEWS

The Liberation Trilogy: **An Army at Dawn** by Rick Atkinson, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 2002, 681 pages, \$22.50; **The Day of Battle** by Rick Atkinson, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 2007, 791 pages, \$23.49; **The Guns at Last Light** by Rick Atkinson, Henry Holt & Co., New York, 2013, 877 pages, \$35.

Many professional military officers, scholars and historians purport to have a good working knowledge of the campaigns of World War II, especially those of Western Europe. The Liberation Trilogy describes several battles with which most of us have only cursory familiarity: Longstop Hill and Sidi bou Zid in Tunisia; Troina and Monte Cassino in Sicily and Italy; and the Argentan-Falaise Gap and the Colmar Pocket in France. In his three-volume opus of the American Army in North Africa, the Mediterranean and on the Continent, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rick Atkinson leads the reader on a 2,400-page odyssey from incipient U.S. unpreparedness through heuristic tactical learning on to final victory. Ranging from two privates firing on enemy troops from the same fox-hole up through Roosevelt and Churchill discussing strategy over cocktails, Atkinson's central narrative recounts the rise of American military power during the pivotal years of 1942-1945. In the end, however, his well-constructed tale leaves

the reader asking several pointed questions.

An Army at Dawn begins the trilogy, with Atkinson illustrating the results of the strategic decision to put American troops into the European Theater in North Africa before the end of 1942. Our veteran British cousins vie to temper American ardor with cautionary admonitions that we do not yet fully grasp the totality of the effort required for Allied victory. Once the U.S. Army organizes, trains and sails across the Atlantic for the Operation Torch landings, our troops first encounter the Vichy French; after several engagements between former allies, the United States and the French put aside our political differences to fight the Germans. Then the still-green U.S. Army runs into *Panzerarmee Afrika* at Kasserine Pass and is mauled. Once we recover from this terrible loss, the U.S. Army buckles down and meets the Germans head on, beginning to comprehend the depth of the British platitudes. After choking off an Axis army in Tunisia, the Americans finally look to our British colleagues with an understanding of the enormity of the task before us. Victory will take time and a tremendous amount of resources.

Starting with the Trident Conference, the second volume, **The Day of Battle**, pits the Western Allies in a nearly constant debate over future operations. The

invasion and conquest of Sicily conclude before the Allies can even agree what to undertake next. The British argue the immediacy of invading the continent through the Balkans; FDR and the Americans, wary of British colonial aspirations, refute this with the pressing need to liberate France and the Low Countries via a cross-channel invasion. Meanwhile, the soldiers on the ground slog through setpiece battles up the Italian peninsula reminiscent of World War I – to include the tremendous casualties. By June 1944 – and the conclusion of **The Day of Battle** – the Allies have captured Rome and have begun exploitation north toward the Gothic Line, a defensive works they would not penetrate until April 1945. The reader is left with Martin Blumenson's lament that "events generate their own momentum," wondering how the Allies ever agreed on a common approach.

The final installment, **The Guns at Last Light**, opens with American soldiers saturating everyone and everything in England during Spring 1944. From here, Atkinson takes the reader through the buildup and bloody invasion in Normandy. As the now-heftier partner in the alliance, U.S. design pervades Allied strategy, most notably in Eisenhower's insistence on the broad-front approach in favor of Montgomery's dagger-thrust alternative. This

potholes among the top leaders caused much ill feeling, and Atkinson relates how it was only due to Ike's charm that the alliance held firm. Following Allied mistakes during Operation Market Garden, in the Hurtgen Forest and in the Belfort Gap, the Allies finally rally in response to the German Ardennes offensive. Ultimately, the Western Allies meet their Soviet counterparts as the German armies finally wilt away.

Atkinson tells this epic story in an immensely readable fashion. First, he cites countless primary sources, mostly diaries and letters from soldiers themselves, who depict the story in stark reality. Second, his command of the English language, both in word choice and sentence structure, is at a sharper level than most historians. He is at his best in the physical descriptions of people, architecture, emotions, nature and even destruction, which are vivid, penetrating and lasting. Related to this, the maps and photographs are outright superb. Third,

rather than attempt to encapsulate every major battle and combat action, he focuses instead on those that further illustrate his two central narratives: the accession of the United States to senior partnership and the American quest for effective generalship throughout the campaign.

I believe he succeeds in validating the first, explaining that by war's end "the United States was making half of all manufactured goods in the world." However, although he rightly criticizes American (and to a lesser extent, Allied) generals for their shortcomings, he proffers no panacea to the reader. Patton may have brandished himself to excess and Bradley may have failed to act at the start of the Ardennes offensive; however, if the U.S. Army struggled with the attributes of generalship in Europe during World War II, then the reader wonders who got it right? If none of our senior leaders offered an example, how should a democracy choose its military chieftains?

Similarly, I felt a sense of yearning for a fourth volume: how did the U.S. Army squander so many tactical lessons from World War II that led to such unpreparedness (again) a mere five years later in Korea?

In a time wherein our Army once again faces a reduction following successful battlefield experience, perhaps the real message of this trilogy is for leaders of today and tomorrow to keep an eye on how to expand the Army rapidly while maintaining combat readiness. Like two of the characters Atkinson repeatedly references, Bill Maudlin and Ernie Pyle, Atkinson views himself as simply the guy who's telling you the story. From a Pulitzer Prize winner and award-ridden columnist for the **Washington Post**, we should expect some better conclusions from this otherwise fantastic recounting of the American Army in Europe during World War II.

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