

Reviews

Case White: The Invasion of Poland 1939, by Dr. Robert Forczyk; Oxford, United Kingdom: Osprey Publishing; 2019; 348 pages; \$30 (paperback).

Every student of World War II knows the generally-agreed-upon *casus belli* of that particular global conflict is the German invasion of Poland Sept. 1, 1939. Similarly, they know the German military flawlessly introduced combined-arms warfare to the world via blitzkrieg against obsolete horse-mounted Polish forces. Too often overlooked, but still known to some, is the role the Russian military played in attacking Poland from the east. These are the agreed-upon facts behind the German attack into Poland under Case White ... or are they?

In his book ***Case White: The Invasion of Poland 1939***, U.S. Army veteran and author Dr. Robert Forczyk presents a new study of the combined Russian-German invasion of Poland using previously untouched Polish sources to shed new light on a much-studied moment in the larger history of World War II. Rather than retreading the same old ground, however, Forczyk dispels many commonly held misconceptions of the campaign. The Polish military, for example, fielded more advanced equipment and employed modern doctrine during its defense of its homeland. Potential readers are forewarned, as this is not a book to be read lightly. Each page is packed full of facts, figures and acronyms, with little ink spilled in developing a storytelling approach. ***Case White*** is a much, much more detailed account than a typical history of World War II and addresses every facet of this critical campaign.

Case White is particularly relevant now given the specter of Russian encroachment upon Europe's eastern flank, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's forward deployment to the Baltics and the growing U.S.-Polish alliance. Indeed, students of current events will note that many of the same preparations Germany made in 1939 – such as creating a false narrative of ethnic tension and using paramilitaries in concert with conventional forces – bear striking similarity to Russian approaches to warfare, as evident by their invasion of the Ukraine in 2014. Further, readers may wish to study ***Case White*** with an eye to the future, given recent developments in Syria following Turkey's incursion against the Kurds and the potential for Great Power miscalculation leading to an expanded conflict. World wars are started in such ways.

LTC CHRIS HEATHERLY

Time in the Barrel: A Marine's Account for the Battle of Con Thien by James P. Coan; Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press; 2019; 256 pages; \$23.44 new.

U.S. Marine Corps combat base Con Thien, affectionately known as the “hill of angels” for its natural beauty, was more like “hell on Earth” in September 1967 when 2LT James Coan reported for duty as the tank-platoon commander of 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment. Coan led his fellow Marines for eight months, but his first 30 days proved to be the most dangerous, as the base fell under an intense artillery siege that was compounded by horrendous monsoon rains. His book ***Time in the Barrel: A Marine's Account of the Battle of Con Thien*** provides a straightforward and unembellished account of leadership, patriotism and survival on and around the hills he called “red clay bullseyes.”

For Coan, this book was a long time coming. After his return to “the world” from his year in Vietnam, Coan began writing about his tour of duty as a form of self-therapy. Years later, he determinedly finished the story, drawing on the diary he kept and, with help from his wife and others, as a way to pay tribute to those who served and selflessly sacrificed themselves during the Vietnam War. He achieved this and much more, virtually re-creating the Battle of Con Thien to the point where you can almost hear the screeching of rounds overhead and feel the intense overpressure created from their explosions in your chest and ears, while the mud forces its way between your fingers as you claw the ground to escape it all. His masterful application of the first-person narrative invariably pulls the reader into the story almost as another member of the platoon.

In 1967, the scale and intensity of combat increased dramatically, originating out of the long-standing demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Vietnam. The most northern area of South Vietnam fell under the command of the Army of Republic of Vietnam I Corps. Until late 1966, it was defended by Army of Republic of Vietnam troops, III Marine Amphibious Force and, in the case of Con Thien, U.S. Special Forces. Due to Con Thien's commanding hilltop terrain in the flat Bến Hải River valley situated two miles south of the DMZ, the U.S. Marine Corps turned it into a combat base by the beginning of 1967.

The base repelled several North Vietnamese Army (NVA) probes and defeated a major attack in May 1967, leaving 49 marines and 197 NVA soldiers dead. This battle reverberated all the way to Washington, DC, leading to the major policy shift of immediately demilitarizing the DMZ. After four months of intense offensive operations in the DMZ, the U.S. Marine Corps cleared it out. Then, on Sept. 3, the day after free elections, the NVA turned to siege tactics, unleashing a continuous bombardment of rocket, artillery and mortar fire on Con Thien. A week later, as a brand-new "butter bar" fresh out of Marine Corps Base Quantico, Coan entered the fray and found himself right in the middle of hell's frying pan.

For the next 34 days, the reader follows Coan and his platoon, mounted on five M48A3 Patton tanks, through the morass of oozing mud and churned-up red clay to which Combat Base Con Thien had been reduced. The reader quickly learns that every movement came under enemy observation and was followed by accurate artillery fire, which led to the grim understanding of "hesitate and you're dead" whenever moving above ground. The reader experiences huddling inside a bunker, thus gaining an understanding of why the U.S. Marine Corps held the earth dwelling as a vaunted sanctuary, even amid the squalor of mud and rats. You get to know the coveted 52-ton M48A3 Patton tanks and the brave men who crewed them. And you gain an appreciation of spending nights peering through infrared night sights in an M48A3 on a listening/observation post with the crew straining to catch NVA troops coming through the wire.

Coan never loses his military bearing as he recounts his time on Con Thien. You hear it from a platoon commander as he steadily issues orders to his men, enforces maintenance standards to keep the Patton tanks operational and looks after his troops' welfare, while constantly under fire in the monsoon rains. Through his actions, you see what good results "coolness under fire" and "trusting your gut" bring.

Time in the Barrel is the complete package featuring maps, photos and detailed endnotes. Devoid of fanfare, this matter-of-fact book can take its place among the classic studies of small-unit leadership. A must-read for company-grade leaders, Coan gives new meaning to the old saying "shooting fish in a barrel," the "barrel" being the height of the Battle of Con Thien.

RETIRED LTC RONALD T. STAVER

The Falaise Pocket: Normandy, August 1944 by Yves Buffetaut; Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers; 2019; 128 pages including photographs, maps, illustrations and bibliography; \$24.95.

The Battle of the Falaise Pocket took place six weeks after the Allied landing in Normandy. From Aug. 12-21, 1944, German Army Group B, along with its subordinate units from Seventh Army and Fifth Panzer Army, was encircled and destroyed by Allied combined-arms teams. This decisive battle saw the swift movement of Allied forces to the Seine River and beyond. Both sides displayed bold actions, innovative tactics and innumerable acts of personal bravery during a series of engagements that culminated in the liberation of Paris.

With this book, Yves Buffetaut concludes the Casemate Publication series on the Normandy Campaign. As with the previous volumes in this series, Buffetaut presents a detailed timeline of events beginning with Operation Epsom, a British operation designed to expand the Normandy beachhead by seizing the French city of Caen, and concluding with the drive to the Seine River and capture of Paris. In thumbnail fashion, the author addresses the June 1944 successes and failures seen by the American capture of the port of Cherbourg and the marginally fruitful Operation Charwood by the British 2nd Army.

By mid-July 1944, the Americans seized Saint-Lo while the British unleashed a massive aerial bombardment against Caen, followed by another armored thrust known as Operation Goodwood. Goodwood fell short of expectations.

At the same time, the Americans launched Operation Cobra that smashed through German defenses and allowed them to roll into Brittany. LTG George S. Patton Jr. and his Third Army then drove across the Brittany peninsula. Late July saw two important tactical victories as American troops trapped elements of seven German armored divisions at Coutances, and British forces drove German armored units out of the Caen area. Overshadowing these massive German defeats was the attempted assassination of Adolph Hitler by a group of German officers.

As the author recounts, retribution against those involved in the failed effort to eliminate Hitler resonated across occupied Europe. Caught up in the whirlwind of conspiratorial implications, several notable German officers were either removed from command or committed suicide. Among these were Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, seriously injured in an aerial attack on his staff car in July, and his replacement as commander of Army Group B, Field Marshal Gunther von Kluge. The disruption of German battlefield activities caused by these and other actions assisted Allied countermoves.

With the Allies now poised to expand out of the Normandy beachhead, Hitler, against all military advice to the contrary, launched Operation Luttich. His objective was to sever the lines of communication from the Normandy area to Patton's swift-moving forces who were then attacking toward the French city of Le Mans. All available German armor, with support from the Luftwaffe, attempted to seize the chokepoint at Mortain. The German effort was a total failure, as Allied troops – supported by a vast array of attacking aircraft – stymied, then destroyed, German forces.

Shortly thereafter, driving down from their northern location, Canadian and Polish forces attempted to link up with Patton's Third Army, then moving toward Argentan. Reacting to this envelopment, the Germans resisted British-led efforts to close the gap between them and the Americans. At the same time, GEN Omar Bradley ordered Patton to advance no further than Argentan. What follows is described by Buffetaut in crisp detail as Allied aircraft, artillery and troop movements destroy German forces within the gap between Falaise and Argentan. By Aug. 25, Allied forces occupied Paris and the Normandy campaign was officially concluded.

This is a well-written account of a battle containing several applicable lessons for maneuver commanders. The development and employment of the combined-arms team by both British and American forces is amply demonstrated by the tactical victories achieved against German forces in the French hedgerow country. The innovative use of airpower as a supplement to ground forces by Patton, Bradley and Montgomery is thought-provoking and highly supportive of the fact that close communications between air and ground forces remains the key to victory.

Equally important in this battle was the role of intelligence, allowing commanders to act faster than the enemy. The Allies were, for example, well apprised of German intentions at Mortain thanks to their code-breaking skills.

The author also fully explores the role of allies in a multi-national force. His description of the vital part played by the interaction of French, Polish, Canadian, British and American forces is well worth contemplating and examining.

Buffetaut is to be commended for bringing this battle to our attention. Maps, illustrations, biographical sketches and an impressive layout of period photographs make this a work that merits the attention of maneuver commanders seeking to either enhance or initiate an understanding of the concluding events of the Normandy campaign.

RETIRED COL D.J. JUDGE

Through the Valley; My Captivity in Vietnam by William Reeder Jr.; Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press; 2016; 238 pages; \$20.50 hardcover.

The Army defines resilience as the ability to grow and thrive in the face of challenges and bounce back from adversity. The embodiment of that definition lies in Bill Reeder's harrowing and, at times, almost unbearable account of survival as a Vietnam War prisoner of war (POW). In *Through the Valley*, Reeder more than tells his story – he takes you by the hand to join him in the cockpit of his Huey Cobra gunship, then to walk with him as he

retraces his agonizing 400-mile walk, one step at a time, while suffering a broken back, three forms of malaria and a rotting leg, and to experience his euphoria of laying eyes on the U.S. Air Force C141 Starlifter transport jet, their “freedom bird,” sitting on the Hanoi runway in 1973.

Needless to say, I was spellbound with his story. I could not put this book down, reading it in one sitting, yet I found myself pausing often to wipe my eyes, for I was moved by his suffering, but more from those tender moments filled with profound acts of humanity and sacrifice of his fellow POWs that pulled him out of the arms of death’s reaper.

Reeder answered his own call to duty, volunteering and returning for his second tour to Vietnam. Reeder, on his first tour in 1968, flew classified missions in Cambodia and Laos as an OV-1 Mohawk pilot, ejecting once from his mortally wounded airship. By his second tour in 1971, he had transitioned to the AH-1 Cobra gunship, flying in support of Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units in the Central Highlands.

With U.S. troop strength down to 75,000 and ARVN forces enjoying tactical success on the battlefield, Reeder felt that South Vietnam was winning and succeeding under Nixon’s “Vietnamization” program to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War through a program to “expand, equip and train South Vietnamese forces.” All that was shattered March 30 (Good Friday), 1972, when North Vietnam launched a massive invasion of South Vietnam that included 14 divisions and 26 separate regiments, including a significant number of tank formations.

In what became known as the Easter Offensive, North Vietnamese Army (NVA) objectives included seizing Quang Tri and An Loc, key hubs in the Central Highlands. The fighting was relentless and on a scale seldom seen throughout history. Suddenly, Reeder found himself in the middle of a battle of “Armageddon” proportions, with many missions leading to the slaughter of hundreds of NVA soldiers – with thousands more coming behind right behind them. Forty days later, while supporting an ARVN ranger battalion, Reeder was shot down in a flaming corkscrew. Somehow, he managed to crawl from the burning wreckage and escape. Severely wounded, he evaded the enemy for three days before capture.

Then began his ordeal in the jungle as a prisoner, with his days filled with interrogations, beatings or lying in the mud with his shredded legs locked in wooden stocks and bamboo cages. His physical condition worsening and the pain reaching unspeakable levels, Reeder tells how faith, hope and family gave him the inner strength to not give up. His patient and level description of surviving a 400-mile forced march that began with 27 other, mostly malnourished, anguished POWs – which ended up claiming seven lives who succumbed to exhaustion, wounds and disease, but probably more so to a broken spirit – puts this book alongside other timeless classics of the POW experience like Nick Rowe’s *Five Years to Freedom*.

Once Reeder and the remaining POWs crossed into North Vietnam, they switched to trucks for transport along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, all the while dodging bombs dropped from U.S. warplanes. The reader learns about the infamous “Plantation” and “Hanoi Hilton” prisons. Reeder describes watching the massive B-52 strikes on Hanoi called the “Christmas bombings” that propelled the North Vietnamese to the peace agreement at the Paris Peace Accords. Along the way of Reeder’s incredible journey, he spends time describing the importance of comradery with his fellow American and South Vietnamese POWs, demonstrating how that without them, he would have never made it.

Most importantly, he describes how a POW is faced with the struggle to maintain the will to live under the most abject conditions, resisting the temptation to surrender to death’s peace. Reeder declares that “spirit” is the most important factor in survival. He goes on to say that a sense of humor helps maintain spirit, and in spirit lives hope. I found power in that message, not just for a POW, but for all human beings, as we set ourselves against life’s challenges. *Through the Valley* contains no flaws nor boundaries in its appeal, reaching beyond just those in harm’s way, military or otherwise. Reeder’s unembellished and humble story of survival in the worst conditions is a strong testament to the power and resiliency of the human spirit.

RETIRED LTC RONALD T. STAVER

Countdown to D-Day: The German Perspective by Peter Margaritis; Haverton, PA: Casemate Publishers; 2019; 648 pages with photos and appendices; \$20.52 hardcover; \$9.99 Kindle.

Where else can you include such a diverse group of words as *panzers*, *Hitler*, *Rommel* and *asparagus* but in a book on D-Day, the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944? ***Countdown to D-Day: The German Perspective*** could easily have been characterized as the Rommel roadshow for the shadow of the Desert Fox; Field Marshall Erwin Rommel could easily have overshadowed the material by force of personality. However, Peter Margaritis' depth of knowledge and his asides in the material help keep that a bit in check for the reader. For instance, it was interesting to see that Rommel took accordions with him to give out as morale-building tools on his visits.

What we see throughout the book is the German High Command's realization that the war in the West was probably not going to get any better. We see Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt, who is more interested in his roses and dining out than in the war (as he sees himself merely as a figurehead). Add into the mix that of Rommel, who is sent to energize the work on the Atlantic Wall – efforts caused as a reaction to von Rundstedt's report of the wall's dismal state of repair – and we have the makings of a poor command relationship. However, as Margaritis notes, this was one of the better-working German command relationships.

Through the course of the book – which is written as a detailed, day-to-day journal approach – the byzantine command relationships Adolf Hitler set up are shown to have impeded the efforts of Rommel and the German *Heer* to intelligently meet any Allied invasion. One could argue that Hitler, the student of history, learned the Roman lesson by not entrusting too much authority or power to any other person, who could then be used as a threat to the Führer's authority. What we see time and time again was the subservience to centralized decision-making and centralized execution that allowed commanders to simply do or not do as they wished – with many choosing instead to enjoy the soft life of France with its wine and women as the Third Reich went up in flames. Rereading Mark Reardon's book reviewed previously in the pages of **ARMOR** added to the overall feel for the material here in ***Countdown***.

What is easy to overlook in the scope of material that Margaritis covers is the huge undertaking that was the construction of the Atlantic Wall. Although it is not within ***Countdown***'s scope to focus on it, that mammoth work comes across well. Even more so, though, is the state of the defenders. The Heer meant to throw the Allies back is no longer the Heer of Operation Barbarossa but one comprised of ill-trained youths, foreign "conscripts" – many of them unreliable Russian former prisoners of war – soldiers with various infirmities and an army going through the throes of demechanization. What the book notes repeatedly on Rommel's visits is that the soldiers are building and emplacing fortifications and not conducting training. As a result, little meaningful military training was conducted before the invasion.

There were no easy choices to make or compromises because, if the defensive shell was weaker, the Allies could easily brush aside any well-organized defense and swamp it at the point of invasion. Rommel understood better than his Wehrmacht counterparts from his time with the Afrika Korps the debilitating effect Allied tactical air had upon the ability to simply move.

One thing we don't always consider is that centralized decision-making – as in the personification of Hitler – doesn't always result in better planning **OR** decision-making. Margaritis uses countless examples from Rommel and von Rundstedt to show the conflicting, convoluted and layered political infighting within the military, as well as give the reader a glimpse of the Nazi leadership. This infighting had an impact on how the Germans prepared for and reacted to D-Day. Preparing for the single most important event to the future of the Third Reich was so wrapped up in byzantine politics that it made Napoleon's failure to grow and school his marshals look like child's play. This thread runs implicitly throughout the book, and wisely Margaritis allows it to speak for itself. The German generals themselves referred to this as *Befehlschaod* (command by confusion). This certainly didn't allow for the exercise of initiative or *Auftragstaktik*. Margaritis emphasized the issue of how to fight the first 24 hours and the battle over command-and-control of the panzers, the only element of German military might standing between victory and defeat once the invasion came shore.

So is this book recommended? Let's just say this about ***Countdown to D-Day***: it played havoc with my bedtime, as I honestly had trouble putting it down, for it was fascinating to be deep inside the mindset of the enemy facing us on that side of the Atlantic Wall. I can easily recommend this book for any World War II aficionado, be it for Rommel fans, students of D-Day history or the military-political side of the war in the West, or simply for the greater understanding the book imparts on the vast undertaking that was Fortress Europa. Any book that helps you see the other side of the hill from your enemy's mindset, their perspective and their own words might allow you in the future to better see the battlespace through your opponent's eyes. That seems like a win-win to me for future military leaders.

LTC (DR.) ROBERT G. SMITH

Acronym Quick-Scan

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam

DMZ – Demilitarized Zone

NVA – North Vietnamese Army

POW – prisoner of war