



Battalion Commanders at War:
U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942-1943

By Steven Thomas Barry

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272 pages

Reviewed by Maj Timothy Heck, U.S. Marine Corps Reserve

Since the publication of Trevor Dupuy's *Numbers, Predictions, and War* in 1979, the standard perception of American combat efficiency was that it was significantly less than that of their German opponents, especially at the beginning of World War II. In *Battalion Commanders at War*, Steven Barry attempts to challenge that perception, using North Africa and Sicily as his proving grounds. The book, which won an Army Historical Foundation Distinguished Book Award in 2014, argues that in spite "the deficiencies in equipment, organization, and mobilization and the inadequate operational leadership," American battalion commanders, particularly those educated at West Point in the 1930s, were the glue that held the Army together and spearheaded success in the Mediterranean.

Barry's book is divided into an introduction, seven chapters, a conclusion, and a historiographical essay. He seeks to answer the question of "how and why did the regular army battalion leadership exercise combat command without any prior combat experience?" Crucial to this combat command, Barry argues, was the shaping of these field grade officers at both West Point and the pre-war Army. The officer pool focused in his study are the field grade Armor and Infantry officers, though the majority of the case studies presented focus on the armored experience.

His first chapter focuses on the evolution of West Point from the 1920s to the mid-1930s as the source for America's professional Soldiers. West Point, he argues, professionalized as an educational institution and as a military one, as a result of leadership and vision set forth by GEN Douglas MacArthur and his successors. Using statistical analysis, Barry concludes that the value of military education, especially by the Department of Tactics and Civil and Military Engineering, was essential in preparing them for "the changes in modern warfare."

Following commissioning, the lieutenants went out in to the Army worldwide to lead platoons or serve on staffs. Unlike in today's Army, the lieutenants of the 1930s went forward without the benefit of a branch school. Instead, they completed one or two tours before returning for what would today be called the Captains Career Course at the appropriate branch school. Those tours included service overseas with the Army in Panama or the Philippines, participation in large-scale maneuvers and exercises, and with the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Additionally, young officers were mentored by their seniors to varying degrees of success. Interestingly, Barry credits "the dogged mentorship of senior officers" with shaping the "quality judgment" of the future Mediterranean Theater of Operations battalion commanders though many of these same senior officers are often portrayed as unprepared for the demands of modern warfare after 1941.

Chapters three through six, which cover combat in North Africa, are the book's strongest and best laid out. Here, Barry follows battalion commanders through a variety of engagements, both offensive and defensive against

French, Italian, and German forces. Barry writes about the successful ones (like Louis Hightower and Hamilton Howze) and the unsuccessful ones with an eye to what made the difference.

Unsurprisingly given his own background as an Armor officer, the sections on armored units are particularly well written. His analysis in these chapters is based on after action reports, oral history interviews, memoirs, and several official postwar analyses of combat. Barry credits the battalion commanders with “consistently displaying a penchant for incorporating lessons learned, leading from the front, and displaying a calmness under fire.” Furthermore, these commanders served as mentors and leaders to the company-grade officers coming from the civilian world via Officer Candidates School.

Barry’s thesis is expansive if not always successfully executed or supported. Some of the commanders he cites, men like Howze and Hightower, are presented as exceptional, making their inclusion or presentation as being indicative of their peer grouping problematic. His inclusion of elite units like the Rangers or airborne forces dilutes his argument’s strength. Furthermore, the inclusion of the Sicily campaign, for example, is cursory in comparison to combat in North Africa, and those pages could have been better spent looking at other actions, commanders, and units in Tunisia.

Battalion Commanders at War is a bold attempt at repositioning the American tactical commander in historiography. He has written a “history from the middle” about the men who “provided the organizational solution to achieve tactical victories in the United States’ first campaigns.” It serves as a useful counterpoint to works like Dupuy’s or S.L.A. Marshall’s that have dominated the narrative of the American Army at the outset of World War II. Furthermore, the book has a place on the shelves of battalion commanders, future battalion commanders, and the leadership and staffs of professional military institutions. Barry reminds his readers that the preparation before combat — be it in a classroom or in the field — reaps rewards, saves lives, and helps produce victory.