



***The Spearheaders: A Personal History of Darby's Rangers***  
**By James Altieri**  
**Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014, 334 pages**

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For readers of military history, the reprinting of a book is almost always a good thing. It places a title back on the market which was normally last seen decades ago. In most cases, the reprint has been supplemented with some nice extras which distinguish it from the original. The best aspect of a reprint is that it exposes itself to a potentially new group of readers. One recent reprint which should unquestionably be experienced by a new readership is James Altieri's superb volume, *The Spearheaders: A Personal History of Darby's Rangers* (first published in 1960).

Before addressing the book itself, it is important to have a succinct background on the author's incredible World War II record. Altieri joined the Army in late 1941 and was subsequently sent to Northern Ireland where he served as an artilleryman with the 1st Armored Division. While stationed there, he was told that volunteers were wanted to form up a new unit structured much like the British Commandos. Altieri completed the demanding training program and became a Ranger in July 1942. For the next two years (plus), he served with the 1st and 4th Ranger Battalions in combat missions executed in the Mediterranean Theater of Operations. Along the way, he earned battlefield promotions to sergeant, first sergeant, and first lieutenant; he also was appointed company commander and received two Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts.

*Spearheaders* enables Altieri to achieve three things. First, the book provides him a forum to address events of World War II that clearly weighed on him through the rest of his life. He candidly and emotionally discusses these events. These include his first firefight, conducting hand-to-hand combat with his enemy, taking the life of another man, and seeing his fellow Rangers injured or killed on the battlefield. He shares the wide spectrum of emotions and feelings that combat brings to every Soldier.

Second, *Spearheaders* serves as an excellent concise history of the formation of the Rangers and their operations in the Mediterranean Theater. Particularly interesting for readers will be the author's reflection on the training regimen he and the others went through prior to their deployment in theater. This training was executed by the British Commandos and to say it was demanding is clearly an understatement. Altieri discusses this training as only a Soldier taking part in it can.

Finally, Altieri utilizes the book to pay tribute to a Ranger he greatly respected — his commander, William O. Darby. By the end of the book, readers will clearly understand why Darby was so admired and loved by his men and why they were called "Darby's Rangers." Throughout the book, Altieri places numerous vignettes and accounts of displays of Darby's leadership qualities and technical and tactical competence. The most poignant portion of Altieri's praise comes after he reflects on his feelings when he learns that Darby is killed in combat on 16 April 1945.

The clear strength of *Spearheaders* is Altieri's writing ability. He expresses himself in a conversational tone that makes the book an incredibly easy read. It is extremely difficult to put down once you begin. Consequently, you won't find any footnotes, endnotes, or long bibliography in his volume. From front to back these are Altieri's words and thoughts.

*Spearheaders* is every bit as valuable today as it was when it was first released more than 50 years ago. It is a volume which highlights the development and contributions of an elite fighting force. More importantly, it honors those Rangers who were part of that force which achieved so much in World War II. A new group of readers have the unique opportunity to read a book that is clearly a classic.