



The Last Drop: Operation Varsity, March 24-25, 1945
By Stephen L. Wright
Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008, 336 pages

Reviewed by Chapel Collins

In *The Last Drop*, Stephen L. Wright has collected an immense amount of firsthand accounts from the men who carried out the remarkable, yet oft-overlooked Operation Varsity. Varsity was the final major airborne offensive of World War II and the largest single-drop airborne operation in history. The drop was made in broad daylight by American, British, and Canadian forces while the Germans waited below. What followed was unprecedented resistance to an airborne operation — into the homeland of the enemy, no less — and the beginning of the end to the war.

Wright takes a backseat throughout the book, wisely and graciously allowing his primary sources to speak for themselves, and do they ever speak. The dozens of accounts from the men who were there, from different nations and divisions, paint a wide, comprehensive, and endlessly colorful picture of the entire operation. The book begins long before the operation and details everything from the histories of the participating regiments, to the planning of the drop, to the training, and finally to the operation itself. Even though it is written very academically and objectively, the personalities of the men going into battle come through their own words in a powerful way, and the tension before the battle is palpable.

When the battle does arrive, it arrives spectacularly. The accounts of the landings are all at once riveting, tragic, heroic, and awe-inspiring. Varsity was an operation fraught with tragedy and loss, but more than that, bravery in the face of it. Wright's permanent residency in the backseat of the story really allows these stories to shine on their own, but also tends to allow the structure of the book to become a bit chaotic. Darting back and forth between points of view does indeed make for a comprehensive account of the operation, but it can sometimes also trip up the pacing and even a little of the humanity of the story. Everything is clear enough to follow, but shifting gears so frequently and starkly puts a little wear and tear on the book's transmission, and spending so little time with so many different people can put a temporary stop on the investment into the personalities of the story.

Yet, at the same time, this shotgun blast of different accounts leads to a genuine capture of and appreciation for the enormous scope of the operation. The book holds stories from infantrymen, pilots, medics, engineers, and everything in between. It provides a clear image of how many different and equally important roles were necessary to accomplish the goals of the operation. It also provides accounts of light-hearted or mysterious battlefield happenings, stories that the soldiers would tell each other, which rounds the book out and keeps it from ever becoming overly clinical.

Despite the fact that each of these accounts is equally valid and worthy, some of them are exceedingly similar. At the risk of sounding hard-hearted, many of the soldiers' stories are so similar that they don't contribute very much

to the flow of the book. On the other hand, I suspect that was the point; by showing all of these stories, no matter how similar, it shows how each and every man on the field was equally brave and equally exposed to unrelenting danger.

The Last Drop is successful in providing a comprehensive boots-on-the-ground — or in the air — story of one of the most important operations of World War II. What it lacks in readability, it more than makes up for in authenticity. Wright's method of primary source compilation ensures that this book is and will remain among the ranks of the most pertinent books on the subject.