



Forging the Anvil: Combat Units in the U.S., British, and German Infantry of World War II

By G. Stephen Lauer

Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022, 463 pages

Reviewed by LTC (Retired) Jesse McIntyre III

The late G. Stephen Lauer, who served as an associate professor of military theory and history at the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, defines how the United States, Britain, and Germany forged the anvil — their infantry — for World War II. In doing so, Lauer’s work examines the widely held perception that average German infantrymen displayed a greater individual and small unit capability in combat.

Among Lauer’s many significant observations and reflections, three stand out. First, his research reveals that all three countries placed a premium on infantry being the decisive weapon in war. All three realized infantry forces possessed the ability to seize, hold, and control terrain. Infantry units possessed the ability to break and destroy the enemy; all other branches and organizations played a supporting role. As a result, all three countries sought to create infantry units with members of society with the highest intelligence and physicality. Lauer’s research indicates this was not what occurred in practice due to competing requirements of aviation, naval, elite units, and industry.

Second, Lauer’s research indicates all three approached the role of junior officers and NCOs differently. The German Army, realizing that combat required independently thinking and acting fighters, placed a greater importance on the selection and training of infantry officers and NCOs. Given that junior officers were often closest to the fighting and took the brunt of officer casualties, they placed a greater emphasis on the leadership and tactical preparation of their NCOs. This is in stark contrast to the American model where the Army viewed an NCO as simply an enlisted man, temporarily elevated at his officer’s pleasure to a supervisory position. U.S. Army NCOs lost their rank upon transferring out of the unit. A telling fact is that NCOs consisted of 50 percent of the American Army in 1945, while German NCOs never exceeded 16 percent during the war despite commanding infantry platoons.

Third, Lauer’s research indicates “tooth-to-tail” ratio of combat troops to support troops was a major issue for all three countries. For example, a single U.S. infantry division in June 1944 consisted of only 2,916 riflemen with an assigned division strength of 14,253. Given that infantrymen bore the brunt of combat, infantry units quickly found themselves unable to replace losses or maintain their sharpness in combat. Germany’s Sixth Infantry Division reported a strength of 4,755 on 10 April 1942, down from its full strength of 17,734. All three countries’ replacement systems simply could not keep up with losses incurred by their infantry units. Lauer describes how each was forced in identifying replacement strategies that further degraded the quality of average infantrymen.

Forging the Anvil: Combat Units in the U.S., British, and German Infantry during World War II’s strength is Lauer’s use of graphics, primary source documents, numerous perspectives of senior leaders, and a writing style that conveys the urgency and complexity in creating and sustaining infantry units faced by

the United States, Britain, and Germany leading up to World War II. It informs us that the Allied victory was more than quality infantry — it was the creation of combined arms that enabled the Allies to attack Germany strategically and operationally in defeating the superior quality of German Army's infantry. This work is highly readable and provides a comprehensive examination of a lesser-known area of World War II. It would be an excellent addition to the library of any historian or student with an interest on the subject.