

The Battle of the Generals

Martin Blumenson. *The Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket - The Campaign that Should have won World War II*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993. pp.288. \$29.95.

Martin Blumenson writes that the Allies' failure to close the "Falaise pocket" was the result of three basic conditions of the Allied campaign: the undue weight of the invasion plan, the

tensions within the coalition, and the less than adequate abilities of the leaders at the top. (p.23) Ignoring for the moment that the proximity of large numbers of trigger-happy Germans may have had an impact on the course of the battle and the decisions taken by the high command, let me quickly summarize Blumenson's argument. Over a third of the book is devoted to context: outlining the major personalities involved, the Allied coalition from the top down (including lengthy discussions on Roosevelt and Churchill), the struggle for dominance within the alliance, the German defences and strategic plans as well as a summary of the course of war from 1939. This, he believes, is the necessary pretext for a series of errors that culminated in the campaign that, according to the title, should have "won the war."

His points follow in succession. The emphasis on moving into Germany as rapidly as possible instead of destroying the German forces in Normandy and the continued dispatch of formations to liberate Brittany are two examples used to illustrate the Allies' dependence on their preconceived plans and that no one at the top firmly grasped the reigns. Eisenhower, Montgomery and Bradley do not come off well in this account; Bradley, in particular, is Blumenson's whipping horse: insecure and ambivalent. While this is not new, the author's criticisms of Bradley have, in the past, been tempered with a recognition of the difficulties he faced. Patton emerges as the hero in this account and the unrecognized saviour of Allied fortunes. "No wonder Patton," he writes, "dreamed of being the Supreme Commander. He would take absolute hold of the operations and surround and destroy all the Germans in Normandy with resolution and finality." (p.223) Blumenson

speculates that an Eisenhower-Montgomery-Patton combination would have been more successful; his own quotes from Patton's correspondence make one wonder whether as an equal he would only have been as obnoxious to these men's faces as he was in his diary.

Written from the US perspective, the Canadians are, of course, given short shrift, although they can not escape the "everyone was to blame" tone of the book. Worse, he uses the unsubstantiated view that "residual tensions between" Crerar and Simonds" (p. 183) influenced the Canadian military fortunes during this period. Although it fits nicely with his theme, it isn't true. Neither is his grasp of the Canadian part in the battle complete. He implies, for example, that it was after the pause on the morning of 8th, and "to get the endeavour (Totalize) started again" that Simonds ordered a second bombardment and the two inexperienced armoured divisions forward, (p.185)

Does any of this story sound vaguely familiar? It should; this is hardly an untold story. Blumenson has himself written two direct accounts of the battle ("General Bradley's Decision at Argentan" in *Command Decisions* and *Breakout and Pursuit*, two volumes of the Official History of the United States Army in World War II) and dealt with it in other works. Blumenson's previous efforts have not focused on personalities; rather, he limited himself to examining the operational possibilities and restrictions. He was also more balanced in his conclusions. His ire has risen with new evidence that more Germans escaped than he previously estimated.

Could the battle have won the war? No one can say for sure; a victory would certainly not have alleviated the Allies' supply problems. Indeed, in previous

battles the Germans had sustained greater losses and not crumbled; they were still fighting while the Russians pounded the bunkers in Berlin. Clearly, on the Allied side there was waffling at the top with regards to objectives and poor decisions (Bradley's order to Patton not to go on to Falaise and beyond to meet the Canadians) but clearly they were also wary of German counterattacks. The central point seems that with the fog of war, no one was sure whether the Germans were still in the pocket; as a result they wavered on whether to slam the door shut or focus on the Seine or both. Blumenson's account smacks far too much of hindsight. Similarly, the problem with examining the failures of the Allies and proposing better solutions is that it presumes the Germans would have gone along with the alternate plans proposed, stopped trying to fight their way out and given up. Nevertheless, the book is a good read and summarizes a lot of material, painting deft portraits of the Allied commanders; its story isn't untold but Blumenson tells it better than some.

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