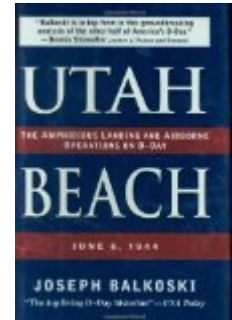


Joseph Balkoski. *Utah Beach: The Amphibious Landing and Airborne Operations on D-Day, June 6, 1944.* Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2005. xx + 400 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8117-0144-0.



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The U.S. Army fought one of its costliest battles on June 6, 1944 at Omaha Beach. At the end of the day, American troops held a thin and tenuous beachhead and over two thousand of their comrades were dead, wounded, or missing. Just a few miles to the west, less than six hundred casualties were lost in the landings at Utah Beach. Omar Bradley, who commanded First Army that day, later described that operation as "a piece of cake." Heavy German opposition, rough seas, strong tides, and the inevitable friction of war altered plans and forced soldiers to improvise at both locations, but the casualties suffered and territory taken in these two victories were vastly incommensurate. With this book, Joseph Balkoski, Command Historian of the Maryland National Guard and author of two previous books on the Normandy Campaign, sets out to explain why.[1] He also seeks to redress what he perceives as the relative neglect of the success at Utah Beach in comparison to the place that the close-run victory at Omaha holds in both scholarly attention and popular memory.

Balkoski argues that taking Utah was, in fact, an equivalent operation to the more famous and iconic one undertaken at Omaha. He creates an expanded context for the events at Utah Beach by examining not only the landings on the beach itself, but also the use of airborne infantry behind the beach in a vertical envelopment operation of unprecedented scale, at that time. He argues that landing troops on the beach was inextricably linked to the airborne assaults in the Cotentin Peninsula, which hampered German resistance, isolated the beach, and established the preconditions for the ensuing breakout to Cherbourg as well as limited casualties on the beach itself. If one combines the troops of the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions with the units that took Utah Beach, the total number of forces deployed and casualties taken are comparable to those at Omaha. Interpreted within Balkoski's context, the efforts to establish these two footholds in Fortress Europe matched one another in scope, resources, risk, and loss.

Utah Beach begins with the planning process for the Normandy invasion and the sometimes

fractious Anglo-American attempts to forge a mutually acceptable plan to begin the campaign in Europe. The majority of the book, however, is dedicated to the ground combat on the first day of the invasion. Balkoski gives full credit at each stage to the English contributions to the invasion, ranging from his judicious and favorable appraisal of Sir Bernard Law Montgomery's strategic vision for Operation Overlord to his appreciative words for the bravery of the Royal Navy sailors who ferried American troops ashore. Although the book's primary focus is on the soldiers of the U.S. Army, it also devotes attention to the achievements of the IX Tactical Air Force, whose preparatory bombardment of the beach was far more successful than that of the 8th Air Force's heavy bombers at Omaha Beach, as well as the U.S. Navy's accomplishment in landing soldiers on the beach. Those seeking a German perspective on the battle will have to look elsewhere, for Balkoski's depiction of the battles for the Cotentin is most decidedly an American one. While American individuals, units, and efforts get meticulous attention, those of their enemies are largely absent.

Using an impressive array of primary sources, including official papers, reports, memoirs, and interviews with participants, Balkoski imparts the perspectives of generals and grunts alike. His reliance upon sizable block quotes from his sources, sometimes one after another, allows the soldiers to tell their own stories and provides valuable first-hand perspectives of events, but this practice often intrudes upon the author's own prose and analysis, and sometimes makes for a choppy reading experience. Scholars will find the book's notation frustrating, since it makes no use of footnotes or endnotes. This results in reader-friendly pages for a popular audience, but one can only check sources by flipping to the back of the book where some, but not all, quotes are listed by chapter. As partial compensation, the book's appendices provide a wealth of useful information on the American forces involved, including

orders of battle for land, air, and naval units and lists of casualties, awards received, and equipment carried into battle.

Despite the shortcomings of style and presentation, *Utah Beach* ably demonstrates that its subject was indeed one of the most ambitious and successful Allied undertakings during the Second World War. Although the amphibious and airborne assaults fell short of their planned goals for the first day, they resulted in a strong and exploitable beachhead at Utah, a success that vindicated the plans and efforts of Allied leaders, planners, and troops. Balkoski has given us an admirable account of an underappreciated battle.

Note [1]. For Balkoski's other works on Normandy see his *Omaha Beach: D-Day, June 6, 1944* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2004); and *Beyond the Beachhead: The 29th Infantry Division in Normandy* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1989).

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