

H-Net Reviews

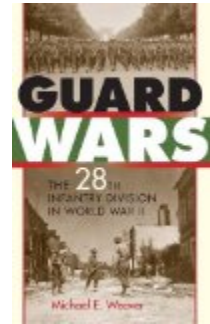
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael E. Weaver. *Guard Wars: The 28th Infantry Division in World War II*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. xi + 366 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35521-8.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



The “Bloody Bucket” Division in World War Two

National Guard divisions participated in some of the toughest fighting on the western front in World War Two. The Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division from Pennsylvania was no exception. After years of training, the division arrived in France on July 27, 1944, in time to participate in the breakout from Normandy and parade through Paris. By early September, the Germans had nicknamed it the “Bloody Bucket,” derived from the division’s red keystone shoulder patch. During the fall of 1944, the division was badly mauled in the tough fighting around the Hürtgen Forest, leading to its transfer, in late November, to a quiet part of the front in the Ardennes Forest. Unfortunately it was there that the Germans chose to open their winter offensive, putting the division in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge. Though outnumbered, the “Bloody Bucket” fought gallantly and slowed the Axis advance when speed was critical to German success. The division crossed the Rhine River in March 1945 before beginning occupation duty in Saarland, Germany.

Michael E. Weaver’s *Guard Wars* does a fine job of bringing the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division to life. The book begins by focusing on the National Guards’ relationship with the regular army as well as the division’s interaction with Pennsylvania society and institutions. This is intermingled with the transformation of the National Guard from amateur volunteers to professional soldiers during World War Two. The second half of the book deals with the division’s experience in battle, focusing mainly on the Hürtgen Forest and the Bulge. Weaver makes excellent use of primary sources to bring his story

to life. This, combined with his firm grasp of numerous historiographical debates surrounding this subject, makes *Guard Wars* an insightful examination of a National Guard division during World War Two.

Weaver contributes to a number of historiographical conversations. One of the most far reaching is the debate surrounding the U.S. Army’s fighting quality in World War Two. Since the war, historians have argued over the fighting ability of American soldiers compared to the Germans, many of whom claimed that the United States won the war through superior fire power and material. However, Weaver concludes that the U.S. Army had “a steep learning curve during combat and that it fought skillfully” (p. 7). He argues that during the Battle of the Bulge there were many examples of small leaderless groups of GI’s fighting doggedly to slow the German advance. During the early days of the Bulge, Weaver contends, American soldiers were outnumbered and did not possess overwhelming firepower, but were still a match for the average German soldier.

Another controversy, begun during the war, was the quality of National Guard soldiers compared to those of the regular army. It was common for regular army officers to characterize National Guard troops as amateurs and to treat them as second-class units. Nevertheless, Weaver argues that though the division began the war strongly linked with Pennsylvania, there were soon few differences between National Guard and regular army divisions. He contributes this assimilation to the forces of

“nationalization, consolidation, and rationalization that had so altered the order and management of American society” in the twentieth century (p. 259).

One of the few parts of *Guard Wars* that I found questionable was the appendix dealing with the execution of Private Edward Slovik. Though this event has attracted most of the attention that the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division has received from historians, Weaver relegates all references to Slovik to a brief appendix. This is surprising since Slovik was the only American executed for desertion in World War Two and would have fit well into Weaver’s discussion of morale problems in the chapter dealing with the Hürtgen Forest. Though not excusing Slovik’s crime, Weaver characterizes his trial as a “scandal” and accepts historian Harry M. Kemp’s argument that the execution did not have any effect on the this division’s soldiers. However, Kemp’s claim conflicts with a statement made by the commander of the division: “that

the execution did have ... the deterrent effect [on desertion] visualized by the theater commander.”[1] *Guard Wars* neglects to mention this statement.

Overall, *Guard Wars* is an insightful study of a National Guard division in World War Two. Weaver does not limit himself to the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Division’s role in combat, but instead spends half of the book investigating the “Bloody Buckets” training and its influence on Pennsylvania society. The book is well researched and heavily cited. Perhaps the two appendixes dealing with Slovik and the National Guard after the war should have been merged into the main part of the book. However, this is a very small detraction from a very good book.

Note

[1]. David Eisenhower, *Eisenhower at War, 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 1986), 643.

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