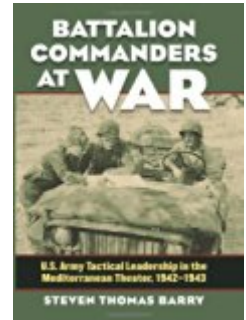


Steven Thomas Barry. *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942-1943.* Modern War Studies Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013. x + 258 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1899-6.



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Published on H-War (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The events, biographies, and memoirs of World War II are the focus of numerous books even seventy years after the fact. Steven Thomas Barry's *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942-1943*, a valuable addition to the historiography of World War II, approaches the war in the Mediterranean theater in a different method than many other studies. Barry sets out to engage historians in the assessment of battalion commanders in the Mediterranean theater by examining "history from the middle" (p. 9). According to Barry, it was battalion commanders (colonels and lieutenant colonels) who provided many solutions that led to the victories of the African campaign. It was during this campaign that the leaders mastered combined arms and adapted tactics to the environment and situation in which they were fighting.

The organization of the text is simple to follow, with each chapter building on preceding chapters. Barry opens the text with two chapters that emphasize the importance of the U.S. Military

Academy at West Point, New York, and the training that cadets received in the years leading up to World War II. A majority of the battalion commanders involved in the Mediterranean theater were educated at West Point in the late 1920s and 1930s, so their experiences at the academy are critical to understanding the background of battalion leadership of World War II. During their time at West Point, cadets were introduced to emerging technologies and the art of adaptation to the circumstances. Officers were further exposed to these technologies and the need to adapt was further reinforced during various General Headquarters maneuvers in the years 1939-41. These experiences led to the success of the battalion officers when first "bloodied" during the African campaign. Following an examination of the typical post-academy assignments and schooling, Barry turns his attention to the events in North Africa. The rest of the text traces the decision making of these battalion commanders through the Sicilian campaign.

Barry opted to focus on battalion commanders because traditionally they have received a significant amount of the blame for the performance of the United States Army during the North African campaign. Barry argues that these leaders performed well under extremely challenging conditions, while admitting that not all commanders did so. Battalions formed the key components of the U.S. Army as they were the units that performed the actions as directed by the strategic plan developed by the headquarters and above. Barry's thesis is that the "battalion leadership exercised by U.S. regular army officers provided the essential component that contributed to battlefield success in the Mediterranean theater of operations despite the deficiencies in equipment, organization, and mobilization and the inadequate operational leadership" (p. 4).

When Operation Torch began, American battalions did not have a chance to conduct training missions simulating the planned assaults, were often short on supplies, and were required to rely on their own assets. Facing these hurdles, Barry argues, the battalions fought bravely. Perhaps one of Barry's strongest arguments for showing the effectiveness of battalion commanders was Major General Terry Allen's field orders when assaulting the Algerian coast; the orders were short and fragmented and "encouraged, and expected, commanders to prosecute their orders with their own initiative" (p. 78). He contends that if the battalion commanders had been as incompetent as others have argued, the result of Operation Torch might have turned out differently because lesser officers would not have been able to successfully execute such vague orders.

While acknowledging that there were failures within the corps of battalion commanders, Barry places more of an emphasis on inadequate intelligence to explain events, such as Faid Pass as part of the Tunisia campaign. He also attributes the failure of Faid Pass to a lack of air support, despite repeated requests made by the battalion

commander. In the case of the action around the Sidi Bou Zid area, he again points out that the failure of intelligence played a significant role; in this case, the absence of adequate maps greatly hampered planning movements and delayed deployment.

Barry sets out to evaluate the combat effectiveness of these leaders. After finishing this study, many readers will be impressed with the success of battalion leaders despite the technical and strategic flaws they encountered as revealed throughout the text. One of the biggest challenges faced by battalion leaders was a lack of experience with combined arms operations that dominated the campaign. At the end of the campaign, battalion leaders overcame many obstacles and led a successful campaign against the German and Vichy French armies in North Africa. In fact, Barry lays more of the blame for the ineffectiveness of the African campaign on senior leaders who were forced through a steep operational learning curve and who had limited time to become proficient commanders.

In conclusion, Barry demonstrates that due to the experience at the U.S. Military Academy and participation in the General Headquarter maneuvers, the professionalism of the battalion commanders in the African campaign led the U.S. Army to many of their early successes in the Mediterranean theater. As a result of the scope of the text and the goal of the author, historians might be left wanting a fuller analysis. With that being said, this book does make a solid contribution to the understanding of leadership challenges during the opening year of World War II.

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Citation: Chris Trobridge. Review of Barry, Steven Thomas. *Battalion Commanders at War: U.S. Army Tactical Leadership in the Mediterranean Theater, 1942-1943*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

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