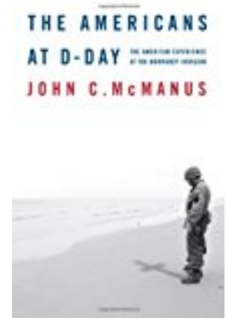
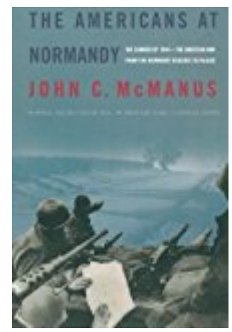
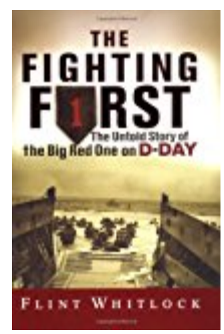
John C. McManus. *The Americans at D-Day: The American Experience at the Normandy Invasion.* New York: Forge Book, 2004. 400 pp. $14.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7653-0744-6.



John C. McManus. *The Americans at Normandy: The Summer of 1944--The American War from the Normandy Beaches to Falaise.* New York: Forge Book, 2004. 400 pp. $17.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7653-1200-6.



Flint Whitlock. *The Fighting First: The Untold Story of the Big Red One on D-Day.* Colorado: Westview Press, 2004. xv + 384 pp. $27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8133-4218-4.



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A Popular Day

Military histories remain as popular as ever, which means that professional military historians continue to face the daunting task of finding intellectual value in writing and reading (and reviewing) books that tiptoe the line between academic and popular history. The sixtieth anniversary of 1944 provided a prime opportunity for studies of the D-Day invasion and Normandy campaign that could make money and, hopefully, provide some new insights into those events. Flint Whitlock and

John C. McManus are two writers who tried to take advantage of that opportunity.

Whitlock is an Army veteran and author of previous books on the 11th Mountain Division and 45th Infantry Division in World War II. He turns his attention to the 1st Infantry Division in *The Fighting First*, and the result is a mixed bag. The problems begin with the book's intent. Whitlock explains in the introduction that movies like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Longest Day* (1962) ignore the division's contribution on D-Day. He adds that books such as Stephen Ambrose's *D-Day* (1994) and Cornelius Ryan's *The Longest Day* (1959) provide a good overall strategic picture, but do not get into the details of the First on June 6. He says nothing of general histories of the division in World War II like the Society for the First Division's *Danger Forward* (1947), but the idea is clear enough: *The Fighting First* will build upon the already extant knowledge by giving a definitive account of the 1st Infantry Division on D-Day.

Only *The Fighting First* does not give a definitive account of D-Day. Whitlock begins with a chapter of background, explaining the division's fighting in North Africa, its devotion to its early commander Terry Allen, the fighting in Sicily, and the replacement of Allen with General Clarence Huebner. Five chapters on the lead up to the landings follow, describing in broad terms the planning for D-Day, moving to England and fraternizing with the locals; training with new weapons and new landing craft; the overall German defenses created by Erwin Rommel; loading of the landing craft; and the heavy gear, choppy waters, seasickness, frayed nerves, and prayers of the troops during the crossing. Whitlock writes with flair, and he has mined several important collections to find vivid first-person descriptions of all of these events, but besides the fact that many men of the division resented having to lead the way in their third campaign, there is nothing particularly unique here--nothing that sets the First's experiences apart from the rest of the men who landed on D-Day. For example, Whitlock spends little time on the particulars of the division's plan, and he does not describe in detail the specific German defenses in the First's landing sector.

The landing itself is more of the same. He follows a long line of literature that describes Omaha Beach as a near-total disaster. The air and naval bombardments were inaccurate, tides carried the landing craft off course, and choppy water caused many of the amphibious tanks to founder. The Germans put down a murderous fire on the landing troops and pinned down the first waves of Americans on the beach for hours. Then the Navy shelling picked up, some tanks and bulldozers arrived on the beach, and leaders emerged from among the survivors. Most prominent among these were General Willard G. Wyman, the assistant division commander, and the commander of the 16th Infantry Regiment, Colonel George A. Taylor. Also, Whitlock correctly credits "incidents of individual bravery" for inspiring groups of men to act (p. 180). By midafternoon, the Americans were beginning to move inland. The voices Whitlock cites come exclusively from the 1st Infantry Division, but again, there is nothing really new here. And that is it for D-Day--scarcely more than 100 pages.

The remainder of the book follows the division from Normandy across northern Europe, with stops at the Argentan-Falaise gap, Aachen, the Hurtgen Forest, the northern shoulder of the Bulge, Bonn, across the Rhine, the Harz Mountains, and into Czechoslovakia. By the end, most of this breathless narrative becomes a collection of Medal of Honor citations. (To the credit of the men of the division there are enough of these for Whitlock to string together the campaigns.) Through it all, he draws on memoirs, oral histories, and archival collections to intersperse interesting recollections from the men who were there, but he does not use those recollections to draw larger conclusions.

When he does engage in arguments, the result is usually disappointing. For example, he cites a memoir to explain the insufficient prelanding naval bombardment: "The reason was simple: the spotter planes--the low-flying, slow-moving Piper Cubs from the Royal Navy's Fleet Air Arm--were knocked out of the sky by friendly fire!" (p. 139). Whether or not that claim is true--and it is not to be found in any other major account of the invasion, including the British official history, which maintains that the Fleet Air Arm used Seafires on D-Day, not Piper Cubs--the fact remains that there is sizable historical debate about naval bombardment on June 6 that Whitlock misses. The same goes for his account of the Argentan-Falaise Gap, which he treats as an unmitigated success, and which most historians see as a lost opportunity. The overall result is a readable but superficial account of the 1st Infantry Division in World War II.

In ***The Americans at D-Day*** and ***The Americans at Normandy***, written together and published only a few months apart, John C. McManus does a much better job of skirting the boundary between academic and popular history. His stated objective is to describe specifically the American experiences in northern Europe in the summer of 1944, from the landings on June 6 to the breakout in August. To be sure, the two books are intended for a general audience, but McManus, a professor of history at the University of Missouri at Rolla, makes it clear that he is familiar with the relevant literature and debates, and his interpretations reflect that familiarity.

The Americans at D-Day quickly establishes McManus's pattern of traveling up and down the chain of command to describe the events of 1944. The first part of the book begins at the top with General Eisenhower and the planning and preparation for D-Day. In just over 130 crisp pages, McManus introduces the participating units and some of the men who fought on the ground, describes the aerial offensive against German lines of communication, gives an account of Eisenhower's briefing of the Allied leadership, follows Ike to the airborne marshaling areas, and explains the painstaking process of giving the go-ahead for the invasion. The second part begins with the naval crossing, the airborne ride over the channel, the glider troop and paratroop drops, and a clear description of the frantic pre-dawn fighting.

Most of the rest of the study focuses on the seaborne landings. McManus makes the common point that cloud cover forced Allied bombers to delay dropping their bombs until they were past the beaches. He points out that the naval bombardment was too short because Allied commanders feared drawing in German reinforcements and ignored the lessons from the Pacific theater. On the more lightly defended Utah beach these shortcomings did not matter as much, and the troops were able to get off the beaches pretty quickly. But on Omaha beach, the shortage of prelanding bombardment led to brutal fighting, which wiped out whole units in the first waves. Like Whitlock, he credits the actions of small groups of men for getting the Americans off the beach. He also gives due to the Navy destroyers that came in close to the beaches and offered crucial fire support. Throughout, McManus makes good use of long quotations from the participants, especially the men at the lower ranks, drawn particularly from the Eisenhower Center, North Texas, and Tennessee oral history collections. He does a notable job with the difficult task of connecting these individual accounts to the specific course of units in the battle.

The Americans at Normandy is better than ***The Americans at D-Day***, if only because it goes over territory that has not been covered as extensively as the actual invasion. McManus begins in the obvious place, June 7, as American units fought their way inland from Omaha and Utah beaches. He describes in vivid detail the fits and starts of the American advance, the difficulties and innovations required to defeat the Norman hedgerows, and the brutal fighting for cities like

Cherbourg and St. Lo. The slow advance sped up in late July, as General Omar Bradley's plan Cobra broke the Americans out of Normandy. Even the German counterattack at Mortain in August could not stop the Americans, and indeed by then the U.S. Army was prepared to take advantage of the overaggressiveness of the enemy to win a great victory. As with the D-Day book, none of this material will be new to readers who are familiar with the campaign, but it is McManus's synthesis of secondary sources and primary accounts that gives his work its greatest value.

In both volumes McManus emphasizes one theme: despite taking grave casualties and making all kinds of mistakes, the Americans won because they fought well and bravely, not because they owned a preponderance of material. Critics of that argument should take note that McManus does not gloss up war and is not some sort of jingoist. He intersperses graphic tales of the carnage of the fight throughout the narrative--Felix Branham having his friend Gino Ferrari's brains blown out onto his face on D-Day is a particularly wrenching example (*D-Day*, p. 319). And McManus is judicious in his accounting--he presents sound arguments backed by solid research. When there are controversies, he handles them well, presenting both sides either in the text or the footnotes, and explaining why one side is stronger than the other. For example, the pilots of the C-47s that dropped the paratroopers the morning of June 6 have been criticized for panicking under fire, flying too fast, and dropping the troops too low. McManus explains the real source of the problem: "The ultimate cause of this fiasco was not the cowardice of transport pilots but intelligence and operational failures. Allied intelligence analysts chose to believe that they had destroyed German flak capacity in Normandy, a tragically erroneous assumption" (*D-Day*, p. 174). Likewise, his description of the Allied failure to close the Argentan-Falaise Gap before thousands of German troops escaped places much of the blame on General Omar Bradley's decision to halt the Americans at Argentan. But McManus ultimately concludes that it was still a great victory, and even if Bradley had sent the troops on, "it would not have meant, in some sort of magical way, a war-ending victory for the Allies in Normandy" (*Normandy*, pp. 414-415).

Understanding the constraints presented by trade presses that do not want to see a narrative bogged down by excessive historiography or citations--and that do not want to pay for the space needed for such things, anyway--some limited attempts to engage the literature, to further the debates, make all the difference. This entreaty comes from more than just pedantry. The academic literature on D-Day and the Normandy campaign, while not always the most readable, has provided a more complex and accurate picture of what happened in the summer of 1944. There is nothing that says a popular history cannot be an accurate and up-to-date history. John McManus succeeds in making his popular history accurate and up-to-date; alas, Flint Whitlock, for all the value of his original research, does not.

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