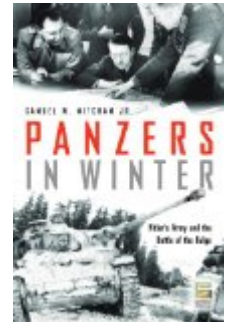


Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr.. *Panzers in Winter: Hitler's Army and the Battle of the Bulge.*
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Reviewed by Henry Staruk

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We know how the story ends, but it is perhaps the fact that this book approaches an episode familiar to military historians from an unfamiliar vantage point that somehow distorts expectations of the story to be told. It may also be that Samuel Mitcham introduces the major German figures in the Ardennes Offensive with lengthy and mostly favorable biographical sketches detailing past successes and a seemingly shared ability to reshape a hopeless situation into victory. After encountering Mitcham's stated aim of presenting the Battle of the Bulge, and in particular the Battle of the Schnee Eifel, "from the German point of view in greater depth than any other book has ever done" (p. ix), readers may get the feeling that they are about to encounter a valiant effort by the Germans to push through the Allied armies at the West Wall, drive to Antwerp and turn the course of the war in the West. It soon becomes clear, however, that Mitcham has no intention of telling us how the offensive failed despite the excellent quality of German units, planning, resources and execution. Rather, this is a story of understrength regular units; infantry units made up of inexperienced naval, air force and overage replacements;

unrealistic and unchangeable objectives; a chaotic network of logistics; and generally disappointing results. Mitcham's apparent argument is that responsibility for the American army's greatest defeat in Europe lies closer to the Americans themselves than to any real German advantages. The author seems to wonder how, rather than explain how, the Germans made the gains in the Ardennes that they did.

Although he also draws from American sources, Mitcham's focus is on the German perspective, and his sources reflect this decision. The revelation of this book is Mitcham's treatment of the Eighteenth Volksgrenadier Division—a sub-par unit whose successes in the Schnee Eifel defied its inexperience. To tell this previously untold story, the author depends on the unpublished account of Lieutenant Colonel Dietrich Moll, the division's chief of operations. Indeed, unpublished after-action reports and postwar manuscripts from German participants constitute the bulk of his source base. Mitcham organizes his work geographically rather than chronologically. After introductory chapters that chart the planning of the

offensive and provide biographical histories of the military men involved, Mitcham recounts the first day of the offensive before breaking his analysis into concentrations on the northern, central and southern sectors. While this strategy allows for better comprehension of what happened within each sector, it does come at the expense of a sense of continuity. One wonders what was happening along the rest of the front at various moments. Is this a better presentation than a strictly chronological approach, in which unit positions and even identities become lost in a sea of designating numbers? Alas, there may be no easy way to detail clearly the events of such a large front, but Mitcham's sacrifice of a sense of chronological continuity for one of geographical clarity serves his account well.

Despite treating the entire Ardennes front, Mitcham's real focus is on the Eighteenth Volksgrenadier, a ragtag unit made up of overage soldiers, Luftwaffe leftovers and outcasts from other units. What little experience the division had was characterized by losses and near-annihilation before Moll took over. Mitcham's description of the Eighteenth's routing of the American 106th Infantry Division makes for compelling and engaging military history. Another of the book's major strengths is his continued attention to the unrealistic nature of operation's objectives, the Wehrmacht leaders' nearly universal acknowledgement of that nature and Hitler's refusal to allow any alteration to his grand plan. Simply put, even though the Wehrmacht never acquired the materiel necessary to undertake such an operation, what little it could scrape together for the offensive caused a series of logistical headaches, the most frustrating and ubiquitous of which were the constant traffic jams clogging the roadways behind the lines.

This compelling book offers a new perspective on one of the most important operations of World War II. Mitcham's discovery of new German sources allows for a wealth of new voices, combining the military situation with the politi-

cal, and his somewhat peculiar arrangement ultimately makes those voices more clearly defined. The volume presents a history that will engage specialists as well as casual readers not deeply versed in military history.

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