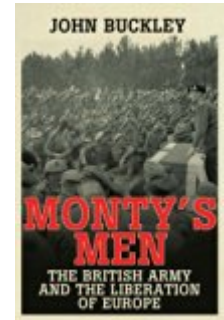


**John Buckley.** *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. ix + 370 pp. \$27.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-20534-3.



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“That’s not all I’ve got, that’s what I’ve got.” Facing a numerically superior enemy and able to count only a few friendlies, John Wayne (Sheriff John T. Chance) made this statement in the epic western *Rio Bravo* (1959). In such moments, there is no point bellyaching; one must simply find a path forward with what resources one has.

Confronted with a legacy of criticisms of the British Army’s performance in western Europe, John Buckley discusses its plan to defeat the Wehrmacht by taking this fair measure as its starting point. Per Buckley, the established canon has created the image of “an unimaginative and plodding force which only prevailed against a dynamic and resourceful foe through sheer weight of resources and recourse to outmoded and attritional methods” (p. 7). He bases this analysis on historiographical trends that are hypercritical of the British Army for what it was not nor never could be, the Wehrmacht, or for failing to complete the campaign without any missteps. Rather than moaning on about what the British Army could not do and did not have, Buckley, like the

British war planners, instead takes account of its resources and capabilities, considers the enemy and the objective, and assesses the strategy and supporting tactics that could defeat the Germans and deliver the necessary postwar political context.

What Buckley sets out to prove is that General Bernard Montgomery (Monty) and the planners did not choose their path out of squeamishness, thoughtlessness, or a concern about the fighting qualities of the average British infantryman; rather, these were sober, mature professional decisions that took account of the full spectrum of realities confronting the achievement of their desired objectives. Whereas the strategy and the tactics they gave rise to were “shaped by the two overarching concerns of troop shortages and morale, conversely [they were] soundly underpinned by the advantage of superiority in resources.” The concept that formed the strategy, drove operations, and set tactics was the use of firepower, tanks, and materiel to wear down the Germans and conserve manpower as far as possi-

ble: in the common parlance of the time, to “let the metal do it rather than the men” (pp. 26-27). Sustaining this effort, logistics would be the salve for other weaknesses, a strength on which strategy, operations, and tactics were based. And although it is not directly addressed in this narrative, any sensible reader will remember, in addition to the constraints specific to the European theater, the sum of the British effort in western Europe, stupendous as it was as the denouement to victory over a formidable enemy, was itself only one part of a larger war effort. Notwithstanding the other independent theater in Asia/Pacific, that the fighting forces could stand on materiel riches meant that there was an even larger legion in the maritime services. This was set piece tactical attrition, and it was believed that it could sufficiently weaken the overstretched and ill-prepared German lines, force them back, and lead to significant territorial gains and ultimately victory. That the objective was achieved within a year of landing at Normandy and was the product of the methods chosen is for Buckley a definitive answer on the quality of the strategy and the army, as well as of General Montgomery and his men.

Thus, in many respects this book reviews the British Army’s performance in Europe. Buckley does not rate the British Army on its failure to be another Wehrmacht. Rather, he assesses it against what it had and intended to do and be; and looks at its strategy, as well as supporting tactics, concepts, and capabilities. That is, he examines its plan to dislodge and defeat the German Army in Europe. Given the issues confronting them, the planners and General Montgomery developed an approach that suited and accommodated all of the military requirements and offered a path to contending successfully against an opponent considered superior in tactics and close combat.

In support of this argument, Buckley’s narrative of the campaign shows clearly that where the army followed its strategy it was more than a match for the tactically brilliant German forces.

Where Monty allowed or encouraged divergence from that path the results rarely satisfied. The author uses the basic chronology of the campaign and its inherent narrative to develop his argument. He includes enough general information to make the work an essential volume on the history of the British Army in Europe. Those who do not want to read another shallow campaign history can breathe easy because in supporting his argument Buckley makes the narrative much deeper than that. Each phase of the campaign to liberate western Europe from German control and defeat the Wehrmacht is the basis to interrogate the events against his argument, which he does to good effect. The campaign itself is the argument, as the progress of the army in the landings, breakout, offensives, setbacks, and eventual military decision is explained in terms of the interplay between its strengths and weaknesses, which the established strategy, tactics, and concept of operations had been created to highlight and mitigate.

In addition to the plan’s essential wisdom, this work’s fair reckoning of the British efforts means that markers previously seen as flaws and weaknesses are far less damaging when considered within the framework of the plan. Caen, which has ritually been read as a case of British Army sluggishness and lack of proper offensive technique, is broken down for analysis according to the strategy. From this view, Buckley establishes that while it might not have been pretty, much of what was depicted as negative was beyond the army’s control, and moreover, the actions of the British ultimately cost the Germans their foothold in Normandy and demonstrated that the latter’s “tactical methods for assaults had been exposed as hugely costly in the face of Allied firepower, and [their] command structure and central strategy was dealt a mortal blow” (p. 87). Other moments that have been set up as failures or signs of the army’s incompetence have far more reasonable explanations in his book. The matter of Antwerp and the north bank of the Scheldt is one such “error.” While Buckley addresses the costs

related to not taking and holding this key piece of terrain early, he is equally on point when he dissects the bravado of hindsight which has asserted that the objective could have been achieved and held with ease.

If General Montgomery is the character whose singular identity personifies the army, then Buckley does well to provide a character of substance to sustain the narrative and argument. It is a refreshing treatment. Because he does not rely on Montgomery as either saint or demon as the answer to the army's performance, Buckley is able to portray him and his role with a balance that is likely most accurate to events. He points out with similar equanimity where the general was brilliant or foolish. We are given the most in-depth view of Montgomery in the early chapter on the preparations for the campaign where his individual action was most important, whether in crafting the strategy, setting the training objectives, planning the campaign, or making command appointments to his subordinate units. Defining his character in this drama, Buckley contrasts the general's "unerring ability to annoy most of those he worked with" with his role in the army's success. Montgomery "identified the most appropriate way of fighting the Germans given the nature and capability of the forces under his command ... [and] adopt[ed] an operational approach that emphasised British strengths ... and avoided weaknesses" (p. 13).

Once on campaign, while he commanded and was responsible for the decisions (and at times the decision making is the critical point), it was for the men, units, enemy, and events to take the dominant presence on the stage. This balance is correct as this was a massive army and its story cannot only belong to a single figure. Buckley examines more than merely the eponymous general; he also delivers on the narrative of the men who made up the army. At the outset, he provides a broad sketch of the institution as a whole. Breathing life into the story throughout, he uses

the voices and experiences of individuals to provide focused insights to points in the narrative. The fairest assessment of the army and its men came from the general himself, as Buckley writes that Montgomery "did not consider his to be bad or poor soldiers, but recognized that they were less proficient than their opponents at the tactical level due to lower levels of experience and their limited exposure to the harsh brutalities of warfare" (p. 24).

Buckley's work serves its intended purpose—well and engagingly—but it also provokes further considerations. For the military historian, there are two very important points this book brings up which ought to spark debate within the community. The first concerns larger historiographical issues, especially as they relate to national trends. Contending as this work does against the current orthodoxy in British literature, from an American perspective, the divergence between the tones of the narratives and assessments of these allies in the campaign is striking. Whereas Buckley reviews a landscape of negative and pessimistic interpretations, the American tradition is far more upbeat and triumphal. British modesty does not account for the difference. And hence, we are left with the same war, campaign, and outcome, explained in entirely different ways. The second is the criticism he levels at sections of the fields of military history and his analysis on his way to a very compelling discussion of the full terms of military effectiveness. For relying on an irrationally narrow definition of military effectiveness, "the overly technocentric vision of success and failure on the battlefields tells us more about the approach of many male military historians who seek to explain complex issues through easily measurable technical performance" (p. 13). The male aspect may simply be correlative, but it is certainly the case that the world of war has been overtaken by quantification, and I think this point opens up a good avenue by which to question this trend critically.

Finally, in addition to any use where a quality secondary work is desired, I particularly recommend the work to British Army professional military education, Sandhurst and beyond. The argument, that Monty and the British Army took what they had and fashioned it into a force worthy of the German Army of WWII, albeit differently capable, is a keen one to keep in mind during this period of transition, transformation, and austerity. The present moment offers no greater challenges than those of the 1930s, and the British Army, which struggled through that period, eventually went on to win the war, a global struggle against two adversaries, one of which was an arguably stronger (and certainly much storied) combatant.

In a year with important anniversaries—one hundredth of the commencement of WWI and seventieth since Normandy Landings—it is tempting to lose track of where one is in retrospective reverie. However, rather than driving my view back, this work speaks to current issues even more forcefully.

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