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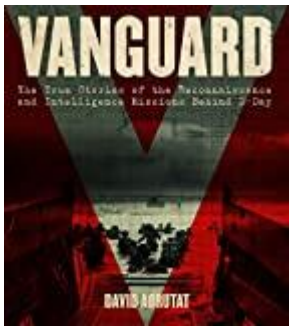

David Abrutat. *Vanguard: The True Stories of the Reconnaissance and Intelligence Missions behind D-Day.* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019. 368 pp. $46.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-68247-454-9.

Reviewed by Toby Clark (Independent Scholar)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

When bemoaning the lack of unity and togetherness in society in 2020, American and British commentators routinely look to history, and specifically the Second World War, as a time when people pulled together. In Britain this idea has a name: Blitz Spirit. In some respects, this nostalgic view of the Second World War has some basis in truth. This is demonstrated in *Vanguard: The True Stories of the Reconnaissance and Intelligence Missions Behind* D-Dayby David Abrutat.

Vanguard shows "the industrial scale and breadth of the intelligence activity for Overlord" (p. 12). A great number of intelligence agencies and reconnaissance units worked cooperatively, in conditions of secrecy and danger, to prepare for the invasion. These groups were populated by as diverse characters as university dons, Royal Marine divers, publishers, meteorologists, guerrillas, pilots, submariners, and model makers.

It is the cast of characters that reveals the author's research. The reader is introduced to men and women whose efforts sustained Operation Overlord. It was the diligence of John Johnson at the Oxford University Press (OUP)—which grew to the size of an infantry battalion during the war—that saw millions of secret military publications being prepared and printed, without any leaks. A further three hundred American personnel were based in the Gloucestershire town of Tetbury. Here they were engaged in building models of the Normandy beaches and then delivering them to the soldiers who would eventually assault them. There were two geographers, one at Oxford University and one at Cambridge University, who established the Inter-Services Topographical Department (ISTD). John Godfrey and Kenneth Mason both had military experience as well as superb teams working under them. Having never heard of the ISTD, I was staggered by the amount of intelligence they gathered. The list of material contains such gems as the "submarine geology of invasion ports," "forecast of soil characteristics of projected airfield sites," and most brilliantly, "selection of training area on River Meuse, with conditions as near as possible to those which would

hold on the Rhine assault crossings" (pp. 278-279). The ISTD was already determining which river in France would be suitable for practicing the assault on the Rhine, before the invasion of France had even happened.

The author makes the valuable point that these skills were managed and streamlined into one efficient system, while all information that was gathered was shared "between all components of the Armed Forces, covert Intelligence Agencies and Special Forces" (p. 21). Sharing information throughout every arm of the Allied military, despite the risk that the whole operation might be blown by a leak, was deemed worth it in order to avoid the problem which the Germans suffered. Under Hitler, German intelligence agencies were in competition. Information was power and influence in Hitler's court, and was thus jealously guarded (p. 34). The difference between the German and British approaches to intelligence sharing is best seen in the example of British Motor Torpedo Boats (MTB). The MTBs were small, fast Royal Navy boats that exfiltrated military personnel and spies after they had carried out missions in German-occupied Normandy. Despite the diminutive size of their craft, the commanding officer of each MTB was given BIGOT security clearance (p. 62). British Invasion of German Occupied Territory (BIGOT) was the highest level of secrecy concerning Operation Overlord. For individuals in small boats to be given this information reveals the trust and unity within the Allies. Given this teamwork during the war, it is not surprising that commentators have looked back at those years in order to commemorate and perhaps recapture this camaraderie.

Another difference between Allied practices and German practices can be gauged from this book. In the armed forces there are two distinct groups: those who serve in the front line and those that do not. In Germany, the teeth of the armed forces, represented by the frontline troops, were comprised mainly of millions of rifle-wielding infantrymen. By the time Operation Overlord came up in 1944, the German manpower reserves were running low and some infantrymen were not German but eastern European. Increasingly, the German tail—that is, the logistical components of the armed forces—was combed for fit men. Matters were worse in Germany, where slave labor was increasingly being used in place of skilled workers in munitions factories. Compared to this to the Allied approach could not have been more different. By 1944, the Allies had formed their own style of war fighting: a large logistical tail supporting a small number of men at the front line. *Vanguard* shows the logistical tail in all its variety. Grand country houses across Britain contained hundreds of thousands of men and women, who outnumbered the frontline troops. At Danesfield House, 3,500 staff collated, studied, and disseminated the aerial reconnaissance photos which the RAF and USAAF took over Normandy (p. 264). Important German prisoners of war were interrogated in Latimer House while Italians were taken to the equally stately Wilton House (p. 100).

Another mansion, Bletchley Park, the home of the British Government Code and Cypher School during the Second World War, has been in the news in 2020 following the publication of John Ferris's book, ***Behind the Enigma: The Authorised History of GCHQ, Britain's Secret Cyber-Intelligence Agency***. While books on Bletchley Park are always popular due to their mix of secrets and success stories, the reason this book has gained attention is because the author has dared to criticize the role of Bletchley Park. Bletchley Park is, alongside Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, and the London Blitz, the cornerstone of the popular view of Britain facing the might of Hitler's war machine alone and building a better world through the defeat of Nazi tyranny. However, historians will explain that history is nuanced. David Abrutat is one of these historians. *Vanguard* shows that Bletchley Park was one part of a greater system of reconnaissance and intelligence gathering. For example, just down the road from Bletchley, Whaddon Hall

was the Government Communications Centre which disseminated the Ultra intelligence from the cracked Enigma code to Allied headquarters all over the world (p. 334).

Abrutat has not been explicit in making the connection between the huge Allied logistical tail for the Normandy invasion and the Allied preference for waging war with money and equipment rather than human lives. Neither has the author made the comparison with the German system. This is a pity because new research, no matter how thorough, does not exist in a vacuum and Abrutat has quoted from but not engaged satisfactorily with the secondary sources.

I was disappointed by the number of errors within the text. Toward the end, spelling mistakes were frequent (pp. 260, 292, 379). At times I found the text confusing, as when the author describes a parachute jump "just prior to the invasion" (p. 89). Considering that this book is about D-Day, there was a need here to explain that the invasion in question was in fact Operation Dragoon in the South of France and not Operation Overlord. There were also failings in editing. Some facts were repeated as many as three times (pp. 306, 325), and the chapter entitled "Racket" jumped around too much. A more astute proofreader might have found and removed more glaring errors, as when two sentences appear to have been accidently combined (p. 292).

Another irritant is the contents page. While reviewing this book I had to jump forward and backward through the text to find certain quotations, and the chapter headings made this process difficult. Each chapter is identified with a number and one or two words. These words might refer to something obvious in the D-Day story such as the beaches, which are in chapter 17 entitled "Sand." However, some titles refer to operational names, such as "Listeners," "Rhubarb," "Jellyfish," "Magic," and "Racket." These names do become familiar when reading the book, but the contents page needed more information. As Mack says in John Steinbeck's novel *Sweet Thursday*, "I'd like to have a couple of words at the top so it tells me what the chapter's going to be about."[1] Otherwise, the reader may struggle to relocate a pertinent fact.

Ultimately, *Vanguard* was a difficult book to read. It would be easy to blame this on the poor standard of editing and spelling. However, the greater problem is the book's length. Abrutat has gathered enough material for ten chapters; unfortunately, *Vanguard* contains twenty chapters. By shortening this book, the author would have avoided the need to repeat himself in order to fill the space. Readers with an interest in D-Day, or military intelligence more generally, can overlook these problems, though. Earlier in this review I referred to the enormity of the preparations for D-Day, and in *Vanguard* the author has managed to draw all these together in one place. While far from perfect, *Vanguard* is the only book to offer such a comprehensive view of the myriad people and organizations involved.

Note

[1]. John Steinbeck, *Sweet Thursday* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), vii.

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