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Air transport arguably came into its own in World War II. Axis and Allied transport planes delivered and sustained airborne troops for assaults in Europe and the Asiatic-Pacific. A network of flight routes connected the Allied and Axis worlds, and both sides counted on air transports for rapid deliveries over great distances.

For many students of World War II, air transport is best known for supplying surrounded forces via an airlift or air bridge. Such operations supported the American garrison in the Philippines, Chinese forces over the Himalayas (the Hump), British forces at Imphal and Kohima, and German forces in many places on the eastern front, all with varying degrees of success. Two of the more famous German efforts were the airlift into Demyansk in early 1942 and the air bridge to Sixth Army in Stalingrad from late November 1942 until the first days of February 1943. The first one succeeded in keeping a corps-sized group sustained until land communications were restored, while the latter failed to meet the basic requirements of Sixth Army and contributed to its demise. Robert Forsyth turns his attention to this last operation in his latest book.

The Battle of Stalingrad was the turning point of World War II’s eastern front and one of the twentieth century’s bloodiest and most consequential engagements. General Friedrich Paulus’s German Sixth Army fought into the city starting in late August 1942, waging a block-by-block *Rattenkrieg* (Rats’ War) against stubborn Soviet resistance. By mid-November victory was in sight, but on November 19 Soviet attacks on the flanks resulted in Sixth Army becoming surrounded. Ordered to hold out, the German Luftwaffe started an airlift that almost never supplied the army’s daily requirements of food, ammunition, fuel, and forage. Meanwhile a relief effort failed, and Soviet attacks pushed German forces westward. Soviet attacks on Sixth Army gradually shrunk the pocket, and Paulus surrendered on January 31, 1943. The last German forces in Stalingrad, XI Corps, held out forty-eight hours longer, until February 2, 1943.
Most histories of Stalingrad focus on the ground battle, often relegating the airlift to the background. In contrast, this book looks at the battle through the eyes of the Luftwaffe personnel required to plan and execute an air bridge to an army of nearly three hundred thousand men on short notice. After a discussion of Demyansk and other prior German airlift experiences (including the Spanish Civil War), Forsyth reviews operations up to November 19. The book’s heart explores the airlift itself chronologically, taking readers from its first efforts through the final surrenders. Forsyth offers commentary along the way, with additional analysis at the end. Appendices compile statistics of tonnage delivery and losses.

Forsyth is a noted author on many topics related to the Luftwaffe, and his expertise shines through. He includes personal accounts of pilots and senior leaders, giving perspectives from all aspects of the operation. These records, including journals of senior leaders like Generals Wolfram von Richthofen and Erhard Milch, provide revealing details of how the airmen coped with increasing stresses as weather and Russian advances hindered performance. His account also explores the Luftwaffe personnel in the pocket and their fates, including that of General Wolfgang Pickert, the senior Luftwaffe officer with Sixth Army. Augmenting the airmen’s accounts is technical information on the planes and equipment involved, including cargo containers and airdrop techniques. These explanations are provided in just enough detail to not slow the narrative, while providing essential details to make sense of the airmen’s experiences.

Readers will find many vignettes that shine new light on these events. The famous commitments of the Luftwaffe’s head, Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, to Sixth Army were based on sketchy information and can be attributed as much or more so to members of his staff. Luftwaffe leaders at the front did their best but doubted the airlift would be successful and ultimately called on aircraft from as far away as North Africa to help. Soviet air activity around the pocket was more effective than generally realized. Pickert was a Flak officer, not aircrew, which affected the airlift and liaison with Sixth Army in the pocket. Paulus and his staff became bitter about the Luftwaffe’s performance, but some of their decisions hindered supply delivery. The disorder at the pocket’s airfields, especially related to the wounded, had an effect on the aircrews. Finally, Heinkel 111 crews flying over Stalingrad on February 3 saw columns of prisoners marching away from the city. All of these, and many more, provide new understanding of the titanic battle.

All that said, the book does have a few limitations. The overview maps are good, but more maps of the battlefront and campaign’s progress would have helped. That points to the other major limitation, namely, too little attention on the ground forces. While Forsyth correctly focuses on the air operations, some more basic detail on the ground campaign’s progress would have been helpful, especially the January and February 1943 battles around Rostov and the Donbass region, which significantly affected airfield and aircraft availability for Sixth Army. Readers may also wish for more details on the interaction of Sixth Army supply officers and Luftwaffe personnel. These limitations, however, do not detract from the book’s overall usefulness and may spur further inquiry.

In the end, Forsyth has illuminated a critical and underappreciated aspect of one of the twentieth century’s greatest battles. His discussion of both the Demyansk and Stalingrad airlifts are superlative case studies of those operations. This book is an essential contribution to the historiography on Stalingrad, the Luftwaffe in World War II, and air transport more generally. It is highly recommended for any student of Stalingrad, the eastern front in World War II, air power, or air transport.
Christopher Kolaskowski works as a historian in Madison, Wisconsin. He is the author of five books on the American Civil War and World War II and a reviewer and contributor to the Air Force Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs. His latest book covers the 1944 India-Burma campaigns.

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