



Stout Hearts: The British and Canadians in Normandy 1944 by Ben Kite.

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Anglophone historians have given few World War II campaigns as much attention as the D-Day landings and subsequent Battle for Normandy. Yet, there has until now been no forensic analysis of the British- and Canadian-led Allied armies involved in these crucial events. In *Stout Hearts*, British Army officer Ben Kite has crafted a remarkable study of the experiences of the men and women of British and Commonwealth armed forces in their bitter fight against a dug in and determined Wehrmacht. His primary goal is to illustrate “how an Army works and operates, highlighting the complexity of land operations as well as the organizational efficiency required to make an Army Group operate effectively” (406). To that end, the book’s twelve chapters describe separate aspects of the Twenty-First Army Group’s component combat and supporting arms. Valuable enhancements include ten detailed appendices, fifteen full-color maps, many diagrams and tables, and a well organized index broken down by military units, people, places, and miscellaneous terms.

Chapter 1 offers a succinct overview of the Normandy campaign and a justification for Kite’s extensive use of personal anecdotes—“you cannot comprehend how an Army works without understanding the men within it who have to serve in conditions of extreme danger, confusion and fatigue” (17).

The long second chapter launches into a detailed account of the British infantry forces that fought in Normandy: the men, their weapons, their organization, and their deployment in both offensive and defensive operations. The blend of cogent analysis of tactics and apt quotations of the battle’s participants yields a kind of tutorial on the British use of infantry during the war and sets the context for the author’s discussion of the Twenty-First Army Group’s infantry, which represented only 15 percent of its overall personnel but suffered nearly two-thirds of its casualties (78).

Chapter 3 concerns Allied naval support, with an in-depth look at minesweeping operations during the initial crossing of the channel and in the following weeks. Though the offshore fire support that battleships, cruisers, and destroyers provided for the Allied armies is covered later in the book, the scant treatment here of the Royal Navy’s big guns is a (rare) disappointment in the book.

Chapter 4 focuses on Allied engineer operations in Normandy. These included clearing the D-Day beaches, hindering enemy movements, paving the way for the Twenty-First Army Group’s forces, and preparations for the Seine River crossings, which went off without a hitch, thanks to the engineers’ hard work.

Chapter 5 is a superb evaluation of the Royal Army’s artillery, which Kite believes was truly an elite force, indeed perhaps the best of its kind in any army deployed during the war. He demonstrates this with an engrossing look at the weaponry, tactics, techniques, procedures, and organization of the artillery. On the micro-level, he gives the reader a vivid sense of what it entailed to dig in, sight in, acquire targets, and fire World War II-era big guns. The detail here is on the level of a graduate seminar on the Royal Artillery.

Chapter 6 considers the Royal Air Force’s role in delivering the Sixth Airborne Division on D-Day, as well as the ground support it provided to the Twenty-First Army Group. He recounts the process of scouting out, choosing, building, and maintaining the runways in Normandy that were so vital to

providing effective close air support. We learn about the massive Tallboy bombs dropped by four-engine bombers and the pilots and ground crews of the Typhoon-equipped squadrons. Like previous historians, Kite correctly observes that Allied aircraft knocked out relatively few German armored vehicles, but adds that the fear generated by the air attacks caused German crews to abandon hundreds of intact tanks and other armored vehicles, an equipment loss that hamstrung the Wehrmacht's western armies for the remainder of the war (216).

Chapter 7 concerns the Allies' dominance in Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) operations, with an emphasis on combat reconnaissance and signals intelligence (though ULTRA is mentioned). Unlike the many writers who have concentrated on the great Allied vs. German armor clashes, Kite properly highlights the value of I&R in furnishing Allied commanders with accurate information on German dispositions, actions, and intentions.

Chapter 8 covers matters of effective command and control from Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's command of Twenty-First Army Group on down to the tactical level. This is followed by a fascinating and substantive look at the planning-execution cycle during at tempo of actual combat operations.

Chapter 9 is a discerning discussion of Allied medical services during the campaign—their structure, the challenges they faced (especially, battlefield evacuation of the wounded), and the benefits they provided to the Twenty-First Army Group. The chapter effectively “take[s] the reader on a journey through [the] medical evacuation chain, explaining the type of treatment the soldier received at various stages as well as how the medical facilities operated” (291).

Chapter 10 places the reader shoulder-to-shoulder with the troops of the Twenty-First Army Group in summer 1944. We observe the differing perspectives of the soldiers as they entered the battlefield on D-Day and in the weeks that followed. We see up close the strains of living for months in a combat zone, always on edge and performing exhausting and tedious tasks shattered by moments of extreme terror.

Chapter 11, the book's grand finale, is devoted to providing “an understanding of how armour supports operations and the experiences tank crews would encounter in Normandy.” Kite judges that the contribution of the often maligned British and Canadian tank crews was in fact “significant, competently executed, and often very courageous” (360). He explains clearly the fundamental flaws in British armored doctrine and design vis-à-vis German tanks. However, he demonstrates that, despite their deficient armor and armaments, British tank crews did accomplish their assigned tasks, though at a terrifying cost even after they were equipped with the best armed main battle tank of the war. As one Allied tank commander put it,

The Firefly tank is an ordinary Sherman but, in order to store its massive shells, the co-driver has been eliminated and his little den has been used as a storage space. The electrical traversing gear makes it easy to swing the gun around but heaven help me if I ever have to traverse the 17-pounder by hand....The flash is so brilliant that both the gunner and commander need to blink at the moment of firing. Otherwise they will be blinded for so long that they will not see the shot hit the target. The muzzle flash spurts out so much flame that after a shot or two, the hedge or undergrowth in front of the tank is likely to start burning. When moving, the gun's overlap in front or, if traversed, to the side is so long that driver, gunner, and commander have to be constantly alert to avoid wrapping the barrel around some apparently distant tree, defenseless lamp-post or inoffensive house. (369)

By his close focus on the Twenty-First Army Group at the Battle for Normandy, Ben Kite has provided a much needed corrective to the idea that the British-led armies fought poorly during the campaign. He cogently establishes that select British combat arms were in fact not just professional or competent but even elite. With *Stout Hearts*, he has made a salutary addition to the literature of his

subject. The book will instruct and engage anyone interested in the functioning of military units and, more particularly, just how the Twenty-First Army Group defeated the strongest forces fielded by the Wehrmacht against Anglo-American armies during the Second World War.