



Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day by Marc Milner.

Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2014. Pp. xviii, 375. ISBN 978-0-7006-2003-6.

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When Gen. Dwight Eisenhower and his fellow Allied commanders were planning Operation Overlord, they knew the Germans might defeat the invasion of Normandy in two ways. Defensively, the mines, obstacles, and pillboxes that German general Erwin Rommel had added to the *Atlantikwall* could sink enough landing craft and kill enough soldiers to shatter the invasion on the beaches. Offensively, if the Allied armies did get ashore, a massive armored counterattack could sweep them back into the sea. That attack is the subject of *Stopping the Panzers*.

Veteran Canadian historian Marc Milner¹ (Univ. of New Brunswick) has not just meticulously detailed five days of fighting by the Canadian Third Division. He has produced a revisionist account to vindicate these Canadians, who, he argues, acting almost alone, took heavy casualties and defeated the German armored thrust, ensuring that Allied invasion forces would not have to fight German armor at the water's edge. Milner excoriates the producers of such famous films as *The Longest Day* (1962) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and especially "the historians"—British and American, but also Canadian—who have misrepresented or ignored the Third Division's contribution to Allied success in Normandy.

The first section of the book sets the stage for the battles fought on 6–10 June. The introduction leads with a single gun: the British 17-pounder, a high-velocity anti-tank weapon that was towed on wheels or deployed on motorized mounts or as the armament of Sherman tanks. It was the only Allied weapon that could reliably destroy German heavy and medium tanks—the famous Tigers and Panthers—at long range. Milner stresses two things: the Canadians were still learning to use it, and they had an extraordinary number of them.

Chapter 1 summarizes the months of planning that led to the Third Division's assignment in Normandy. Although Milner focuses on that specific unit, he also explains, here and throughout, what British and American airborne, infantry, and armored units did on the other beachheads in the week after the landing. The second chapter fleshes out the preparation for the invasion, with sections on the Canadians, other Allied units, and Rommel and the other German commanders. The anti-tank guns of the Third Division were expected to provide massive support for the unit's infantrymen and tank crews. They were supplied with better ammunition and far more artillery batteries. To top it off, two Royal Navy cruisers were standing off the beaches, waiting to rain down shells whenever the Canadians' forward observers radioed for help.

The heart of the book is Milner's excellent day-by-day narrative of the Third Division in action (chapters 3–9). He tracks its soldiers from the moments before they landed on D-Day to the point where the Allies were absolutely secure in their beachhead. And he keeps both the big and small pictures in focus at the same time. We always know where the Third Division is in relation to the Allied units on its flanks and the German units opposing it. Milner not only follows hundreds of men in bri-

1. His earlier books include *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1985), *The U-Boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive against Germany's Submarines, 1943–1945* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 1994), and *Battle of the Atlantic* (St. Catharines, ON: Vanwell, 2003).

gades, but also companies and even individual soldiers. He provides reasonably good maps and photographs, including unusual aerial shots of the battlefield taken during the fighting.

The author has done his homework in the appropriate archives and relevant secondary literature; he also interviewed veterans of D-Day (including his own father) and walked the walk: he knows how flat the ground is on both sides of the River Mue because he toured the battlefield repeatedly. All this preparation enables him to show what the Canadians and Germans were doing, minute by minute. He also treats an issue that many American and British historians have slighted—German war crimes in Normandy. A significant percentage of the men of the Third Division who died in Normandy were killed after being taken prisoner by SS units. Milner describes their fate and that of the German officers who ordered the slaughter.

It did not help the Canadian case in the larger Normandy literature that the SS war crimes went largely unpunished. The British, who commanded the higher-echelon formations normally charged with investigating such things, refused to prosecute. Only when General Eisenhower heard of the mass shooting of Royal Winnipeg Rifles prisoners on the side of the road by [Gen. Wilhelm] Mohnke's troops on the night of 8 June did SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force] intervene and begin an investigation. That case was pursued until the Malmedy Massacre of January 1945 [sic],² when eighty American POWs were murdered during the Battle of the Bulge. At that point, SHAEF dropped the Canadian case and switched to the more politically important American one. (313)

The most interesting aspect of the Canadians' advance after D-Day is the brief, but potentially disastrous, failure of their artillery support on 7 June. As Canadian brigades surged forward on both sides of the Mue, they initially swept German defenders aside. Then, encountering panzer units preparing their own attacks, they dug in and radioed for help from their artillery batteries and the Royal Navy cruisers offshore. For many hours, none came. Milner has no explanation; possibly, the Canadians' radio net was overwhelmed by the volume of traffic or the Germans were jamming radio signals. In any case, the Canadian infantry, with only a few tanks in support, stopped the German tanks and SS infantry units before they could threaten the beaches.

Marc Milner tells a very persuasive story, counterbalancing American accounts of Normandy, which usually focus on "bloody Omaha" and the heroic Ranger and airborne assaults. (British historians include but downplay the Canadians' story.) Milner sometimes overplays his hand,³ however, and may be faulted for spending too much time correcting earlier histories. But these are quibbles. *Stopping the Panzers* presents a gripping, superbly researched narrative of the fighting in Normandy, with a salutary stress on the vital role of the Canadian Third Division.

2. The correct date is 17 Dec. 1944. This is one of a very few errors of any sort that I noticed in a book full of German and French names, as well as technical weapons terminology.

3. He repeatedly refers to some German SS units as "over strength," with infantry companies of 210 or 250 men instead of the normal 140. But his quarrel here is with other historians. His readers need only know how many soldiers were fighting on each side.