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Jeff Danby, *Day of the Panzer: A Story of American Heroism and Sacrifice in Southern France*. Philadelphia: Casemate, 2008. Pp. xxv, 365. ISBN 978-1-932033-70-0.

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Among the most familiar stereotypes of the US army in the European Theater of Operations (ETO) is that infantry was its weak link. Its personnel was allegedly disproportionately selected from draftees not qualified for more “intellectually demanding” branches; its doctrine, tactics, training, and equipment were significantly inferior to those of their German counterparts. That stereotype has been challenged persuasively by soldier-scholars like Keith Bonn and Peter Mansoor.¹ Danby’s use of the phrase “Lieutenants’ war” nevertheless remains apt. Front-line ground combat depends on the leaders, the junior officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs). But it depends as well on the fighting spirit and the military effectiveness of each individual unit. Those internal dynamics differ widely and challenge facile conflation. In telling the story of one engagement, *The Day of the Panzer* makes a major contribution to our understanding of American infantry combat in Europe. This review seeks to describe and contextualize that engagement.

The Allied invasion of southern France in August 1944 remains one of the neglected operations of World War II. Its genesis was strongly disputed. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill so opposed what he considered a risky diffusion of limited strength that he was said to have insisted its code name be changed from “Anvil” to “Dragoon” because he had been dragooned into approving it.

That story is apocryphal—the name change was for security reasons, and the new title derived from the city of Draguignan, near the initial landing site in southeastern France. But by whatever name, the “second D-Day” remains a “secret invasion.” In good part that reflects its success. Tactically, the landings went smoothly at relatively low cost. Operationally, the breakout up the Loire valley was a model exercise in maneuver warfare. Strategically, Dragoon shortened the main Allied front in northeast Europe, and by making the French southern railroads available, significantly eased the logistical crisis that hobbled the autumn fighting. Politically, the close, effective cooperation between French and US troops and commanders went far to mitigate high-level squabbling among Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, and Free French leader Charles de Gaulle.

Comprehensive success, unfortunately, seldom makes for exciting war stories. Even some participants dubbed Dragoon “the champagne campaign”: an extended opportunity to enjoy wine, women, and song in a part of France relatively untouched by war; a brief summertime rest and recreation between the mountains of Italy and the snows of the Vosges.

The brutal fact is that modern war offers no milk runs. By 1944, German soldiers had become masters of defensive war. The men in field gray were outnumbered by every measurable standard: men, tanks, guns. But they exacted a high price even from the veteran French and American divisions committed to Dragoon’s early stages—especially in the small-unit infantry-based fighting that set the stage for the breakout up the Rhone valley.

Danby focuses on a single rifle company: L, of the 3rd Battalion, 15th Infantry, 3rd Infantry Division. The 3rd had landed in Casablanca in November 1942, fought through Sicily and up the Italian boot, and spearheaded the breakout from the Anzio beachhead. On paper, L was a veteran outfit. In fact, after its near annihilation at Anzio, it had been rebuilt with replacements, some recovered wounded and others entirely green.

1. See respectively *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944–January 1945* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1994), based on Bonn’s doctoral dissertation (Chicago 1991), and *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1999).

That threw a disproportionate burden on the company cadres. Darby introduces L's key men economically and effectively. In particular Capt. James Coles and 1st Sgt. Walton Works emerge as ideal leaders of citizen soldiers. Themselves "ordinary Joes" shaped by the Depression, they were brave, competent, and result-oriented, as hard as they had to be to get a job done. L Company responded, settling in and shaking down in the weeks between Anzio and Dragoon, suffering only three wounded in the early stages of the advance towards Marseilles.

The easy times came to a temporary end on 22 August, when L came under German artillery fire. Among the dead was the commander of a supporting tank platoon. His replacement was 1st Lt. Edward Danby (the author's grandfather). When the French assigned to relieve them were delayed, L and its parent 3rd Battalion boarded an improvised truck convoy at midnight on 25 August and set out up the Rhone valley. Fuel shortages and mechanical breakdowns kept progress at a stop-and-start pace. Danby's account of the battalion's initial advance at 4:00 a.m. on 27 August highlights the little, maddening glitches that Clausewitz calls "fog and friction." Time was lost getting tanks to the head of the column. Radios failed to work. Vehicles ran out of gas or broke down. Since there were too few trucks to carry everyone at once, a shuttle service was necessary—and paid for with loss of contact among the battalion's elements. At midmorning, battalion commander Lt. Col. Frederick Boye asked Coles whether Love could push ahead and catch up to the Germans retreating ahead of 3rd Battalion.

Third Division had an attached battalion of Sherman M4 tanks, and another of M10 tank destroyers—three-inch high-velocity guns in an open-topped turret mounted on a Sherman chassis. Standard practice was to attach a company of each to the infantry regiments, and usually in turn a platoon to each battalion. This decentralization of armor assets offended tanker purists then and now, but the GIs and their officers prized the immediately available mobility and firepower. Centralized armor was often hours away when minutes counted. Boye offered Coles two Shermans, four M10s, and a pair of small self-propelled howitzers from the 15th's cannon company, plus a truck and two jeeps—enough to carry Love's riflemen. For the hard-driving captain, it seemed more than enough.

Love initially made good progress, breaking through a German roadblock and rolling forward to the village of Allan—a four hundred-person spot on the map where a German corps headquarters was surprised by the Americans. To cover their evacuation, the Germans brought in armor of their own: seven Marder self-propelled antitank guns, roughly similar to the US M10s, a couple of assault guns, and a Mark V Panther. At 45 tons, the Panther was a rolling roadblock with over three inches of frontal armor and a high-velocity 75-mm gun capable of taking out a Sherman at over a thousand yards.

L company meanwhile had overtaken the Germans, including trucks and buses, bicycles and horse-drawn wagons, and men on foot intermingled with the vehicles. The Americans shot up a small convoy, killed a motorcyclist attempting to alert Allan, and paused about five hundred yards from the seemingly empty village. But Coles was too experienced to ignore two of "Murphy's Laws of Combat": the easy route is always mined, and, if your attack is going really well, it's an ambush. He sent a platoon into Allan to reconnoiter. When it came under fire, the commanding officer took a patrol forward and discovered two things: the Germans were north and northwest of the village in strength, and the platoon's radio would not work—another of Murphy's Laws. The lieutenant, the radioman, and three others were taken prisoner.

At 1:30 p.m., Coles was still waiting for a report when he heard the sounds of heavy engines coming from Allan. Either the Germans were there in force or they were moving into position. The longer they had to prepare defenses, the more difficult and expensive it would be to dislodge them. The captain promptly led his two remaining rifle platoons, the tanks, and two M10s into Allan. Coles's quick action threw the Germans off balance. The American tank-infantry team reached the crossroads at the center of the village but then encountered heavy small-arms fire. Worse yet, the Panther and one of the Marders had moved into position outside Allan, well within range of the open village square.

The first high-velocity round grazed the turret of Danby's tank—as close a near-miss as anyone was likely to survive. The Sherman pulled back as Coles's riflemen continued clearing houses on the west side of town. On the east, it was a different story. Snipers kept the American pinned down in the fields and ditches,

as a Marder moved up to support them. What happened next was a paradigm of American performance in the ETO. A private first class on his own initiative worked to within fifty yards of the vehicle and shot one of the crewmen through the head. A few minutes later the Mios left outside of Allan zeroed in on the Marder and set it ablaze. Courage and initiative combined with overwhelming firepower make victory likely if not automatic.

By then, L Company seemed to have the upper hand in Allan. Coles's assigned objective, however, was the retreating Germans. Instead of pushing through Allan house by house, he decided to make up time by using the crossroads to swing L Company north, then west and back to the main road—in effect bypassing half the town. Coles sent a fifteen-man patrol up the main street to make sure the German armor was gone and the crossroads clear. He, along with more riflemen, followed in his command jeep. The Germans seemed indeed to have withdrawn. Lieutenant Danby, whose tank was leading L's advance, was reluctant to keep Coles waiting—and more reluctant to look timid. He ordered an advance. His experienced platoon sergeant, in the other tank, suspected a trap. Danby pulled rank. A little outside Allan, a high-velocity round tore apart his tank and three of its crew. Danby, a conscientious commander, had been riding with his head and shoulders exposed; shorn from the rest of his body, these tumbled onto the road as German infantry advanced on Coles and his men and the Panther that had fired the lethal round pulled into the open.

Coles managed to reach his battalion commander and report before mortar fire drove him away from the jeep. Inside Allan, the American column was trapped in the town's narrow streets, with no room to maneuver. Coles made a two-hundred-yard run back to Allan despite a painful wound in his buttocks and began improvising a defense. The Germans pressed forward, the Panther using Danby's burning tank as a smoke screen, driving over Coles's jeep with an insouciance that suggested the balance had shifted suddenly and decisively away from the Americans.

Then the Germans halted—"unwilling, unsure, or unable" to push forward. As the Panther continued to fire blindly into the town, Coles limped from man to man and position to position, stabilizing a line, reinforcing it with the stragglers and the distracted left behind in any street fight. Further up the chain of command, 3rd Battalion's other two rifle companies deployed in support. But as more and more Germans emerged across the fighting line and infiltrated the village, L Company was cut off and out of radio contact.

Boye responded by sending Coles's executive officer into Allan by jeep. First Lieutenant George Burks arrived safely after a wild ride under fire. He failed to find Coles, but determined that "a big German tank" was holding everything up and that Love needed help. After an even wilder ride back through mortar and small-arms fire, Burks reported to Boye, only to learn that most of the same information had just been radioed in by the commander of the M8 platoon. Bellona may be the goddess of war, but she has a sideline in irony. Burks, checking out the bullet-riddled jeep, had no comment when Boye told him "great job."

The Panther pulled back and turned its gun on 3rd Battalion's other two companies. Boye informed his superiors that L Company was "disorganized" and requested armor support. In Allan itself, the Germans had established a network of machine-gun positions that kept Coles's men pinned down, unable to concentrate for a counterattack. The German MG 1942 was the finest weapon of its kind developed during World War II. It was the infantry's primary weapon, and a high rate of fire and quick-change barrel made it devastating at battle ranges.

All the clichés of war movies—training, discipline, comradeship, the example set by leaders—came into play on that late August afternoon. Some men risked their lives to take out German strong points. Others overcame fear enough to keep firing. Others just stood their ground. In Danby's words, if L Company bent and twisted under pressure, it did not break. That was sufficient.

Around 8:30, with darkness setting in, the Germans withdrew. From their perspective, it had been a successful rearguard action, buying fifteen miles' worth of time for their main body. The rest of the night passed quietly enough to tally losses. Two tanks had been knocked out; seven of their ten crewmen were dead or wounded. Love Company had gone in with 130 men. Five were dead, thirteen captured, seven seriously wounded: about 20 percent. A few lightly wounded remained on duty. The distribution of casualties

is worth noting: one officer and two sergeants captured, a sergeant killed and two more wounded—leadership from the front, in spades.

Love spent a relatively quiet night and had a day to rest and reorganize while 2nd Battalion took over the lead. It had not exactly been just another day in a long war, but that phrase suits the kind of government work performed by the men of Love Company, their predecessors, and their replacements. Neither a band of brothers nor a band of heroes, they did what needed to be done, not perfectly but well enough. Let us remember and honor them.