



The British Way of War in Northwest Europe, 1944–5: A Study of Two Infantry Divisions by L.P. Devine.

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Review by Martin Samuels, Stourbridge, UK (ms6569@googlemail.com).

Given the vast historiography concerning the performance of British forces in the campaign in Northwest Europe from the Normandy landings to March 1945, it may be wondered whether further analysis is warranted. Historian Louis Devine,¹ however, believes he has found a new and better perspective on the British “way of war” in this theater of World War II.

This is a study of how the men of the infantry battalions of two British infantry divisions fought the war in Northwest Europe from June 1944 onwards. Much of the history that has been written about this campaign either has been from the “top down” to examine command handling of the Overlord campaign as a whole or has instead examined the main battles in some detail.... These approaches leave some aspects of the war in Northwest Europe unexplored; this thesis [*sic*] aims to correct this deficiency by taking a “history from below” approach and considers the experience of the British infantry at battalion level over an extended period. This book, then, is really an exploration of the war that was experienced by those in the fighting components of a British infantry division from their deployment in France up until the crossing of the River Rhine. (1)

The author concentrates on the 43rd (Wessex) and 53rd (Welsh) Divisions as representative of the British contribution to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery’s 21st Army Group. Forty-third was “an untried ‘average’ division,” a Territorial formation founded in 1908 and deployed throughout the First World War. It had seen no combat during the Second World War before D-Day, having spent the war training in Kent. There was nothing special about it with regard to combat experience, weapons, or training (39–40). The experience of 53rd was very similar, though one of its brigades fought in Flanders in May 1940 (83–84). That the commanders of these divisions retained their positions throughout the campaign of 1944–45 suggests their performance met with Montgomery’s approval, especially, given the rapid turnover among other commanders; hence they may be taken as representative exponents of the army’s accepted “way of war” (83).

The introduction summarizes Devine’s conceptual methodology, gives an overview of the relevant scholarship, and characterizes the typical British infantry division of the period. Chapter 1 provides context with a conventional account of the advanced state of development of the British Army in 1918, its stagnation owing to political and financial factors during the interwar period, and the painful lessons it had to learn in the early years of the Second World War. There is also a sound discussion of the development of doctrine and training, based on the work of David French.²

1. A former long-serving officer in the Royal Navy, Devine is now an independent scholar who lectures on twentieth-century military history. His 2013 University of Plymouth doctoral dissertation (available online) was, with slight revisions, the basis of the present volume.

2. Esp., *Raising Churchill’s Army: The British Army and the War against Germany, 1919–1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2001).

Chapters 2–8, the core of the book, alternate between the two selected divisions. Devine stays true to his promise to write “history from below,” focusing on each formation’s various engagements, large and small, through the crossing of the Rhine in March 1945, when the German defenses crumbled and the war took on a new character. The following is typical of the detailed analyses of operations, based on war diaries written by the various units and formations:

At “H” hour, the 5th [Battalion] DOR [Dorsetshire Regiment]’s three-company assault quickly ran into trouble: In avoiding a known minefield, “C” Company ran into an unlocated one and suffered casualties, including its commander. “B” Company made some progress before being stopped by heavy mortar and artillery fire, which neutralized the entire company headquarters team except for the commander himself. “A” Company made some headway but were stopped by heavy fire and later had to withdraw due to “heavy casualties.” The battalion found itself around 300 yards from its start point and unable to move due to the combined factors of heavy enemy fire, mines and booby traps and the restricting nature of the bocage countryside. Tanks were summoned to assist, but were unable to do so for the same reasons that hampered the infantry. “D” Company remained at its forming up point, unable to move forwards. The battalion remained in their positions for the remainder of the day.... (59)

Each chapter ends with a convenient summary of the key points in its narrative.

The book’s conclusion pulls together its main themes, focusing on casualty avoidance and Montgomery’s strategy of creating “colossal cracks” in the German defenses, as well as artillery and armor. Devine maintains that the evidence contradicts the orthodox argument stressing efforts to conserve Britain’s dwindling supply of infantry through careful planning, detailed rehearsals, and ample artillery and armored support. Although planning was often elaborate and preoccupied commanders, its benefits were limited by the need to make frequent changes in reaction to evolving situations. Similarly, the infantry’s increasing reliance on heavy and timely artillery support was a response to deficiencies in armor and anti-tank support rather than a way to reduce casualties. Devine cites many instances of divisional commanders aggressively driving their troops forward, sometimes for little benefit, despite the consequent heavy losses they suffered (175–82).

Despite Devine’s clear argumentation and close reading of many pertinent war diaries and personal accounts, his approach has significant weaknesses. Though the idea of a longitudinal study has much to commend it, including avoiding the risk of overemphasizing set-piece battles as if they were the norm, much of his argument depends on whether two “average” infantry divisions can be considered representative of the entire British Army in a specific campaign. Britain contributed three armored divisions to 21st Army Group, along with expert infantry such as the 1st and 6th (Airborne) Divisions and the 51st (Highland) Division. Incorporating into his analysis one division from each of these categories would have enabled the author to compare them with his selected “average” units.

Devine assumes a readership with significant prior knowledge. He describes neither the specific forces of the 21st Army Group as a whole nor their operations during the campaign, thereby depriving his discussion of 43rd and 53rd Divisions of much-needed context. Dates of operations are often omitted until deep into the narrative, and the provided maps (all from previous publications) are never referred to. Conversely, he sometimes explains details likely to be familiar to most readers, such as what an “O Group” was (58), or makes outright errors, such as referring to the “CO” of a platoon or to “Operation Garden” as “the accompanying ground advance to Operation Market Garden” (82).

Louis Devine has written an interesting and salutary longitudinal account of two “average” British infantry divisions during the campaign in Northwest Europe. But, though he opens a valuable

new perspective and fills gaps in the existing historiography, he ultimately fails to make a convincing case that his analysis of two rather untypical divisions proves that the existing picture of the “British way of war” is incorrect.