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**Landing on the Edge of Eternity: Twenty-four Hours at Omaha Beach. By Robert Kershaw. New York and London: Pegasus Books Ltd., 2018.**

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***Landing on the Edge of Eternity: Twenty-four Hours at Omaha Beach.* By Robert Kershaw. New York and London: Pegasus Books Ltd., 2018. ISBN 9-781681-778662. Maps. Photographs. Glossary. Notes. Sources cited. Index. Pp. xl, 376. \$27.95.**

Although a simple military history might not seem to fit within the usual scope of this journal's interests, the recently passed seventy-fifth anniversary of the D-Day invasion of France that took place on June 6, 1944, in itself warrants some acknowledgement as well as a minor, temporary expansion of the journal's normal range of book review topics. Moreover, there are some interesting portions of this book that speak universally to the use of intelligence and propaganda, though that is not a major focus. Instead, Robert Kershaw, a former British Army colonel, historian, and battlefield guide, provides a closer look at the near debacle at Omaha Beach, site of one of the two main American amphibious landing efforts. Like the brutal assault itself, there is scant elegance in Kershaw's prose, but there is power in the voices and events he captures.

From a strategic aspect, Kershaw provides only a very broad sketch from the viewpoints of the American and German commanders and the problems they faced, but it is at the tactical level that the story comes alive. No characters are wholly fleshed out, but the quickly moving narrative includes excerpts from first-hand accounts that mirror the perspective of the average foot soldier's limited view of a battle from over the sights of his weapon. The staccato nature of the story reflects the uncertainty and confusion of the fighting; the incomprehensible nature of the carnage that seems to have stunned those on both sides.

To help readers make sense of it all, Kershaw provides a series of useful maps illustrating the troop dispositions and defensive works at Omaha Beach and Pointe du Hoc. One map pinpoints the location of the German, French, and American "Voices From Omaha" (ix), which belong to the most frequently quoted participants. On the American side they include 1<sup>st</sup> Division veterans of North Africa and Sicily as well as the untested National Guard troops of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division. Allied planners mistakenly thought that the small number of German defenders would be comprised of inferior troops. Instead, as a result of an intelligence blunder that failed to detect the arrival of German reinforcements, Americans landing on Omaha found themselves facing a tougher foe in the 352<sup>nd</sup> Division, with

its cadre of experienced veterans of the Eastern Front. Many more were recent young recruits to the unit, but even they were driven to put up fierce resistance. German soldiers who had experienced the early war triumphs were steeped in a militaristic ethos and had full of confidence in their fighting prowess. Those who came later were aged twelve to fifteen at the war's start. They grew up with the successes of the Nazi machine and were influenced by intense propaganda efforts during their impressionable years. This in turn made many of them rabidly National Socialist in ideology, and that commitment drove them to fight to the bitter end. That same propaganda effort also influenced attitudes of most German soldiers at Normandy when it came to their views of Allied goals and the nature of the German relationship with France, which many strangely considered to be an alliance in the effort to defeat the Soviet menace. As for America, German soldiers wondered why a country with such vast land areas would want to bother seizing France from their control. Clearly, they understood little about why they were fighting except what was fed to them by the highly effective Nazi propaganda campaigns.

It is easy to overlook many of the smaller Allied intelligence failures in the grand strategic picture. The usual focus is on the fact that the Germans were deceived about the time and exact location of the landings until they discovered the vast armada off the French coast at dawn. At least part of that success can be attributed to hard-won Allied air superiority and an apparently lackluster Luftwaffe effort to conduct diligent surveillance. In the Pacific, aircraft were searching hundreds of square miles of ocean to locate enemy fleets, yet by 1944, Allied air superiority combined with frequently overcast weather conditions prevented effective German reconnaissance of the ports lying in some cases only a few score miles across the Channel. Bad weather for days leading to the invasion was the key to keeping the Luftwaffe on the ground, but in other respects the Allies were not so fortunate. Flawed, but well-intentioned decisions also played a role. With the rapid push inland foremost in mind, Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, commander of the U. S. First Army, was adamant that bombing efforts designed to soften up the German defenses not crater the beaches. As a result, American troops attempting to advance across those beaches in the face of murderous German fire had no place to find cover and safety. Many of the men confronted that concentration of fire because planners failed to account accurately for the tidal drift that drove landing craft off their targeted landing points and into the very spot where the

most destructive German firepower was focused. American soldiers, many of whom were desperately seasick and weakened from hours of bobbing in the still roiling Channel, were also weighted down with far too much equipment. Weakened, wet, sick, and traumatized men found themselves pinned down behind beach obstacles at the water's edge. Bodies, equipment, and the detritus of battle floated around them in the water reddened by the blood of their comrades. So great was the carnage that by 0830, both sides thought the attack at Omaha Beach was a total failure. There had been a focus on planning the logistics of moving inland and beating back a German counter-attack, but not enough attention had been paid to the immediate tactical problem of gaining a solid foothold on the beach.

In the end, the rising tide and intrepid individual leaders combined to drive many stalled men across the beach, but two key decisions at a critical moment played a role in turning the tide of battle. First, despite a lack of communication with troops onshore, it was obvious to Navy observers that German guns were decimating the men. Naval fire support was brought to bear on the German defenses overlooking the beaches. The volume of flat trajectory shellfire loosed at those positions from point-blank range, and the inspiring sight of destroyers passing just a few hundred yards off the beach with all guns blazing had both practical and motivational effects. Men remembered being lifted off the ground just from the concussion of the battleships' twelve-inch guns firing. That concerted naval effort allowed the momentum of the attack to resume and the men already on the beach to push forward. Seeing the impact of the ship's firepower, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's Brigadier General Willard Wyman radioed a desperate plea for more assault troops. Logistical timetables calling for landing more unneeded vehicles were scuttled in favor of rushing more fighting men to the beaches, and that made all the difference.

Robert Kershaw's analysis and description of the fighting on Omaha Beach supplemented by the participants' own words is a fitting tribute to those who suffered or died there because of miscalculations and errors on both sides, but it's not only the combatants who are honored. Many French civilians were killed as a result of the shelling and bombing raids, and Kershaw acknowledges their sacrifices as well. Heroic men did their duty that day, opening the door to Germany's eventual destruction, but to paraphrase Winston Churchill after the 1942 British victory at El Alamein,

D-Day represented not the end, nor even the beginning of the end, but at least the end of the beginning of the assault on Festung Europa. Kershaw's book will be of interest to anyone interested in Military History and national security strategy in action, but intelligence professionals will derive much from the lessons of effective propaganda and the depiction of how a failure of intelligence gathering, analysis, and dissemination can have tragic consequences.

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