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The Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket by Martin Blumenson [Review]

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candid and, at times, caustic. Tact has not always been his strong suit with the inevitable result that advancement was slow. If there are a few words that might best describe Forbes they would be “thoroughly dependable” or “natural leader.”

The reader is given early glimpses of these qualities from the author's childhood days in the Gaspé. There begins a tumultuous and adventurous life that shows no signs of slowing down except for the occasional pause to cope with tragedy or to catch much-needed breath before resuming a sometimes hyperactive pace. The result is a book that bristles with action, indignation, Rabelaisian humour, warmth, contempt...all marks of a man at once blessed and damned with perhaps an overabundance of talent and energy.

How many men are honest enough to admit that theirs has been a life plagued by alcoholism? Charly is candid enough in this regard and the mark of the man is that he was able, despite this problem, to accomplish the many things he did. But he is honest enough to hint at how much more could have been done without the bottle and the reader is made to feel that a large part of his problem is pride. This pride coupled with fierce independence made enemies for Charly which probably accounts for his having ended his active military career as a major. His one-time nemesis, Jacques Dextraze, cared enough for him to try to get Forbes to stop drinking. He pointed out the vast potential of the man but the touchy relationship between the two is worth the read in itself and Forbes is honest enough to swallow his pride and admit the considerable leadership qualities of the man many of us called “Kid 28.”

It would be safe to say that for every enemy Charly made in the service, there were many more friends. Naturally they were

similar types...men who had proven themselves in battle such as Louis Rend Drapeau with his two well deserved DCMs or Harry Pope or Guy de Merlis, men who had little or no use for the “niceties” aptly called chicken shit. But the most significant mark of the man as leader is the way he is seen by those he leads. Charly Forbes very simply was venerated by his men. His total concern in the field was their welfare and this he demonstrated from the very beginning of his soldier's life to the point where promotion, family and everything else became secondary.

Charly's marital difficulties are diplomatically handled and nowhere does he indulge in recrimination. There is also regret at his not having managed such matters with more tact but the call to duty and the need to serve played an inordinate role in his life. The price he paid was high. The strongest element in the book remains Forbes' total and accurate recall of the fierceness and confusion of battle whether it was in Normandy, at Walcheren or in those hectic four days in Korea in November 1951. Here is a very close approximation to the descriptions of combat and its effects as depicted by Mowat in *And No Birds Sang*. In some ways, Forbes outdoes Mowat for he avoids inventiveness of any kind for effect...the price Mowat admits he pays for being a writer.

From the shaky start as a cadet at RMC when he first displayed his independence by refusing to sing “God Save the King” while insistently repeating the words of “O Canada” as his national anthem in the company of another recalcitrant, Philippe Rousseau (later killed with his brother in the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion) through to the day he is declared redundant by a budget conscious government, Forbes has been his own man and hundreds have shaken their heads in amazement and admiration at his skills as a

leader and his joie de vivre as a man.

The photos in this book excellently illustrate the closeness that existed between Charly and his comrades-in-arms. But the book's saving grace is its candour. Whether Charly is reflecting upon conscription, the criminality of the Dieppe raid, battle exhaustion, the death of a platoon sergeant, the devoted Maisie padre, Marchand, the incompetence of some officers, the Yank bug-out on 355 or his own shortcomings...what the reader comes away with is a lasting impression of having met an extraordinary man.

The book ends with anecdotes ranging from the comic to the tragic and the last notes are a humble tribute to his comrades, especially the junior officers with whom he served. As I close, one word keeps buzzing insistently in my head: compassion. It is this quality that permeates Charly Forbes' life—compassion for those who have had to put up with the arrogance, stupidity and incompetence too frequently the companions of power.

A translation of this re-edited book would be a very good thing.

Gil Drolet

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The Battle of the Generals

Martin Blumenson. *The Battle of the Generals: The Untold Story of the Falaise Pocket - The Campaign that Should have won World War II*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993. pp.288. \$29.95.

Martin Blumenson writes that the Allies' failure to close the “Falaise pocket” was the result of three basic conditions of the Allied campaign: the undue weight of the invasion plan, the

tensions within the coalition, and the less than adequate abilities of the leaders at the top. (p.23) Ignoring for the moment that the proximity of large numbers of trigger-happy Germans may have had an impact on the course of the battle and the decisions taken by the high command, let me quickly summarize Blumenson's argument. Over a third of the book is devoted to context: outlining the major personalities involved, the Allied coalition from the top down (including lengthy discussions on Roosevelt and Churchill), the struggle for dominance within the alliance, the German defences and strategic plans as well as a summary of the course of war from 1939. This, he believes, is the necessary pretext for a series of errors that culminated in the campaign that, according to the title, should have "won the war."

His points follow in succession. The emphasis on moving into Germany as rapidly as possible instead of destroying the German forces in Normandy and the continued dispatch of formations to liberate Brittany are two examples used to illustrate the Allies' dependence on their preconceived plans and that no one at the top firmly grasped the reins. Eisenhower, Montgomery and Bradley do not come off well in this account; Bradley, in particular, is Blumenson's whipping horse: insecure and ambivalent. While this is not new, the author's criticisms of Bradley have, in the past, been tempered with a recognition of the difficulties he faced. Patton emerges as the hero in this account and the unrecognized saviour of Allied fortunes. "No wonder Patton," he writes, "dreamed of being the Supreme Commander. He would take absolute hold of the operations and surround and destroy all the Germans in Normandy with resolution and finality." (p.223) Blumenson

speculates that an Eisenhower-Montgomery-Patton combination would have been more successful; his own quotes from Patton's correspondence make one wonder whether as an equal he would only have been as obnoxious to these men's faces as he was in his diary.

Written from the US perspective, the Canadians are, of course, given short shrift, although they can not escape the "everyone was to blame" tone of the book. Worse, he uses the unsubstantiated view that "residual tensions between" Crerar and Simonds" (p.183) influenced the Canadian military fortunes during this period. Although it fits nicely with his theme, it isn't true. Neither is his grasp of the Canadian part in the battle complete. He implies, for example, that it was after the pause on the morning of 8th, and "to get the endeavour (Totalize) started again" that Simonds ordered a second bombardment and the two inexperienced armoured divisions forward. (p.185)

Does any of this story sound vaguely familiar? It should; this is hardly an untold story. Blumenson has himself written two direct accounts of the battle ("General Bradley's Decision at Argentan" in *Command Decisions* and *Breakout and Pursuit*, two volumes of the Official History of the United States Army in World War II) and dealt with it in other works. Blumenson's previous efforts have not focused on personalities; rather, he limited himself to examining the operational possibilities and restrictions. He was also more balanced in his conclusions. His ire has risen with new evidence that more Germans escaped than he previously estimated.

Could the battle have won the war? No one can say for sure; a victory would certainly not have alleviated the Allies' supply problems. Indeed, in previous

battles the Germans had sustained greater losses and not crumbled; they were still fighting while the Russians pounded the bunkers in Berlin. Clearly, on the Allied side there was waffling at the top with regards to objectives and poor decisions (Bradley's order to Patton not to go on to Falaise and beyond to meet the Canadians) but clearly they were also wary of German counterattacks. The central point seems that with the fog of war, no one was sure whether the Germans were still in the pocket; as a result they wavered on whether to slam the door shut or focus on the Seine or both. Blumenson's account smacks far too much of hindsight. Similarly, the problem with examining the failures of the Allies and proposing better solutions is that it presumes the Germans would have gone along with the alternate plans proposed, stopped trying to fight their way out and given up. Nevertheless, the book is a good read and summarizes a lot of material, painting deft portraits of the Allied commanders; its story isn't untold but Blumenson tells it better than some.

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Merry Hearts Make Light Days

Donald Graves, ed. *Merry Hearts Make Light Days. The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot.*

In May of 1812 the brig *Ann* headed westward from England into the Atlantic carrying a number of British army officers towards Canada. The vessel encountered its first gale while they were at dinner, and a 17-year-old lieutenant described the resulting chaos: "The old brig was