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Review of "The Battle of the Peaks and Long Stop Hill: Tunisia, April-May 1943" by Ian Mitchell

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Ian Mitchell. *The Battle of the Peaks and Long Stop Hill: Tunisia, April-May 1943*. Warwick: Helion, 2019. Pp. 352.

The Battle of the Peaks and Long Stop Hill by Ian Mitchell tells the story of the British 78th Infantry Division's overlooked battle in Tunisia in 1942. After landing in North-West Africa during Operation Torch, the British 1st Army, commanded by Kenneth Anderson, advanced eastwards into Tunisia. Simultaneously, Bernard Montgomery's 8th Army completed the pincer movement by advancing westwards from Libya which overshadowed Anderson's advance, an injustice that Ian Mitchell seeks to remedy with this, his first book.

Mitchell focuses his analysis specifically upon the 78th Division's attacks through the hills of central Tunisia, generally referred to as the 'Peaks', and on one hill in particular, Long Stop, which guards the key valley through the highlands to Tunis. Mitchell argues convincingly that capturing this route through the Medjerda Valley was the pivot on which the North African campaign finally turned; 8th Army's attacks from the east had been slowed by successive German defensive lines and so 78th Division's victory at Long Stop allowed the Axis forces to be outflanked and forced into a final retreat.

The Battle of the Peaks and Long Stop Hill holds an important place in the historiography, as no historian has deconstructed the battle in this detail before. General works of Second World War history and specific studies of the war in the West include North Africa, but the Tunisian campaign is given less attention. John Keegan devoted a few pages to the campaign in his broad study of the war, but neglected to name Anderson or the victories he won.¹ Additionally, both Richard Overy and Phillips Payson O'Brien consider victory in North Africa to have been decided by slow and lethal erosion of German strength by naval and air power, not boots on the ground, and *The Cambridge History of the Second World War* concludes along similar lines.² Disappointingly, Mitchell misses the opportunity

¹ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London: Century Hutchinson, 1989).

² Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Second Pimlico Edition, 2006), 64; Phillips Payson O'Brien, *How the War was Won* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); John Ferris and Evan Mawdsley, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Second World War. Volume I: Fighting the War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 365.

to engage with the literature, which would reinforce the importance of his work.

The fighting for Long Stop dominates the structure of the book, but in an unbalanced way. Mitchell forgoes an introduction to the strategic context of the campaign within the wider war. While he does use the first chapter to set the scene prior to the unsuccessful first attack against the Peaks in December 1942, Mitchell devotes only nine pages to this attack, contrasting starkly against the ten chapters devoted to the second attack. While the first attack involved fewer troops and was fought over a shorter period of time compared to the second, it would have benefitted from a more sustained analysis due to the lessons learned in all-arms coordination that would be used in the second attack.

Mitchell quotes soldiers of the 78th Division throughout the book; their words gathered from archival documents and published memoirs. Mitchell has effectively mined British war diaries and memoirs to reveal fascinating asides on a cast of British characters which provide context and depth to the book. In contrast, there are few German sources. Specifically, there is a shortage of primary accounts from German soldiers. Mitchell does not explain why the opposition force has fewer sources. Whatever the reason, a battle is more easily understood when you have both viewpoints.

Mitchell provides a summary of those British men and their stories in the final chapter. Any concluding remarks are scattered through the last few chapters and are hard to find. Most interesting of which is the learning process which occurred in the British 1st Army in Tunisia and its effects on British tactical and operational doctrine. In Sicily, Italy and Normandy, in which the British had to attack over dreadful terrain which helped the German defenders, the British resorted to the lessons learned in Tunisia: amass prodigious amounts of fire-support, be it aircraft, mortars, medium machine guns or artillery, in combination with infantry and tanks fighting alongside each other.

Ultimately, Mitchell's book is the only work on the fighting for Long Stop Hill and the surrounding peaks. In time, historians will combine Mitchell's excellent scholarship on the British 78th Division with material on their German opponents and the Tunisian Campaign as a whole. The history of the Second World War will be stronger for its inclusion.

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