



Over the Battlefield. OPERATION GOODWOOD.

Ian Daglish.

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pp 272. Index, Appendices I – X, numerous b/w maps & b/w photos.

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In his Foreword the author criticises many - indeed all - previous accounts of GOODWOOD as incorrect to some degree, through “omission, ignorance or casual acceptance of anecdote.” Wisely not claiming to be error-free himself, he draws attention to the large amount of source material currently available, although he sees much of it as unreliable. He clearly admires, and by implication allies himself with, those current Second World War military historians who are returning to primary sources to re-evaluate received wisdom. Where his book appears to contradict earlier accounts he asks the reader to consider that no previous account has had access to all the information he has used.

The treatment is essentially at the tactical level, with the accent on the main armoured thrust. Following an introductory chapter on the opponents, the operation is split into well-defined stages, including good coverage of local German responses, and extends to the 20th July. There is a lot of detail here, as one might expect from an author who has written two books on the same subject within two years (*see OPERATION GOODWOOD: The Great Tank Charge, Ian Daglish, series Battleground Europe: Normandy, Pen & Sword, 2004*). Much added value of a technical nature is wisely shunted off to the Appendices to avoid clogging the main narrative. For example, Appendix III gives a useful analysis on how the time was recorded in different locations by the various arms of service and by the enemy, Appendix X is an interesting aside covering the pilot and the air reconnaissance flight that produced the photographs that feature prominently throughout the book, and Appendix V has a useful outline of “Lessons Learned” as applied to the post-war period. Elsewhere, notwithstanding the assurance with which the information is presented, some readers may wish to take their own counsel. One case might be the detail in the “order of battle” for 11th Armoured Division in Appendix VI.

Appendix IX will probably attract most attention. This is a very useful analysis of the evidence relating to the vexed question of von Luck’s Cagny 88s. The author is uncharacteristically coy about stating a definite conclusion but clearly invites the reader to consider two well-argued propositions. The first is that Becker’s retreating 5th Battery was the most likely cause of the casualties to the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry’s C Squadron and the second is to query the very existence of an 88 battery in Cagny. The associated question of what killed the two Tiger Is, frontally, 1km north of Cagny, remains unresolved and seems the most significant remaining argument in favour of 88s in the vicinity. The author himself questions the likelihood of a Pak 40 achieving this kind of kill at all, let alone two in quick succession.

The aerial photographs are the innovative primary source used in this study. By chance they happened to be taken during the operation and therefore captured images of forward British forces on the battlefield. They clearly show the layout of buildings and roads in villages and farm complexes and can readily be related to extracts from a map (presumably contemporary)



frequently shown in close juxtaposition. They also show the tracks of tanks and the way their movement was influenced by the terrain. This last is vividly demonstrated at the first lateral road and rail obstacles where tracks are seen funnelling towards the viable crossing points before fanning out on their new tack. A similar pattern is shown at the unexpectedly dense hedge lines north of Le Mesnil Frementel.

Also visible in some photographs are images of individual vehicles. These are perhaps not as clear in reproduction as on the original prints that the author presumably used. In his captions he has felt able to identify particular types of tank and even, on at least one occasion, a particular command group. What some may find striking is that, beyond choke points, individual vehicles are often very widely spaced and show little evidence of the formations so beloved of tactical schematics.

The photo mission was probably undertaken to evaluate the success of the heavy bombing support for GOODWOOD and the author uses the photographs to some extent for this original purpose in pursuit of his case that previous authors have been wrong in their interpretation of the bombing pattern. However, it does appear that he has, albeit with some advice and assistance, himself undertaken the complex technical role of photographic interpretation, not least to determine the time at which the photographs were taken. Reference has already been made to the identification of individual vehicle types. Without wishing to over-emphasise the problems of photo-interpretation, some may nevertheless wish to treat with caution any key conclusions so derived. Even with that caveat, the analysis of bombing patterns offered in Appendix VIII is persuasive, particularly in the way it relates back to the original bombing plan. There is in addition useful analysis not dependent on photographic interpretation, including flaws in previous accounts.

There is no doubt that these aerial photographs are a useful addition to the evidence on this battle. However, it is not clear that they reveal anything radically new. Similarly, although the author makes much of the need to return to primary sources, there is scant evidence of the use of such in this book. Unhelpfully, there is no bibliography but from a trawl of the chapter-end footnotes few primary sources can be identified. Also, the overall standard of photograph and map captions is not good, with some maps and many photographs innocent of any comment or context. Surely not all of these instances can be blamed on a publisher's misguided concept of book "design". The map overprints produced for the book to demonstrate specific movements are, however, clear and helpful. So, incidentally, is the inclusion (p. 17) of an example of the outdated "hachure" type of map being used by the Germans.

With regard to a rigorous application to primary sources the author may have fallen short of the ideal he set himself in his Foreword. Nevertheless, this is a useful addition to the popular literature of GOODWOOD that addresses some vexed questions and adds an interesting new source of evidence.

Mike Taylor
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