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"Caen Controversy: The Battle for Sword Beach 1944 (Book Review)" by Andrew Stewart

David Stubbs

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rehabilitated along the lines of John Grodzinski's *Defender of Canada* (2013) despite his shortcomings as an operational commander; and Commodore James Yeo, the commander of British naval forces, is treated as an impediment to operations, yet he did make significant contributions as ably described in Robert Malcomson's *Lords of the Lake* (1998).

Despite these criticisms, *And All Their Glory Past* is a fine concluding volume to this trilogy and covers the closing period of the War of 1812 in an entertaining and lucid fashion. Its breadth and scope make it useful to both historians and students alike.

RICH ROY, PHD, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

Caen Controversy: The Battle for Sword Beach 1944. Andrew Stewart. Solihul: Helion & Company, 2014. Pp. 164.

Caen Controversy is a narrative account of the activities and performance of the 3 (British) Infantry Division that fought in the Sword sector on the eastern flank of the D-Day landings in Normandy. In order to contextualise the Division's progress inland the book also describes the preparations for the landings, the supporting activities of the 6 Airborne Division, which protected the left flank of the Allied forces, and it assesses the capabilities and challenges facing the German defenders. The book's aim is to analyse the performance of the assaulting officers and soldiers, in the context of the objectives set for them, to examine their relative success. Stewart's narrative closes on the evening of 6 June 1944 when, although a solid lodgement had been secured away from the beaches, the objective of Caen had not been taken.

The controversy described in the book stems from an enduring perception that 3 Br Inf Div was excessively cautious in advancing towards Caen and was affected by an offensive malaise which permeated staff and soldiers alike. The French, of course, might consider any controversy relating to Caen in terms of the deaths of over a thousand French civilians killed by the Allied Air Forces bombing of the city in June and July 1944, something that still

rankles with the city's residents today.¹ But unlike John Buckley's *Monty's Men: The British Army and the Liberation of Europe*, Stewart's version of the Caen Controversy is not a radical revisionist reappraisal of the fighting performance of the British troops. Instead, it challenges the argument that the failure to take Caen was the result of a general lack of 'offensive eagerness'. Stewart's analysis adds to the understanding of what happened on and beyond Sword beach on 6 June 1944 by explaining how a combination of factors and events conspired to expose 185 Brigade to what seemed to be considerable risk. In doing so it explains why the Brigade's commander, Brigadier K. P. Smith, decided not to 'bash on regardless' and, instead, to methodically take a German strongpoint named 'Hillman', the last major barrier between the beaches and Caen and by the threat posed by reports of German panzers nearby.

What makes this book especially interesting is its detailed analysis of a multiplicity of factors that delayed the move inland and affected the capabilities of the assaulting British forces. In particular, the book describes how the loss of so many officers to sniper fire induced a general loss of confidence and offensive spirit amongst many of the surviving troops; how the plan was vulnerable to the loss of the forward observer responsible for bringing down naval gunfire on Hillman; why it was necessary to reconfigure the assault with artillery and tank fire support; the impact of beach bottlenecks and poor communications which, amongst other things, caused Smith to think the Germans still held St Aubin; and, finally, the threat of German armour between Hillman and Caen. The combination and response to these influences meant that it took seven and a half hours to secure 'Hillman', which meant that Caen could not be reached by nightfall. Stewart's main focus: the analysis of the factors affecting the troops on the ground is very well explained and many of conclusions are derived by drawing on primary source material from regimental archives, supported to contextualise events by a wide-range of secondary sources.

Stewart mainly concentrates on describing the situation faced by the soldiers on the ground, and as a result his analysis of the

¹ Anthony Beevor, *D-Day: The Battle for Normandy* (London: Viking, 2009), 266–269; Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 578–579; 1000 ans d'architecture: Un patrimoine exceptionnel, Caen, Tourist Guide.

roles played by the Allied naval and air forces is relatively sketchy. In terms of presenting a more holistic focus of events and their repercussions, more detail about the mechanism and the fragility of bringing down naval gunfire on strongpoint defences would have been useful, particularly as this method of coordinated attack was used so successfully in helping to overcome a similar strongpoint adjacent to Hillman. Stewart could also have done more to support his claim that the air forces did little to assist the inland assault (p.74) by analysing the reasons, if any, for the breakdown in the procedures and mechanisms to bring down fire from the Spitfires allocated a dedicated close air support role to the Sword area (p.141). After all, these Spitfires were scheduled to operate in 'Patrol Line Charlie', almost directly above Hillman.

One of the main reasons the performance of 3 Bri Inf Div was questioned was because a main objective of the advance to Caen and beyond on D-Day was to secure sufficient territory to build airfields, from which the Allied Air Forces could operate their short-range fighters, outside the range of enemy artillery fire. Stewart noted the relevance of this topic in his introduction and conclusion but by choosing to side step the issue in the main body of the book he has missed an opportunity to contextualise Brigadier Smith's aversion to risk in the context of Montgomery's demand for aggressive tactics and his willingness to accept almost any risks on D-Day.² By avoiding the airfield issue *Caen Controversy* is perhaps a little too sympathetic to post-event assessments made by the senior army officers involved, those who coordinated and produced the official history, and by regimental histories which are in general supportive of the actions of its officers and men.

The book leaves a few unanswered questions: if Caen was never really a viable objective for D-Day why were orders to capture Caen and establish a bridgehead to the south of the River Orne produced (p.145)? Why did General Dempsey, who later claimed that he 'never expected 3 [Br Inf] Div to get Caen on the first day' and who claimed that 'if we didn't get it the first day it would take a month to get it afterwards' (p.151), produce orders that required his Second Army was to secure the airfield sites to the southeast of Caen by D+7-8?³

² Richard Lamb, *Montgomery in Europe 1943-1945: Success or Failure?* (University of Michigan: Buchan & Enright, 1984), 65.

³ Carlo D'Este, *Decision in Normandy: The Unwritten Story of Montgomery in the Allied Campaign* (London: Collins, 1983), 78.

Stewart alludes to the possibility of subterfuge surrounding the way orders were constructed to secure the cooperation of the air and naval forces (p. x) by citing the work of one of his staff college students, who claimed that Montgomery and his subordinates always thought Caen an entirely unrealistic objective.⁴ If true and taking Caen on D-Day was always ‘over ambitious’, ‘unachievable’ and ‘too optimistic’ (pp. 146–151) and the bridgehead secured on D-Day ‘a notable feat of arms’ another question arises: was why was Smith aversion to risk punished by relieving him of his command a few days later?

Ultimately, the details provided in the book give the reader sufficient evidence to delve deeper into these issues. The book provides an extremely enjoyable and illuminating description of the events and activities of the 3 Br Inf Div which adds a significant degree of granularity to the events that occurred on Sword Beach and further inland on D-Day. By giving the reader insight into the various factors that influenced Brigadier Smith’s thinking, *Caen Controversy* has opened up areas for further study and discussion. The overall message conveyed tallies neatly with other recent work by David French and John Buckley,⁵ and would be particularly relevant and useful for academics and graduates studying the invasion of Normandy, beach assaults and littoral operations as well as those enthused by the D-Day anniversaries to find out more about what really happened on that fateful day.

DAVID STUBBS, *INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER*

Canada and the End of the Imperial Dream: Beverley Baxter’s Reports from London through War and Peace, 1936–1960. Neville Thompson. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 393.

Canadians of a certain age will remember Beverley Baxter as the author of a regular column entitled “Letter from London” that appeared in *Maclean’s* back when it was a general interest magazine.

⁴ James Babbage, “Montgomery’s presentation of his plans for D-Day: a case of consent and evade?” *Defence Studies* 11, 4 (2011): 657–671.

⁵ French, David (2003) ‘Invading Europe: The British army and its preparations for the Normandy campaign, 1942–44’, *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 14: 2, 271–294. John Buckley,