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Book Review: The Panzer Killers: The Untold Story of a Fighting General and His Spearhead Tank Division's Charge into the Third Reich

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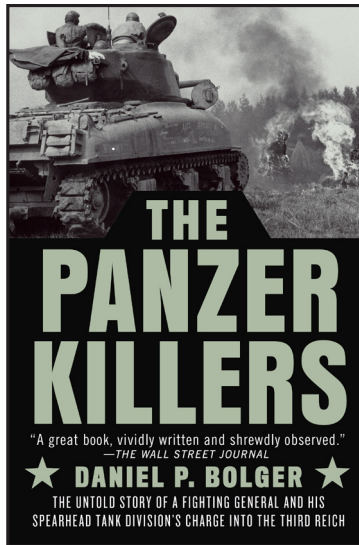
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Reviewed by Rev. Dr. Wylie W. Johnson, US Army War College class of 2010

Retired US Army Lieutenant General—now college professor and historian—Daniel P. Bolger's new "battle-biography" of World War II Major General Maurice Rose is an important read for senior leaders in this age of political generals. Bolger distinguishes his work from other Rose biographies by providing a close-up focus on the armor battle in northern Europe. He presents the last seven months of Rose's life as an exemplar of effective senior competence, leadership, and tactical acumen. Bolger's extensive research includes primary source documents from several institutions, including the 3rd Armored Division Association Archives housed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and funded by the Andrew Barr World War II Archive Endowment; the Ike Skelton Combined Arms Research Library at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; the US Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle, Pennsylvania; and the US National Archives and Records Administration. The record supports Bolger's recount of persons, places, and tactics.

Rose, the son and grandson of rabbis, never went to college and may not have graduated from high school, however, his dog tags read "Protestant," and he is buried under a Christian

cross headstone in the Netherlands American Cemetery at Margraten. Rose ascended in rank despite the era's anti-Semitism and his surprising lack of education during World War I. After that conflict's end, he had a short stint in civilian life as a salesman before reentering the Army in 1920 as a captain. In the early months of World War II, he received attention as the 2nd Armored Division Chief of Staff during the North African campaign (June 1940–May 13, 1943). Promoted to brigadier general in time to lead Combat Command A through Operation Husky (Sicily, July 9–August 17, 1943), Bolger's narration begins in Normandy, France, August 1944, with the relief of Major General Leroy H. Watson and Rose's assumption of command of 3rd Armor Division.

American forces in World War II European and Pacific theaters featured many political generals who sought military success and public glory, including General of the Army Douglas MacArthur in the East and General George S. Patton Jr. in the West. Never that sort of glory hound, Rose disdained celebrity and focused on his lane of responsibility. Bolger does not state it outright but clearly indicates to readers in positions of senior leadership that self-aggrandizement

is detrimental to a unity of effort and the business of winning wars.

The author, a retired senior combat commander, does not shy away from evaluating the relative competence and ability of a range of senior leaders of that era, including US Army Generals Omar N. Bradley and Courtney H. Hodges and British Army Field Marshall Bernard L. Montgomery. By contrast, Bolger upholds Rose as a shining example of an involved, competent frontline leader not content to direct a battle from a map. Rose was notorious for advancing so far forward that he was continually at risk of enemy fire. Soldiers respected him for sharing in their risk, and Rose consistently succeeded against better equipped foes. Bolger does not gloss over Rose's mistakes but instead examines them in detail for opportunities to gain military wisdom.

Aspiring senior leaders can learn much from this battle-biography. Rose was a demanding combat leader who aggressively prosecuted each battle. He mastered the art of combined arms battle while safeguarding the lives of his men, preferring to "send a bullet, not a man" (187).

German tanks of the day severely outclassed American armor forces. America's Sherman tanks could only defeat German armor by scoring a side, rear, or bottom hit. Worse, the American infantry anti-tank weapon colloquially known as a bazooka was plainly inferior to the German infantry *Panzerfaust* weapon. What made a difference was the use of American combined arms tactics. In fact, a majority of German armor was destroyed by artillery and aircraft. Rose was a master of aggressive combined arms maneuvers.

Other combat leaders caught the eye of the American public. We are well informed about the aggressive leadership of Patton, especially during the relief of Bastogne, Belgium, during

the Battle of the Bulge. Almost unknown are the exploits of the 3rd Armored Division under Rose, whose determined defense north of the Bulge bore the brunt of the German advance in that sector and stopped the attack with a much weaker force. As we always suspected, Patton did not do it alone.

The 3rd Armored Division entered Belgium first and crossed into Germany first, earning the name Spearhead Division. German forces were disintegrating rapidly—however, the remainder of those forces that fought continued to be formidable foes. Unfortunately, the fighting general's time ran out. A career soldier, Rose died a soldier's death. After dark on March 30, 1945, south of Paderborn—a city in eastern North Rhine-Westphalia—a German tanker shot and killed Rose. The war would officially come to a close six weeks later on May 8.

We may never fight such a war again, but history often repeats itself. Senior leaders would do well to consider the winning ways of the 3rd Armored Division. The division fought with deteriorating equipment, shortages of everything, including manpower, and engaged in combat for more than 170 continuous days. During this time, a great sifting of leadership occurred on every level. Many leaders did not succeed, but the very best prosecuted their craft at the tip of the spear. All too often they became casualties of conflict.

Bolger includes three maps, a 3rd Armored Division leadership roster, and an order of battle. The book is a useful study for aspiring senior leadership seeking to learn lessons from an extraordinary commander.

New York: Caliber, 2021 • 432 pages • \$30.00

Keywords: World War II, 3rd Armored Division, Battle of the Bulge, Spearhead Division, George S. Patton

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