Naval War College Review

Volume 45
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 18

1992

Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War

I.B. Holley Jr.

John Ellis

pro-active posture will avoid the need for intervention, while neglect simply will not make the problems go away. They will still be with us long after Fidel is just a memory.

J.D. WAGHELSTEIN
Colonel U.S. Army (Ret.)
Naval War College

Ellis, John. *Brute Force: Allied Strategy and Tactics in the Second World War.* New York: Viking, 1990. 643pp. $29.95

The author promotes two major theses in his survey of the global sweep of World War II: that victory for the Allies rested largely upon the immense resources in materiel, productive capacity, and manpower that they were finally able to deploy; and that the generalship, strategy, and tactics used to exploit that overwhelming force were often inept and maladroit. They relied upon brute force to batter the enemy into submission rather than resort to daring maneuver, surprise, and individual unit initiative to seize fleeting opportunities.

The author possesses a gift for the well-turned phrase. For example, speaking of the Allied response to the Nazi thrust through the Ardennes, he observes that "if the Allied commanders suffered from operational arthritis, the whole of their armed forces were beset by tactical palsy." But most impressive are the elaborate statistical tables that the author has garnered from a number of sources to reveal the comparative strengths of the participants at various junctures throughout the war. If for no other reason, this volume will be consulted by students of warfare as a handy reference source for these statistical compilations (for which source citations are provided in the appendix).

Despite these strengths, however, this study suffers from what might be called the "Barbara Tuchman Syndrome." John Ellis is contemptuous of virtually all in command positions; he utterly ignores the fog of war, the difficulties of communicating over far-flung battlefields, and the inescapable problems of trying to execute intricate maneuvers with forces largely composed of partially trained, mostly inexperienced civilians in uniform—Christmas help: willing, well-meaning, often brave, but still learning while doing. The peacetime poverty of the armed forces meant not only that the essential cadre of noncommissioned officers was far too small to cope with the enormous expansion of wartime but also that there had been far too few full-scale maneuvers and fleet exercises to afford suitable training for senior leaders.

One searches in vain for evidence of sympathy or understanding of the uncertainties and unknowns confronting the decision makers. There were mistakes aplenty, readily evident in retrospect, but all too often Ellis excoriates commanders without exploring the circumstances in sufficient depth for the reader to judge whether or not alternative tactics were considered. He condemns *planning* on the basis of failed *results* without indicating whether the results were the

consequence of faulty planning, or as is often the case, faulty *execution* resulting from delayed orders, misunder- stood intentions, and such like. He deplores "the complete lack of attention to a proper combination of arms," especially artillery support for armored thrusts, without supplying the reader with evidence to show whether the failure was one of planning or execution.

Despite dust-jacket claims of "new ideas, new insights, even new facts," this volume is largely a reworking of familiar sources. The "brute force" thesis dates back to the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey and has been exploited by numerous historians ever since. Ellis relies almost entirely on secondary sources from which he frequently weaves quotations into his text. Unfortunately, in many instances he gives no indication whether these passages are an interpretation by the historians quoted or of the primary source used by them.

Navy readers will welcome the author's praise for the naval gunfire support provided during the initial landings on the south coast of Sicily, but may question his condemnation of the Allied failure to use naval power along the east coast of Sicily for amphibious landings behind the retreating Germans or to interdict their escape to the Italian mainland across the Strait of Messina. To be successful such naval operations would have required assured air cover, which was lacking. Characteristically, Ellis reports the numerical superiority of Allied aircraft available for operations over Sicily; he neglects, however, to address the realities of logistics, notably fuel supply, as well as delays in opening adequate bases close behind the advancing ground forces. The presence of Luftwaffe units, with far fewer aircraft but operating from well established bases (especially those covering the Straits from the mainland), helps to explain why so many enemy forces escaped from Sicily. Throughout, the author relies upon gross statics of forces available without giving full consideration to the ever-present qualitative factors affecting performance.

Flawed as this study is, readers would do well not to dismiss the author's significant second thesis: there were indeed many instances of unimaginative tactics and dubious strategy. Surely, navy readers could profitably ponder Ellis's notion that naval strategy in the Pacific might better have concentrated on Japan's economic lifeline, the shipping which carried essential resources to the home islands, rather than the bloody island-hopping campaign. This thesis itself is not so much at fault as is the dogmatic way in which the author *asserts* rather than *suggests* it, and the caustic tone he adopts, particularly when bashing individual commanders.

I. B. HOLLEY, JR.
Duke University

Cohen, Elliot A. and Gooch, John. *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War.* New York: Vintage, 1991. 246pp. $11

Military failure, and the ineptitude or bad luck presumed to cause it, have