

1992

## The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940

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Robert Allan Doughty

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### Recommended Citation

Maurer, John H. and Doughty, Robert Allan (1992) "The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 45 : No. 4 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol45/iss4/23>

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wrote a fine book about this fight, titled *Coral Comes High*.

The 1st Marine Division continued the struggle on Peleliu for four weeks. All its infantry units suffered heavy casualties operating in the rugged terrain and stifling heat, but Puller's 1st Marines, facing the main ridge, suffered the most. Major Raymond Davis's 1st Battalion was reduced to thirty percent of its original strength. Rupertus and Puller insisted that the weakened rifle companies continue the attack. Finally, with the regiment reduced to a fragment, Major General Roy S. Geiger, the corps commander, insisted on the relief of the 1st Marines by an army regiment. The sorely tested 1st Marine Division turned over the final mop-up of Peleliu to the Army's 81st Division and returned to Pavuvu to prepare for the assault on Okinawa.

Ross has presented an in-depth account of the bloody campaign. The book does contain a number of minor historical inaccuracies, but none that detract from the main thrust of the story. I recommend it to anyone interested in World War II or in American military history. The fight for Peleliu deserves to be remembered.

Both books maintain the constant theme of courage and sacrifice for others and for the country. In this increasingly high-tech world, and the seemingly bloodless military environment of today's battlefield, both authors remind us of the realities of war and of the dedication and valor necessary to win it. *Semper Fidelis!*

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Doughty, Robert Allan. *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940*. Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1990. \$39.50

Colonel Robert Allan Doughty, who serves as chairman of the history department at the United States Military Academy at West Point, has written a detailed account of the battle fought in mid-May 1940 along the Meuse River that led to the disintegration of the French army. This battle pitted some of Germany's best combat units against a hodgepodge of French divisions, some of which were indifferently trained, led, and equipped. Despite the advantages offered by light field fortifications and terrain generally favorable to the defense, the French resistance along the Meuse collapsed. The French reinforcements that tried to close the gap created by the German offensive were too little and too late. The strategic result of the German breakthrough in the Meuse battle was that Germany's mobile divisions—armor and motorized infantry—were given an opportunity to reach the Channel coast and cut off the Allied armies fighting in Belgium and Holland.

Building on his earlier work, *The Seeds of Disaster*, which examined French military doctrine between the world wars, Doughty shows the consequences in battle of faulty doctrine, inadequate training, and poor

leadership. His research is impressive: he has used both French and German archives in an attempt to reconstruct events accurately. Its depth is displayed in the detailed description of the tactical aspects of the ground fighting. Doughty demonstrates the important role played by German infantry, combat engineers, and artillery, all working in conjunction with armor units and the Luftwaffe in breaching the French defensive positions along the Meuse. The poor, bloody infantry are thus given their pride of place in Doughty's account.

Yet, one drawback of Doughty's account is that his focus on the tactical aspects of the fighting along the Meuse obscures the larger strategic picture. Churchill records in his memoirs that after the German breakthrough on the Meuse he asked the French chief of staff, General Gamelin, where was the strategic reserve to shore up the breach in the Allied line. Gamelin replied that none was readily available. Churchill was stunned by Gamelin's failure to provide for a strategic reserve. Had a strong strategic reserve existed to launch an immediate counterattack, the German success on the Meuse might not have resulted in the complete breakdown and rapid defeat of the British, French, and Belgian armies. How much did this failure in command account for the Allied disaster? Or, was France's defeat foreordained by the inadequacies of French doctrine and force structure? Was France simply so outclassed by Germany that an effective defense was

not possible? While Doughty provides a succinct account in the first chapter of the overall Allied and German strategies, he might have done more to put his narrative of the battle into its larger strategic context.

Another shortcoming of Doughty's analysis is that his focus on the ground fighting is not well integrated with the air operations. How important was German air superiority in determining the outcome of the Meuse battle? To be sure, to integrate analyses of air and ground operations poses a difficult methodological problem for military historians, because "bean counts" of tanks, trucks, and artillery pieces destroyed by aircraft are inadequate in evaluating the actual impact of air power on land fighting. For example, Doughty points out that French forces were frequently slowed down in reaching the battlefield by German air attacks. An argument could be made that, if these reinforcements had arrived in a more timely fashion, the German breakthrough might have been halted. Doughty's narrative might have been more comprehensive if he had provided a more explicit evaluation of the contribution made by air power in determining the outcome of this crucial battle. This type of analysis is important for improving our understanding of the interrelationship of ground and air combat.

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