

1986

The Fight for the Channel Ports: Calais to Brest—A Study in Confusion

J. L. Moulton
Royal Marines (Ret.)

Michael Glover

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Moulton, J. L. and Glover, Michael (1986) "The Fight for the Channel Ports: Calais to Brest—A Study in Confusion," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 39 : No. 4 , Article 27.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol39/iss4/27>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Gow, Ian. *Okinawa 1945: Gateway to Japan*. New York: Doubleday, 1985. 224pp. \$16.95

More often than not books about World War II battles are little more than rehashes of older books or official histories with little new added. Dr. Gow's book is different. The author, whose doctorate was on Japanese civil-military relations, provides some Japanese perspectives on the battle. Moreover, from the perspective of an Englishman, he provides some insights into how the British viewed the battle from the coalition warfare standpoint. Several works published in Japan about the Okinawa battle are included in the bibliography. So, *Okinawa 1945* is something more than the oft-told tale retold.

Okinawa 1945 describes the contributions made by the Royal Navy to the battle. The ships of TF 57 proved to be a welcome addition to the U.S. Fleet as they gained valuable experience in operations extended both in time and distance. That experience would have been needed desperately had the planned assault of the home islands taken place. It was obvious that all available aircraft would have been needed to suppress the anticipated kamikaze attacks. At times the reader is given the feeling that the British were unwanted in the "American show." Though this may have been true, Dr. Gow devotes little to this clash of allies as it may have detracted from the story. The reviewer questions why he raised the subject if he was not going to address it in any depth.

It is clear that General Mitsuru Ushijima, in command of the island's defenders, did an excellent job in a desperate situation. In those overwhelming situations where defeat is so apparent, there is little one can do except to cause delay and raise the cost to the victor. Ushijima became a master, carefully choosing terrain, preparing it and falling back when required. He was ably assisted by his artillery commander, General Kosuke Wada. Besides the extensive defensive positions, Wada's able use of his weapons frustrated U.S. Army and Marine assaults. Gow does a good job of describing these assaults.

Okinawa 1945 is interesting but, as in many another book, the maps are inadequate. However, there are many excellent photographs not seen before by this reviewer.

PETER C. UNSINGER
San Jose State University

Glover, Michael. *The Fight for the Channel Ports: Calais to Brest—A Study in Confusion*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1985. 269pp. \$25

When on 10 May 1940 Hitler invaded the Low Countries, the main fighting elements of the British Expeditionary Force in France advanced into Belgium under the French higher command's Plan D. There, deployed along the River Dyle with the 1st French Army and the Belgian Army, nine 1st-line British divisions held their front without undue difficulty against probing attacks from German Army

140 Naval War College Review

Group B. Farther south, however, Army Group A with the main mass of German armor broke through on the front of the French 9th and 2nd Armies, and on 16 May the Allied armies in the north were ordered to withdraw. The BEF retreated in good order and prepared for an increasingly unlikely counteroffensive southwards. It was not until the Belgian surrender on 28 May that the British faced their most critical emergency from the east.

Meanwhile the weight of the German armor had swung northwards behind the Allied front making for the Channel coast, cutting the communications of the French 1st Army and the BEF and opening their rear to attack.

A hasty attempt to block the German advance northwards led to widely separated reserve units being overrun or bypassed. Boulogne and Calais were reinforced from England—the latter on a tragic no-withdrawal mission—but quickly fell to overwhelming attack. Largely because of the Hitler-Rundstedt halt order, a thin line of improvised forces facing westwards was able to stave off the danger to the British rear until divisions returning from Belgium were able to take over.

As the Dunkirk evacuation began, other British and French forces were scraped together to face the Germans when they resumed their westward march. Lines of communications units were formed into improvised brigades, three of them forming the Beauman Division. The 1st Armoured Division forming in England was

sent to France disembarking at Le Havre and Cherbourg, to be joined west of the Somme by the 51st (Highland) Division, sent north from the Maginot Line where it had been temporarily stationed before 10 May. Later the 52nd (Lowland) Division disembarked at Cherbourg in time for one of its brigades to see action.

Fighting under the French higher command and alongside French formations, they did what they could to hold back the Germans between the Somme and the Seine. The Highland Division was trapped at St. Valery; remnants of the others reembarked at Cherbourg when general collapse became evident. The last British left Bordeaux on 28 June. Underequipped and overstretched, they had fought resolutely against odds, as had many of their French companions in misfortune. Unsparing in its efforts despite the earlier stresses of Norway and Dunkirk, the Royal Navy had brought seapower to the rescue of forces soon to be desperately needed to face the threat of invasion.

This story has been neglected by English-speaking historians and used by some French apologists to find scapegoats. Michael Glover, drawing on regimental histories and personal memoirs tells a vivid and moving saga of courage in the face of defeat at unit level, as well as describing the strategic and political background. His maps, however—with too many irrelevant place names, no roads and no force overprints—make it almost impossible to follow force dispositions without reference elsewhere. And he makes no attempt, in this

American edition, to explain the confusing British regimental nomenclature of the day. More attention to these things might have made this a memorable book; as it is, it is well worth reading for incident and atmosphere of what was in any case an incoherent battle.

J.L. MOULTON
Major General, Royal Marines (Ret.)
Surrey, England

Blair, Clay. *Ridgway's Paratroopers: The American Airborne in World War II*. New York: Dial Press, 1985. 588pp. \$19.95

Clay Blair, formerly the Washington correspondent for *Time* magazine and editor in chief of the Curtis Publishing empire, has written extensively on World War II, most recently as a collaborator with Omar Bradley on *A General's Life*. In this latest effort, he traces the parallel development of Matt Ridgway and the American airborne in World War II.

It is a stirring story, filled with legendary heroes (James Gavin, Max Taylor, Tony McAuliffe, among others) and lots of battles (Salerno, Anzio, Normandy, Arnhem, the Bulge, crossing the Rhine). Blair is not only a good writer who brings these men and their actions to life, but one who does not hesitate to assign blame when justified. He is merciless in pointing out the manifold shortcomings of the Army Air Corps in carrying out its mission of dropping paratroopers on target; the drop in

Normandy, as he demonstrates, was a scandal. It was so badly done that there should have been numerous courts-martial, and the truth was that Ridgway's boys were lucky to survive at all. The key problem was that the Army Air Corps simply would not take its mission seriously and refused to properly train its pilots for the job. There was no excuse, because the drop in Sicily, in July 1943, was as bad, but the airmen refused to learn from their mistakes.

Fortunately, Ridgway had done such an outstanding job of preparing the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions for their mission that the paratroopers were able to overcome the problems stemming from the scattered drops and accomplish their objectives. How it was done is Blair's real story, and he tells it well. Highly recommended.

STEPHEN E. AMBROSE
University of New Orleans

Miller, Stephen E., ed. *Military Strategy and the Origins of the First World War: An International Security Reader*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985. 186pp. \$25.50 paper \$6.95

This collection presents five interpretive essays on the origins of the First World War and its contemporary significance, originally published as an issue of the journal *International Security*. Two contributions treat general questions; the remaining three concentrate on the cult of the offensive prior to 1914.