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Jay Wertz, *D-Day: The Campaign across France*. Leesburg, VA: Weider History Publications, 2011. Pp. 304. ISBN 978-0-9842127-1-2.

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In this seventieth anniversary year of D-Day—the start of the Normandy invasion and the return of Allied forces to Northwest Europe on 6 June 1944—memorial events have rivaled in number those for the Great War of 1914–18. Countless television reporters have interviewed veterans of the landing and film crews have made video records of the observances. And, in the print media, too, various writers have participated in the commemorations. In *D-Day*, historian and filmmaker Jay Wertz¹ has done so by interviewing hundreds of surviving American, Canadian, British, French, and German participants in the Normandy landings and the following “campaign across France.” He has enhanced his account with an impressive number of photographs to help readers visualize the stories those veterans have told. The volume under review is one (the second) of a projected ten in the publisher’s special series entitled “War Stories: World War II Firsthand.”

The book consists of six chapters, an introduction, and a foreword by Maj. Gen. (ret.) David T. Zabecki. Wertz intends his book to provide neither a “comprehensive history of the Normandy campaign nor a chronicle of all the veterans of that campaign” (10). Rather, he wants “to preserve the voices and memories of a sample of veterans—a sample which includes as many veterans as possible from as many forces as possible” (10).

The book’s chronologically organized chapters recount the campaign from readying for the invasion through the liberation of Paris. Chapter 1, “Preparation for the Allied Cross-Channel Invasion,” covers the Dieppe Raid, logistics, German defenses, personnel, intelligence, and Exercise Tiger. Chapter 2, “June 6, 1944,” chronicles Allied air, ground, and naval operations before and during the first day of the amphibious assault on all five Normandy beaches, and the Battle for La Fièvre Bridge.

Once the beachheads were established, Allied forces discovered that the breakout into the French countryside was not going to be easy: the region’s thick hedgerows presented serious obstacles to their advance inland and enabled German defenders to inflict heavy casualties on Allied troops. Wertz adeptly utilizes soldiers’ firsthand accounts of the difficulties posed by the terrain in chapter 3, “Fighting in the Hedgerows.” Chapter 4, “Breakout from Normandy,” covers the arrival of Gen. George Patton’s Third Army and the Allied effort to close the gap at Falaise. Wertz also briefly discusses the contemporaneous “20 July plot” to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Chapter 5, “The Allied Invasion of Southern France,” concerns Operation Anvil/Dragoon, and chapter 6, “The Liberation of Paris,” describes the advance of Allied forces across France and into the city of Paris.

Each chapter comprises smaller sections featuring both narrative and firsthand accounts. Many well chosen black-and-white photographs and colorful maps enrich the glossy, large-print pages of this coffee-table volume. Such enhancements may appeal to academics, but it is apparent that the book is meant for a much broader range of readers interested in World War II in general, and the Normandy invasion and campaign more specifically.

Eyewitness accounts like the following, in Wertz’s discussion of German preparations for the Allied assault, will capture the reader’s attention:

1. His previous written work includes *The Civil War Experience, 1861–1865* (NY: Presidio, 2005), *The Native American Experience* (2008; rpt. NY: Metro Books, 2012), *The Pacific*, vol. 1: *Pearl Harbor to Guadalcanal* (Leesburg, VA: Weider History Pub., 2010), and, with Edwin C. Bearss, *Smithsonian’s Great Battles and Battlefields of the Civil War* (NY: Morrow, 1997). Wertz has also contributed many columns and articles to such journals as *Civil War Times*, *America’s Civil War*, *HistoryNet.com*, *GreatHistory.com*, *Aviation History*, and *Armchair General*. As a filmmaker, he produced, directed, and wrote *Smithsonian’s Great Battles of the Civil War*, a multi-part documentary, for The Learning Channel and Time-Life Video.

The East-West swap of units and men affected these two German military veterans in different ways. Hans Eckhardt, a 17-year-old from the Sudetenland, volunteered and received admission into the very competitive Luftwaffe flying personnel program. He was placed on active duty in the fall of 1942. “We spent a short time in Germany then we were shipped out to France near the west coast for Luftwaffe training regiments. So we did what was called in America boot camp. We were trained with guns, machine guns and mortars and we were also kind of manning the Atlantic defenses. There were three battalions and every third night we were on the alert. We slept in our uniforms, with our boots on, and we practiced that within three minutes we were down out of the barracks and into trucks where we were ready to go to the coast where there were fortifications. This was an early response in preparation for D-Day. It was in late 1942.” (32)

Some of the firsthand accounts included by Wertz demonstrate that the war was not always all business, fighting, blood, and death. Some veterans, like 2nd Lt. Dean McCandless, who parachuted into action in the early hours of 6 June, even found some humor in their situation:

I was lucky enough that I landed close to the drop zone. They scattered the guys all over. As I came down I saw what looked like a transformer and I was slipping like hell to avoid it and I landed in a barnyard. General Ridgway [Major General Matthew B. Ridgway, 82nd Airborne Division Commander] jumped that night. He [also] landed in a barnyard with some cattle. He said when he saw that cow he coulda kissed her [laugh]. That’s a big relief ‘cause there were no mines or anything to worry about. I’m sure that’s what Ridgway had in his mind too. We did get together. Our battalion commander then was Major [Frederick A.] Kellem. He was just a different kind of guy. I remember him singing “Rye whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey, I cry. I’ll be drinking rye whiskey the day that I die.” And it was he that called us the Jack of Diamonds battalion. And on our helmets we had a red diamond with a “J” in it and then like, cannonball crowns. Anyway, we set up our command post. (86–87)

In general, however, the firsthand accounts add a somber tone to the narrative and forcefully convey the harsh and bloody realities of war.

Although most of the eyewitnesses were soldiers, sailors, and pilots from all the forces in Normandy, Wertz highlights as well some unsung heroes—female nurses. One US Army nurse, Muriel Kappler, from Minnesota, recalled her trip across the Channel to Utah Beach in vivid detail:

Well, I’ll tell you, I was very young and we really, I don’t think any of us had any fear. And we, I know that night we slept where the nurses were, down the hatch, and there were just ships around us. All I remember was the planes above and the shooting and our getting off the ship and having to go down this rope ladder. And we were told to spread [out] as soon as possible, so that we were ten groups. And of course we had our back packs and gas masks, because they didn’t know if gas would be used, or what. We just had our regular combat jackets [and a helmet] and of course we were in fatigues, that’s what we wore all the time, you know, even in our tents when we were working. We never saw a white uniform, or anything like that. (200–201)

Wertz has not, then, produced a typical scholarly monograph. He presents no thesis, no deep analyses, and, consequently, no supporting evidence. Rather than making a historical case, he wants to directly preserve the stories of World War II veterans themselves. And this he achieves very well. Although the author interviewed over three hundred men and women for his multi-volume project, his readers will be left, as I was, wishing to hear more “voices and memories.” Wertz is not, of course, the first to rely predominantly on the remembrances of a campaign’s participants. Author Mark Bando, for example, has written books in the same genre,² relying on extensive interviews with veterans. But, while Bando focuses on a particular division in his works, Wertz operates on a broader scale; his treatment of the campaign in France is based on a cross section of units, both Allied and German.

In *D-Day: The Campaign across France*, Jay Wertz succeeds in providing a general overview of the campaign through careful attention to the voices and memories of its still living participants. In so doing, he has both preserved their stories and honored them for the valor they showed on the beaches and fields of France in 1944.

2. *Vanguard of the Crusade: The 101st Airborne Division in World War II* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2012), and *Breakout at Normandy: The Second Armored Division in the Land of the Dead* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2013).