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Danny S. Parker, *Fatal Crossroads: The Untold Story of the Malmédy Massacre at the Battle of the Bulge*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 390. ISBN 978-0-306-82152-3.

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On 17 December 1944, members of the 1st SS Panzer Regiment machine-gunned eighty-four US POWs at Baugnez crossroads near the town of Malmédy in Belgium. This murderous act and several others committed against prisoners and civilians on that day and some days afterward were the subject of the controversial Malmédy Massacre Trial in 1946. In *Fatal Crossroads*, independent historian Danny Parker, a leading expert on the Battle of the Bulge,¹ brings to bear fifteen years of research in a meticulous investigation of the meeting between the German Panzer Regiment and elements of the US Army 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion (FAOB) outside of Malmédy. Besides culling material from military and judicial records and the scholarly literature on the subject, Parker draws on interviews with both German and American witnesses as well Belgian civilians who lived in the tiny crossroads hamlet.

While historians concur that the spearhead of SS Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper's battle group initially engaged elements of the 285th FOAB near the Baugnez crossroads while advancing to the Meuse River, they agree about little else that occurred there. Parker considers two competing theories about just what took place and why. The first, espoused by, for example, Gerd Cuppens² and other "SS sympathizers," contends that the "Americans were fired upon in three separate engagements with the lagging elements of Kampfgruppe Peiper, leading to a large number of unfortunate casualties made worse by the American movements while they were captive" (275). The second maintains that the American forces were in fact executed after being captured in a German effort to preserve the elements of surprise and speed (275). Parker assesses in detail the plausibility of the German claims and concludes that at some point orders were very likely given to liquidate the prisoners, but that, owing to the bond of those complicit in the massacre, there is no concrete evidence as to who actually issued them (280).

The book comprises a prologue, twelve chapters chronicling the pertinent events, an epilogue, four appendices, and ninety pages of endnotes providing not only source citations but detailed contextual information for the accounts in the text proper and the appendices. In a gripping narrative style, Parker shifts between the vantage points of the Americans and the Germans, with engrossing personality vignettes for key individuals. The German perspective affords the reader a good understanding of the disposition of the members of Kampfgruppe Peiper, the coordinated secrecy surrounding the events at the Baugnez crossroads, and, ultimately, the responsibility for them. While it can be argued that the book presents little new information, Parker's balanced reconstruction and objective conclusions offer, at the very least, persuasive, substantiated insights into an otherwise nebulous military engagement.

Parker's main thesis is that the importance of gaining and maintaining the initiative through speed and audacious campaigning was reiterated at all echelons of German leadership down to the operational level. Peiper and the units under him capitalized on surprise and relentless aggression to achieve their initial successes. While the actual events at the Baugnez crossroads are not in much doubt, Parker seeks to definitively assign culpability for the deaths of the eighty-four American service members. His biographical sketches of the German leaders, especially Peiper and SS Maj. Werner Poetschke shed light on the relationships, chain of command, mission statement, and unquestioning obedience of the SS. In his 1946 testimony, 2nd Lt. Hans Hennecke reported that Peiper himself stated that "In the coming operation, the regiment will

1. His earlier work includes *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler's Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (1991; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004), *To Win the Winter Sky: The Air War over the Ardennes, 1944-1945* (1994; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 1998), and *The Battle of the Bulge: The German View* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1999).

2. In *Massacre à Malmédy?: Ardennes, 17 décembre 1944: le Kampfgruppe Peiper dans les Ardennes* (Bayeux: Ed. Heimdal, 1989).

have the duty to attack recklessly. No consideration will be paid to man or machine. The coming mission will be the last chance to win the war. Therefore, we will attack like a storm wind [Sturmwind]. The enemy must be totally crazed with fear that the SS is coming. That is our obligation” (27).

Parker maintains, contrary to claims by SS apologists that the American servicemen died in a series of three engagements, that they were in fact executed on the direct orders of the 1st SS Panzer Regiment leadership, most likely Poetschke in pursuance of Peiper’s directives regarding speed, expediency, and terror (240). Though details vary with their locations in the field south of Café Bodarwe, witnesses tell a consistent story: the soldiers of the 285th FOAB, along with prisoners captured at earlier points of the offensive, were assembled in a field and summarily executed. T/5 Charles Appman’s account is representative: “we had our hands up and crossed the fence, and stood there in the open field and we meddled [*sic*] around in the circle facing the road.... So then, two tanks came up and parked almost in front of us and they pulled machine guns out and mounted them on the outside of their tank.... Just about then an order was given to fire” (121).

The author also draws on interviews with Belgian civilians who witnessed the massacre, notably Henri Lejoly. Positioned next to Madame Bodarwe, the owner of the crossroads café, Lejoly observed the shootings as they occurred. His and others’ statements corroborate the testimony of American survivors and refute German claims that the Americans fell in three distinct actions. According to Lejoly, the SS formation assembled their prisoners in a field south of the café, and—contrary to Peiper’s standing order—went through their pockets: “A few minutes later a German officer approached an American medic and pointed a revolver in his direction. I had just had time to see what was going on when the shot went off. This was the signal for the killing to commence. The tanks placed at the corners of the field opened fire mowing down the prisoners under the gun fire” (214). The mention of stationary vehicles with mounted and sited weapons bolsters Parker’s conclusion that a massacre did in fact occur.

Parker thoroughly dismantles the arguments of historians³ who espouse the SS story of multiple engagements between American forces and Kampfgruppe Peiper by careful forensic analysis (including autopsy reports) and by constructing a convincing timeline of events based on the firsthand accounts of many witnesses, the official history of the US Army, transcripts of the Dachau War Crimes Trial, and interrogations of German personnel detained at Schwabish Hall after the war. He describes his methodology as follows:

greater weight was given to facts supported by multiple witnesses—a method borne out by forensic crime eye-witness research. Generally, one witness alerts one to possibility, two unrelated witnesses provides substantiation, and three or more witnesses makes the case persuasive. This method, applied both to the mass of American testimony and the less reliable confessions of SS men from Schwabish Hall, paints a compelling picture of what really happened that December day in 1944. (276)

The book concludes with four invaluable appendices—I: “Survivors and Victims,” II: “Order of March: 285th FOAB,” and III: “Order of March: Kampfgruppe Peiper at the Baugez Crossroads”—provide granular detail on specific units and individuals involved in the massacre. They demonstrate that no other units than the lead elements of the 1st SS Panzer Regiment took part in the killing of the American POWs. In the final appendix, “Malmédy: In Search of the Truth,” Parker objectively assesses the many other studies of the Malmédy Massacre and indicates their relation to his own work. While admitting the problems posed by the pervasive secrecy maintained by surviving SS members, he concludes that the liquidation of the American prisoners reflected the German commanders’ desperate emphasis on speed and audacity (274).

In his exceptionally well researched study of one of the most controversial engagements of the Battle of the Bulge, Danny Parker has dispersed some of the fog of war that attended Hitler’s last gamble. Readers interested in forensic reconstruction and the Ardennes Offensive of 1944, specifically the details of the Malmédy Massacre, will find much of value in *Fatal Crossroads*.

3. E.g., Cuppens (note 2 above) and Dietrich Ziemssen, *The Malmédy-Trial: A Report Based on Documents and Personal Experiences* (Torrance, CA : Inst for Historical Review, 1981).