



A Machine Gunner's War: From Normandy to Victory with the 1st Infantry Division in World War II by Ernest Albert Andrews Jr. and David B. Hurt.

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While World War II memoirs abound, few have been written by combat soldiers. Audie Murphy and Eugene Sledge¹ come to mind, but even specialists must rely on oral histories or accounts by junior officers when discussing soldiers' experiences in the war. Very few veterans of the war survive to add more such works to the literature. But the publication of Ernest Andrews' detailed memoir, *A Machine Gunner's War* now gives us one more.

Andrews died before the actual publication of this book, but with the help of author/editor David Hurt, he drafted enough of the chapters to allow Hurt to see it through publication. Hurt first got to know Andrews while helping a friend, German army veteran William Lubbeck, write his memoir.² He heard enough of Andrews' stories to recognize the quality and precision of his recollections; he soon began working with Andrews on his own memoir. They were able to check Andrews's stories against information in unit records, including those of his own company. This enabled them to trace Andrews' story almost day-by-day from Normandy to the end of the war.

Ernest "Andy" Andrews (b. 1923) grew up in Signal Mountain, Tennessee, just outside of Chattanooga. He found outdoor activities, whether with the Boy Scouts or hunting squirrels with his brothers and friends, far more interesting than school. Drafted in 1943, he trained as a machine gunner. Sent to England in January 1944, he was assigned as a replacement to H Company, 2nd Battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment, part of the 1st Infantry Division, a veteran regular army unit that had already distinguished itself in combat in North Africa and Sicily and was now slated for the invasion of Normandy.

The book begins with Andrews' experiences in early June 1944, preparing for D-Day; it takes him through the landing at Omaha Beach before backtracking to sketch his early experiences and his training in the United States and England. The D-Day vignette typifies his story in that he missed most of the action. His regiment led the way onto the beach, but the landing craft charged with moving his platoon to the beach never showed up; by the time they landed, the beach was relatively safe.

Over the next several months, Andrews led a charmed life, barely coming under fire for long periods of time. H Company, the weapons company of his battalion, supported the line companies with heavy machine gun and mortar fire. Andrews carried a water-cooled machine gun of World War I design and often a 53-lb. tripod when his unit was attacking in the hedgerow country of Normandy. It participated in the breakout from Normandy and the rapid advance across

1. Authors respectively of *To Hell and Back* (NY: Henry Holt, 1949) and *With the Old Breed* (NY: Ballantine, 2001). See, too, Peter Kindsvatter, *American Soldiers: Ground Combat in the World Wars, Korea and Vietnam* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2003).

2. Viz., *At Leningrad's Gates: The Story of a Soldier with Army Group North* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2006).

France and Belgium to the German frontier near Aachen. His regiment was normally attacking, and Andrews rarely had to hold a line against German attacks.

Without a lot of intense combat to describe, Andrews concentrates on day-to-day life in his unit and the smaller actions he took part in. His experiences in the Boy Scouts and as a hunter stood him in good stead, and he sometimes received assignments to operate ahead of his unit. On September 12, during operations on Germany's western border, he was ordered to sneak up on a machine gun nest and destroy it with a grenade. As he approached the nest unseen, the gun stopped firing. "Then, strangely, the unmistakable sound of children crying reached my ears, though it was hard for me to determine its origin" (166). Peeking into the nest, he saw three seven-year-old German boys in Hitler Youth uniforms. There was a string attached to the trigger of the machine gun, and they had been told to pull it regularly to produce short bursts without aiming it. They were crying because they were out of ammunition and did not know what was coming next. This struck Andrews as a sign of German desperation and a warning of what he might encounter later.

Things gradually got worse for Andrews and his company. In the Hürtgen Forest in November, he finally found himself on the front lines defending against German counterattacks. On the night of 18/19 November, he was manning a gun by himself and fending off attacks to his front when he heard an explosion above him.

Taken completely by surprise, it took me a moment before I realized what had happened. Exploiting our focus on the frontal assault against our lower positions on the hill, the Germans had sent another force to circle around behind us and wipe out our two gun crews higher up. Having gained control of the high ground, the dozen or more enemy troops up there were now shooting down at us. Because of the angle, I could not elevate the barrel of the machine gun high enough to fire back at them, and even if I had been able to shoot up at them my vantage point below made it nearly impossible to see the Germans who were firing down at me. (219)

Not knowing what else to do, he kept firing forward until American artillery took out the Germans behind him.

After the Hürtgen Forest, Andrews' unit saw action in the Battle of the Bulge, especially during efforts to push the Germans back in January. The combat was intense, but this time they were advancing, however slowly, and the physical conditions were as much a problem as the Germans. The pattern of action reverted to something like what it had been earlier: German opposition in the last months of the war was more intermittent and his unit again provided support rather than having to hold lines against concerted attacks. Despite suffering several minor wounds and a bout of frostbite, Andrews survived the war and went on to a career in Christian education, dying in 2016 at age 92.

Readers interested in combat stories per se will be disappointed by *A Machine Gunner's Story*, since Andrews missed much of the worst fighting his regiment engaged in, whether by accident or because of the nature of a weapons company's mission. For anyone else, it offers a treasure trove of the daily experiences of soldiers in the field. The book is accessible to a broad audience, but its level of detail will make it useful to specialists as well.