

The Lorraine Campaign: Patton's Bloodiest Test

Patton at Bay: The Lorraine Campaign, September to December 1944 by John Nelson Richard, Praeger Publishing, Westport, Conn., 1999, 320 pp., \$45.

The author has written an ambitious, provocative, and well-researched account of the Lorraine Campaign. Moreover, he has taken on the daunting task of examining George Patton's generalship. Richard suggests Patton failed to wage the most effective warfare possible.

During late July and early August 1944, Patton's Third Army spearheaded Operation Cobra, the unforgettable breakout from the Normandy beachhead. Throughout August, the Third Army was a battering force that rolled practically unchecked through Rheims and the great Champagne vineyards, through Verdun, with its gruesome reminders of the horrors of World War I, and the Argonne, where Patton was wounded and nearly died in 1918.

Following the advance across southern Normandy, the only logical employment of Third Army was for it to proceed into the Province of Lorraine, which was the shortest route to Germany. This was in keeping with Eisenhower's strategy of advancing on a broad front and eliminating the enemy's fighting units west of the Rhine.

With German forces in total disarray at the end of August, a virtually undefended Lorraine beckoned. Patton pleaded with his boss, General Omar Bradley, that if Third Army could be allocated enough fuel — as little as 400,000 gallons — he could be inside Germany in two days. Time was crucial before the inevitable reaction by the Germans to shore up their defense, preventing Patton from advancing to and penetrating the Siegfried Line. Bradley refused Patton's request for more fuel. Unfortunately, the farther and faster Allied armies advanced, it became more difficult to sustain supply lines. Consequently, by early September, Third Army had ground to a virtual halt along the flooded Moselle River. In places, Patton's tanks and vehicles literally ran out of fuel on the battlefield.

The sudden turnabout from pursuit to static warfare within the space of a few days ended any chance of rapidly cracking the Siegfried Line. Instead, from September until mid-December, Patton was forced to direct a frustrat-

ing battle for Lorraine, plagued by supply shortages, critical interference from superiors, flooded rivers, fortified cities, difficult terrain, untrained troops, dreadful weather, and the most powerful of the German armies in the West. Patton had little opportunity to wage a fast, successful campaign.

The author, a graduate student in military history, has failed to avoid the passion evident on both sides of any discussion of generalship that typically challenge traditional views through newly uncovered evidence, or by highlighting a less considered perspective. Historian B. H. Liddell Hart maintained that, to make an accurate judgment of generalship, the historian had to consider conditions and relative resources, along with those factors that lie outside a commander's control.

Richard insists that in order to pass judgment on Patton's part in the Lorraine Campaign, he did, for the most part, work within the general guidelines suggested by Liddell Hart.

However, the author neglects to give proper weight to uncontrollable factors in the Lorraine Campaign. Instead, he tends to resort to partisan judgment, and at times seems slavishly bound to condemnation of Patton. For example, he argues that Patton did not fully appreciate the drastic change in terrain, and completely misread the ability of the German Army to stand and fight. Few historians would accept the comment without debate, in light of Patton's comment that at Luneville and Arracourt east of Nancy was, "As bitter and protracted fighting as I have ever encountered."

Richard deduces further that Patton's fascination with the West Wall and the Rhine blinded him to the fact that problems posed by intermediate objectives, like Metz, required immediate attention. He condescendingly suggests that Patton, an astute student of war, should have taken time to read *FM 31-50* as it pertains to the attack on fortified positions. Richard censures Patton for not visiting XX Corps often enough in September, when in fact the author includes a list indicating nine visits by Patton or a staff member during September. It is not uncommon for a staff officer to represent the commander.



By mid-September, 1944, the Third Army had been in near-continuous combat for nearly two months. The author's crowning judgment was to condemn General Patton for taking a Sunday off to play with his pet dog.

There is no question that the Lorraine Campaign, fought between Third Army's greatest triumphs — Operation Cobra and the relief of the Bulge — became Patton's bloodiest and least successful campaign. Richard argues that Patton cannot be excused from his failure to make sound tactical decisions. He further concludes that the general's difficulties were caused sometimes by a failure to face the obvious, but also with the incompatibility of his established battle philosophy with the battle conditions in Lorraine, particularly his concepts of minimal interference and the utilization of speed.

Historians judge performances and perpetuate or revise early impressions. There is no way objectively to measure generalship — each circumstance in which a general officer serves is unique. Whether the prolonged outcome of the Lorraine Campaign was due solely to generalship or uncontrollable factors — or a combination of both — remains debatable.

The author's well-written study of the Lorraine Campaign is useful because it has been thoroughly researched, drawing heavily on Hugh M. Coles' official history of the Lorraine Campaign and a broad range of other sources. The book is supplemented by full orders of battle, casualty and equipment losses, maps and period photos. Assuredly, *Patton at Bay* is required reading for scholars of WWII.

DENVER FUGATE
Radcliff, Ky.