

# BOOKS

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## ***An Exciting Combat History... ...But with a Hidden Agenda***

**Grenadiers** by Kurt Meyer, translated by Michael Mende, J.J. Fedorowicz Publishing, 106 Browning Blvd., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3K 0L7 (PH: 204-837-6080), 1994, 254 pages. \$45.00.

One might say that *Grenadiers*, an interesting combat narrative by a key leader in WWII Germany's panzer forces, is for armor officers what Rommel's *Infantry Attacks* is for infantry officers.

Told in the first person, from an enemy perspective, it is a personal account of Kurt "Panzer" Meyer's experiences in World War II, beginning in 1939, when Meyer was a reconnaissance battalion commander in the 1st SS Panzer Division, fighting in Poland, Holland, France, Greece, Russia, and eventually in France. By that time, he was division commander of the 12th SS Panzer Division. Meyer provides an intense description of his experiences in mechanized warfare; one can almost feel the wind and smell the gunpowder. The translation is excellent, and little is lost in Meyer's countless stories of men gallantly charging against foes no less so vigorous and bold, if less successful. Meyer paints himself as a fair-fighting, gracious victor, never cutting down foes in cold-blood, offering cigarettes to captured officers, a man caught up in his times, doing deeds he could not conceive of as criminal.

He describes the attitude of the men in his unit as outstanding, and is often moved by their camaraderie, especially when enemy fire takes several of his drivers out from under him.

There are tense moments. Meyers describes the assault on a hill in Greece as his most "dire situation" as an officer, when he had to toss a grenade behind his covering men (and himself) to get them to assault. In Russia, he outruns his reconnaissance battalion and finds himself in the middle of a Russian assembly area. He promptly exchanges cigarettes with the ranking Russian and waits for his men to arrive and rescue him on cue. Countless stories of such bravery and leadership abound. Meyer is the leader every soldier dreams of being led by. He joins his new troops as a comrade and rides with the reconnaissance battalion in their first battle

when he becomes their regimental commander. His units never break, from Normandy to the Falaise Pocket, even though they never receive reinforcements and are at below 20% strength when he is captured. They never break international laws of warfare, either, according to Meyer.

Only near the end of the book does Meyer's hidden agenda emerge. It becomes clear that he is writing to convince readers that the members of the 1st and 12th SS Panzer Divisions were soldiers who did their duty to their country, and were not war criminals. He skillfully avoids any discussions of a political nature, focusing instead on battlefield vignettes. The target audience is the future military historian whom Meyer must have pictured as a well-educated doubting Thomas. He knows that after time, there will be those who doubt the judgment of history, those who want to know details of life in the Waffen SS. He bluntly states this near the end of his story.

Meyer was convicted of war crimes because he was in command when a member of his unit executed 37 Canadian soldiers within rifle shot of their comrades on the Normandy beachhead. Though Meyer does not dispute that the event occurred, he despises the men who convicted him. While he admits that war crimes occurred in his command, he insists they were not unpunished and not without cause. At his trial, he tries rather unsuccessfully to convince his judges that the Canadians had committed exactly the same crimes on the same day. He makes little headway because the commander who had faced him on the beaches of Normandy happened to be the chairman of the tribunal which eventually sentences him to death.

*(Editor's Note: Soldiers of the 12th SS Panzer Division murdered 19 soldiers of Canada's Royal Winnipeg Rifles on 7 June 1944, near Authie. The bodies of the prisoners were thrown down in a roadway and crushed by trucks and tank treads, according to one Canadian historical study.)*

The reader who believes Meyer's one-sided argument might be convinced that Meyer was wronged, and that possibly many more like him were also falsely accused. The most convincing piece of evidence that Meyer presents is that, on his birthday in prison, on death row, company

and field grade officers who had fought against the 12th SS Panzer Division at Normandy threw Meyer a secret birthday party. He was allowed to see his wife, and was promised that his execution would be commuted by their efforts. This happened, as promised.

Shortly after writing this book, Meyer would die of a heart attack. To the end, he spent his days trying to raise support for former members of the SS, who received no pensions and were treated as outcasts. He died trying to rewrite history, and in this book, he has.

The book was never translated into English until 1994, and most of the evidence is so convoluted it is hard to prove or disprove. One thing is certain: Kurt "Panzer" Meyer was a great warrior whose story is well worth reading. Whether or not his conviction on charges of war crimes was just is a question for great debate. If his side of the story is not true, why was Meyer freed? And, at what level is a war crime an individual decision or a command climate problem? This is the puzzle which Meyer frames in his well-told story. Meyer cleverly convinces the audience that he is a gracious war hero and then paints the picture of vindictive Allied war tribunals acting out of victor's anger. Clearly, there are other sides to the story of Meyer's part in the war crimes; it is very much worth investigating more deeply.

The amount of "political correctness" involved in writing or translating a book of this nature cannot be overestimated. Meyer never mentions the Jewish question and, for all intents and purposes, plays ignorant of the Final Solution. In not addressing the actions of the Allgemeine (General) SS, Meyer has limited the topic to something for which only few can answer — the conduct of Waffen SS units in combat. He is very careful not to bruise his enemies' egos. He often praises their bravery, a subliminal method to gain their support and make himself look more humble and heroic.

But overall, Meyer has created a masterpiece in combat documentary. The book is packed full of adventure and pictures. It does lack maps, which makes following Meyer's path difficult at best. However, any leader of mechanized forces should arm himself with maps and read this book.

More adventurous historians could travel to Normandy, where, at the Abbey of the Ardenne, near Caen, Meyer had his regimental headquarters. This is where the 37 Canadians were executed and buried. There is a gardener in the abbey who was a child when Meyer was there. He holds keys to the towers where Meyer could see all the way to the beaches at Juno and Gold. This man gave insight into Meyer the man. He said to me, "No we did not hate this man. He was very charismatic. He came here in peace after his release from prison, and some people were afraid. It was a bad time for our people and his. Maybe he was angry with us. But no, Panzer Meyer said he only wanted to see the battlefield again. He said a great warrior must always return to his battlefield."

In the end, Meyer's book is an attempt to return to the battlefield and separate himself from the record revealed at his trial. He honestly believes he was wronged, and wants a chance to set the record straight. Despite the author's bias, and the book's lack of maps, it is a must-read account of armored warfare from an enemy perspective. Whether or not you agree with it, Meyer's story is a compelling one.

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**The Rise of U.S. Grant** by Colonel Arthur L. Conger (1872-1951), new introduction by Brooks D. Simpson, Da Capo Press, New York. Originally published 1931, republished 1996. 362 pages (includes 12 maps and 8 illustrations), plus 25 pages of appendices, bibliography, and index. \$15.95.

You've got to be a big U.S. Grant fan to really appreciate the full content of this meticulously detailed book. The new introduction, by a noted Civil War historian, updates the relevance of the text, yet with every page, I was waiting for something to happen as I plodded through verbatim orders and counter-orders between Grant and his subordinates at Cairo, Illinois; Forts Henry and Donelson; Shiloh; and Vicksburg. COL Conger's formal, dry writing style, although appropriate for the early 1930s, fails to hold the 21st century reader's full interest.

However, select parts of the book are quite interesting. Specifically, COL Conger details how Grant rose, in 1861, from an obscure civilian clerk in Galena, Illinois, to command the Union armies by 1864. There are several interesting leadership points concerning Grant's rapid rise. Foremost, COL Conger highlights Grant's common sense. Without the flash and charisma associated with many Civil War generals,

Grant relied on his ability to chop complex problems down into simple segments. For example, when dealing with strategy, Grant had no need for multiple intelligence annexes, detailed orders of battle, or studies of the enemy commander's personality. To Grant, who boiled down information to its necessary essence, all questions about the enemy could be answered by understanding strength, disposition, and intention.

Most historians focus on Grant's leadership and strategic record from Vicksburg through Appomattox. In contrast, *The Rise of U.S. Grant* provides a detailed analysis of Grant's tactical and logistical skills at the regimental and division level. If you are willing to sift through a cumbersome text, then you will enjoy linking together the daily events in Grant's early commands that shaped the eventual leader of the Union Army.

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**From Battlefield to Boardroom: The Leadership Lessons of Robert E. Lee** by Bil Holton, Ph.D., Presidio Press, Calif., 1995. 158 pages. \$9.95.

For over one hundred and thirty years, Robert E. Lee has been an inspiration to military leaders. Bold and audacious in the attack; firm and resolute in the defense; magnanimous and charitable in victory; dignified and courageous in defeat, can Lee also be an inspiration to civilian leaders? As military leaders, we understand the timeless universality of leaders and soldiers. What inspired and motivated the Roman legionnaire still inspires and motivates the modern soldier; it is only updated to account for era and social circumstances. From battlefield to boardroom is an attempt to show civilian leaders that they, too, can learn from past military leaders, and who better to study than Robert E. Lee? Unfortunately, the transition from battlefield to boardroom is not very smooth.

Dr. Holton is a management and leadership consultant who, rightly, believes there are qualities essential for good leadership regardless of profession. To illustrate his point, he uses a series of brief sketches of Robert E. Lee's leadership and several vignettes of Civil War battles. Drawn from numerous sources, each sketch is titled with a leadership trait or quality and arranged alphabetically. Following each sketch is Dr. Holton's interpretation and business application for that trait.

Under the headings of the basic leadership competencies, Dr. Holton is on firm ground. The traits of honesty, integrity, loy-

alty, and courage are essential for any successful leader. Dr. Holton's civilian interpretation and analysis of Lee's actions under these headings ring true and are useful for all leaders. However, some of his analysis misses the mark completely for military readers. The most striking was a very moving description of the desperate fighting at the "Bloody Angle." During a critical point in the battle, a group of Confederate soldiers were attempting to surrender when another Confederate soldier shouted, "Shoot them fellows! Shoot them fellows!" The soldiers trying to surrender were gunned down by their own. Soldiers fight for each other; their highest loyalty is to their buddy next to them. It is a very intense loyalty that when betrayed results in incidents like at the "Bloody Angle." That would be a military interpretation. Dr. Holton, however, uses this extreme act as an example of "Groupthink" warning, "...in their intense desire to be team players and collaborators... group members censor the kind of independent, critical thinking that produces more objective and discriminating results." The connection to the example is a stretch. In another, Dr. Holton uses Lee's last words, "Strike the tent," as the starting point to list similar words a civilian leader might utter such as, "Balance the budget" or "Decouple old electronics networks." Perhaps, these words carry the same significance to a plant manager as Lee's to a soldier, but next to Lee's, these phrases seem incongruous.

It has become fashionable to read and study civilian management methods and theories in the name of breaking old paradigms and moving the Army into the 21st century. It is imperative that we maintain an open mind and accept leadership lessons from any source. However, *From Battlefield to Boardroom* illustrates the gulf in the "bottom line" between the Profession of Arms and all other professions. Few, if any, CEO's have had to make decisions they knew would cause the death of their subordinates or, like Lee, have had the fate of a nation placed on their shoulders. Yet, a 22-year-old platoon leader may be called upon to make life and death decisions daily. We must also remember that we do not have "customers" or "products," rather we lead and command soldiers and units of the United States Army.

Dr. Holton is to be commended for his thorough and extensive research. The passages he chose for the sketches provide concise insight into Robert E. Lee's personality. He is to be further commended for his noble attempt to teach leadership principles to civilian managers by interpreting military history into business language. However, a soldier may find some of his interpretations disconcerting.

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