The Bitter Truth About Malmédy

On December 17, 1944, a convoy of unarmored trucks carrying Battery B of the US Army's 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion left Schevenhütte, Germany, near the dark and foreboding Hürtgen Forest that had been the focal point of such vicious combat, for Luxembourg and what was hoped would be some easier duty.

Most of them would never arrive. In the Ardennes, just south of Malmédy, Belgium, at a crossroads called Baugnez, the column fell foul of the spearhead of the German offensive that would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. By the end of the day, some eighty US soldiers would be dead, having surrendered to the improvised German task force known as Kampfgruppe Peiper, and, unarmed and herded into a field,
subsequently murdered by troops of the Waffen SS. It was at least the second such massacre of Western Allied troops by the Waffen SS, the first being the murder of some 80 British POWs near Dunkerque (Dunkirk), France, in 1940. This was also the only such large-scale massacre of American troops by the Germans in World War II.

The Malmédy Massacre, as this incident has become known, is the subject of a new book by Danny S. Parker called Fatal Crossroads: The Untold Story of the Malmédy Massacre at the Battle of the Bulge.

The reason for the massacre, as well as the responsibility, has never been fully understood. That is the point of Parkers work in Fatal Crossroads. He seeks to determine whether this was a battlefield incident, which affects all armies including the US Army, or a deliberate slaughter.

In his efforts, Parker has created a military history investigative masterpiece, one that should rank up there with Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway, by Jonathan Parshall and Tony Tully; The Battle of Surigao Strait, also by Tully; and Champion Hill: Decisive Battle for Vicksburg, by Timothy B. Smith. Part World War II, part true crime, part detective work, part archaeology. I literally could not put it down.

Two elements stand out in making Fatal Crossroads a must-read.

First, the book is the culmination of some two decades of investigation by Parker, who is an authority on the Battle of the Bulge in general. Two decades of pouring over transcripts of the interviews and criminal trials related to the massacre, as well as his own interviews of witnesses. You can see the results in the extensive endnotes, which I strongly advise checking out as the narrative is read.

I cannot do justice to Parkers research in this single post, so let me just give a taste of it. In Fatal Crossroads, Parker identifies (almost) every soldier who died on the field at Baugnez and shows the location of the bodies on a map. Parker also identifies every single German vehicle involved in the massacre and shows the positions of the vehicles at the time of the shooting. He identifies the crews and officers involved. This is an investigative tour de force.

Which brings me to the second feature of Fatal Crossroads and that is the story itself.

Parker has written this book based on mountains of evidence, but also made a balanced presentation from the perspectives of both the US POWs and the SS troops. The chapters of the book generally alternate between the US and German perspectives. It is filled with eyewitness accounts from the surviving POWs as well as the SS troops. The accounts can seem to be repetitive, but though they describe the same event, they can differ
wildly. Some say the first shot of the Malmédy Massacre came from a guy in a tank with a pistol. Others say it was a halftrack. Still others say it was a jeep. Some say the vehicle that tried to aim its big gun at them was a tank, others say it was a halftrack. After reading this book, you will understand the unreliability of eyewitness testimony.

Parker has arranged these eyewitness accounts with a dramatic flair. Though you know what is going to happen, you can feel the tension build, especially among the US POWs, as little by little they realize something is seriously wrong. Why is the halftrack aiming its gun at us? Why are they mounting machine guns? Why are they loading ammunition? It is masterfully written.

At the same time, Parker also gives the perspective of these lead elements of Kampfgruppe Peipers attack and takes great pains to explain the conundrum they face. As Parker points out, in the SS, disobeying orders could mean execution. And their orders were to take no prisoners and spread terror like a storm wind, as Peiper put it, in part as revenge for the Allied bombing of Germany. But they actually took prisoners -- there is a difference between taking no prisoners and taking prisoners only to shoot them. They are supposed to move as fast as possible, but now they are stuck with some 120 POWs (and trucks, which the vehicle-starved Germans desperately want). No one seems to know what to do with them.

Which only goes to explain the massacre, not justify it. There is no justifying what took place at the Baugnez crossroads.

It is so easy to see the letters SS, assume very, very bad and leave it at that. While that is understandable and usually accurate, it is not always so (see, e.g. Wilhelm Bittrich and the 9th SS Panzer Division Hohenstaufen) and is intellectually lazy. Parker has not fallen into this trap and has instead tried to use the aforementioned mountains of evidence to find out who (if anyone) ordered the massacre and the specific orders or combat objectives that led to it.

In so doing, he has come up with findings that may surprise readers. As they should.

During a time when we are losing the last of our World War II veterans to the Big Guy Upstairs, Danny S. Parker has taken this chance to memorialize the very names of the troops of Battery B of the US Army's 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, who gave their lives not in combat but in a needless slaughter by a vicious, sadistic enemy.

I cant recommend Fatal Crossroads highly enough. Take a look at it, to honor the memories of those fallen troops, but also to check the evidence for yourself and see if you agree.

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