

Peter Mansoor. *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941-1945*. University Press of Kansas, 1999. Pp. 1 + 267. Glossary, notes, bibliography, and index. Review by David Kerby

Peter Mansoor's *The GI Offensive in Europe* argues that American infantry divisions in World War II were more effective than German divisions.<sup>1</sup> This argument challenges earlier writings that attributed the victory to American industrial might and the ability to overwhelm the Germans with material and troops. Mansoor cites works by soldiers, historians, and authors S.L.A. Marshall, Trevor N. Dupuy, Martin van Creveld, John Keegan, Max Hastings, and John Ellis for the foundational works of this field. Mansoor calls these earlier claims "fashionable," but he rejects them (p.2). He counters that sheer numbers alone were insufficient for victory without quality forces with levels of combat effectiveness. Mansoor defines combat effectiveness as "the ability of a military organization to achieve its assigned missions with the least expenditure of resources (both material and human) in the shortest amount of time" (p.3). He subsequently identifies four factors that contribute to combat effectiveness: human factors, organizational factors, technical factors, and the capability to endure. Human factors are qualities such as leadership, discipline, morale, and group cohesion. Organizational factors refer to the ways a unit organizes itself around its equipment and personnel. For example, early in the War, armored vehicles were kept separate from infantry units until leaders discovered that integrating the two proved most effective. Technical factors are the quality of weapons and equipment and the competence with which soldiers utilize the equipment. The ability to coordinate artillery and air-support or to integrate machine guns in support of an infantry attack are technical factors. Finally, endurance refers to a unit's ability to continue fighting over extended periods. A unit that can sustain itself despite casualties, material losses, and physical exhaustion possesses good endurance. Combining these factors determines the ability of a military unit to accomplish a given mission without sustaining insurmountable losses. To explore the combat effectiveness of U.S. infantry divisions in World War II, Mansoor organizes his work chronologically to follow the Army's development. His first and last chapters serve as an introduction and conclusion. The rest of the book details the organization, mobilization and training, and various combat experiences from North Africa to Germany. He builds his argument from the plethora of primary sources available on the World War II U.S. Army. Archived U.S. Army doctrine, memorandums, and policies on organization, training, and tactics provided context on the structure and development of the infantry divisions. After-action reports, oral history with veterans, memoirs from prominent commanders, captured German documents, and interviews with German prisoners all document and attest to the capabilities and shortfalls of American units. Mansoor's motivations for writing are not clear, but it appears to be to defend the honor of the U.S. Army's mobilization and performance during World War II. He states that his goal is to bring balance into the debate over the American Army's performance in the Second World War. This reviewer suspects another motive that stemmed from a cultural battle in the U.S. military during the 1980s and 1990s when Mansoor wrote this book. This cultural battle surrounded the ideas of "attrition" and "maneuver" as two different styles of war.

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<sup>1</sup> "Division" is an organized unit typically incorporating around 15,000 troops. Ninety separate infantry divisions existed throughout the course of WWII. An infantry division in WWII was commonly composed of three infantry regiments plus numerous supporting units like engineers, doctors, artillery, tanks, and trucks. Each infantry regiment contained three infantry battalions. Infantry battalions contained three or four infantry companies and a specialized weapons company.

Mansoor identifies himself as in favor of the attrition style of war, while “maneuverists” fill the ranks supporting the authors Mansoor seeks to debunk.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter two, Mansoor argues that the method of manning, organizing, and training the infantry divisions was fraught with error but still produced combat-effective units. He opens the chapter with a description of the U.S. Army in 1940. As Germany invaded France, America only had eight weakened infantry divisions and eighteen poorly trained National Guard divisions. Over four years, the U.S. Army would grow to 89 infantry divisions. Creating these divisions proved difficult. The Army struggled to balance creating new units with training the units it already had. Infantry units lacked well-trained officers, and Army command split these officers between training units and the deploying divisions. Units like the Air Corps had priority selection of recruits and consequentially gained most of the high-quality soldiers, leaving lower-quality troops to the infantry. The Army’s constantly changing doctrine also resulted in multiple organizational or personnel changes within the divisions, which hindered unit cohesion. During the Louisiana and Carolina maneuvers of 1941, the participating divisions demonstrated their low readiness. Additionally, the smaller units within the divisions lacked extensive training or an effective evaluation process. The Army’s attempts to centralize and control all training stifled the initiative of lower-level commanders, and equipment shortages hindered training efforts. Once divisions were ready to deploy, they faced further difficulties while awaiting shipping. They often received new soldiers at the docks, and shipping delays forced the divisions to sit idly for weeks. The bureaucratic tendencies of higher-level headquarters resulted in consistent decisions to sacrifice training to meet bureaucratic tasks. Even when the U.S. Army reached 89 divisions, the failure of America to stick with its “Germany First” strategy hindered these divisions further. Infantry divisions that should have been fighting in Europe in 1944 found themselves fighting in the Pacific, the Mediterranean, Africa, and China. The replacement system was also flawed and could not keep up with increasing casualties. The Army instead began stripping divisions-in-training of their troops for replacements. These replacements showed up to their combat units without the necessary combat training or group cohesion. Finally, the War Department failed to incorporate African-American troops into infantry divisions, and this failure kept many capable soldiers from supporting front-line efforts in Europe. Despite these shortcomings, Mansoor claims that divisions typically quickly learned from failures in combat. Additionally, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall, handpicked all the division commanders, and his selections typically exhibited strong leadership that was critical to their division’s combat effectiveness.

Chapter three argues that despite shortcomings of the Mobilization Training Plan (MTP), the Army succeeded in forming “capable” infantry divisions. Mansoor clarifies that only a few of the divisions were “highly effective” when they first entered combat. However, most

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<sup>2</sup> The history of the attrition versus maneuver debate has filled entire books. In summary, the overarching theory asserts that the conduct of war exists on a spectrum. On one side is complete attrition, where two opponents battle until “the last man is standing.” Attrition warfare includes the frontal bayonet charges of the American Civil War or massive artillery barrages in World War I. On the other side is maneuver. Maneuver warfare implies some sort of movement in space and time in an attempt to avoid attacking an enemy’s strength. Instead, maneuver warfare includes deception, stealth, surprise, or firepower paired with maneuver to allow an army to strike at an enemy’s weak spot. Maneuver warfare includes the guerrilla tactics of revolutionaries in the American Revolutionary War, the German invasion of France in 1940, or the American invasion of Iraq in 1991. The American military continues to this day to debate which way of war is more appropriate. American technological and industrial superiority has enabled the American military to wage attrition-style warfare for much of its history, but maneuverists argue that this must change in the face of catastrophic nuclear weapons or elusive guerrillas.

divisions were “acceptable” in their combat effectiveness upon their first contact with the enemy. Mansoor uses case studies from six divisions to examine the pre-combat training and later successes or failures in combat of these six divisions. Across the six divisions, Mansoor notes that the MTP failed to deliver adequate small unit training, suppressed troop initiative, and failed to train for close air support. While the pre-combat training the Army provided to divisions was insufficient, Mansoor identifies two variables present in the more successful divisions. The first variable was leadership. Divisions with strong leaders at the division, regimental, and battalion levels fared better in combat. The second variable was supplementary training. Divisions that incorporated unofficial training plans focused on the battalion level and below saw more success in initial combat.

In chapter four, Mansoor argues that American combat in North Africa and Sicily helped improve the combat effectiveness of US infantry divisions. As a consequence of sub-standard training discussed in the previous chapters, Mansoor details the disastrous first encounters between American and German troops. The pre-eminent example, the Battle of Kasserine Pass, resulted in the worst operational and strategic defeat for American forces of the entire war. German forces managed to outmaneuver and surround entire American regiments and battalions. Poorly-trained soldiers fumbled to implement new rocket launchers as German tanks overran them. In Sicily, American divisions performed slightly better but still learned many hard lessons. Mansoor concludes the chapter noting the importance of these lessons, this “school of hard knocks,” that prepared these units for later successful combat against the Germans in Europe. However, this chapter appears to detract from Mansoor’s overarching argument. American divisions repeatedly failed their tasks or only succeeded at the cost of immense casualties. The lessons learned that helped make these units more combat effective than the Germans in 1944 were not new lessons. A notable example of this was the American failure to attack German reverse-slope defenses. The German’s implemented this technique in the First World War, and American bewilderment at encountering it was inexcusable. The lessons learned in the school of hard knocks in North Africa and Sicily were only possible *because* America had a surplus of material and manpower to replace the equipment and men lost.

In chapter five, Mansoor argues that American divisions during the Italian Campaign, 1943-1944, were “flexible, resilient, and capable of functioning at a high level of effectiveness over extended periods of combat” (p.132). However, he proceeds to list that poor tactics, strategic failures, and improperly trained replacements hindered American combat operations on the Italian peninsula. The invasion of Salerno barely succeeded, and the initial infantry divisions ashore failed to dislodge German forces and were on the brink of retreating into the sea. It was only after significant reinforcements that the Americans could make inland gains. However, they still failed to defeat the German forces, who withdrew to strong defensive positions south of Rome. Mansoor further details that several infantry divisions fruitlessly attacked these positions until they “had been bled white” (p.114). The casualties these divisions sustained surpassed all American anticipations and overwhelmed the replacement system, and Mansoor notes that some regiments suffered 70% casualties. The failed assault across the Rapido River in January 1944 is another example Mansoor cites. Here, the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division suffered over 2,000 casualties in two days. Lack of coordination between supporting units and poor rehearsals certainly contributed to the attack’s failure but these were fundamental lessons that should have been fine-tuned in training. These types of failures were inexcusable for a unit of any experience. The 36<sup>th</sup> Division required complete reconstitution; a feat only possible because of the massive reserves of manpower available in the United States. The author recounts other near-failures and costly

successes at Monte Cassino, Anzio, and smaller operations. Mansoor contradicts his claims in the book's introduction as he details two capabilities that prevented the complete annihilation of American forces on the Italian peninsula. American artillery's ability to accurately and consistently saturate German positions protected struggling infantry divisions and American logistics kept the infantry divisions supplied with replacement men and equipment. It appears that, once again, the sheer weight of American material and manpower saved the American infantry divisions from their blunders.

Mansoor argues in chapter six that the invasion of Normandy and subsequent fighting among the hedgerows demonstrated that US infantry divisions were "tough, resilient, and capable of accomplishing their missions under the worst of battlefield conditions" (p.133). Absent from this argument is any mention of combat effectiveness. Mansoor also claims that the successful invasion of Normandy was the premier evidence of the MTP's success; civilians transitioned to soldiers in a short time and overcame the German forces in Normandy. Surprisingly, Mansoor details the American logic behind the Normandy invasion as a continuation of the "American way of war" (p.159) from the Civil War and World War I. U.S. commanders believed their best chance of success relied on a strategy of attrition, and this required attacking German military strength. This assertion further undermines Mansoor's original claims because attrition strategies historically succeed only if a military possessed overwhelming manpower and material compared to its opponent. Mansoor even uses the phrase "to bludgeon an enemy to death" to describe this strategy (p.158-9).<sup>3</sup> While the D-Day invasion was a success, Mansoor's descriptions credit the success more to individual initiative and creativity among junior leaders than effective training and preparation. U.S. infantry divisions later struggled among the hedgerows of the French countryside, and this is inexcusable since prior intelligence provided U.S. troops adequate knowledge to prepare for such fighting while training in England. Slowly, the infantry divisions adapted to the hedgerows, relearned lessons from World War I, and eventually collapsed the German defenses around Normandy. Of the divisions that participated in the battle, Mansoor only cites three as being overwhelmingly successful from the landings to the final defeat of German defenses.

Chapter seven argues that, after a few months of challenging combat following the Normandy landings, American divisions finally displayed levels of combat effectiveness equal or superior to German infantry units. Furthermore, Mansoor asserts that the successful American pursuit of German forces back to the German border proved that the U.S. infantry divisions had achieved a high level of effectiveness. Again, Mansoor seems to contradict himself. While appropriately lauding American infantry divisions' growing capability and experience, he also cites instances of successful frontal attacks and attrition warfare. Indeed, he points out that the combat effectiveness of these divisions only came after many casualties in June and July 1944. Again, it appears that Mansoor is unknowingly describing the "school of hard knocks" situation the American Expeditionary Forces faced in World War I. Eventually, U.S. divisions successfully implemented combined arms warfare in the fall of 1944 and mitigated the steep

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction, Mansoor says of the argument he is challenging, "A fashionable argument in the past two decades has been that the Allies won World War II only through the sheer weight of matériel they threw at the Wehrmacht in a relatively unskilled manner... The more combat-effective German army was in the end bulldozed by a less capable, but more numerous, enemies – or so the argument goes" (p.2).

costs of frontal attacks.<sup>4</sup> Several US divisions effectively stopped German counterattacks against the Normandy landings and pushed the Germans back to their homeland. However, Mansoor mentions the example of the 80<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and further undermines his main argument. The 80<sup>th</sup> Division engaged in combat for the first time in the Battle of the Falaise Gap and ultimately failed. American divisions, then, continued to only achieve combat effectiveness at the expense of significant casualties and much battlefield experience.

In chapter eight, Mansoor argues that, by the end of 1944, American infantry divisions were, on the whole, able to outperform German infantry units. He discusses actions at the Siegfried Line, Lorraine, and in the Vosges Campaigns as evidence for his argument. While previous chapters failed to support his argument, this one supports it quite well. Mansoor effectively shows that even new infantry divisions performed well in their first engagements during late 1944. By this point, pre-combat training was improving based on after-action reports, and divisions utilized time away from the front-line to train replacements adequately. Divisions utilized their troops and supporting arms effectively, and Mansoor points out that “GIs rarely lost a tactical engagement in the fall of 1944” (p.214). However, Mansoor partially credits these successes to American manpower reserves that helped sustain these divisions despite losses.

Chapter nine argues that the Battle of the Bulge near the town of Bastogne was another proving point for American combat effectiveness. Mansoor argues that the combined-arms defense and small-unit actions in less-than-ideal conditions against some of the best forces the Germans possessed showed that American units were able to compete on the same level as the Germans. Despite German gains in their offensive that resulted in the creation of “the bulge,” the valiant delaying actions of U.S. infantry divisions enabled American forces to move reinforcements to the area. Mansoor attributes the poor performance of a few divisions to the “stripping” of their personnel by higher command before the battle. Prior to the German offensive, U.S. commanders considered the area around Bastogne a quiet sector. Divisions in the area were there because they were understrength or yet to experience combat. Mansoor concludes that despite being short on supplies, out-numbered, surrounded, and battered by poor weather, the infantry divisions successfully held the Germans back, which displayed just how far American combat effectiveness had come.

In chapter ten, Mansoor closes his book by arguing that, in 1945, the U.S. Army achieved the height of its combat effectiveness. Here, he discusses the final campaigns of the American Army as they fought into Germany. These last operations included the problematic and complex seizure of bridges so that American forces could flow into Germany. Mansoor points out that American combat experience by this point made the U.S. infantry divisions into seasoned veterans which rivaled the German Wehrmacht at its prime. The movement of supplies, replacement integration, and combined-arms coordination reached a point of effectiveness previously unachieved among American forces. Mansoor ends the chapter with a brief conclusion that Nazi Germany eventually succumbed to the “superiority of Allied power” (p.247). With an argument centered on countering the belief that overwhelming power was how Americans defeated the Germans, this seems an odd way to end the final chapter.

Mansoor ultimately fails to effectively support his argument that American infantry divisions in World War II were more effective than German divisions. Early in the book,

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<sup>4</sup> Combined arms warfare refers to the combination of “arms” - artillery, air, tanks, and infantry - to attack an enemy from different approaches and in varying ways. These arms provide unique benefits to the other arms that can overwhelm an enemy when combined properly.

Mansoor begins adding caveats to his argument. The Americans were more combat effective...but only towards the last year of the war... and only after significant combat experience and casualties...and only if the divisions had effective leadership to implement those lessons learned... and only so long as the massive American industrial base was able to continue to replace their equipment and personnel losses. These continued refinements to his argument result in a claim drastically different from the one with which he opens and closes his book. A more accurate thesis would be, "American infantry divisions were only able to achieve a level of combat effectiveness comparable to the German Wehrmacht after sufficient combat experience, significant casualties, and absorption of lessons-learned through a high-price in life and material." In the end, Mansoor adds more evidence to the claims of other authors that America was able to help the Allies win the war through its massive industrial and manpower base. While he proficiently details the growing capabilities of U.S. infantry divisions through the war, he also clarifies that this growth was only possible through the immense reserve of recruits and new equipment produced in the United States. Indeed, when the reader sees that eighteen of the forty-two European divisions suffered over 100% casualties, and that all but seven suffered at least 30% casualties (a percentage that makes a unit combat ineffective), it is hard to agree with Mansoor that these units met his definition of combat effectiveness. Furthermore, compared to the performance of the German Wehrmacht in 1939 and 1940, it is clear that the Germans achieved a higher level of combat effectiveness through pre-combat training and effectively incorporated lessons from previous conflicts *without* having to suffer severe casualties. Notably, in the Battle of Sedan and the fall of France in 1940, the Germans faced off against numerically *and* technologically superior French forces. The French possessed more infantry and tanks that were of higher quality than the German divisions. The ability of the German Wehrmacht, with little prior experience, to quickly achieve its objectives with minimal loss of life or equipment against a superior force displayed a level of combat effectiveness that American forces were unable to match, except in rare cases, until late 1944 and 1945. M. Wade Markel, an Army major and instructor at the West Point Military Academy, expressed similar sentiments in his book review. Markel ultimately applauds Mansoor's work as successful. However, Markel still identifies similar shortfalls and contradictions in the continued importance of America's manpower and material reserves.<sup>5</sup> William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine colonel, provides a much shorter review and does not explicitly state that he agrees with Mansoor's conclusion. However, Bushnell approves of Mansoor's compilations of sources and he notes Mansoor's work as "thoughtful."<sup>6</sup> Regardless of the argument's shortcomings, Mansoor's work belongs alongside previous works that address American performance in World War II. The successes and failures, the lessons learned, the organizational changes, and the tactical innovations are all essential for the collective memory of the U.S. military in preparations for future wars. The "American way of war," it seems, was still present in World War II; America's infantry divisions gained their combat effectiveness through the expensive cost of human life in the school of hard knocks. This book should serve as a warning to prevent future leaders from learning such hard lessons at such a high cost of human life.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Wade Markel, review of *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945*, by Peter R. Mansoor, *Army History* 49 (Spring 2000): 31-32.

<sup>6</sup> William D. Bushnell, review of *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–1945*, by Peter R. Mansoor, *Library Journal* 124, no. 9 (May 1999): 108.