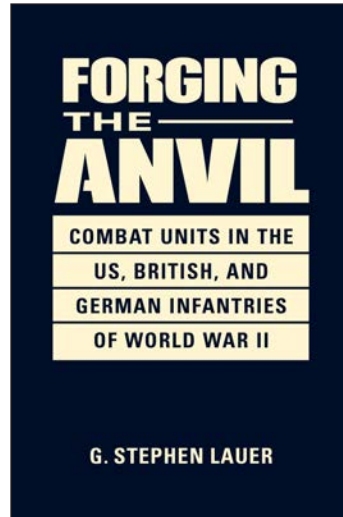


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Forging the Anvil:
Combat Units in the
US, British, and
German Infantries
of World War II

G. Stephen Lauer

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1

Forging the Anvil

NOVEMBER 11, 1918, THE “WAR TO END ALL WARS”—the Great War—did not. The bloodletting of war’s end in 1918, the visual and visceral narrative of the cost of four years of stalemated war in the trenches, the destruction of so many young men, the millions of infantrymen, considered the flower and hope of their generation, dimmed the honor and raised horror at the cost in lives.

The largest war in mankind’s history followed—World War II. Conscripted citizens once more formed the basic raw material of war—obligation in service as citizen-soldiers. Millions filled the fighting armies, navies, and air forces. All the technological marvels of the mid-twentieth century, all the industrial, management, and military advances born of the crucible of the Great War, drove a narrative focused on technology and machines—more machines on land, in the air, at sea. Industry needed greater numbers of citizens to build, feed, and fix the technological products of the great industrial nations.

The infantry remained the one indispensable fighting element, the least machine-oriented, required by all armies to hold the ground seized by the machines of land, air, and sea, the force to occupy the enemy country and capital. The infantry became the anvil against which the machines came to bear upon and destroy. The purpose of this book is to define how three combatant nations of World War II forged the anvil—the infantry—upon whose legs victory, the occupation of the enemy’s land and capital, and the breaking of their will depended.

A narrative arose during and after World War II of a perception among the infantrymen of the nations opposed to Germany that the average German infantrymen displayed a greater individual and small-unit capability in close combat. The perception manifested itself in the words of historians, and contemporary general officers who observed the performance of German infantry, and other combat soldiers, and noted a qualitative difference in combat performance. John Ellis concluded that German victories in the defensive stages of the war were “often as not infantry victories in which a combination of fixed defenses, a masterly deployment of artillery and assault guns, and a positive genius for the well-timed *local* counter-attack time and again prevented the enemy from completely shattering or rolling up the German front until they were at the very gates of Berlin itself.”¹ Field Marshal Harold Alexander, commanding the Allied Fifteenth Army Group in Italy, noted that “the enemy is quicker than we are: quicker at regrouping his forces, quicker at thinning out on a defensive front to provide troops to close gaps at decisive points, quicker in effecting reliefs, quicker at mounting attacks and counter-attacks, and above all quicker at reaching decisions on the battlefield. By comparison our methods are often slow and cumbersome, and this applies to all our troops, both British and American.”² General Omar Bradley’s aide, Major Chester B. Hansen, noted Bradley’s exasperation in late 1944, before the German Ardennes offensive, at the resistance of the German infantry. “If we were fighting a reasonable people they would have surrendered a long time ago, but these people are not reasonable.” And further: “The German has proved unexpectedly resistant, however, he dies only with great difficulty. . . . It is little wonder, therefore, that we find them fighting our advance savagely, causing us to kill them in great numbers.”³ Unable to visualize another motive for such tenacity in defeat, Hansen attributed it in defeat to propaganda.

Postwar, with the onset of the Cold War and the prospect of fighting the Soviet Red Army, the US Army employed former chief of the German General Staff Franz Halder to create a collection of German wartime operational experiences. The collection reached over 200,000 pages between 1946 and 1961. These operational studies, building upon a narrative of a “clean” German Army, professionals untainted by Nazism, reinforced the perception.⁴ Upon completion of the studies, General Halder received the US Meritorious Civilian Service Award for “a lasting contribution to the tactical and strategic thinking of the United States Armed Forces.”⁵

A narrative also exists that this notion, a perception of German individual and small-unit combat excellence by their enemies, has been told many times, with works either acknowledging the perception as true, or vehemently denying it. Why write again about something accepted as truth, at least by some historians? Or something believed to be untrue and unprovable? What is new is the availability of statistically relevant wartime demographic information for comparison across the Anglo-American and German infantry. New German demographic data and soldier narrative studies provide information to allow such a comparative.

This work hypothesizes that if the perception and its accompanying narrative existed, an evaluation of evidence in the classification, selection, training, and assignment of citizens to the infantry, and efforts to build and sustain a cohesive social bond within the small units, should demonstrate a bias toward supporting the perception. The starting place for this examination was the method for entering citizens into the army and then into the infantry, and we find here a significant discontinuity between the Anglo-American armies and the German.

The British Army and the US Army classified their conscripted citizens and volunteers for selection and assignment with criteria based upon psychologically and scientifically informed methodologies. There were three principle factors: first, the possession of a civilian job skill or experience that translated with little or no additional training into a military position; and second, the results of individual mental, mechanical, and other test scores indicating the level of intelligence or trainability. Where there was no civilian skill identified, high test scores marked an individual for assignment to jobs assumed to demand greater intelligence and technical aptitude. The final element in selection was the medical examination to determine whether a citizen was physically fit, as one robust or healthy enough for military service in some form. In the US forces, all soldiers fell into one of two physicality categories, general service or limited service, with the majority accepted at induction for general service. For the British Army there was a more complex and stratified physical determination, and three-quarters of the soldiers found suitable for induction qualified for active service at home or abroad.⁶

These methods ensured that, in the largest majority of cases, men with proven civilian skills, high test scores, or both, did not receive assignment to the infantry. The armed forces of both the United

Kingdom and the United States perceived that the technical nature of the war required the appointment of higher-category men to the army's more complex specialties, favoring their navies and air forces.⁷ The US Army Ground Forces⁸ found a fundamental correlation between intelligence and physical health, in which men of higher intelligence also tended statistically to be the most physically healthy or robust.⁹ This correlation is the primary criterion for the comparative methodology used here to determine the effect of measures to classify, select, and train inducted and volunteer citizens for the infantry. The British Army noted this relationship between physicality and intelligence, observing that "it was known that the less fit men tended to be somewhat less intelligent."¹⁰ On this basis, the quality of the Anglo-American infantry suffered when men without a demonstrable civilian skill, with test scores identifying a lower capability in terms of intelligence or trainability, and by correlation, less physically robust and mentally alert, were disproportionately assigned to small units tasked with the greatest likelihood of physical, mental, and moral stress—those destined for frontline combat.¹¹

The German Army classification and selection process did not employ the "modern" psychological or scientifically based testing of the US and British Armies. Instead, the German Army applied a traditional methodology, seeking to identify the most physically and mentally robust individuals for service in combat units, through reliance on a medical examination and multiple-perspective interview. A standardized general intelligence test was not part of the German methodology, which instead relied on the level and nature of individual education achieved through the German education system to judge this aspect of a citizen's qualifications. Unlike the Anglo-American forces, the German Army found no requirement for programs to bring illiterate citizens to a minimum level of literacy for purposes of wartime service.¹² Psychological testing, performed from 1926 to 1942, was for officer candidates, pilots, drivers, and technicians, not for the conscripted or volunteer combat soldier.¹³

Citizens judged by the examining physician to possess the higher requisite physical robustness to withstand the rigors of the combat environment received the designation as combat-capable, or *kriegsverwendungsfähig* (k.v.). Army-specific military specialties of the front line, or *fechtende truppe*, such as the infantry, armor, artillery, engineers, and a few others, also required the k.v. designation, as did pilots and aircrew, naval combatant vessel officers, and crewmen.¹⁴

The German induction and classification process combined the multiple-perspective interview with the judgment of the examining physician for its primary selection decision. Physicality, the presumption of a mental and physical capability to withstand the stress of combat, was the principal criterion for selection for combat service. The combined interview by a local board consisting of representatives of police, labor, mayoral, and education officials provided a community perspective on the character of each inductee.¹⁵ Given the fundamental correlation between physicality and intelligence, average German infantry quality increased when German citizens possessing high physical robustness and its corollary intelligence or trainability were disproportionately assigned to small units tasked with the greatest likelihood of physical, mental, and moral stress—those destined for frontline combat.¹⁶

The methods through which Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States classified, selected, assigned, and trained their citizen-soldiers for duty as infantrymen, and how they built and sustained the social fabric of their small unit, their cohesive behavior in combat, are the two themes forming the heart of this investigation. It is the story of how these nations took their conscripted citizens and turned them into soldiers, those destined for the most frightful mental and physical duty, the face-to-face combat of the infantryman during World War II.

Each nation had a tradition of citizen service. The Anglo-American model was one allowing the conscription of citizens only in wartime and then only in defense of the nation. Geography as an island and a continent separated by seas and oceans from threats defined the form and function of Anglo-American understanding of the obligation of a citizen in wartime, and the moral and legal authority of the nation to compel his service in conscription. Ocean barriers and navies gave the Anglo-Americans time to prepare an army without the need for conscription until their major wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as in the American Civil War, the Boer Wars, and World War I. Prussia-Germany held a different understanding based on its geographic heritage. The lack of natural barriers to invasion created a state tradition obligating some native subjects to military service from the earliest days of Brandenburg-Prussia. By the time of the great wars of the twentieth century, citizens now, rather than subjects, held an obligation to military service in greater Germany and embedded as a societal narrative. The Prussian-German armies substituted

for natural barriers because there was no time to raise an army when threatened. The army was the barrier.

Cohesion and the Primary Group

Once selected for assignment to the infantry, the second factor affecting the presence of the perception was the concept of building and sustaining the social space, the cohesive behavior of the individual within his small unit—the primary group—the infantry squad of eight to fourteen men. “Combat is the end toward which all the manifold activities of the Army are oriented, however indirectly. Organized combat is also the activity by which an Army is most differentiated from other social organizations. The role of the combat soldier may well be considered the most important single role for the understanding of the Army.”¹⁷ Psychiatrists and historians struggle for an adequate definition of the term *cohesion*. Most often it describes the actions and expectations of individuals within the social sphere of the small unit or “primary group.” A principal conclusion of psychiatrists after the war was that the social bond was of principal importance for the lessening of psychiatric breakdown and the sustainment of combat effectiveness. “This bonding maintained, he never faces combat alone.”¹⁸

Notions of comradeship and friendship and esprit de corps illuminated in concept the expectation of cohesive behavior in combat. Carl von Clausewitz listed this as the “moral” constituent of battle and placed it among the key factors of war, from which “one might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.”¹⁹ The expansion of armies into the millions moving across the stage in the wars of the twentieth century, combined with the introduction of smokeless gunpowder, massed shrapnel artillery, machine guns, trenches to enhance the defense over the offense, all made uncertain the ability of soldiers to advance under the phenomenon of the “empty battlefield.” Notions of *élan*, the primacy of a bond between soldiers, the moral factors needed to advance under these lethal conditions to achieve offensive success, dominated the writings and doctrinal concerns of all armies.

S. L. A. Marshall noted the importance of the bond to the well-being of the soldier. “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with

his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade. The warmth which derives from human companionship is . . . essential. . . . It is that way with any fighting man. He is sustained by his fellows primarily and by his weapons secondarily.”²⁰ Building and sustaining this bond appeared essential for success and survival in battle. The collective training, unit organization, leadership, punishment, and recognition, as well as the medical treatment of wounded soldiers, and replacement policies, all combined as factors in the soldier’s view of his own organization and his opponent across no-man’s land. The result of the selection process and the experience of battle has its focus here in the intent of the armies to create and sustain cohesive behavior of the individuals in their small units.

US and British soldier-authors sought to portray through World Wars I and II this concept of comradeship and obligation in literature and poetry as they observed and experienced this aspect of infantry combat. J. Glenn Gray noted of the US infantry the power of the “determination not to let down his comrades” as the key factor allowing the soldier to continue amid the horrific sensations of battle. Gray expressed the idea of the cost expected of the infantry and their willingness to move forward in the face of the sacrifice of life as one both tragic and noble. “In the German language, men never die in battle. They *fall*. The term is exact for the expression of self-sacrifice when it is motivated by the feeling of comradeship. I may fall, but I do not die, for that which is real in me goes forward and lives on in the comrades for whom I gave up my physical life.”²¹

The poetry of the British soldier of World Wars I and II expressed this sense of sacrifice and loss in comradeship in death for these generations of infantry in John McRae’s *In Flanders Fields* (1918) and in Alun Lewis’s *Lines on a Tudor Mansion* (1942).²² These poems gave the sense of both the obligation of the survivors to continue to fight in the face of loss and the recognition that it was the young upon whom this burden fell.

Stephen Fritz expressed the universality of the combat experience across the young men of these three nations in noting of the German infantryman, the *Landser*; “amid the despair and cynicism, that affection for those enduring the same horrors created a sense of unity and pride, an intensity of feeling that rose to a level rarely achieved by mere friendship. Loyalty, mutual obligation, a willingness to sacrifice, pride, a sense of duty, even love—these constituted comradeship for the *Landser*.”²³ The young men of each nation sought, amid the horrific

sensations of death and wounding, in face-to-face battle with other young men, an enduring sense of worth, “when, through military reverses or the fatiguing and often horrible experiences of combat, the original purpose becomes obscured.”²⁴ It is this sense of cohesion toward which the infantry policies of the various nations here find expression, either as a certain, stated goal, or as an implied and expected outcome. *Cohesion* is a term reflective of the battlefield, more art than science; combat-oriented, and centered on group, mission, and task, its intent is the satisfaction of the primary social needs of the individual for family, respect, and the “sympathy and mutual identification for which ‘we’ is the natural expression.”²⁵

The seminal work from World War II on the nature of collective cohesive behavior was Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz’s *Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II*. Their work on the concept of the “primary group” remains a principal reference for studies of such behavior in combat. They hypothesized that “the extraordinary tenacity of the German Army” was found in the effective influence of the primary group:

It appears that a soldier’s ability to resist is a function of the capacity of his immediate primary group (his squad or section) to avoid social disintegration. When the individual’s immediate group, and its supporting formations, met his basic organic needs, offered him the affection and esteem from both officers and comrades, supplied him with a sense of power and adequately regulated his relations with authority, the element of self-concern in battle, which would lead to disruption of the effective functioning of his primary group was minimized.²⁶

He was likely to go on fighting, provided he had the necessary weapons, as long as the group possessed leadership with which he could identify himself and as long as he gave affection to and received affection from the other members of his squad and platoon. In other words, as long as he felt himself to be a member of his primary group bound by the expectations and demands of its other members, his soldierly achievement was likely to be good.²⁷

The characteristics of the rifleman form the essence of this comparison of the armies of Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Riflemen, then and today, must cross no-man’s land to engage an enemy. During World War II, the primary location of the rifleman was within the rifle squads resident in the typical or line infantry division. Elite combat divisions, such as the airborne, serve

here to illustrate key distinctions between these atypical infantry divisions. Elites in the Anglo-American tradition used different and often more strenuous entry requirements in physicality and intelligence than the line infantry. Anglo-American armored or German Panzer divisions also housed mechanized or motorized infantry. The rifleman received support from other infantry specialists manning crew-served weapons such as machine guns, mortars, and anti-tank weapons, all supporting his task to expose himself to reach and defeat his foe.²⁸

The British Army in December 1944 deployed twenty-one infantry, five armored, and two airborne divisions. The US Army in June 1944 mustered sixty-seven infantry, sixteen armored, one cavalry, and five airborne divisions. The German Army on the Eastern Front alone in July 1943 marshaled 151 infantry divisions and nineteen Panzer divisions, excluding three *Schutzstaffel* (Shield Squadron [SS]) Panzer-grenadier divisions. For all armies and nations, the largest combat experience for the conscripted citizen serving in the infantry lay in the line infantry division.²⁹

The numbers of riflemen, and infantrymen in general, were quite small in comparison to the total strength of the armies. Fewer than 230,000 riflemen served during 1944 in the eighty-nine ground combat divisions in the US Army, winnowed from 8 million citizen-soldiers serving at that time. Of 2.5 million soldiers in the British Army, there were 81,000 riflemen serving in 1944 in twenty-eight ground combat divisions. In 1941, near 400,000 riflemen served in the ninety-nine infantry divisions, nineteen Panzer divisions, and eleven motorized divisions in the German Eastern Army, or *Ostheer*, within an attacking force of over 3 million soldiers. The numbers of German infantry plummeted as the war progressed, dwindling to an average manning level of at or near 50 percent, or 250,000 riflemen in 151 infantry divisions on the Eastern Front in 1943.³⁰ Of the 19 million soldiers in these three armies serving during 1943–1944, 561,000 riflemen, or 3 percent of the total for all armies, suffered up to 80 percent of the combat casualties.

Comparing Soldiers

There are few works making direct comparisons of US, British, and German soldiers or infantry. A US historian wrote that a successful

work of comparative history “does justice to culture and ideology as well as structure, draws attention to the most significant causal variables, and shows the peculiarities of each case without making one of them the exception to a general pattern represented by the others.”³¹ Along with Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States share an essential Western narrative of Judeo-Christian beliefs, a history of war as allies and enemies, as well as historical antecedents in economics, law, empire, and revolution. A common Western heritage converges to demonstrate the common legacy of the cultures and national experiences of the soldiers of these nations. During the interwar years, the Great Depression was another point of shared experience in the searing remembrance of poverty and hunger among many citizens. One factor was not shared by the nations—Adolf Hitler—and this shadows any wartime comparison.

The overlay of twelve years of governance of the German state by the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP), the Nazi Party under Adolf Hitler, and its legacy of aggressive war and human extermination, colors any comparison of these soldiers. This fact has the capacity to overwhelm otherwise resonant features of a prior shared Western culture and society and military service. The Nazis murdered millions of human beings.³² The German Army was the principal means by which the Hitlerite regime imposed its expansionist political and racial goals through war and conquest.³³ Without the offensive mastery of the German Army from 1939 through 1942, and its defensive tenacity from 1943 through 1945, the extension and consolidation of Nazi influence across Europe, the European Soviet Union, and North Africa was not possible. The capture and imprisonment of millions targeted for Nazi policies of extermination occurred following the march of the German Army. The tactical prowess of the German Army provided the space to make Nazi murder policies workable.³⁴

This inquiry is not a definitive review of the role of the German armed forces, the *Wehrmacht*, in the Holocaust, or Nazi racial extermination policies, all well-documented and thoroughly researched. The moral judgment against the Hitlerite regime is settled. The intent here is to examine, and compare to their Western adversaries, the manpower policies of the German Army, the *Heer*, within the larger organization of the *Wehrmacht*,³⁵ and the impact of *Heer* manpower selection policies on the cohesion of the small combat infantry unit.

This work confines its analysis to the drafted and volunteer German male citizen who, upon being selected for the combat infantry, carried the primary burden for close combat in the German Army. The form and type of the principal Nazi criminal formations intended for the destruction of innocents and prisoners of war are not discussed in detail here, including the selection policies of Heinrich Himmler's *Schutzstaffel* or *Gestapo* units of any type, the murder units of the *SS-Einsatzgruppen*, the *SS-Sonderkommando*, or the *Waffen-SS*, the Nazi political-military combat component. Nor are the murder units associated to the *Wehrmacht*, or the *Heer*, such as the police battalions, the field police and gendarmes, the army's security divisions, nor those manning the prisoner-of-war transit camps (*Armee-Gefangenen-Sammelstellen*). Not all who wore German field gray uniforms were combat soldiers.

If it can be demonstrated that the characteristics of the German infantry soldier, and the development of his cohesive behavior in battle, was compatible with the expected battle norms of other Western soldiers, does not this seem to justify a conclusion of moral equivalence between the German and his US and British counterparts? "This objection rests on a common tendency to confuse an explanation of causes with a justification or acceptance of results. What use one makes of a historical explanation is a question separate from the explanation itself."³⁶ The distinction made between the German combat soldier and those not selected or qualified for assignment to fighting units is not made to condone, or to excuse, or to diminish the horror of the aims of the Nazi state.

It is not deniable that the German generals acquiesced to these aims, and the army facilitated them through its tactical and operational methods. The distinction between men selected for infantry combat, and those not, enables a comparison of infantrymen and infantry small units across the Western nations selected for study. This qualification in the comparison does not hide or shadow any responsibility borne by individual infantrymen of the regular combat divisions who participated, in or out of battle, in the killing of innocents or prisoners of war.

To cite the differences between the infantry of these armies does not elevate the moral purpose to which the German Army was directed. It is these differences that highlight an understanding of the perceptions of that infantry in the eyes and experience of the Anglo-American infantry.

Narratives and Perceptions

British perceptions of the quality of the infantry force and the results of the selection process both during and following the war were remarkable for their candor. In the interwar years, commentary noted the reduction in both the quality and numbers of infantry and highlighted the possible effects in a future war. During the war, reporting by general officers and other commanding officers related their continuing discontent with the manner of selection and assignment to the infantry, noting the experience of this selection on morale and combat performance. After the war, the official British Army reports in the works titled *Morale*, *Manpower Problems*, *Personnel Selection*, and *Training in the Army* all highlighted the lessons learned in regard to the reduction in the quality of the infantry force, its training, and combat effectiveness as a result.

It is the contention here that the meta-narrative, the master plot,³⁷ for the expectations of the British infantry arose from the experience of the mass infantry army of World War I. The character of that master plot was to place the physically best and most intelligent young Britons into the deadliest space—the infantry. The quality of the conscripted army allowed for the general expression of the initiative, alertness, and leadership from the ranks to sustain the army toward victory. There was no mass Royal Air Force to siphon away the leaders available to the army in the infantry of the Great War. The expectation for the infantry regiment, its traditions of bringing into the mass of soldiers a spirit of bonded, cohesive excellence, was not achieved in World War II. The scientific methods of psychological and intelligence testing to post the best-qualified into more technical fields denied the regiment the ability to perform its expected role. This surprised the leaders of the British Army as they came to understand the effect of such classification on the quality of their infantry.

David French provided perhaps the best modern summary of the concerns and outcomes of the selection process for the infantry of the British Army. He noted the army was rarely the choice of volunteers, who preferred the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force in far greater numbers than they could take. “But the most serious problem was the way in which manpower was allocated to the infantry. . . . The policy of posting the worst men to the infantry was contrary to its real needs. Infantrymen had to be fitter, to possess more initiative,

endurance, and leadership skills than other arms because their job was more arduous, dangerous, and continuous.”³⁸

The US meta-narrative prior to World War II was an assumed native male excellence in battle. The performance of the US citizen in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War I cemented this assumption into both subjective and objective reality³⁹ for the expected performance of a future mass infantry army. Works such as George Marshall’s *Infantry in Battle*, and movie depictions as in Gary Cooper’s portrayal of Sergeant York and his exploits, sustained the narrative assumption through stories: “the more culturally specific the masterplot, the greater its practical force in everyday life.”⁴⁰ The problems of the quality of the US infantry were a surprise and based on the same difficulty as for the British Army—the classification system through scientific methods of psychological and intelligence testing to post the best-qualified into more technical fields, the air forces, and the navy.

Both during and after the war, the failure of the narrative was met with a mix of recognition of the problem of infantry quality and one of vehement denial. During the war, stating his public expectation that US infantrymen would stand in battle on an equal basis with their German opponent, Lieutenant General Lesley McNair, the commanding general of the US Army Ground Forces, from 1942 until his death in France in 1944, provided statistical evidence to the leadership of the army on the quality shortcomings of the infantry. He noted that the infantrymen, by November 1943, were shorter in height, lighter in weight, and possessed the lowest average education and intelligence test scores of any combat specialty.⁴¹ As each division embarked for duty overseas, McNair provided a training report card to the theater commanders concerning the state of manning and the level of combined arms training of each combat division. These reports highlighted the training deficiencies of the divisions and the fact that too often their infantry were in the units for too short a time for adequate combat preparation. He found that the process of stripping the infantry from divisions in training to man the next division embarking for overseas diminished the combat capabilities of both the stripped unit and the receiving unit.⁴²

McNair’s wartime assessment was echoed later by Russell Weigley, who noted that the US Army “habitually filled the ranks of its combat infantry with its least promising recruits, the uneducated, the unskilled, the unenthusiastic. Those left over after the Army Air

Forces, the marines, the navy, the paratroopers, and the technical branches had skimmed off the best of the nation's military manpower were then expected to bear the main burden of sustained battle."⁴³

Michael Doubler, in *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs fought the War in Europe, 1944–45*; Peter Mansoor, in *The GI Offensive in Europe: The Triumph of American Infantry Divisions, 1941–45*; and Robert Rush, in *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, all provided a counterpoint concerning the quality of US soldiers and their performance in battle. In Doubler's judgment, it was an identifiable American entrepreneurial spirit that ensured the success of the US infantry, as opposed to the less adaptable and more cautious and authoritarian German and Soviet Armies.⁴⁴ He argued that the superiority of US soldiers in battle over the German enemy was not due to any perceived material or manpower numerical largesse, but to this intangible, superior American characteristic.⁴⁵

Mansoor argued for organizational adaptability and sustainability of the divisions as the key to success, not materiel, noting that apologists for the defeated German Army adhered to the belief that victory came through the massive industrial advantages of the Allies over the "superior but hopelessly out-numbered forces of the *Wehrmacht*." Noting that the US Army failed to provide a "fair share of quality recruits and replacements" for its infantry divisions, and paid little attention to cohesiveness and small-unit training below the battalion level, this did not amount to lesser capability against their German counterparts.⁴⁶

Rush, in contrast, wrote to address the perception of an increased German individual and small-unit combat capability. He sought to compare and "describe the American infantryman and German Landser," and "to deal even handedly with a subject that is obviously controversial, namely the relative performance of the U.S. Army and its German adversary in Western Europe in fall 1944."⁴⁷ He focused on the fortunes of a single regiment, the Twenty-second Infantry Regiment of the Fourth Infantry Division, a veteran division that landed in the first wave on Utah beach at Normandy on D-Day. The division and regiment engaged in battle in the Hürtgen forest during eighteen days from November 16 to December 3, 1944.⁴⁸ Having complete access to the daily morning reports of the Twenty-second Infantry Regiment, he "could not achieve the same level of resolution on the German organizations."⁴⁹

As a narrative of the strengths and weaknesses of US Army infantry battle performance, Rush described the shortcomings of the

battlefield personnel replacement process. He noted: “There is no question that the German Army stopped the Americans at the West Wall. The question is how.”⁵⁰ The fact that its commanders judged the Twenty-second Regiment—after eighteen days of combat with continuous replacements, against a weakened and demoralized German infantry—incapable of further combat and withdrawn from the continuing battle, reinforced the underlying hypothesis that a perception of superior German soldier and small-unit combat skill and perseverance existed.⁵¹

Perhaps the most singular of works assuming the fact of the perception of German individual and small-unit combat superiority was Trevor Dupuy’s direct comparison of US, British, and German combat performance during World War II in *Numbers, Predictions, and War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles*. Dupuy, writing during the Cold War, developed a mathematical model from his analysis of historical combat narratives of the Allied and German armies in battle.⁵² He concluded that this analysis of historical combat demonstrated the tactical superiority, through casualty production ratios, of the German Army in defense against any Allied formation. This conclusion was not supported by the reports of either Allied or German casualty summaries for the individual theaters of war.⁵³ A key assumption of the Dupuy model failed, but his work was powerful evidence of the existence of the perception among their opponents that the German soldier and small unit held a demonstrable combat superiority.

Following World War I, the leaders of the reduced German Army sought to change the meta-narrative of the historical mass German infantry armies. General “Hans” von Seeckt looked to the period before the Great War, and sought to build a new army of leaders based on high-quality selection of enlisted and officers. Defeat presented a paradigmatic change to the societal narrative of German battle excellence.⁵⁴ Looking past the defeat in 1918, the German Army developed a new method for a war of movement. It relied upon the traditional expectations for high quality and the intentional development of high-quality and cohesive behavior in the small-unit leaders and the individual soldiers. These restored and enhanced stories drove a master plot connecting the past to the army of the future and were the basis for the perception of excellence.

German narratives did not, as a normative study, address the individual soldier, his small unit, or the development and sustainment

of cohesive behavior in battle. As noted by Wolfram Wette, the principal focus has been the Nazi elites—political appointees, generals, admirals, and other senior officials. Greater than 99 percent of the soldiers were not in this elite group. “The history of German enlisted men in World War II has remained largely uncharted territory. For a long time, ordinary servicemen, popularly referred to as *Landser*, were simply overlooked. . . . Soldiers who do not belong to this elite function in this system, and in the thinking of those who run it, act merely as agents executing commands—essentially, that is, as parts of a machine.”⁵⁵

New evidence presented by authors Christoph Rass and Felix Römer provided a more nuanced picture of the soldier than previous research. Rass wrote two works presenting statistically relevant demographic data, detailing information about individual German soldiers in *Menschenmaterial: Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront—Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision, 1939–1945*, a social and statistical history of the 253rd Infantry Division (*Menschenmaterial*) between its formation in 1939 and surrender to the Red Army near Prague in 1945. René Rohrkamp, in *Deutsche Soldaten, 1939–1945: Handbuch einer biographischen Datenbank zu Mannschaften und Unteroffizieren von Heer, Luftwaffe und Waffen SS*, provided for the first time a unique and statistically relevant set of demographic data for more than 18,000 individual soldiers of all services from the *Wehrkreis VI*, Rheinland-Westphalia region.⁵⁶

Rass provided insight into the social support structure of the German infantry division and its subordinate small units. German policies of recruitment from a single region, maintaining the common origins and dialects of the German soldier, enhanced the internalization and legitimation of the social bond built upon entering a combat unit.⁵⁷ Knowing that through selection, assignment, battle, and wounds the German soldier expected to return to his home unit was a powerful tool for the creation and sustainment of cohesive behavior in battle.⁵⁸ The soldiers of the 253rd Infantry Division and the more than 18,000 men of the database provided a picture of the soldiers of the Rhineland-Westphalia region. Coming from a stable, lower-working-class population, with an upward-mobility potential into the lower middle classes, these soldiers represented an unremarkable homogeneity of German society with Christian religious confession dominated by Catholic and Protestant groups. The soldiers of these divisions represented a uniquely cohesive group.⁵⁹

Felix Römer, in his works “Milieus in the Military: Soldierly Ethos, Nationalism, and Conformism Among Workers in the Wehrmacht” and *Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht von Innen*, provided an unambiguous look at the contemporary attitudes and expressions of German soldiers of World War II. Römer used US Army interrogation questionnaires and transcripts of eavesdropped conversations of more than 3,000 German prisoners of war, during 1942 to 1945, at Fort Hunt, outside Washington, DC. The statistical relevance of the soldier commentary lies in the volume of transcript material, and its coverage of multiple cohorts of prisoners captured in more than three years of recording, “so that the length of their service in the Wehrmacht varied between several years and a few months.”⁶⁰ He noted that “for the most part their concept of patriotism corresponded to rather traditional nationalistic views than to National Socialist theories.”⁶¹

Römer’s analysis demonstrated that this military socialization was a specific, internalized factor in the soldier’s view of himself and his service:

The Morale Questionnaires demonstrated that the shared pride in the abilities of the Wehrmacht and its martial virtues was deeply rooted throughout German society. It combined to form a collective military morale that vaulted traditional dividing lines in the German armed forces and contributed elementarily to the motivation of the troops.⁶²

. . . Military morals with their key categories of fulfillment of duties, bravery and male toughness constituted for them an ideal that they wanted to conform to . . . the loyalty of the troops fed not only from the solidarity of the primary groups but also related to the Wehrmacht as an institution, which conveyed and symbolized those military morals on which the soldiers depended if they wanted to prove themselves in front of their comrades.⁶³

New works such as *The German War* reinforced this picture, describing the strongest foundation for the patriotism and performance of the German soldier in his connection through family experience in the prior war, not with the Nazi regime.⁶⁴ Prior to the evidence presented by Rass and Römer, the primary sources for soldier viewpoints were the subjective memoirs available following the war, soldier letters, as well as official reporting in a *Kriegstagebuch*, or unit war diary. The problem of reliance on war letters and memoirs has been well documented. One can find evidence for any point of view from the war letters remaining from World War II. In his edited

work *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von Unten*, Wette wrote: “The history of the soldiers of the Second World War is, in the end, for the historical science, up to now a vast unknown territory. The simple *Landser* exists generally only anonymously as an element of a casualty list or a table of organization . . . seen in a double role as a perpetrator and victim. We render the concrete truth about the war a service when we return ‘the unknown soldier’ his face and his name.”⁶⁵ He noted that letters remained the primary source for placing a face on the soldier, but that the use of these same letters was fraught with danger for the historian. “The sole tolerable source, which the soldier left to posterity, was usually the letter from the front. Moreover, the communication medium of the letter from the front has peril for the historian.”⁶⁶ The soldier faced the problem of the military censors. “Given direct and indirect influences on what the soldiers could say about their feelings and hardships caution should be kept in mind when using them as evidence.”⁶⁷ As less than 1 percent of the letters written during the war by German soldiers and their families still exist in archival collections, the samples available for examination were scarce and did not achieve any form of structural statistical relevance. The new information made possible by the Rass and Römer research opened new avenues for the evaluation and comparison of the German infantrymen and their Anglo-American counterparts.

About the Book

The book follows a chronological methodology with three national chapters (United Kingdom, United States, Germany) in each part. Part 1 follows each national army through the interwar years up to the reinstatement of conscription. The chapters in this section analyze the history of the obligation to serve in wartime, the selection of the individual, and the institutional intent of the armies to create and sustain cohesive infantry small units, prior to the opening of the war. Part 2 focuses on the intent and effects of conscription and standards for induction and classification that informed the selection of soldiers for the infantry in the opening period of the war. Part 3 follows the war to its conclusion and the outcomes of both selection and classification, and the institutional intent to build and sustain cohesive behavior in the infantry small unit.

Infantry soldiers, when placed into the environment of the battlefield, regardless of their selection process, learned to fight and survive, and to rely on their comrades—to find cohesion in the shared hardship and danger of the front line. They were the anvil against which the nations threw their massed mechanization, artillery, and aircraft against. Theirs was the mission to close with and destroy their enemies. The citizen-soldier in all of his forms and tasks was the decisive arbiter of national power during World War II. Inside the small infantry unit, in the midst of so much that was dreadful, men brought together by the will of their nations found faith in each other, fought for one other, and lived and died for their friends. This study recognizes the soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines of World War II who answered the summons, who placed their lives into the fire of combat, who lived and died, won and lost. Regardless of the ultimate outcome, the men of these nations fought for their comrades, found solace in the shared bonds of their fate, and endured all as members of a fraternity of the few—the infantry combat soldier.

Notes

1. Ellis, *Brute Force*, 532, emphasis in original.
2. Ibid.
3. Beevor, *Ardennes 1944*, 99.
4. Wegner, “Erschriebene Siege,” 287–302.
5. Detwiler, *World War II German Military Studies*, 1–9.
6. Ungerson, *Personnel Selection*, 7; Palmer, *Study no. 5*, 3–4; Kreidberg and Henry, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army*, 639–643; Lerwill, *The Personnel Replacement System in the United States Army*, 312–319.
7. TNA PRO WO 216/66, Note from Inspector-General, Training, to C.I.G.S., August 4, 1942; US Army Ground Forces, *Study no. 11*, 42.
8. The US Army Ground Forces formed in 1942 to train and prepare all divisions for combat operations.
9. Palmer, Wiley, and Keast, *The Procurement and Training of Ground Combat Troops*, 65.
10. Ungerson, *Personnel Selection*, 47.
11. Ibid., 19; Palmer, *Study no. 5*, 2.
12. Houle et al., *The Armed Services and Adult Education*, 169–190; Hershey, *Special Monograph no. 16*, 159–163; TNA WO 32/9960 E.C.A.C./P(41)111, “Paper by A.G. on Use of Manpower in the Army,” pt. 1, “January 1939–December 1941,” December 5, 1942, appendixes A, C; “Paper no. 3 by A.G. on Use of Manpower in the Army, June 1942–May 1943,” June 1943, appendix A; Ungerson, *Personnel Selection*, 63; Pigott, *Manpower Problems*, 15, 54.

13. BAMA ZA 1/1779, Personnel and Administration (Project 2b) P-005, Teil V, Simoneit, *Die Anwendung psychologischer Prüfungen in der deutschen Wehrmacht. (Deutsche Wehrmachtpsychologie von 1927–1942)*, 30–32.

14. Absolon, *Die Wehrmacht im Dritten Reich: Band V*, 116–117.

15. BAMA ZA 1/1778, Personnel and Administration (Project 2b), P-006, Teil I, *Das Rekrutierungssystem der deutschen Wehrmacht in Frieden und im Kriege; Anlage I, Durchführung einer Musterung und Aushebung*, 73–75, 97.

16. *Ibid.*, 98.

17. Stouffer, *The American Soldier*, vol. 2, 59.

18. Willer, “Groups Reward Individual Sacrifice,” 23, 33–43; Siebold, “The Evolution of the Measurement of Cohesion,” 5, 23–26; Siebold and Lindsay, “The Relation Between Demographic Descriptors,” 109, 118–128; Milgram, Orenstein, and Zafrir, “Stressors, Personal Resources, and Social Supports,” 185, 190–199; Moreno, “Note on Cohesion in Social Groups,” 176; Jones et al., *War Psychiatry*, 15–16.

19. Von Clausewitz, *On War*, 185.

20. Marshall, *Men Against Fire*, 42.

21. Gray, *The Warriors*, 40, 46, emphasis in original.

22. Ward, *World War One British Poets*, 12; Archard, *Alun Lewis*, 33–34.

23. Fritz, *Frontsoldaten*, 157.

24. Gray, *The Warriors*, 40.

25. Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht,” 283, n. 3; Moreno, “Note on Cohesion in Social Groups,” 176.

26. Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht,” 281; Cooley, *Social Organization*, 23.

27. Shils and Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht,” 284.

28. The standard or “line” infantry division was a notionally pure infantry division with two or three infantry regiments and supporting elements, such as artillery, engineers, and logistics. Anglo-American infantry divisions of World War II were larger than their German counterparts. A British infantry division of 1944 totaled over 18,000 men; a US Army infantry division of 1944 numbered over 14,000; German infantry divisions in 1944 averaged 12,000.

29. French, *Raising Churchill’s Army*, 189; US Army Ground Forces, *Study no. 12.*, 13; Kroener, Mueller, and Umbreit, *Organisation und Mobilisierung des Deutschen Machtbereichs*, 953.

30. TNA PRO WO 365/203, *W.E. (War Establishment) Analysis by Arms. A.G. Stats (War Office)*, S/243/43, *Analysis of Arms of W.E. of Standard Formations*, March 26, 1943; US Army Ground Forces, *Study no. 8.*, 71, 72; Kroener, Müller, and Umbreit, *Organisation und Mobilisierung des Deutschen Machtbereichs*, 969; *Kriegstärkenachweisung Schützenkompanie (KStN) 131e*, January 2, 1941, Record Group 242, T-283, Roll 123, Frame 4730251–253; *Schützenkompanie neuer Art (n.A.) (KStN) 131n*, 1.5.1944, Frame 4730259–261, NACP; BAMA RH 2/1331 *Schützenkompanie neuer Art (n.A.) (KStN) 131n*, for January 10, 1943 and January 12, 1943.

31. Frederickson, “From Exceptionalism to Variability,” 601.

32. Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 256.

33. Müller and Ueberschar, *Hitler’s War in the East*, 34.

34. *Ibid.*, 73.

35. The German army, or *Heer*, was one component, the largest, of the arms of service collectively described by the term *Wehrmacht*, which included the army (*Heer*), the navy (*Kriegsmarine*), and the air force (*Luftwaffe*).

36. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 17.

37. See Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 46–48, for discussion of master plots.

38. French, *Raising Churchill's Army*, 64, 70–71.

39. See Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 128–129, for discussion of socialization and subjective and objective reality.

40. See Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 47, for discussion of master plots.

41. Memorandum for the Chief of Staff, US Army, subject: Utilization of Available Manpower Based upon Physical Capability, tab D, “Characteristics of Infantry,” December 21, 1943, WD, AGF (1916–1954), Ref. Files L. J. McNair (1940–1944), RG 337.3, NACP.

42. US Army Ground Forces, *Study no. 12*, 1.

43. Weigley, *Eisenhower's Lieutenants*, 27.

44. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy*, 5–7, 282.

45. *Ibid.*, 3.

46. Mansoor, *The GI Offensive in Europe*, 12, 267.

47. Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, xv.

48. *Ibid.*, xv, 280, 301, 305.

49. *Ibid.*, xvii.

50. Rush, “A Different Perspective,” 499.

51. Rush, *Hell in Hürtgen Forest*, 280, 292. The figures provided in his Table 5 represent the table-of-organization strengths of the opposing infantry divisions at full strength. While the Twenty-second Regiment entered combat with 90 percent of its infantry strength and received replacements throughout the eighteen days of battle, German infantry divisions at this time held 50 percent or less strength in infantry, especially when incorporating into infantry units a variety of replacements from noninfantry formations at this late stage of the war.

52. Dupuy, *Numbers, Predictions, and War*, xi.

53. *Ibid.*, 97–104. Dupuy noted here: “These figures have been adjusted to allow for the increased effectiveness of defensive firepower, so that they suggest that on the offensive as well as the defensive two German soldiers could on the average fight three Allies to a standstill.” In their work on the war in Italy, Graham and Bidwell, *Tug of War*, 403, noted that the balance of Allied casualties in Italy against defending German forces rather favored the Allies. Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste im zweiten Weltkrieg*, 336, tab. 73e.

54. See Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 111–113, for discussion of paradigmatic change in crisis.

55. Wette, *The Wehrmacht*, 176–178.

56. Rass and Rohrkamp, *Deutsche Soldaten*, 41.

57. See Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 128–129, for concepts of internalization and legitimation in institutions.

58. Rass, “*Menschenmaterial*,” 50.

59. Rass, “Das Sozialprofil von Kampfverbänden,” 686.

60. Römer, “Milieus in the Military,” 138.

61. *Ibid.*, 143.

22 *Forging the Anvil*

62. Ibid., 136.

63. Ibid., 148–149.

64. Stargardt, *The German War*, 17–18.

65. Wette, *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes*, 13.

66. Ibid., 20.

67. Kilian, “Kriegsstimmungen,” 251–252; Vogel, “Der Kriegsalltag im Spiegel von Feldpostbriefen,” 200.