

# The Mobile Offensive

reviewed by Capt John R. Studt

**A BIAS FOR ACTION: The German 7th Panzer Division in France and Russia, 1940-1941.** By Russel H.S. Stolfi. Marine Corps Association, Quantico, VA, 1991, \$3.00.

It might seem at first glance that *A Bias For Action* is yet another book on World War II German military prowess, in the same mold as countless other works on the Germans. These works often border on long, monotonous narratives of history with applicable lessons not always apparent. Dr. Stolfi's work, however, is different.

Here, seemingly for the first time, is a scholarly study of German tactical techniques and process written specifically for Marines in a concise, easy-to-read format—even with specific lessons clearly spelled out in the conclusion. Unlike many other battle studies that evince little real understanding of the art of war, Stolfi's work plainly discusses the base factors and operational techniques the Germans used to succeed in combat and goes on to relate them to current Marine Corps warfighting capability.

The book focuses on the German ground offensives of 1940 and 1941 in France and the Soviet Union, keying in on the tactical/strategic victories of one unit—the 7th Panzer Division. This unit moved faster and with greater effect than any other German unit during the 6-week campaign against France and went on to form the key link in the Russian Campaign, closing several great encirclements and capturing over 600,000 prisoners and 7,000 tanks.

Several points about successful German tactics leap out at the reader. First is the German use of "thrust lines," which were established at the divisional level by Generalmajor (BGen) Erwin Rommel during the French campaign. Essentially, thrust lines were lines drawn on a map and graduated in kilometers that indicated the division's direction of attack. They were used by the entire division to indicate the route of advance. Subordinate units further utilized them to report their relative positions and progress to higher headquarters. It did not indicate particular objectives, but instead

relied on subordinate commanders to follow the direction indicated while maneuvering as needed.

Another key to 7th Panzer success involved communications. It was general practice for messages from the battlefield to be brief in words, but very long in meaning. Their brevity indicated a level of confidence and understanding between the sender and the receiver not often matched (though often preached) in our own Marine Corps training. A typical German radio message sent by Rommel to one of his commanders during the heat of one battle in 1940 was noticeably brief: "Rommel 1930 [orders]: Pursue with all weapons." The statement left no question as to what the general meant. There were no extraneous words. Messages were phrased in widely understood and simple terminology. Commanders trusted their subordinates' ability to respond to the commander's intent as they saw fit. When is the last time a Marine field exercise displayed such brevity in communication and faith in command?

Finally, the role of the brigade/division staffs are noted. The average German staff at the division and battalion levels had only seven officers (three majors and four captains). In the Marine Corps today, there are currently 30 officers assigned to the division staff and 12 officers to the battalion staff. The relatively small German

staff was largely devoid of bureaucratic overplanning and the inevitable debates and frictions that characterize its American counterpart today. This streamlined organization enabled the German staff to operate decisively and with a speed unparalleled by other Armies. It essentially gave the commander a closer, more direct relationship with his subordinate commanders than a more manpower-intensive system would.

Stolfi examines this phenomenon at some length and offers one interesting reason for the disparity in staff strengths: Whereas the World War II German division confronted the uncertainty and chaos of war with quick and decisive action, its current American counterpart prefers planning and preparation. Whether or not a contemporary, peacetime Marine division/battalion staff can (or should) be scaled down in personnel is open for debate. After all, who would produce the mountain of directives, publications, and paperwork that plagues us today if not for the large staff organization?

Most important, however, *A Bias For Action*, which was published by the Marine Corps University and funded by a grant made possible by the Command and Staff College Foundation at Quantico, heralds the entrance of the Marine Corps into the community of military scholarly institutions responsible for publishing original research on war. With the publication of this work, the Marine Corps becomes a contributor to that arena of military thought on a level equal to the Army's well-known Leavenworth research establishment. Marines can now read important works written for and focused on Marines. And with the increased prospect of few, if any, major conflicts in the future, our fighting expertise may well hinge on individual and institutional study such as this. As Stolfi writes in his book:

the lessons [of war] lay in the pages of history like free money waiting for a Marine who is willing to snatch them up, take them back to his unit, and put them into action.

His book goes a long way toward encouraging this.



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