

Renouf, Tom, *Black Watch*

Little, Brown, London: 2011. Softcover, 312 pages, 32 black and white photographs, 6 maps. RRP \$33. ISBN 978-1-4987-0272-7

Personal war stories can often suffer from too little historical fact or too much emotional angst, but *Black Watch* is a lively richly-detailed personal retelling that avoids both of these dangers. Tom Renouf's well-researched work is an action-packed first-person historical account of his experiences with the Highland Division from 1943 to 1945. Starting from his Saturday night dance as a youth in Musselburgh and finishing with his involvement in the capture of the infamous Himmel, the book covers the invasion of Europe and Germany, and every movement of Renouf amidst the Highland division.

Renouf very skillfully weaves historical details together with his personal story of travel, fighting, courage and confusion. He includes chapters on the June 1940 decimation and early 1942 rebuilding of the Highland division, his journey into France, his wounding, his combat in Holland, and then his final entry into Germany. Each chapter flows well and provides plenty of information on the context for the reader to appreciate the significance of the events described. This is understandable because Renouf collected a huge archive of veterans' interviews during his twenty-plus years as secretary of the 51st Highland Division Veterans' Association. He uses this material to fill every chapter with a rich collage of personal stories that give authenticity and texture.

The book avoids the usual war clichés, and the photographs avoid propaganda—they show very everyday occurrences which resonate with the down-to-earth approach of the text. Renouf describes being frozen stiff by the bitterly cold winds, sneaking behind German lines on reconnaissance missions, and the tragedy of soldiers being frozen to death while huddled in their armoured cars. He also tells of capturing 30 dispirited German soldiers and of his own lack of emotions or

sense of achievement in the circumstances. The book avoids any sense of triumphalism, and presents Germans, Dutch and French with a grounded sense of a common humanity. Renouf recounts how the ordinary events of war like going for breakfast can determine whether a soldier is killed in an artillery barrage or not.

Renouf's description of conditions and events during the Normandy breakout is full of intriguing details like a jazz concert amidst war, the realities of Bocage battles, and the practical value of mates in the trenches. Of particular interest is the chapter on the capture of Himmler, which provides significant details of the event, and in which Renouf presents his own quite-believable theory for explaining the death of Himmler. He also discusses the realities of the anti-Nazi hatred among British soldiers, and their desires for revenge after seeing first-hand the evidence of barbaric atrocities in the death camps.

After the war, Tom Renouf lectured at military college for 10 years before becoming a physics lecturer at Edinburgh University, and his scholarship and thoroughness are evident in this book. *Black Watch* could serve as a textbook even though it is readable as a novel, and although there are no footnotes, the index and bibliography are adequate. This is reasonable however, as many details in the text may not even be referenceable. Indeed, one of the strengths of this tome is that it presents for the first time many unique observations and fine-grained data that are often missed by the larger-scale narratives.

It is a pity that more histories like this were not written before the dwindling number of WW2 veterans died. Too many particulars will be lost forever unless there is adequate documentation of personal accounts. Thankfully, Renouf paints a vivid picture of the Battle of Normandy, the liberation of Holland, the Battle of the Bulge and many other WW2 events while providing extensive personal insight and factual detail. This book would be useful for any WW2 historian seeking specific details on particular units especially the Highland Division. It is a

refreshing change from earlier clichéd war histories and is an enjoyable read for any historian of epic struggle.

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