

The Horror of D-Day

A New Openness to Discussing Allied War Crimes in WWII

By Klaus Wiegrefe

D-Day may have been the beginning of the end of Germany's campaign of horror during World War II. But a new book by British historian Antony Beevor makes it clear that the "greatest generation" wasn't above committing a few war crimes of its own.

It was the first crime William E. Jones had ever committed, which was probably why he could still remember it well so many years later. He and other soldiers in the 4th Infantry Division had captured a small hill. "It was pretty rough," Jones later wrote, describing the bloody battle.

At some point, the GIs lost all self-control. As Jones wrote: "(The Germans) were baffled and they were crazy. There were quite a few of them still in their foxholes. Then I saw quite a few of them shot right in the foxholes. We didn't take prisoners and there was nothing to do but kill them, and we did, and I had never shot one like that. Even our lieutenant did and some of the non coms (non-commissioned officers)."

The dead will most likely never be identified by name, but one thing is clear: The victims of this war crime were German soldiers killed in Normandy in the summer of 1944.

At daybreak on June 6, the Americans, British and their allies launched "Operation Overlord," the biggest amphibious landing of all time. During the operation, Allied and German troops fought each other in one of the fiercest battles of World War II, first on the beaches and then in the countryside of Normandy. When it was over, more than 250,000 soldiers and civilians had been killed or wounded, and Normandy itself was ravaged.

The Only Good German Is a Dead German

There is no shortage of books on the Battle of Normandy, which also goes by the name of D-Day. And the same can be said about films, such as Steven Spielberg's award-winning film "Saving Private Ryan," which was a global success. Indeed, it would almost seem that everything that could be said about the battle has been said.

Still, that didn't deter British historian and best-selling author Antony Beevor from taking another stab at the material. While conducting research for his newest book, "D-Day: The Battle for Normandy," Beevor stumbled upon something that is currently a matter of much debate among experts. If some of these scholars are correct, Allied soldiers committed war crimes in Normandy to a much greater extent than was previously realized.

Beevor extensively quotes reports and memoirs of those who took part in the invasion, many of whom state that American, British and Canadian troops killed German POWs and wounded soldiers. They also reportedly used soldiers belonging to the German Wehrmacht or Waffen SS as human shields and forced them to walk through minefields.

For example, one recounts the tale of a private named Smith, who was fighting with the 79th US Infantry Division. Smith allegedly discovered a room full of wounded Germans in a fortification while he was drunk on Calvados, a local apple brandy. According to the official report: "Declaring to all and sundry that the only good German was a dead one, Smith made good Germans out of several of them before he could be stopped."

In another account, Staff Sergeant Lester Zick reportedly encountered an American soldier on a white horse who was herding 11 prisoners in front of him. He called out to Zick and his men and told them

that the prisoners were all Poles, except for two Germans. Then, according to Zick, the soldier took out his pistol "and shot both of them in the back of the head. And we just stood there."

Beevor also quotes John Troy, a soldier with the 8th Infantry Division, who writes of finding the body of an American officer the Germans had tied up and killed because he had been caught carrying a captured German P-38 pistol. Troy describes his reaction in the following way: "When I saw that, I said no souvenirs for me. But, of course, we did it too when we caught (Germans) with American cigarettes on them, or American wristwatches they had on their arms."

Rage and Violence

The issue of war crimes is an incredibly sensitive one. But, in this case, the evidence is overwhelming.

Given the high number of casualties they suffered, Allied paratroopers were particularly determined to exact bloody revenge. Near one village, Audouville-la-Hubert, they massacred 30 captured Wehrmacht soldiers in a single killing spree.

On the beaches, soldiers in an engineering brigade had to protect German prisoners from enraged paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division, who shouted: "Turn those prisoners over to us. Turn them over to us. We know what to do to them."

When the same LSTs (landing ship tanks) were used to evacuate both German POWs and Allied wounded, the wounded attacked the Germans, and it was only through the intervention of a pharmacist's mate that nothing more serious happened.

A New Approach to Writing History

Beevor frequently quotes from personal memoirs of Allied soldiers that have been available to historians for years. But could it be that they were ignored by them until now because they didn't support the image of the "greatest generation," the term that Americans have liked to use to describe their victorious soldiers from 1945? It would seem that no shadows were to be cast on the war that gave the Americans, in particular, the moral right to have a say in shaping Europe's postwar future as well as creating the practical conditions for it to do so.

Still, that approach has recently been revised. In his 2007 book "*The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1934-1944*" Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rick Atkinson described various war crimes committed by the Allies. And now we have the same thing with Normandy.

Beevor primarily attributes the Allied crimes to the epic ferocity of the battles. The Germans themselves called it a "dirty bush war," a reference to the bushes and hedgerows, ranging in height between one and three meters (three and ten feet), used to demarcate the fields in Normandy's bocage landscape.

Indeed, Normandy's terrain is ideally suited for ambushes and booby traps. For example, German units stretched thin steel cables across roads at head level, so that when an American Jeep came roaring down the road, its driver and passengers would be decapitated. They also attached hand grenades to the dog tags of dead GIs, so that anyone who tried to remove the dog tags was blown up. Likewise, it is an established fact that German soldiers, and particularly those in the Waffen SS, shot prisoners.

Allied Behavior Doesn't Forgive Germany 's

The artillery fire from both sides and the Allied bombing attacks transformed Normandy into a moonscape. Beevor writes about soldiers who huddled in the craters screaming and weeping, while others walked around as if in a trance picking flowers in the midst of explosions. Indeed, American physicians reported 30,000 cases of combat neurosis among their troops alone.

In a letter to his family in Minnesota, a US infantryman wrote that he had never hated anything quite as much, adding: "And it's not because of some blustery speech of a brass hat."

But such "blustery speeches" did exist. According to the findings of German historian Peter Lieb, many Canadian and American units were given orders on D-Day to take no prisoners. If true, that might help explain the mystery of how only 66 of the 130 Germans the Americans took prisoner on Omaha Beach made it to collecting points for the captured on the beach.

It is also conspicuous that the Allies rarely captured members of the Waffen SS. Was it because the members of this organization -- with its Totenkopf (death's head) insignia -- had sworn allegiance to Hitler until death and often fought to the last man? Or did the Allied propaganda about the SS have its desired effect on soldiers? "Many of them probably deserved to be shot in any case and know it," a British XXX Corps report bluntly stated.

Of course, for German apologists, this new information shouldn't be something to make them feel better about their own side's behavior. In fact, although the extent of Allied war crimes may have been greater than previously known, it cannot be compared with the scope of German crimes against civilians. For example, shooting innocent hostages was part of the German strategy for fighting the French partisans who struck out after D-Day. Up to 16,000 French citizens -- men, women and children -- fell victim to the terror of the Wehrmacht and the SS.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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