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### Review of Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Dog Company: The Boys of Pointe du Hoc—The Rangers Who Accomplished D-Day's Toughest Mission and Led the Way across Europe*

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Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Dog Company: The Boys of Pointe du Hoc—The Rangers Who Accomplished D-Day's Toughest Mission and Led the Way across Europe*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012. Pp. xiv, 305. ISBN 978-0-306-82029-8.

Review by Jared Dockery, Harding University (jndockery@harding.edu).

The American 2nd Ranger Battalion's Company D—"Dog Company"—scaled the treacherous cliff at Pointe du Hoc on D-Day, participated in the subsequent capture of the French port of Brest, and endured grim fighting in the harrowing Hürtgen Forest campaign in November and December 1944. These men now have an able and admiring chronicler in Patrick O'Donnell, a specialist in World War II oral history and former Iraq war correspondent.<sup>1</sup> His eminently readable narrative traces the company's exploits from its formation in March 1943 to the end of the war in Europe. O'Donnell's general thesis is simply that these self-sacrificing men bravely helped win the war against Hitler.

Now well into their nineties and down to only a handful, the men of Dog Company are fading away, but their legacy will never be forgotten. Their courage, fortitude, and spirit endure in new generations of Rangers. Many of them were regular citizens—patriotic volunteers asked to do the impossible. The Rangers of Dog Company answered the call, rose to the challenge, and, in the process, discovered the greatness within them. Together they transcended the ordinary and helped change the destiny of the world. (252)

The attack at Pointe du Hoc is one of the most famous American actions during World War II, in part because President Ronald Reagan commemorated its fortieth anniversary in a memorable speech.<sup>2</sup> Dog Company's 225 men scaled the 100-foot-high seaside cliff in Normandy on 6 June 1944 in order to neutralize a German battery of six guns. In the face of stiff resistance, they clambered to the top, only to discover that the cannons were not in their emplacements. But they soon located them a few hundred yards inland, sabotaged them, and then doggedly held out against German opposition until being relieved on the morning of 8 June.

Historians differ in their accounts of Pointe du Hoc. The US Army's official history plays down the drama at the precipice, stating that Allied naval fire "forced the enemy to take cover while the Rangers scaled the cliff" and suggesting that when the Rangers disabled the guns inland "they had not [yet] had a hard fight."<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Cornelius Ryan grippingly describes the "wild, frenzied scene" at Pointe du Hoc—"here and there at the cliff top Germans bobbed up, throwing down 'potato masher' hand grenades or firing *Schmeissers* [submachine guns]"—but judges the mission "a heroic and futile effort—to silence guns which were not there."<sup>4</sup> Stephen Ambrose refutes Ryan's assessment, noting that the German cannons had been operational, well-stocked with ammunition, and a threat to the landings at Omaha and Utah Beaches. Yet, despite his penchant for colorful stories, Ambrose diminishes the drama of the climb up the Pointe: though he admits that some Germans lobbed grenades or cut the Rangers' grapnel ropes, he writes that Allied gunfire "kept most of them back from the edge."<sup>5</sup>

1. He has written seven previous books. *Beyond Valor: World War II's Ranger and Airborne Veterans Reveal the Heart of Combat* (NY: Free Pr, 2001) won the Colby Award for Outstanding Military History, and *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah* (Boston: Da Capo, 2001) was selected for the 2011 US Marine Corps Professional Reading List. Some of O'Donnell's interviews with World War II veterans are available at his website – [www.TheDropZone.org](http://www.TheDropZone.org).

2. See Douglas Brinkley, *The Boys of Pointe Du Hoc: Ronald Reagan, D-Day, and the U.S. Army 2nd Ranger Battalion* (NY: Morrow, 2005), which deals with other 2nd Battalion Ranger companies besides Dog Company; four of its seven chapters are devoted to Reagan's speech.

3. Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross-Channel Attack* (1951; rpt. Washington: Ctr of Military Hist, US Army, 1993) 322.

4. *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1959) 237, 239.

5. *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 1994) 417, 410.

In O'Donnell's version of events, the Rangers' climb up the rocky cliff was indeed a desperate endeavor in the face of active opposition by 120 German soldiers (66), who, besides throwing grenades and cutting grapnel lines, were firing small arms, machine guns, and mortars. However, the author could have made his narrative more compelling by specifying exactly, or at least estimating, how many heavy machine guns the Germans employed, how many lines they cut, how many casualties the Rangers suffered, among other details.<sup>6</sup> Like Ambrose, O'Donnell insists that the mission was not in vain. He notes that five of the six big German guns were still "pointed at Utah Beach" in their inland position and could "easily" have directed fire at Omaha Beach as well (86). Hence, the destruction of the guns "had a profound impact on the entire invasion" (88).

After Pointe du Hoc, Dog Company helped capture the port of Brest in Brittany. O'Donnell here shifts his focus from Company D to the exploits of four soldiers in Company A<sup>7</sup> in securing the Lochrist Battery, a German fortified gun emplacement. After Brest, Dog Company and the rest of 2nd Battalion were sent to defensive positions near the German town of Vossenack in the Hürtgen Forest, where savage fighting had left dead GIs and disabled vehicles strewn about.

The macabre scene continued as the men spotted a burned-out Jeep—a lone sentinel guarding one of the forest's many destroyed churches. Hit head-on by an 88 mm round, its lifeless driver seemed to welcome Dog Company into one of the tiny hamlets that were scattered inside Germany's dense Hürtgen Forest. The charred corpse sat in the rusted vehicle with its blackened hands affixed to the steering wheel. Only the dead soldier's torso and skull remained intact. He dutifully wore his M1 helmet, which had been scorched to a charcoal-indigo color by the shell that had engulfed him in flames. The odd grin on his unrecognizable face exposed shiny ivory teeth that gleamed in the sun's fading rays that filtered through the diffused clouds of the gray November sky. Dog Company fixated on the driver; the spectral figure eerily pointed the way to the remains of an old building which would become their new command post. (161–62)

The Rangers also found a decapitated German corpse with a "starving black cat" snuggled in the torso, its head gruesomely protruding "where the soldier's head should be" (162). Such grisly images effectively set the stage for Dog Company's part in the Hürtgen campaign, to which O'Donnell devotes roughly a fourth of the book. The company's most intense action occurred at Hill 400, on the edge of the town of Bergstein. On the morning of 7 December 1944, Dog and Fox Companies successfully launched a frontal bayonet attack against the German-held position, then barely withstood repeated counterattacks until relieved the next day. Fortunately for these Rangers, the worst of their war was over: they served in a supporting role during the Battle of the Bulge, crossed the Roer River in February with little drama, and spent the rest of the war in mopping up actions.

In a narrative style reminiscent of Ambrose's bestselling *Band of Brothers*,<sup>8</sup> O'Donnell masterfully strings together compelling vignettes. For example, he mentions that the German 252nd Infantry Division killed twenty-seven birds in the Pointe du Hoc area in the spring of 1944, in an attempt to prevent the French Resistance from communicating with London via carrier pigeon (58). On a more somber note, he

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6. Ambrose (ibid., 408) suggests there was only one German heavy machine gun at the cliff. O'Donnell mentions one fired by Pvt. Wilhelm Kirchoff, but does not clarify whether it was the only one (69). Ambrose estimates that the Germans cut "two or three" Ranger grapnel lines (ibid., 409–10), and Harrison that the Rangers had suffered "thirty to forty casualties" by the time they destroyed the guns inland (note 3 above). Ryan estimates that "perhaps twenty-five" Rangers died at the base of the Pointe (note 4 above, 239).

7. These "Fabulous Four"—Lt. Bob Edlin, Sgt. Warren D. Burmaster, Sgt. William J. Courtney, and Sgt. William Dreher—charged an outlying German pillbox, whose none-too-belligerent twenty-man crew promptly surrendered. Then Edlin and Courtney, along with one of their prisoners, coolly walked into the Lochrist Battery itself; after earnest negotiations with a Col. Martin Fürst, during which Edlin threatened to blow both of them up with a grenade, the German commander surrendered the entire 800-man battery garrison.

8. Subtitle: *E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001). O'Donnell served as a consultant for HBO's popular television adaptation of the book. Sadly, Ambrose's scholarship was impugned by justified charges of plagiarism; in addition, his claim to have interviewed Dwight Eisenhower on certain days proved false. See Mark Lewis, "Ambrose Problems Date Back to Ph.D. Thesis," *Forbes* (10 May 2002) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1326.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1326.htm), and Richard Rayner, "Channeling Ike," *New Yorker* (26 Apr 2010) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1327.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1327.htm). This is not, of course, to suggest any such ethical problems with O'Donnell's work.

poignantly observes that Dog Company veteran Robert Fruhling, who took his own life by gunshot on the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, “could take no more of the war” (251). O’Donnell relies heavily upon firsthand accounts of the vets themselves (oral interviews, diaries, unpublished memoirs), duly cited in his endnotes. Thirty-eight black-and-white photographs and four battle maps are further enhancements.

Although laudatory in tone, the book does not portray its subjects as unblemished angels. O’Donnell mentions two occasions when Rangers murdered Germans who had surrendered (130, 195). He also unabashedly discusses their “carnal desires,” relating how some of the men satisfied them with local girls while stationed in Britain (28, 36). Nor does he sanitize their language, sometimes, regrettably, even using salty words in his own voice (9, 10, 17, 101, 151, 155, 156).

As I have mentioned, O’Donnell’s story sometimes lacks needed detail, omitting, for example, such readily available information as the number of Dog Company casualties during the three-day battle at Pointe du Hoc.<sup>9</sup> He does (quoting others) provide total casualty figures for all three companies: only about ninety of the 2nd Battalion’s original 225 men were still capable of fighting when the battle ended (xii, 125).<sup>10</sup> In describing the fighting at Hill 400, O’Donnell dramatically observes that “Almost every man in Dog and Fox was killed or wounded.... Reduced to just a handful of men, Dog Company practically died on Hill 400” (225, 227). But he is again vague about actual figures, though he notes that, at the battle’s end, one of the Rangers thought the company was down to eighteen men (227). Glaringly in error is his assertion that the “staggering 40,000” GIs killed or wounded in the Hürtgen Forest “approached America’s losses for the entire Vietnam War” (162)—US dead and wounded in Vietnam totaled about 360,000.<sup>11</sup>

These criticisms aside, O’Donnell vividly portrays the bravery of the Rangers of Dog Company as they did their part to help destroy the Third Reich. Though it offers no ground-breaking interpretation, his book does a real service by allowing the veterans to tell their own stories. Scholars exploring the role of the Rangers in World War II or their specific actions at Pointe du Hoc, Lochrist Battery, or the Hürtgen Forest, will find the abundant eyewitness material most useful. And the broader readership of World War II buffs who enjoyed *Band of Brothers* will find *Dog Company* instructive and appealing as well.

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9. Among the book’s illustrations is a photocopy (included between 146 and 147) of a roster of Dog Company written by one of the Rangers, Len Lomell; notations next to each name indicate the fate of each man on 6–8 June. By tallying the numbers, the reader can learn that twenty-three of the seventy men in Dog Company at the beginning of the battle were killed, thirty wounded (two of whom were captured), and six others taken prisoner. This information belongs in the body of the text.

10. These estimates are corroborated by the official history (note 3 above).

11. See Anne Leland and Mari-Jana Oboroceanu, “American War and Military Operations Casualties: Lists and Statistics,” *Congressional Research Service Report RL32492* (26 Feb 2010) 3 – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1328.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1328.htm).