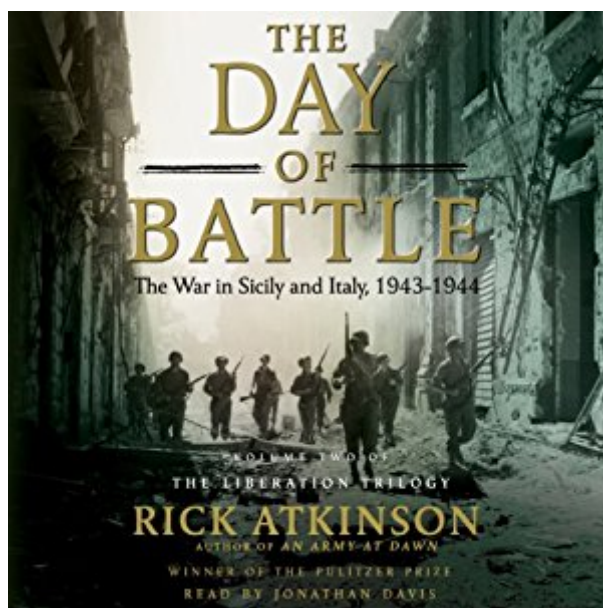


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The Day Of Battle: The War In Sicily And Italy, 1943-1944



Synopsis

In *An Army at Dawn* - winner of the Pulitzer Prize - Rick Atkinson provided a dramatic and authoritative history of the Allied triumph in North Africa. Now, in *The Day of Battle*, he follows the American and British armies as they invade Sicily in July 1943, attack Italy two months later, and then fight their way, mile by bloody mile, north toward Rome. The Italian campaign's outcome was never certain; in fact, President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and their military advisors bitterly debated whether an invasion of the so-called soft underbelly of Europe was even wise. But once underway, the commitment to liberate Italy from the Nazis never wavered, despite the agonizing price. The battles at Salerno, Anzio, the Rapido River, and Cassino were particularly ferocious and lethal, yet as the months passed, the Allied forces continued to drive the Germans up the Italian peninsula. Led by Lieutenant General Mark W. Clark, among the war's most complex and controversial commanders, American troops became increasingly determined and proficient. With the liberation of Rome in June 1944, ultimate victory in Europe at last began to seem inevitable. Drawing on extensive new material from a wide array of primary sources, and written with great drama and flair, *The Day of Battle* is narrative history of the first rank.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 32 hours and 48 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Simon & Schuster Audio

Audible.com Release Date: April 16, 2013

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00CD8KPU2

Best Sellers Rank: #40 in Books > History > Europe > Italy #93 in Books > Audible

Audiobooks > History > Europe #212 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military

Customer Reviews

A very detailed and precise account of the allied landings in Italy in 1943 and the tough battles that ensued to push the Germans out of the country and capture Rome. Objective representation of the problems facing the adversary troops: on the Allied side, inadequate number of troops, a very difficult terrain to deal with, the shortcomings of allied commanders, particularly General Clark's

fixation with having his fifth army be the one capturing Rome and entering the city first and his willingness to accept increased American casualties in order to achieve this objective. Very good summation as well of German commanders' strength and weakness, although less detailed than those of the Allies'. Overall an excellent account of a phase of WW II that is much less well known than the Allied invasion of Normandy that took place shortly after the capture of Rome, shifting the news headlines, to Clark's chagrin, from Italy to Normandy.

Atkinson has a gift for description, evoking a scene, and bringing together details to highlight a situation. He must have read boxes of letters by individual soldiers. He depicts the campaign from the grit, exhaustion, hunger, and fear in the trenches to the comforts of Army headquarters and the settings of the great Big 3 conferences that debated and then set overall policy. It was not at all certain the campaign reviewed in this book would occur at all - many US generals opposed it. He does not let the generals, all the way up to Ike -- off easily. Their blundering and slow learning are disheartening to read about... as well as several ghastly operational blunders that led to legendary fratricidal incidents where brave men died needlessly. He closes his discussion soon after the conquest of Rome, which makes sense for such a long volume, though it left me eager to hear his views on the remainder of the march to the Po Valley. Was it even necessary? Anyway, Atkinson never lets you miss the suffering and harshness of life for the ordinary GI, or for the civilians blasted by the American way of war...(written by a onetime GI, RVN class of 1969-70)

I'm about halfway through *THE DAY OF BATTLE: THE WAR IN SICILY AND ITALY, 1943-44*, the second volume of Rick Atkinson's masterpiece, *THE LIBERATION TRILOGY*, about the American army and air force in Europe in World War II. (I've already read the other two excellent volumes of his trilogy, *AN ARMY AT DAWN*, which is about the North African campaign -- a fiasco generally -- for which Atkinson won a well-deserved Pulitzer, and *GUNS AT LAST LIGHT*, which describes the final year of the war, post D-Day, when my Dad served over there in a rifle company.) I am utterly in awe of Atkinson's writing, but I am infinitely more in awe and in admiration of the gallant men he writes about, men of my Dad's generation. Italy in 1943-44 was hell on earth. The combat there was as bad or worse than any fighting in the American Civil War or in either World War. Here is a shocking and particularly moving passage from this book, pp. 343-345: "Off they went, trudging like men sent to the scaffold. A soldier stumping down a sunken road toward the Rapido [River] observed, 'There was a dead man every ten yards, just like they were in formation.' Close to the river, the formation thickened. Another soldier, carrying a rubber boat, later wrote, 'It didn't seem

what were walking on was dirt and rock. We soon found out it was dead GIs" On the division left, the 143rd Infantry [Regiment] crossed more adroitly on Friday afternoon than it had on Thursday evening. [A full-strength regiment had about 2000 men; none of those in Italy by this time were full strength after months of combat.] Confusion delayed the attack for two hours, but at four PM, beneath a vast, choking smoke bank, the 3rd Battalion [800 men, give or take] began to paddle west. By 6:30 all rifle companies had found the far shore, and Colonel Martin ordered his 2nd Battalion to follow in train late that night. A quarter mile upstream, the 1st Battalion also crossed at dusk, although the laconic battalion commander, Major Frazier, radioed, 'I had a couple of fingers shot off.' Three battalions crowded a bridgehead only five hundred yards deep and six hundred yards wide. 'When twilight turned to darkness,' one soldier later wrote, 'I was thinking this is my last old day on earth.'" On the division right, delay began delay in the 141st Infantry. Not least, engineers neglected to bring an air compressor to inflate fifty rubber boats, and Colonel Wyatt, the regimental commander, postponed the attack until nine PM, without telling Walker. By two AM on Saturday, a pair of footbridges had been laid, and six rifle companies [about 200 men each] from two battalions soon crossed. They found no survivors from the previous night's combat. Engineers wondered whether the Germans had left the catwalks intact 'to draw more of our troops over.' Some soldiers balked at crossing the river, or deliberately tumbled into the water. Others displayed uncommon valor. Company E of the 2nd Battalion -- the unit roster boasted mostly Spanish surnames, Trevino and Gonzales, Rivera and Hernandez -- advanced with bayonets fixed through sleet fire from three sides. 'Fire wholeheartedly, men, fire wholeheartedly!' cried their commander, Captain John L. Chapin, before a bullet killed him. Corralled by minefields and barbed wire, the 141st held twenty-five acres of bottomland that grew bloodier by the hour. 'Well, I guess this is it,' a major told a fellow officer. 'May I shake your hand?' Moments later a shard from a panzer shell tore open his chest. He dragged himself to safety across a submerged bridge, and medics saved him. 'It was the only time,' one witness said, 'I ever saw a man's heart flopping in his chest.'" [German] Artillery and Nebelwerfer drumfire methodically searched both bridgeheads, while machine guns opened on every sound, human and inhuman. GIs inched forward, feeling for trip wires and listening to German gun crews reload. 'Get out of your holes, you yellow bellies!' an angry voice cried above the din, but to stand or even to kneel was to die. A sergeant in the 143rd Infantry described 'one kid being hit by a machine gun -- the bullets hitting pushed his body along like a tin can.' Another sergeant wounded in the same battalion later wrote, 'I could hear my bones cracking every time I moved. My right leg was so mangled I couldn't get my boot off, on account of it was pointed to the rear.' German surgeons would remove the boot for him, along with both legs." A private sobbed as wounded

comrades were dragged on shelter halves up the mud-slick east bank. Ambulances hauled them to a dressing station in a dank ravine behind Trocchio. Crowded tents 'smelled like a slaughter-house,' wrote the reporter Frank Gervasi. Outside a small cave in the hillside, a crudely printed sign read: PIECES. Inside, stacked burlap bags held the limbs of dismembered boys. On average, soldiers wounded on the Rapido received 'definitive treatment' nine hours and forty-one minutes after they were hit, a medical study later found: nearly six hours to reach an aid station, followed by another three hours to a clearing station, and another hour to an evacuation hospital. The dead were easier: they were buried fully clothed without further examination."Certainly the doctors were busy enough with the living. Only five physicians manned the clearing station of the 111th Medical Battalion. They treated more than three hundred battle casualties on Friday, often struggling to mend the unmendable, and they would handle nearly as many on Saturday. A wounded sergeant undergoing surgery with only local anesthesia later reported, 'The doctor stopped in the middle of the operation to smoke a cigarette and he gave me one too.' Another sergeant from the same company told a medic, 'Patch up these holes and give me a gun. I'm going to kill every son of a bitch in Germany.'"Well, what can one say after reading that?

I had already read parts one and three of the trilogy, but not two. Rick Atkinson's style shines all the way through all of the volumes, and the continuity of the story lines (threads) for both major and minor characters is a good draw. It is thus easy to pick up the story in some random stage of the war pretty easily. Rick writes WW II history the way I would aspire to write it-- so that just about anyone, even with a breadth of previous knowledge of the war or military in general, could pull at least something interesting, and human, out of the narrative. The level of research is as exhaustive as possible and thus beyond reproach; as a result, even persons knowledgeable about the campaigns and the war in general can learn something new or an interpretation not considered. For example, while many have decried the Italian campaign as wasteful and largely unnecessary, Atkinson has clearly implied here that it was the next logical, obvious stage after Sicily, Sicily being the obvious and logical next step after Tunisia, regardless of what Churchill wanted; also, that Salerno and Anzio, while both costly and near-catastrophic, taught valuable lessons about amphibious landings that otherwise would have made an accelerated timetable Invasion of W. Europe completely disastrous and potentially "game-over".

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