



Learning from the Germans

Maneuverist Paper No. 4

by Marinus

One of the more curious features of the first four decades of the maneuver warfare movement within the Marine Corps is the large role played by artifacts of the German military tradition. Why, after all, should American Marines, who defend a liberal democracy, depend so heavily upon lessons taught by the champions of authoritarian regimes? Why should “soldiers of the sea” in the service of a global maritime power devote so much time to the lore of the army of a continental state? Why should the heirs of the victors of two world wars pay so much attention to the methods of the losers? One possible solution to this conundrum lies in the realm of what might be called “literary logistics” of the early years of the maneuver warfare movement. Marines of 1970s might well have depended so heavily upon books and articles drawn from the German military tradition because such works were familiar to many of them and available to all.

In 1967, Kenneth Macksey, who had commanded tank units in the British Army during World War II, published a book called *Armoured Crusader*. Bearing the subtitle of *A Biography of Major-General Sir Percy Hobart*, this work told the tale of an officer who, after playing a key role in experiments in military mechanization in the 1920s and 1930s, had done much to promote the use of armored vehicles in amphibious operations during World War II. Unfortunately,

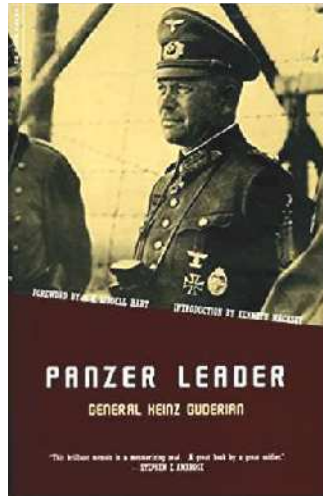
no publishing firm saw fit to put out an American edition of *Armoured Crusader*, no American military journal reviewed it, and few American libraries put copies on their shelves. As a result, very few Marines, who might otherwise have learned a great deal about institutional reform, armored fighting vehicles, and amphibious operations, ever crossed paths with this extraordinarily useful book.

In 1975, Macksey published a biography that, in many respects, had much in common with his study of the life and work of Gen Hobart. Distributed under the title of *Guderian: Panzer General*, this second work recounted the trials and triumphs of another interwar armor enthusiast who had gone on to command mechanized forces in World War II, Col-Gen Heinz Guderian of the German Army. The following year, a leading New York publishing house published two hard-back American editions of this biography, both of which bore the title of *Guderian: Creator of the Blitzkrieg*. (One edition, printed on inexpensive paper, was made available to the public through mail order book clubs. The other, bound in better cloth and printed on better stock, was intended for sale to libraries and people who shopped in the independent bookstores that could be found in so many American towns in those days.) In July of 1977, the *Marine Corps Gazette* listed *Guderian: Creator of the Blitzkrieg* among the modest number of books that members of the Marine Corps As-

Why was the German military tradition so important to the development of maneuver warfare in the Marine Corps? (Leatherneck File Photo.)

sociation could purchase by mail. One year later, in July of 1978, it printed a short, but extremely favorable, review of the book.

Many of the Marines who read *Guderian: Creator of the Blitzkrieg* were already familiar with the memoirs of its protagonist. An autobiography, with the eye-catching title of *Panzer Leader*, had been in print in the United States since 1952, favorably reviewed in the *Marine Corps Gazette* (in March 1953), and available as a mass-market paperback pocketbook since 1957. Even those who had yet to read Guderian's autobiography would have recognized his name, which had appeared 38 times in the issues of the *Marine Corps Gazette* published in the quarter century between 1953 and 1978. (By way of contrast, the name of Percy Hobart can be found only once in those 300 issues, in a passing reference so brief that no mention was made of his first name or rank, let alone his many achievements.)



Panzer Leader, by Heinz Guderian, New York, NY, Ballantine Books, New York, NY, 2009. ISBN: 978-0141042855, 196 pages.

Copies of *Guderian: Creator of the Blitzkrieg* began to appear on the bookshelves of American Marines at a time when a good number of them were actively exploring the possibility of mechanizing substantial portions of landing forces. It was also a time Marines could easily get their hands upon the autobiographies of three of Guderian's colleagues: Erwin Rommel, Erich von Manstein, and Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin.¹ Like *Panzer Leader*, these memoirs had enjoyed favorable reviews in the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette* in the 1950s and had subsequently become available to the American reading public, in a range of formats, for two decades or more. The *Marine Corps Gazette* had even published four substantial excerpts from Manstein's *Lost Victories* well before copies of the complete book began to roll off of American presses. Because of this, Marines of the 1970s who were in the habit of visiting their base libraries, looking for a paperback to take to the field, browsing in second-hand shops, subscribing to a book club, taking advantage of the Marine Corps Association book service, or perusing back issues of the *Marine Corps Gazette* would have found it difficult to avoid learning something about the experiences, observations, and achievements of Guderian, Rommel, Mellenthin, and Manstein.

Between 1975 and 1979, the prospect of landing on shores defended by Soviet-style armored forces led many Marines to advocate the mechanization of substantial portions of the Fleet Marine Force. If the articles promoting this point of view that were published in the *Marine Corps Gazette* at

this time are any indication, the partisans of this point of view borrowed much from the already familiar memoirs of Guderian, Rommel, Mellenthin, and Manstein. Indeed, it is articles of this sort that account for the doubling of the rate at which Guderian was mentioned in the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette* and the 50-fold increase in the number references to the memoirs of Mellenthin that appeared each year. (The surge of interest in Mellenthin, who ended the war as a brigadier general, may well have been a function of the scale of the actions he discussed. Where Guderian, Rommel, and Manstein dealt chiefly in the operations of army corps and field armies, Mellenthin paid much more attention to the tactics of regiments and battalions.)

Reception of the Memoirs of German Generals in the *Marine Corps Gazette*² 1950–1999

In the second half of the 1970s, mechanization enthusiasts writing articles for the *Marine Corps Gazette* tended to advocate both the acquisition of additional armored fighting vehicles and the adoption of German-style methods of leading units equipped with such machines. Capt Ronald C. Brown, for example, authored a “professional note” introducing Marines to the idea of an “assault gun” (turret-less tank), a piece that described a battle won by German Gen Hermann Balck as a model for the ways that Marines might deal with Soviet armor, and an article that discussed both possible designs for assault guns and Manstein's operations in the Crimea. William S.



Lt Erwin Rommel in World War I. These experiences were the basis of Rommel's Attacks. (Unknown German Army Photographer 1917.)

Name	Title of Memoir	Year of First U.S. Edition	Month Reviewed	Other Substantial Mentions (Total for Period Average Per Year)					
				1950–1974		1975–1979		1980–1999	
Guderian	<i>Panzer Leader</i>	1952	March 1953	31	1.24	14	2.8	68	6.8
Rommel	<i>The Rommel Papers</i>	1953	September 1953	36	1.44	11	2.2	83	8.3
Mellenthin	<i>Panzer Battles</i>	1955	July 1956	2	0.08	21	4.2	1	0.1
Manstein	<i>Lost Victories</i>	1958	December 1958	17	0.68	5	1	28	2.8

Reception of the memoirs of German Generals in the Marine Corps Gazette 1950–1999.

Lind, then serving as a legislative aide to Senator Gary Hart of Colorado, sketched out a program for increased mechanization, proposed experimentation with a variety of different kinds of mechanized forces, and urged Marines to devote more effort to the study of operations, tactics, and military history.

In October of 1979, the *Marine Corps Gazette* published a letter, written by the aforementioned Mr. Lind, that argued that the experimental Marine mechanized forces that had taken part in a recent exercise had fallen short of the standard set by German armored formations of World War II. In the course of doing this, Lind introduced readers of the *Marine Corps Gazette* to the term “maneuver warfare,” which he defined as attempting “to achieve operational success directly, shattering the enemy command by maintaining an increasing tempo of operations deep in his rear area.” Two months later, the expression “maneuver warfare” appeared again in the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, this time in the second half of a two-part feature article called “Winning Through Maneuver.” Like Lind, the author of this piece, the same Capt Brown, who had previously written about operations conducted by Manstein and Balck, described maneuver warfare as something that required much more than the mere mechanization.

At the start of the 1980s, writers publishing articles related to mechanization in the *Marine Corps Gazette* began to specialize—with some focusing on equipment and logistics while others placed far more emphasis on tactics, training, culture, and command. By the middle of the 1980s, members of the second group had come to define “maneuver warfare” as something that was entirely independent of armament. Pointing to the Finnish experience in the Winter War of 1939–1940 and the infantry tactics employed by Erwin Rommel in World War I, these authors argued that the style of

fighting practiced by “classic light infantry” was essentially the same as that of the German *Panzer* generals of World War II.³ Thus, a Marine preparing to fight on foot in the forests of Northern Norway could learn much from reading about employment of armored formations by LtGen Rommel and a Marine anticipating service with a mechanized task force in the Middle East could also benefit from the careful study of the tactics of mountain troops led by 1stLt Rommel.

The separation of the “maneuver warfare movement” of the 1980s from the “mechanization movement” of the 1970s coincided with a huge increase in the availability of media on military subjects.⁴ Marines who, only recently, had been limited to a relative handful of relevant books and articles were thus able to choose from a wide variety of monographs and memoirs, reprints of classic texts, as well

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as several handsomely produced magazines, books-on-tape, and videotapes. One result of this phenomenon was that those who wished to delve deeply into the German military tradition had the means to do so. Thus, if mentions made in articles and letters published in the *Marine Corps Gazette* are any indication, one of the paradoxical results of this bumper crop of military media was a considerable increase in interest in the reminiscences of the German senior officers who had become so familiar to Marines of

the years between 1955 and 1980. (The brief-but-brilliant career of the memoirs of Gen Mellenthin may be the exception that proves this rule. In the 1970s, *Panzer Battles* was one of the few places where a Marine could readily learn about the nuts-and-bolts of German mechanized warfare. By the middle years of the 1980s, it was competing with dozens of other works that provided comparable information.)

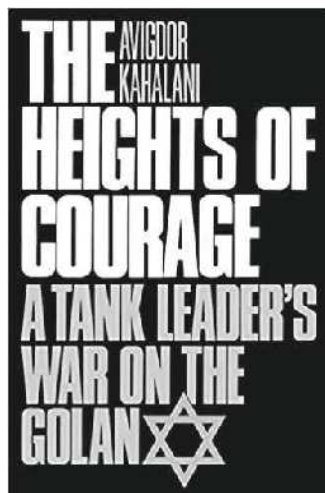
The military media explosion of the 1980s also made it possible for Marines to explore maneuver warfare traditions



U.S. Army MG John Shirley Wood commanded the 4th Armored Division which spearheaded General Patton's Third Army drive across France in World War II. (Unknown War Photographer-U.S. War Department.)

other than those of Germany. This same embarrassment of riches also facilitated the study of what might be called “maverick maneuverists,” commanders who, in order to practice maneuver warfare, were first obliged to reject many aspects of the culture of the armies in which they served. Thus, where the maneuver-minded Marine of 1978 would have been hard-pressed to find alternatives to the memoirs of German generals who fought in World War II, his counterpart of 1988 might have been able to learn many of the same lessons from Hanson Baldwin’s biography of MG Shirley P. Wood of the U.S. Army of World War II or the first-hand account, by Israeli LtCol Avigdor Kahalani, of the fights fought by the battalion he led on the Golan Heights in October of 1973.

What was true for Marines of the 1980s was even more



The Heights of Courage: A Tank Leader's War On the Golan by Avigdor Kahalani, London, Praeger, 1992, ISBN: 978-0275942694, 198 pages.

true for those of the three decades that followed. Thus, those who wished to immerse themselves in the German military tradition enjoyed an ever-increasing number of opportunities to do that. At the same time, each passing year has provided more in the way of resources to Marines who, for whatever reason, wished to study maneuver warfare without engaging German examples. This latter possibility raises the question of whether the Marines of the fifth decade of the maneuver warfare movement might be able to dispense with the German model entirely. That, however, is a subject for another day.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, *The Rommel Papers*, which was assembled from surviving correspondence well after the death of its author, should be classified as a “collection of letters” rather than an “autobiography.” However, it is so close to a memoir that Spanish-language editions of the work bore the title of *Memorias*.

2. For the purposes of this chart, a “substantial mention” was one which described the accomplishments, whether tactical or institutional, of the German general in question. Thus, for example, a reference to the North African troops serving in French Indochina who had “fought against Rommel” during World War II was not counted.

3. An excellent example of the separation of the “maneuver warfare movement” of the 1980s from the “mechanized warfare movement” of the 1970s is provided by the seventeen articles written (or co-authored) for the *Marine Corps Gazette* by Col Michael D. Wyly in the years between 1981 and 1988. In all of these writings, Col Wyly, who was one of the most prominent maneuverists of the 1980s, dealt with a wide variety of issues related to maneuver warfare. None of these articles, however, were chiefly concerned with the operations of mechanized forces *per se*. Indeed, a piece that would, at first glance, appear to be an exception to this rule, a book review which appeared, in December of 1986, under the title of “Training for Mechanized Warfare,” made but one mention of mechanized operations and none whatsoever of armored fighting vehicles.

4. If items listed in the world’s most comprehensive union catalog (Worldcat) are any guide, 117 English-language books on the subject of military history had been published in 1970. In 1979, that figure had risen to 139 and, in 1989, to 255. Thus, between 1970 and 1989, the number of books in English that dealt with military history published each year had more than doubled.

>Editor’s Note: Maneuverist No. 1 mentioned one of the more controversial aspects of the maneuver warfare movement starting in the 1970s: the heavy reliance on German historical examples and concepts. This paper explores that topic in greater detail.





Learning from the Germans Part II: The Future

Maneuverist Paper No. 5

by Marinus

In the last three decades of the 20th century, the study of German military history, and in particular, the reading of the memoirs of German general officers of World War II, allowed Marines of that era to imagine what maneuver warfare might look like. In the 21st century, a substantial change in the supply of relevant resources raises the question of whether Marines intent upon improving their understanding of maneuver warfare should look for other examples to emulate, experiences to evaluate, and traditions to contemplate.

In 1979, the Old Army Press, a small publisher specializing in the history of the American West, printed 2,000 cloth-bound copies of a book called *Tiger Jack*. Written by Hanson W. Baldwin, who had won a Pulitzer Prize for his work as a war correspondent in the Pacific during World War II, this book told the tale of MG John S. Wood, a U.S. Army officer who, in the course of the last year of World War II, led the 4th Armored Division in a distinctly maneuverist manner. (British military historian B.H. Liddell Hart once referred to Wood as “the Rommel of the American armored forces.”)

Arriving, as it did, during the genesis of the maneuver warfare movement, *Tiger Jack* should have been of considerable interest to Marines. Notwithstanding the long and happy relationship between Mr. Baldwin and the professional journal of the Marine Corps, no mention of the book appeared in

the pages of the *Marine Corps Gazette* and few, if any, copies found their way onto the shelves of the libraries of Marine Corps bases.¹ A few Marines may have run across the reviews of *Tiger Jack* published in *Armor* magazine and *Parameters: The Journal of the U.S. Army War College*. Of these, those who were especially adept at chasing down books might have ordered a copy, whether from a full-service bookseller or directly from the publisher. However, only those who were able to spend several days in the reading room of the National Archives, the archives of Syracuse University, or the library of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College would have been able to delve more deeply into the way John Shirley Wood commanded the 4th Armored Division.

Today, dozens of copies of *Tiger Jack* can be found for sale on the websites of dealers in second-hand books. Better yet, Marines who wish to learn more about MG Wood and the way he handled his division can find dozens of additional works on the website of the Combined Arms Research Library at Fort Leavenworth. These include monographs that reconstruct particular engagements; after-action reports submitted by the commanders of subordinate, adjacent, and supporting units; and accounts that describe the operational context of the decisions made by MG Wood. A broader internet search will turn up additional resources on the operations of the 4th Armored Division during the last year of World War II. These

German tactics and operational art formed much of the foundation for maneuver warfare in the Marine Corps. (Photo by LCpl Angel Serna.)

include four complete histories, three partial histories, three documentary films, two histories of subordinate units, and a table-top wargame—as well as a module for a computer-based wargame.

After feasting on these resources, Marines still hungry for case studies in the effective application of maneuver warfare can easily find much material about Japanese, Israeli, French, Finnish, British, and American battles, campaigns, and leaders. Thus, for example, a Marine interested in the “bicycle blitzkrieg” conducted by the Japanese forces led by LtGen Tomoyuki Yamashita in Malaya in 1942, will, in the course of a short internet search, find enough in the way of papers, podcasts, low-cost wargames, and readily available books to permit an in-depth, multi-sided exploration of that campaign. (Readers contemplating such a project may want to start with the seventeen-episode series of audio programs about the Malayan Campaign produced by the *Principles of War* podcast.)

The existence of this cornucopia of concepts to contemplate, examples to explore, and paragons to imitate raises the question of whether maneuver-minded Marines of the Information Age need bother at all with the study of German military history. At the very least, those seeking to encourage Marines to devote their precious professional development time to the exploration of the German military tradition will not only have to produce persuasive arguments in favor of this choice but will have to deal with a pair of powerful objections.

The simplest argument in favor of the continued study of the German tradition of maneuver warfare stems from the same wealth of sources and resources that enables the study of alternative models. In the years between 1979 and 2019, more than two thousand English-language books about various aspects of the German military experience were published. The same period saw the printing of hundreds of board wargames and the creation of dozens of computer games that attempted to replicate, in various ways, the tactical and operational characteristics of German forces. The existence of this body of work makes possible the detailed reconstruction of a wide variety of campaigns, battles, and engagements. At the same time, it facilitates the placement of such events in the broader context of strategy, politics, and culture.

The availability of so much material about the German military tradition greatly reduces dependence upon the memoirs of general officers that loomed so large in the early days of the maneuver warfare movement within the Marine Corps. Most of these suffered from the sort of defects so often seen in the genre of autobiography. That is, they were self-serving accounts that minimized mistakes made by the authors, omitted information that would have been embarrassing, and placed the blame for fiascos on third parties. The worst offender in this regard was *Panzer Leader*, in which Heinz Guderian took far too much credit for the creation of German armored forces in the 1930s and, in doing so, painted the man most responsible for that development, Ludwig Beck, as a hidebound reactionary. Thanks, however, to the work of English-speaking historians, present-day Marines are in a

position to not only recognize this gross mischaracterization but learn about the troubled relationship between the two officers. (General Beck, who had resigned in protest from the German Army in 1938, had been one of the leaders of the failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler. In the aftermath of this event, which took place on 20 July 1944, Gen Guderian took aggressive measures to ensure the loyalty of German military officers to the National Socialist regime.)²

A more nuanced case for frequent recourse to the well-spring of German military history rests upon the continuous, consistent, and increasingly central role played by many of the fundamental precepts of maneuver warfare in German military culture. That is, while there were many instances where German military professionals violated one or more of these tenets, a deep appreciation for such things as the inherently chaotic nature of war and the importance of a rapid decision cycle permeated the way that German soldiers fought, thought, and taught for more than a hundred years. Thus, while the American, British, and French practitioners of maneuver warfare often waged war in ways that put them

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at odds with the cultures of the forces in which they served, German maneuverists could reasonably assume that they were cooperating with superiors, subordinates, and peers who shared their beliefs and biases. Because of this, Marines attempting to imagine a force in which the practice of maneuver warfare is the norm will find more positive examples of such organizational orthodoxy in the annals of German military history than in the tales of mavericks, eccentrics, and doctrinal apostates.³

A more powerful justification for the retention of the link between maneuver warfare in the Marine Corps and the German military tradition begins, paradoxically, with the two most common arguments offered by the opponents of that enterprise. The first reminds us of the large number of war crimes committed by members of the German armed forces during those conflicts. The second rests firmly upon the incontrovertible fact that Germany lost both world wars.

There is no doubt that, during both world wars, members of the German armed forces, acting in their official capacities, violated laws of war that were then in force in a large number of ways. These crimes included the invasion of neutral countries, the aerial bombardment of cities, the sinking of civilian ships, and the collective punishment of civilians. (Outrages



The actions of the Nazis are indefensible, but the study of German military tradition was indispensable to the development of Warfighting. (Photo: National Archives.)

of the last types usually took place in the course of attempts to enforce one of the central tenets of the law of war of that era: the rule that civilians may not, under any circumstances, participate in combat.) In the Second World War, moreover, German soldiers, sailors, and airmen served a regime that engaged in the persecution of political dissidents, the maltreatment of prisoners of war, and a gargantuan, frequently murderous, campaign of ethnic cleansing.

As horrible as they were, the war crimes committed by German servicemen in the course of the world wars were far from unique. The armed forces of the victors of the Second World War invaded neutral countries, bombarded cities from the air, sunk civilian ships, maltreated prisoners of war, and engaged in the collective punishment of civilian communities. In addition to these things, they conducted campaigns of mass rape, looting, and indiscriminate murder against civilians they were obliged to protect. In addition to this, they ensured the survival and, indeed, enabled the expansion of the communist regime of the Soviet Union, the crimes of which surpassed in quality, and greatly exceeded in quantity, those of National Socialist Germany.

The war crimes of the armed forces of the alliance that won the Second World War does not, in any way, excuse those of their German counterpart. They do, however, present serious students of the art of war with a conundrum. If German violations of the laws of war prevent us from studying German military history, then the war crimes committed by members of the Allied armed forces during the Second

World War should prevent us from making use of the American, British, and Soviet experience of that conflict. Similarly, if connection to a reprehensible regime prevents a military tradition, institution, or personality from offering anything of value to present-day Marines, then we may study neither Soviet military theory nor the campaigns of the Red Army, let alone the memoirs of Georgi Zhukov.

What is true for the question of war crimes also applies to the issue of ultimate defeat. If we limit ourselves to the study of the winners of various wars, then we deprive ourselves of the lessons that we might learn from the study of the achievements of Hannibal, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Robert E. Lee—let alone the strategic contests that we ourselves have lost. What is worse, a one-sided study of history leads easily to the false assumption that everything done by the victors contributed to their eventual triumph and every act on the part of the losers drove another nail into their collective coffin. In other words, it replaces attempts to make sense of the complex interplay of multiple forces with the unthinking embrace of all things, whether help or hindrance, associated with the side that achieved strategic success.

Done well, the study of German military history necessarily produces a great deal of discomfort. Even if a Marine begins with a quest to learn about techniques, tactics, or campaigning, he cannot spend much time with the relevant sources without being reminded of fatal mistakes made in the realms of strategy, policy, and morality. Indeed, it is this “elephant in the room” that makes the study of the German military tradition so valuable to Marines of the 21st century. In the course of helping us learn the nuts-and-bolts of maneuver warfare, it draws our attention towards the higher arts of war.

Notes

1. Hanson W. Baldwin (1903–1991) had already written sixteen books on subjects related to national defense and was well known to well-read Marines of the middle years of the last century. Between 1937 and 1980, authors of articles published in the *Marine Corps Gazette* mentioned him 79 separate times.

2. For a sympathetic biography of Ludwig Beck, see Nicholas Reynolds, *Treason Was No Crime*, (London, UK: Kimber, 1976). For an account of the development of the German armored forces in the interwar period that gives considerable credit to Gen Beck, see Bruce Gudmundsson, *On Armor*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2005.)

3. The publicists for the memoirs of German generals published in the English-speaking world in the 1950s, chief of whom was Basil Henry Liddell Hart, took pains to present the authors of such works as nonconformist visionaries at odds with their superiors. This view, however, had less to do with German military culture than with the predilections of those promoters and the prejudices of the readers they were trying to reach. For a short treatment of this phenomenon, see Bruce I. Gudmundsson, review of *Guderian: Panzer General*, (Revised Edition, 2003) by Kenneth Macksey, *War in History*, Volume 12 Number 4, (October 2005), pp. 474–476. For a more extensive exploration, see, among others, John Mearsheimer, *Liddell Hart and the Weight of History*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

