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Carrying the War to the Enemy: American Operational Art to 1945

by Michael R. Matheny

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Michael Matheny, a retired Army Colonel and Military History Ph.D. on the faculty of the Army War College, has written the first book on the American development of operational art to 1945. Operational art is the creative act of designing and combining battles to produce strategic results. It is the way commanders and staffs synchronize and sequence tactical engagements to produce strategic victory. It is campaign planning at the most basic level, but it is also something more. Matheny believes many historians unfairly criticize the US military for failing to develop a theory and educate its leaders in operational art during the interwar period. Such criticism usually emphasizes the lack of modern techniques, organization, and technology—often expressed as the lack of effective US tank corps doctrine, units, and equipment. The traditional story is that the Germans discovered the secrets of operational art in the interwar period and the Soviets made it a separate level of war and a study by itself. Matheny argues such analysis misinterprets the US experience and deemphasizes significant developments in American military thought and practice that had been evolving for decades and culminated in superb operational performance in the Second World War.

Dr. Matheny bases his assertion on a study of the senior US military school systems from their inception beginning in the 1880s. He finds that, although the term was not used, the curricula was heavy on issues of operational art. Army officers, for example, at both the staff school at Fort Leavenworth (under a variety of names) and later the Army War College studied issues like logistics, command and control arrangements, and campaign planning that are fundamental to operational art. They did so in terms of large units using consistent methods of both analyzing the issues and presenting their results. Naval officers at Newport did the same while addressing other operational issues like forward basing. The advent of the airplane added new operational issues of integration for the traditional services, and the Army Air Corps began thinking about the unique operational aspects of air power. The US military grappled with executing operational art in Europe during World War I, where it learned invaluable lessons. All the study of and education on operational art paid dividends during World War II when American commanders faced problems they had already considered and were able to craft masterful campaigns that produced decisive strategic results. The author illustrates that success with short examples of campaigns from both world wars.

Dr. Matheny tells a familiar story with a different slant. All the battles and campaigns he uses as examples have been studied in detail; historians, for example Henry Gole in *The Road to Rainbow*, have studied the interwar military education system's impact on war planning. Matheny's work provides new material in terms of the curricula of all the services' education systems, but its real contribution is in the synthesis and interpretation of a mass of material at a high level in terms of operational art. This is refreshing in an era when much of military history seems to be focused on drum and trumpet history more than the major issues of winning and losing.

If *Carrying the War to the Enemy* has a shortcoming, it is a reflection of the subject matter. Any book on operational art starts at a disadvantage. War is a tightly integrated human activity. In an attempt to study and analyze it, warriors and scholars must try to tease apart that unity and talk about artificial parts like levels of war—tactical, operational, and strategic. That is a necessary and useful intellectual exercise, but looking at only part of a complex, unitary subject is always difficult if not confusing. Tactical war is definitely different than war at the strategic level, but it is not so easy to draw clear distinctions between tactical and operational war or operational and strategic. Dr. Matheny does a good job staying away from the tactical, but perhaps because he does so, he almost automatically bumps into issues of operational versus strategic art. Is the best demonstration of US World War II operational art in the Pacific the invasion of Okinawa or the island hopping campaign that led up to that operation? The answer is probably “Yes.” One can look at the island hopping as either a campaign of a theater strategy (an unfortunate doctrinal term), or one can think of Okinawa as a battle or a campaign that includes several engagements. Dr. Matheny chose one of those approaches. He is not wrong, even if the reader likes to think about it using a different mental model. Similarly, Matheny argues the US operational approach was one of concentric pressure. One might argue that was the strategic approach and operationally the US military sought maneuver. Good cases can be made for both positions.

Overall, *Carrying the War to the Enemy* is well worth the read. The integration in a single source of a coherent interpretation of the development of US operational art for all the services is a real achievement. The research is exhaustive, and the writing is direct and very readable.