



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,

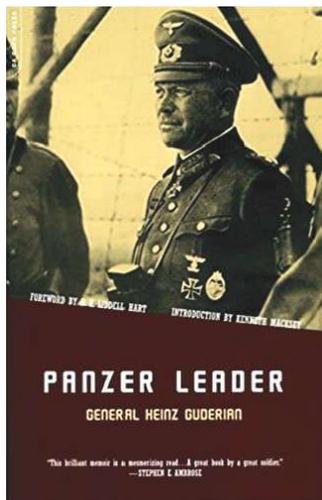
no publishing firm saw fit to put out an American edition of *Armoured Crusader*, no American military journal reviewed it, and few American libraries put copies on their shelves. As a result, very few Marines, who might otherwise have learned a great deal about institutional reform, armored fighting 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.)

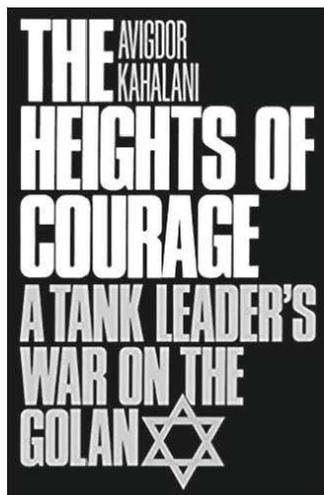
The military media explosion of the 1980s also made it possible for Marines to explore maneuver warfare traditions



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.

