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Review of *The Battle of The Peaks and Long Stop Hill: Tunisia, April-May 1943* by Ian Mitchell

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maintaining an invasion operation, particularly one launched without control of the air above the Channel and south east England. This, according to Baughen, would not have caused the Germans any real problem, but he fails to explain why such an invasion was not launched. The coverage of early RAF/army operations in north Africa and in Greece and Crete are a welcome addition as these have largely been overlooked in the literature but given the failings in both research and analysis previously highlighted it is difficult to be convinced by the conclusions reached. Overall, this is a poorly researched piece of amateur history, that, due to its price point, could have a significant negative and potentially misleading impact in terms of public understanding of this particular topic.

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Ian Mitchell, *The Battle of The Peaks and Long Stop Hill: Tunisia, April-May 1943*. Warwick: Helion & Company, 2019. 26 photographs. 15 maps. 326pp. ISBN 978-1911628934 (hardback). Price £35.00.

Most accounts of the 1943 campaign in North Africa dwell on the achievements of the British 8th Army; Montgomery's victory at the Second Battle of Al Alamein at the end of the previous year was famously referred to by Churchill 'as the end of the beginning' of a war which, until then, had seen British and Commonwealth forces struggling to overcome a seemingly irrepressible foe. The 8th Army's achievement in driving Rommel's Africa Korps back into Tunisia was quite rightly lauded by a public eager for good news. More than this though, Montgomery's penchant for self-publicity ensured that the men who fought under his command would dominate the post war historical narrative. It might come as a surprise to many people, therefore, that much of the fighting in the latter stages of the North African campaign was undertaken not by the 8th Army, but by Lieutenant General Kenneth Anderson's British 1st Army. Indeed, Tunis, the first capital city to be taken by the Western Allies, fell to the latter on the 12 May 1943, heralding the capture and imprisonment of 250,000 German and Italian combatants.

Following the successful execution of Operation Torch, the Anglo-American invasion of French Morocco and Algeria, the British 1st Army struck out into Tunisia. As Tunis itself came under threat from the Allied force German and (to a lesser extent) Italian

resistance stiffened, partly driven by the appointment of a new 5th Panzer Army commander, Hans-Jürgen von Arnim, and partly by the earlier arrival in theatre of the 10 Panzer Division. Interlocking defensive lines were consolidated in the Djebel el Ahmera and Djebel Rhar hills (Long Stop and The Peaks) by the German 334th Infantry Division thus barring access to the main Tunis rail and road route running through the Medjerda river valley. This book is concerned with the battles in this mountainous area and, in particular, the successful part played by the British 78th 'Battle Axe' Division.

The opening chapter provides vital contextual information about Operation Torch, the collapse of Vichy hegemony in North Africa and the Allied drive across Morocco, Algeria and into Tunisia. The book then goes on to explore the 1942/ 43 Winter stalemate and the planning and preparation for Operation Sweep, an attack undertaken by all four divisions of V Corps, with French and American contributions. The 78th Division was tasked with taking Longstop Hill and it is their efforts, along with the associated actions of other formations, that are examined in the main body of the book. In reading the detailed accounts of each attack and the extent of the effort made by the men involved one is struck by the scale of 1st Army's achievement. The German defenders who were made up of experienced grenadier regiments supported by specialist anti-tank, engineering and mountain troops were tenacious, well led, and impressively equipped. The heat, lack of cover and the absence of obvious supply routes created a logistical challenge which added to the difficulties faced by the attacking force.

The penultimate chapter covers the final stages of the struggle for The Peaks culminating in the taking of Djebel Rharb, a feat which was enabled by the use of Churchill tanks – to the surprise of the defenders. Finally, the author summarises the resultant destruction of the Africa Korps in May 1943 and the end of the land war in North Africa before lamenting the way in which the 1st Army was unceremoniously disbanded at the end of the campaign. The 1st Army commander was clearly treated in a rather cavalier fashion and his reputation was not helped by Montgomery's tactless public observation that Anderson was just 'a plain cook' (a metaphor re-used by Gregory Blaxland in a book which Ian Mitchell cites as his major influence, *The Plain Cook & The Great Showman*). Indeed, in his memoir *El Alamein to the River Sangro*, Montgomery couldn't even bring himself to credit Anderson with the capture of Tunis without reminding his readership that 8th Army's 7th Armoured Division was the first unit into the liberated city.

To say this work is comprehensive would be an understatement. The author has gone to extreme lengths to uncover the truth about this campaign. His list of sources and bibliography is impressively full and this is reflected in the text where different sources are compared in order to provide a composite picture of events. The author does not

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shy away from criticising individual commanders which makes his attempt to rehabilitate the reputation of Lieutenant-General Kenneth Anderson all the more credible. The pages are full of anecdotes and flashes of humour – the latter helped along by the fact that Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe both served as gunners in 1st Army and were not shy in offering up anecdotes in their respective memoirs.

This book, which is imbued with the author's passion for his subject, is written in an engaging and informative style. The chronology is supplemented by fascinating biographical detail and the referencing is meticulous and varied – often citing unpublished primary sources. The accompanying high-quality maps are well cross-referenced and there is a good mix of contemporary photographs and later images captured by the author during a visit to the battlefields. In summary, it goes a long way in filling a gap in the historiography of the Tunisian campaign and promotes an argument for the writing of a full history of the 1st Army. Kenneth Anderson was a man whose death, according to Gregory Blaxland, 'caused little stir. He was one of nature's losers in the contest for fame'. Aside from being an authoritative study of the Battle of The Peaks and Long Stop Hill Ian Mitchell's new book represents the first step in a rehabilitation which is long overdue.

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