"Wehrmacht Mystique"
Revisited
by Roger A. Beaumont
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The author expands on his earlier work and answers the criticisms of Martin van Crevel and others. He reasserts that reliance on one doctrine or method, even one so popularly held as the Germans' Auftragstaktik, is risky business and often ignores new and changing conditions of war.

In "ON LEARNING From the Wehrmacht and Other Things," in the January 1988 issue, Martin van Crevel critiqued my 1986 Military Review article and others that have examined the rise of interest in German military doctrine in the US Army since Vietnam. However, he seems to have misunderstood my position on the value of studying the Wehrmacht or das Heer (the army). I questioned how much, not if, those experiences and methods apply to the shaping of the US command method and style. I also have some difficulty agreeing with other assertions he made, although I thank him for stimulating me to further thought on the matter, all in the finer traditions of scholarly debate.

Interestingly, many Wehrmacht enthusiasts have overlooked substantial German influence on US Army doctrine from the late 19th century to World War II, from Emory Upton's enthusiasm for a general staff to the field service regulations between the world wars and the adoption of Feuer und Bewegung tactics. US military doctrine analysts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries drew upon a German tract warning of the problems of not "... tress[ing] on the province of the subordinate... an error too often committed..." and invoked the language of Auftragstaktik, that is, "your orders acquaint your subordinate with his task; the manner of execution is his affair."

Although van Crevel argues that US adaptation of German models was imperfect, how reasonable is it to expect that such a complex transfer from one culture to another can approach perfection? Whether German doctrinal elements were seen as a plus, a minus or irrelevant by US commanders, there is scant evidence of them in their memoirs or in the broader body of US military history until the 1970s.

It seems peculiar that the traits of rigor, efficient use of lean resources, professionalism, a strong warrior spirit and a tactical versus strategic bend in das Heer were also extant in the Imperial Japanese Navy. Although US sailors have studied and admired various aspects of that model, no one has suggested grafting the Yamato way onto the US Navy. Portraits of Musashi and Admiral Heihachiro Togo are not enshrined in the Naval War College. Why not? In the spirit of Musashi, we may ponder that well.

To some extent, the recent focus on the Wehrmacht as a doctrinal touchstone in the US Army has stemmed from popularization of the
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Concept of Auftragstaktik, the roots of which have been traced to the era of August von Gneisenau, to von Moltke the Elder and to World War I trench warfare counterattack tactics. In the late 1930s, after a review of doctrine was directed by the German army chief of staff, Ludwig Beck, the military science branch concluded that the utility of Auftragstaktik was doubtful and that its origins were indeterminate. Beck had misgivings, but subsequently, responsibility for operations was placed in the hands of higher commanders. That and Adolf Hitler’s insistence on compartmentalizing security information further undercut lower echelon discretion and initiative. Nor was the principle of Auftragsbefehlgebung accepted universally in Germany.²

The key concepts of mission orders and independence of commanders were evident long before the founding of the Bundeswehr.³ In the late 19th century, after the Austrian and Franco-Prussian wars, a debate among German military analysts focused on the fragmentation and confusion of the Wars of 1866 and 1870-1871, and perceived a need “to organize the necessary disorder of the attack” by re-imp osing close control and structure on small-unit operations.⁴ The central logic of Auftragstaktik was also examined in detail by the British military analyst Colonel G. F. R. Henderson in The
Science of War, who criticized it as “disintegrating methods.” The basic problem confronted by the Prussians in 1866 and 1871 was that faced by US commanders during 1861-1865. Railways, telegraphy and rifles led to massing, dispersion and speed of operations unknown earlier. But immediacy of communication ended at the forward telegraph keys. The dilemma of high-level control versus low-level reaction to the situation continued until, in stages, radios closed the link between the High Command and units in contact—or so it seemed. Erich Ludendorff, who headed the General Staff in the final phases of World War I, struggled against subordination of junior leaders, which he saw as a result of too many telephones and lack of experience. Beneath the Auftragstaktik model lies the theme of independence from civilian political authority that underlay German tactical doctrine from the Franco-Prussian War until 1918.

In any case, the use of mission orders relied on the quality of German staff officers, which was substantially diluted in the course of rearmament from the mid-1930s onward. Those fully qualified, few in number, were dispersed throughout the expanding forces. Later, the army was required to assign General Staff officers to Waffen-SS division, corps and armies. At the same time, the rigor and length of training were both reduced, in phases, from three years to one year, while education was limited to preparing students only for the "execution of written orders."

During World War II, increase in span of control and dispersal and lagging command and control technology at the tactical level led to increased reliance on Auftragstaktik, partly a reaction to Hitler's central direction of the war and partly due to weak communications technology. Whatever its lineal descent may have been in the Bundeswehr, current enthusiasm in US Army and reform movement circles for Auftragstaktik stems not only from Federal Republic of Germany and NATO geostrategic concerns, but from a search for new reference points since Vietnam. The concept, in essence, was certainly well known in the pre-1945 German army.

The adulation of the Wehrmacht stems to some degree from resentment toward "skip-echeloning" by the very highest levels and the overriding of on-the-spot commanders by "squad leaders in the sky" in the Vietnam War. Beyond that, if West German politics and geography had not precluded phased withdrawal or even standing fast versus launching deep counterattacks against Soviet second and third echelons, the complex of evolving nonnuclear technologies would have forced the issue. Yet undertones of hostility to new technology and especially toward command and control can also be heard, and of nostalgia for an image of bolder, simpler days have been evident in the reform movement and the adulation of Auftragstaktik.

Auftragstaktik, part of the doctrine of the Bundeswehr, is seen as one of the “specifically German leadership concepts” underlying the tactical doctrine of the Reichswehr, the German army of 1919-1936. Wherever the roots of Selbständigkeit— independence from close supervision by civil or even high-level military authority—lay, perhaps in the counterattack tactics of World War I, they also rose from a strong sense "... a soldierly minority amidst unsoldierly masses founded on its independence..." The focus on tactical dynamics has meant that the political aspect of war, dramatized on a
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...grand scale by Napoleon in practice and stressed by Carl von Clausewitz, has been crowded off the analytical scene, even though the hazards of focusing on tactics have often been noted, such as a 1927 study of the World War I German officer corps:

"Politics, properly practiced, is a delicate performance involving expertise in history, sociology, the sciences and the psychology of other nations. It is a long-range art when used to gauge situations, while the art of arms is a short-range art."13

Questions of discipline and authority seem to get lost in all of this. Even if allowing lower-echelon commanders a long leash is a sure way to augment the tactical speed of response in every or even most instances, and it is not at all a surety, beyond raising questions regarding the US constitutional principle of civilian control of the military, Auftragstaktik also bumps into dilemmas of command responsibility and the ongoing command, control and communications revolution. Auftragstaktik, as practiced in World War II, was not the freewheeling model implied in recent tracts.14

Nor does one encounter the qualifying term Gesetz der Sache — the Law of the Situation—which refers to the fact that sometimes close supervision and set-piece planning is at a premium as in amphibious operations, combined
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arms orchestration and complex deception and static breakouts. Nevertheless, to Heinz Guderian, slipping the leash and "ohne befahl zu kampfen"—to fight without orders—seemed the best practice. But who makes the choice? Having strong emotions and warping data is not a guarantee of either wisdom or rectitude in this realm made all the more complex by the evolution of command and control systems and other technologies with increasing disynchronicity since the early 19th century. Everybody doing their own thing may work out all right—or lead to a melee.

Tactical skill and major early successes of das Heer and the Wehrmacht did not yield ultimate victory. Paradoxically, a great many senior German army leaders were as amazed by the Blitzkrieg as were the enemies and victims of the Third Reich. Whatever the case, that model is almost 50 years old. The nexus of conventional weapons systems is now far more vast and complex than that which generated the often-unexpected synergism of the Blitzkrieg. Those World War II battles are farther back in time from today than the Russo-Japanese War was from the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union; about as far away as the Meuse-Argonne was from the Little Big Horn; and Bull Run, from Waterloo.

Of what use are such models? Napoleonic models shaped the bloody tactics of the US Civil War, and they in turn affected European military professionals and historians over the next generation who focused on such mobile Civil War actions as "Stonewall" Jackson's Valley Campaign and Chancellorsville, and ignored the less-dashing sloggling and attrition in the Wilderness Campaign and at Petersburg.

The pattern of transition from mobile to static, of 1861-1865, was repeated with mounting costs at Mukden, China, and then on the main fronts of World War I. If modern military history holds a central lesson, it is that it is risky to strike postures and make confident assumptions based on any claim of a certain future. If military history has "lessons" to offer, they lie more in the direction of suggesting the danger of bearing down on simple concepts and nostrums; of selecting and glamorizing events; and employing techniques previously thwarted by those against whom they are designed to be employed.

Beyond that, van Creveld correctly noted my concern about Nazi-Wehrmacht links. Studies of the Third Reich's complex structure ran counter to his suggestion that they were "tenacious." As Harold Deutsch has noted:

"As Nazi influence grew in Germany, some split in the officer corps did develop... the older and higher in rank tended to regard Hitler and his ilk as vulgar upstarts... All officers of whatever rank and age found appeal in the national and martial flavor of Nazi ideology, were delighted with the agitation for rearmament, and applauded demands for a vigorous foreign policy... Younger officers were intrigued by Nazi dynamism, were impressed by Hitler's knack for enlisting national enthusiasm and found inspiration in the pleas for social solidarity and comradeship. Their generals and colonels were regarded as somewhat stuffy, as too wedded to old ways, and somewhat behind the times."

Equally puzzling is van Creveld's suggestion that the "Wehrmacht's rank and file were probably no more, and no less, 'Nazified' than the remainder of German society." Public support
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for the Nazis was substantial. Not only did the army have strong Nazi links, but it helped launch Hitler on his political career and bring him to power. The Waffen-SS and the Luftwaffe were National Socialist enclaves. Major Nazi paramilitary structures, such as the NSKK, Hitler Youth and the Arbeitdienst physically and ideologically conditioned those who entered the Heer from the mid-1930s on. Beyond that, a great host of foreign volunteers was folded into the Waffen-SS.

It is especially curious that enthusiasts slide past the intermeshing of Heer and Waffen-SS as the war progressed. Army staff officers were assigned to some SS units, and SS ideological publications were distributed in the army. No one has suggested that Waffen-SS divisions, or the unabashedly National Socialist Luftwaffe's airborne forces and field divisions were marginal elements in the overall combat power of Wehrmacht ground forces. Attempts to ignore complex and extensive linkages between Wehrmacht—including the Heer—and Nazi state and society are, at best, terminological gymnastics.

Van Creveld's assertion that "ideological considerations did not play much of a role in motivating the German soldier and making him fight as he did" is also well off the mark. Morris Janowitz and Edward A. Shils in "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II" (Public Opinion Quarterly, Summer 1948) noted how Hitler's motivating power held until the end. Unit cohesion and the replacement system crumbled, individuals and isolated units fought on, and some German commanders later judged "the troops' tremendous confidence in Hitler...as the dominant factor, whether one liked it or not."

The problems of weak political training in
the Wehrmacht are reflected in the Bundeswehr's \textit{Innere Führung} system. Discussion of Nazi ideological training in the German army officers corps appeared in German military professional literature in the late 1930s. In 1941, Walter von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the army, laid down precepts and programs for ideological training that predated the National Socialist leadership officers program by two years.\textsuperscript{20} By

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\end{quote}

vacillating on the issue of ideological training for so long, the army essentially left it to be usurped by the Nazi Party.\textsuperscript{21}

Van Creveld also suggested that Nazi militarism was less pervasive than fascist militarism. Were, indeed, \textit{Mein Kampf} and Nazi films, art, architecture, youth programs and ceremonies, including the party days and the 1936 Olympics, overshadowed by Italian fascist posturing? A browse through military catalogs, bookstores and video parlors in the United States and Britain hardly suggests Goebbels' inferiority to Benito Mussolini as a propagandist. Is it seriously argued that the Italian forces were more avid in their ideology than the Germans? Italian generals deposed Mussolini, while German generals failed in moving against Hitler, due to the loyalty to Nazism of lower echelons.

Nor is van Creveld's assertion about US forces' ideological fervor borne out by the opinion polls and attitude surveys of US troops reported in Samuel Stouffer's \textit{The American Soldier}; by Russell Weigley's \textit{Eisenhower's Lieutenants}; Ernie Pyle's \textit{Brave Men and Here Is Your War}; Bill Mauldin's \textit{Up Front}; not by Yanks or Stars and Stripes. The desire to get it over with and get back home overshadowed official attempts to indoctrinate.

Van Creveld's echo of the old apologia of \textit{Eine Ganze Welt Gegen Uns} ("a whole world against us") in suggesting the Nazis were "overwhelmed" also bears closer consideration. Western Allied ground forces' numerical superiority often fell short of the 3–1 tactical rule-of-thumb manpower ratio considered as "even odds" in taking the offensive. The production statistics he cites do not reflect actual amounts on-line, or the "soakage" effects of training, submarine and ferrying losses, wear and tear, allocations for maintenance far from factories and bases, and the like, that drained the Allied "pipeline" running to far-flung theaters. In the end, US divisional manpower in Europe approximated World War I levels. All US forces overseas equaled about half of the Red Army's strength on the Eastern Front. Nor were the Nazis invincible at the tactical level. They were often defeated or slowed down even when they held a major advantage, such as at Westerplatte, Brest Litovsk, Calais, Leningrad, Sevastopol, Bir Hacheim, Alam Halfa and at Bastogne.

A curious implied argument here is that the Allies were somehow deficient or unfair in not seeking to match the Wehrmacht, in the manner of golf handicaps or horse racing. The Nazis certainly did not seek a sporting ratio in attacking Poland, Denmark, Norway, Yugoslavia and Greece. Also strange is the way in which air power is seen as a contaminant in equations of combat power seeking to prove Heer and Waffen-SS prowess, while the role of artillery is also well out of focus.

In any case, should Allied planners really have planned, after all the early Nazi victories, to deploy just what they estimated as needed for victory—especially in view of major losses to U-boats in 1941–1943? That they overestimated Nazi productivity and efficiency was a tribute to \textit{Reichspropagandaminister} Goebbels'
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Skills—as is a good portion of the afterimage of Third Reich prowess itself. Given what the Nazis were up to in their conquered areas, a view of the war as a kind of Schlieffenian Grosse Speil or tilting match rings hollow, but also reflects how fixating on the Hauptschacht overshadows political or noncombat factors.

Nor did “numerical inferiority and an impossible strategic situation,” as van Creveld suggests, come about “through no fault of its [the Wehrmacht’s] own.” It was hardly uphill all the way. After knocking off a string of weak neighbors and the factionalized French, the Nazis held the strategic initiative until mid-1943 and occupied their early conquests until mid-1944. They had the vast resources of conquered and allied states and then those of western Russia and the Caucasus to exploit, as well as aid from neutrals who traded with the Third Reich. The Balkans had been under Nazi economic hegemony from the late 1930s on, and Stalin had also provided Hitler with large amounts of raw material from 1939–1941.

On the other side, the Western Allies had to play “catch-up ball” after a generation of pacifism, building up both “teeth” and “tail” far from the battle zone. Allied resources, although rich at the source, had to be fabricated and brought vast distances, over time, at great peril and cost, against the half-decade lead of major German war production. That the Nazis—and the General Staff as well—fell short in organizing for total war, did not match their foes’ buildup, or that they could not hold that giant early advantage was not the Allies’ fault nor some Wagnerian play of fate. Wrong calls abounded. It was not Allied materiel strength that made the General Staff and others skeptical and anxious about tanks even as Gudери raced across France, or made them fail to plan...
Allied success [was not] wholly based on the principle of mass. The Allies excelled in artillery, electronic warfare, fighter-bomber tactics, scientific organization, tactical “psywar” and logistics, hence Erwin Rommel’s admiration for US contempt for doctrine and their sense of speed and mobility.

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Allied victory was far less a “sure thing” than hindsight may suggest. Indeed, Nazi leaders saw victory as just around the corner until their defeat at Kursk in mid-1943. Their lack of foresight was matched by other errors. Extensive slack and maladministration across the war machine was revealed during Albert Speer’s subsequent realignments. Shortfalls and glitches in planning, procurement, training and misappreciations stemmed from Hitler, the party—and from the armed services. Nor was Allied success wholly based on the principle of mass. The Allies excelled in artillery, electronic warfare, fighter-bomber tactics, scientific organization, tactical “psywar” and logistics, hence Erwin Rommel’s admiration for US contempt for doctrine and their sense of speed and mobility. As van Crevel suggests, the Nazis were behind the Allies in orchestrating complex elements across space and time, even though they held the classic advantage of “interior lines.”

Although postwar memoirs of some German commanders attributed the Red Army’s “near miraculous” holding-on and comeback to barbarian hardness and brutality, fixating on the Wehrmacht mystique does little to put that in balance, especially when it leads far more people to read Erich von Manstein and F. W. von Mellenthin than Polkovnik Vasilevski and S. M. Shtemenko.

Taking a longer view, the adulation of the Wehrmacht seems to reflect an urge to glamorize defeated causes that has generated eloquent and elegant defenses and rationales since the classical age. Yet, how is one to judge quality if not by victory? A number of “Great Captains”—Hannibal, Napoleon, Lee—were on the losing side. Looking back across the vast panoply of military history, as van Crevel does at
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Leonidas’ Spartans, the Praetorians, Zizka’s Hussites, the New Model, the Garde Impériale, Brigadier General John B. Hood’s “Texas Brigade,” the Iron Brigade, Australian Imperial Force and 9th Division, the 82d and 101st Airborne of World War II, various Marine divisions, the 442d Regimental Combat Team, the “Few,” Guards Armoured, Gurkhas, 3d Shock Army, the Foreign Legion, and so on—and then concluding that the Wehrmacht was “second to no fighting machine in history and better than any in the 20th century” is begging a very large question.

The bottom line? The Wehrmacht and das Heer did some things very well and others poorly. They gained a huge early lead and blew it. How much of their experience is now useful to Western military systems? How much does focusing on the Hauptschlacht, Umfassung, and so on offer an advantage versus blunting the capacity to cope with the nuances of low-intensity conflict, the vastly more complex systems of today—and “transcentury” scenarios? How much has neo-Prussianism diverted American military professionals from developing a fuller sense of their own system’s workings, or of the Soviets’, or others? At the very least, fixating on a single model blunts creative scanning and tends toward the orthodoxy that both Rommel and Guderian saw as a major flaw in the German army of their time. Nor can judgments and perceptions of the Nazi system by those within its toils be accepted uncritically, such as the argument that psychological side effects of combat had little influence on the Wehrmacht.

How much military professionals’ always scarce time is best spent mastering their craft—in training, planning, conducting exercises and games, making projections or studying the past—is their province of decisions. How much should—or can—scholars and civilian analysts in this realm be guides, scavengers, advocates or counselors? Can history yield clear lessons? Is it reasonable to expect that complex paradigms
from one cultural system can be transferred to another? The debate among Israelis over the value of the British military service of many of the early IDF (Israeli Defense Force) leaders reflected how that process can be viewed in different lights.

The difference in contexts between the current US Army and that of the Third Reich's, half a-century past seem obvious enough, as are geographical, political and situational differences. The United States has no ardently selected and trained general staff. Feudal values are not represented in the officer corps. Nor are marked deference to authority or martial symbols and values strongly shaped in the culture. There is no deep resentment born of defeat in battle that underlay the rise of Nazism with support from the army. Whatever went awry in Vietnam, the Army won its major battles and did not fall back in disarray.

It is interesting to note, then, how Heer commanders such as Guderian and Rommel felt about the overall effectiveness of their system and its intellectual foundations, including Clausewitz, whom Guderian mentioned briefly in passing and to whom Rommel made no reference, while Hitler invoked him occasionally, rather in the manner of the devil quoting scripture.25 The views of Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist are worth reflecting upon: "The German mistake was to think that a military success would solve political problems . . . under the Nazis we tended to reverse Clausewitz's dictum and regard peace as a continuation of war."

Structurally, formal enshrinement of Auftragstaktik as fixed central doctrine would stand athwart basic principles of command authority and responsibility and civilian control of the military. While that does not seem to be the goal of the enthusiasts, any assumption about the nature of future warfare is risky. The track record of military professionals or civilian defense analysts in making such predictions does not warrant the granting of the working hypotheses or assertions the status of truism. Artful argument and strong feelings cannot command the future. Military history, if nothing else, shows how often strongly held expectations were dashed and schemes frustrated. It certainly does not support an iron law that optimum grasp of the "situation" in tactical or strategic situations is always to be found at a particular level on the hierarchical network—or, indeed, that there is a generic link to such situations.

In World War II, the Nazis' early successes with the blitzkrieg sprang from tactical fusion of various weapons through radio networking, and a general emphasis on mobility and maneuver. As the Allies got the measure of it, the result was often grim indeed, such as the destruction of the massed panzers at Kursk and Mortain, and of German and Italian armor in the action at "Snipe" in North Africa. (The great admiration among Wehrmacht enthusiasts for Rommel and Guderian, who regularly skipped echelons and micromanaged on the front line, is paradoxical.)

Selecting doctrines and methods in a given situation and keeping a close watch on unfolding events remain the responsibility and the burden of higher commanders. Lightness of hand on the reins is a matter of skill and style, and virtuoso performance in command closer to art than science. The military art of the Wehrmacht offers one model of many for practitioners to draw upon in developing their art. But like the other models, Auftragstaktik is not an immutable constant or a universal truth, but subject to the old Prussians' "law of the situation." There is no certainty that a future contingency would not require close orchestration, set-piece battles and static warfare versus Umfassung and Vernichtungskampfen—or vice versa—or both. The 1944-1945 campaigns in the West, from Operation Overlord to central Germany, involved all of the above. Keeping many kinds of arrows in the proverbial quiver of options offers some insurance against the emergence of the unexpected that has been all too much in abundance in the history of modern warfare. And beyond that, there seems little
purpose in announcing to a potential foe how one intends to proceed, especially when it is in

a manner that they have seen before—and defeated.

NOTES


2. Erich Wagger, "Der Selbständigkeint der Unterführer und ihre Grenzen," Militärwissenschaftliche Rundschau (No. 2) 1944, 100-115, and for an earlier report on Hitler's rise see: Der Weltkrieg, 1933, 216-218.

3. E.g., see Tag und Nacht Am Fange: Aufklärungsaktions in Westen (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1942), 176 and 426; A. W. Brijlise, The German Army (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Department of Military Art, 1916), 53.


7. Julian Lerner noted that "Hitler's ambition was to make himself the man that the German people thought they had seen before—and defeated" in his introduction to Hitler's Mein Kampf (New York: Schocken, 1977).


10. Contrary to the assertion that "The German Army [1917-1943] never used the term... an artificial construct whose meaning has never been defined with any precision..." and "... never even thought of the term as "human,"" cf. John T. Nielsen, Where Do We Go From Here? Considerations for the Adoption of Aufräumstruktur By the U. S. Army (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School for Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1983), 7-9.


15. Klaus Padanauburg, Undermining the Deutsches Stimmungs (1918-1945), (Düsseldorf: ASV Verlag, 1959), 20.


17. For perspectives on Nazism in the army officer corps, especially at middle and lower levels, see comments by senior Wehrmacht officers in Command and Staff of the Modern War (eds. Lewis, 1980), 29-30.

18. For a recent perspective on the impact of Hitler as a training, see Ian Kershaw, Hitler: The Life of a Tyrant (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 333.


23. General J. Lawton Collins, US Army chief of staff during the Korean War, who held major field commands during World War II in both the European and Pacific theaters, later observed that: "We have a great army, an 88mm gun, but they never did really learn how to handle artillery. This may be shocking but it's a fact. We knew so much more about artillery than the Germans did, it was a tremendous advantage...," in Conversations With General J. Lawton Collins (Gary Wadde, ed., (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1983), 4.

