

British Journal for Military History

Volume 9, Issue 1, March 2023

Review of *Ham & Jam: 6th Airborne Division in Normandy – Generating Combat Effectiveness: November 1942-September 1944* by Andrew Wheale

Matthew Powell

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 27 March 2023

Citation: Matthew Powell, 'Review of *Ham & Jam: 6th Airborne Division in Normandy – Generating Combat Effectiveness: November 1942-September 1944* by Andrew Wheale', *British Journal for Military History*, 9.1 (2023), pp. 181-183.

www.bjmh.org.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



The BJMH is produced with the support of **Goldsmiths**
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Andrew Wheale, *Ham & Jam: 6th Airborne Division in Normandy – Generating Combat Effectiveness: November 1942-September 1944*. Warwick: Helion, 2022. Xxxviii + 267pp. 7 maps. 7 Tables. 3 Figures. ISBN 978-1915070852 (hardback). Price £35.

Andrew Wheale sets out to chart the development of British airborne capabilities in the Second World War through an examination of one of the major formations utilised in this role: 6 Airborne Division. The book is formed of six chapters including an introduction and conclusion. The actions of various British, Commonwealth and United States formations during and after the D-Day landings has had much coverage both in official histories and subsequently by historians. The operations and capabilities of Allied forces has been subject to many decades of historical research and has undergone revision and counter-revision. One area that is lacking in the literature of the Second World War more generally, however, is looking at the development of the fighting capabilities of national armies or looking at individual formations. Wheale's work looks to fill this gap in a small way through a detailed look at not only how an airborne capability developed in Britain in the years prior to 1944, but also how doctrinal principles were modified in the light of German airborne operations, and how experience from training and exercises was incorporated to create a fighting culture within the 6 Airborne Division. Further to this, Wheale examines the leadership ethos and driving force behind the division of Major-General Richard Gale who set the standards to be followed by both the officers and men. In this attempt, Wheale largely succeeds, and this is a book that would be of interest to students and generalists with an interest in Second World War force development, and the learning culture in armed forces and airborne warfare. The book is excellently referenced and makes use of the plethora of primary source material available from the National Archives and other repositories, alongside a wide range of secondary material on the D-Day operation and the subsequent drive through France.

Wheale begins his analysis by exploring the attitude to airborne forces within the War Office in Britain, particularly in response to the successes of German airborne forces in France in 1940 and on Crete in 1941 (pp. 40-3), where the shock value of troops landing from the air had shown themselves. Wheale demonstrates that the investigation by the War Office of the potential of airborne forces was not simply limited to what had been successful. This was a full and frank investigation that sought to understand the risks associated with the use of airborne forces and how these risks might be mitigated. This review took place in the context of airborne forces being a low priority for senior army commanders in Britain prior to the Second World War, and the following quotation highlights the prevailing attitude within the British Army in the inter-war years:

Airborne forces had been dismissed by the British Army prior to the Second World War. The then Lieutenant-General Archibald Wavell (GOC 2 Div) had observed the September 1936 Kiev manoeuvres by the Soviet Army during which 1,500 paratroopers were dropped. Wavell's final report focussed on Soviet mechanized capability and judging from his scanty comments he clearly viewed the airborne operation as a side show. He reported 'its tactical value may be doubtful', having noted the length of time it took parachutists to regroup after the drop and the vulnerability of their close formation low-flying aircraft (pp. 51-2).

One of the highlights of Wheale's work is the analysis of how airborne forces were trained, led, and how doctrine was developed and refined (pp. 73-128). In this, Wheale devotes much space to providing substantial evidence for the fighting capabilities of the division when deployed to Normandy in support of the D-Day Landings. The standards expected of those who volunteered are clearly evident in the fact that anyone at almost any level of command could be returned to unit if they did not prove themselves to be exceptionally physically fit and have the tenacity to adapt to difficult circumstances during training and exercises. This ethos set by Gale, the division's commander, created an atmosphere that meant the division performed with exceptional skill and bravery despite having never before been deployed against the enemy. It was able to accomplish tasks under difficult circumstances, facing heavy enemy resistance and with minimal logistical support during the airborne drop phase of its operation, as well as holding bridgeheads at the River Orne, something that it would not necessarily have been expected during the initial planning phases of the operation as reinforcements had been expected to reach the division sooner (pp. 173-207). This flexibility of action shows how much effort had been placed into training and the development of the division's combat effectiveness in Britain in the years prior to 1944.

One additional area of interest is the inter-service rivalry that prevented the fuller development of airborne forces and their wider utilisation by British forces due to disagreement about the use of generally obsolescent bombers and their modification into transport aircraft. This was something that the Royal Air Force, and Bomber Command in particular, were desperate to avoid as their experience in the inter-war period had created a fear of losing operational control of aircraft. There were also concerns raised regarding the development of airborne forces removing pilots for training and operations that the Royal Air Force did not consider to be the major wartime role of Bomber Command (p. 49).

This book would be of interest to academics, practitioners and the wider public for differing reasons. For academics it fills a large gap in the current literature on force development in the Second World War. For practitioners it covers the development

REVIEWS

of combat effectiveness and the challenges that this poses at various levels of command. Finally, the wider public with an interest in the Second World War would discover a new aspect of the D-Day landings that has had relatively little coverage compared to the amphibious operations and the landing beaches of Normandy.

MATTHEW POWELL

University of Portsmouth, UK

DOI: [10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i1.1697](https://doi.org/10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i1.1697)