Welcome to the December meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speaker is Peter Mansoor, author of *The GI Offensive in Europe*, along with combat veterans of the European Theater.

One of the enduring myths of the Second World War is the military prowess of the German *Wehrmacht*. It was propagated by the survivors from the defeated German officer corps, who wanted to believe that they were not really defeated for second time on the battlefield. The army did not lose the war, Adolf Hitler did. The only reason the Allies won was because of their overwhelming numbers of men and materiel, supplied by the United States.

European militaries have always condescended to US military forces. For instance, many Europeans believed that the two opposing American Civil War armies were just two armed mobs. To be fair, throughout its history Americans have been suspicious of professional standing armies, preferring to rely on local militias (now known as the national guard), for the bulk of their fighting forces. Time, the amount of men needed, and the increased military professionalization did not allow this reliance on National Guard personnel to last very long in World War II.

Following the German invasion of the Low Countries and Norway, and the fall of France in 1940, the government began calling guard and reserve officers, men, and divisions to active duty as facilities became available (the 34th ID did not report for muster until 10 February 1941). A draft, for one year of service not outside the hemisphere was established. On 7 July 1941 US Marines replaced British troops as the garrison force in Iceland, the first expansion of postings abroad. Following the passage of the Lend-Lease bill, American industrial production soared, going mostly to the Allies who our neutrality favored.

With the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States became the last combatant to enter World War II. Armies do not appear overnight, and ours was far from ready. Some of the forces could be drawn from National Guard units but their training had been very limited during the economically depressed inter-war years. Personnel would be drawn primarily from the able-bodied white male population. Racism was a major factor in keeping minority populations from serving. The men, who did serve needed to be fed, clothed, and trained. Training facilities had to be built, munitions made, and soldiers taught to fight. Added to these exclusively American military needs were the lend-lease promises to the European and Soviet Allies. Once the system was “up and running” things did move more smoothly.

In 1941, American planners proposed a 215 division army for the war with over 8 million men. This number was reduced in 1943, to 111 divisions. The final number settled on in 1944 was 90 divisions, but the United States Army ended up with only 89 divisions with more than 5 million men in service. These divisions needed to be divided between the European Theater and the Pacific Theater. Although President Franklin Roosevelt followed a “Europe First” strategy, he could not neglect the American public’s venomous need for revenge against the Japanese, or the strategic and tactical opportunities our limited forces in theater created. American troops often fought the German army on a one to one ratio, so
The Round Tablette

8 December 2011 — 2

the myth of overwhelming Allied manpower just does not hold up.

General George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, faced a daunting task of training existing divisions and creating new ones, and finding qualified officers to lead them. Officers could be drawn from the Regular Army, the Reserves, or the National Guard, Officer Candidate Schools (OCS), and the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). Marshall himself selected division and corps commanders, mostly from people he served with in the regular army. Only one National Guard unit, the 37th Ohio, was commanded by the same person, Major-General Robert S. Beightler from 1941 to 1945. Even with experienced divisional leaders there was not guarantee of command success. The majority of divisional commanders at the beginning of the war had gone to West Point and had combat experience in the Great War, but what set the most successful ones apart from the others was their ability to learn from their mistakes and adapt at every level of the command structure. From the privates to the generals, Americans had to learn their new profession of war, and did so. It is a measure of their success that they won both their wars. The vaunted Wehrmacht lost its war.

The Allied goal in Europe was clearly defined; destroy the Third Reich and its Italian cohorts. Despite myths, United States did not have the mass of men and materiel to overwhelm the German Wehrmacht. They did have enough men, and materiel, and especially the innovative thinking to follow through to victory.

Further Reading:
Michael Doubler, Closing with the Enemy: How GI’s Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945 (Lawrence, KS: The University Press of Kansas, 1994).


Announcements:
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - No meeting till 23 Jan. 2012, Steve Anderson - 715-386-1268


July, 14-15, 2012

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry55@hotmail - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org or Bill at 952-201-8400

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