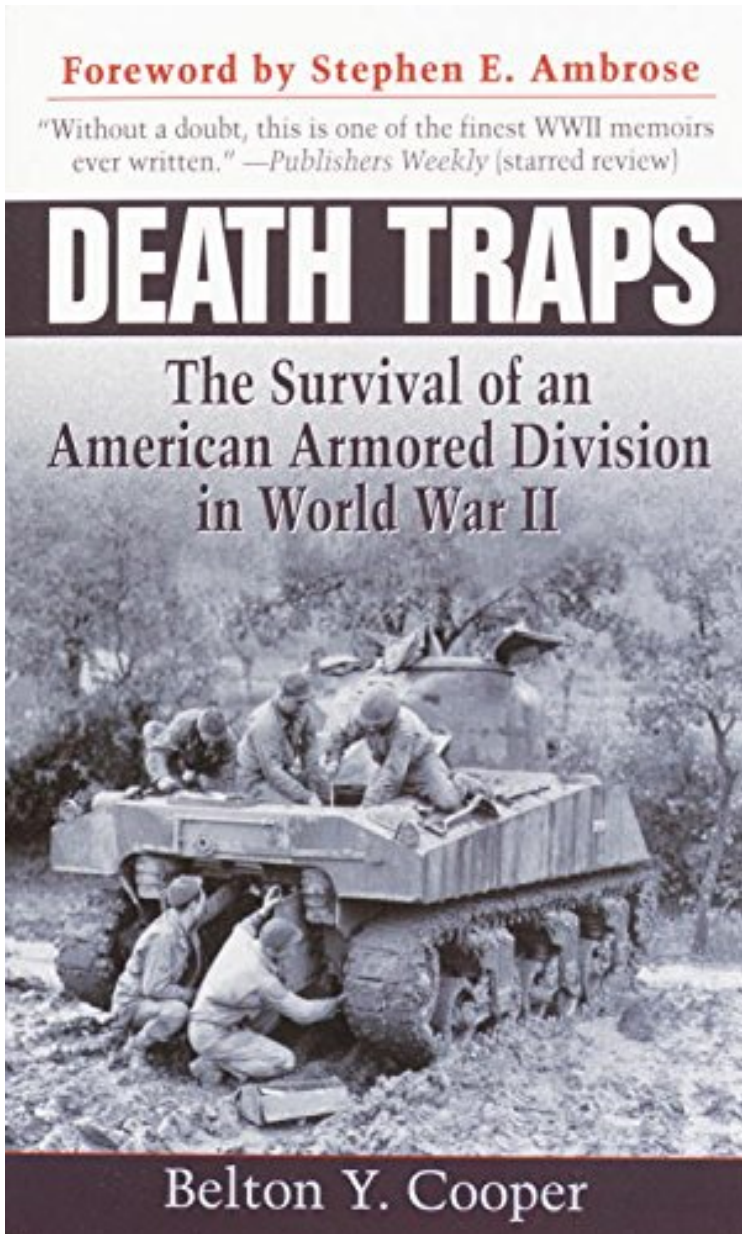


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Death Traps: The Survival of an American Armored Division in World War II



Par Belton Y. Cooper
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Description : Description du produitAs American tanks raced across France, one fact became immediately clear: One-on-one, the Sherman tank with its 75 mm main gun was no match for the more heavily armored and heavily-gunned German tanks that it faced across the battlefield.

Prsentation de l'diteurCooper saw more of the war than most junior officers, and he writes about it better than almost anyone. . . . His stories are vivid, enlightening, full of lifeand of pain, sorrow, horror, and

triumph. STEPHEN E. AMBROSE From his Foreword In a down-to-earth style, *Death Traps* tells the compelling story of one mans assignment to the famous 3rd Armored Division that spearheaded the American advance from Normandy into Germany. Cooper served as an ordnance officer with the forward elements and was responsible for coordinating the recovery and repair of damaged American tanks. This was a dangerous job that often required him to travel alone through enemy territory, and the author recalls his service with pride, downplaying his role in the vast effort that kept the American forces well equipped and supplied. . . . [Readers] will be left with an indelible impression of the importance of the support troops and how dependent combat forces were on them. Library Journal [DEATH TRAPS] FILLS A CRITICAL GAP IN WW2 LITERATURE. . . . ITS A TRULY UNIQUE AND VALUABLE WORK. G.I. Journal From the Paperback edition. Extrait Reflections On Board the LST to Normandy My feelings were somewhat ambivalent as I stood on the deck of the landing craft and looked down at the gently rolling seas of the English Channel. Although the water was not particularly rough, the heavily laden landing craft seemed to have a roll frequency in sync with that of my stomach. We had been advised to take seasickness pills about two hours before embarking, but because I had spent ten days crossing the entire ocean without using pills, I felt certain I would not need them to cross the narrow Channel. Earlier in the evening, when we had loaded on the landing craft, we were immediately shown the officers country mess, where I proceeded to load up on buttered toast, doughnuts, and coffee. This now was my undoing, and I regretted having waited until getting out to sea before taking the pills. In addition to being seasick, I felt thoroughly confused. My concern and apprehension about the future were somewhat offset by the excitement of participating in the largest invasion of all time. But I was also teed off. Watching all the surrounding ships made me realize that I should have chosen the navy; instead, I was an ordnance liaison officer in the 3d Armored Division. During my first two years of college at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI), I took army ROTC in the artillery branch. At the beginning of my junior year, I transferred to the University of Michigan to study naval architecture and marine engineering, which had been my lifelong ambition. Because the University of Michigan did not have a naval ROTC at the time, I decided to enter the army ROTC ordnance branch, which was the closest thing to artillery offered by the university. Although I received full credit for my ROTC studies, I had to take additional hours to graduate. By fall 1941, a new naval ROTC program had been started at Michigan, but by this time I had already received my commission as a second lieutenant in the Army Ordnance Department Reserve. The naval ROTC unit started offering ensigns commissions for senior naval architects in the Bureau of Ships, pending graduation. I immediately submitted my transcript and took the physical exam to apply for a commission; I was accepted based on my graduation in February 1942. But a problem surfaced during my interview with the naval commanding officer. He told me it was not possible to have simultaneous commissions in the army and the navy; I would have to resign my army commission in order to accept my navy commission. I agreed at once and requested that he contact the War Department and have me transferred to the navy. But it wasnt that simple. According to regulations, the navy could not request that the army transfer me; I would have to resign. However, he would be glad to provide a letter showing that I had been offered the commission as an ensign. Here began my enlightenment about the governments bureaucratic machinations. One could not simply turn in a resignation. Instead, certain forms had to be requested from the War Department, filled out in triplicate, and sent back to the department. I immediately requested such forms, then waited. In early June 1941, I received a telegram from the War Department and eagerly opened it in anticipation of good news about my requested transfer. I was shocked when I read the contents. TO BELTON Y. COOPER SECOND LIEUTENANT ORDNANCE DEPARTMENT RESERVE stop. CONGRATULATIONS, YOU ARE HEREBY ORDERED TO REPORT TO ACTIVE DUTY TO THE EIGHTEENTH ARMORED ORDNANCE BATTALION THIRD ARMORED DIVISION CAMP POLK LOUISIANA ON JUNE 22ND 1941 stop. YOU ARE TO BE RELIEVED OF ACTIVE DUTY IN ORDER TO RETURN TO YOUR HOME IN HUNTSVILLE ALABAMA BY JUNE 22ND 1942 stop. SINCERELY HENRY L. STIMSON SECRETARY OF WAR. Although I did not know then that circumstances would extend my active duty and postpone my graduation until June 1946, I was upset that my plans to design the worlds first unsinkable battleship were shot square in the rear end. It appeared incomprehensible to me that the government would insist that I remain a maintenance officer in an armored division when every year only ninety naval architects graduated as opposed to some twenty thousand mechanical engineers, who could have easily filled this position. It was sometime past midnight on July 3, 1944, when we cleared the breakwater at Weymouth, England. I was impressed with the skill of the U.S. Navy in keeping the LSTs in a somewhat orderly formation. In the

darkness, I could barely see the shadowy forms of the ships in front and to the rear of ours. All of a sudden, my seasickness became acute. Cooper, what the hell are you doing? asked one of my buddies. I'm feeding the fish, damnit. What the hell does it look like? Had I not grabbed my helmet, I would have lost it also to the briny deep. I sat down on the deck in a cold sweat and waited for the next spasm. Fortunately, the queasiness passed. Crossing the Atlantic It was only natural that I would compare the trip across the Channel to crossing the Atlantic on the troop ship John Erickson. We sailed from New York on September 5, 1943, in the largest troop convoy that had yet been assembled in World War II. The German submarine wolfpack attacks on American convoys had peaked in the spring of 1943 and now seemed to be abating. The navy took no chances, however, because the German battleship Tirpitz was known to be in Norway along with several cruisers and submarines. The convoy consisted of nine transports carrying the 3d Armored Division and the 101st Airborne Division, which would play a major role in the battle of Normandy and the following breakout, as well as numerous separate artillery, medical, and service units. The convoy also included nine navy tankers, loaded with fuel and supplies for the upcoming invasion, and an escort consisting of the battleship Nevada and nine destroyers. I was standing on the deck at the stern as our ship passed down the Hudson Channel. Some two thousand troops were also on deck enjoying the sunshine of a clear September day. Looking aft, we could see the Statue of Liberty as her head disappeared over the horizon. This final vision of New York had a profound effect on me and probably all the other troops. I'm sure that many were wondering if or when we would see our country again. I was assigned to a cabin with five other first lieutenants. The cabin, about ten feet square, contained two stacks of three bunks each and had a small adjoining toilet and saltwater shower. Although we were crowded, our accommodations were luxurious compared to those of the enlisted men, who slept in the holds in bunks stacked five high. I had an upper bunk on the starboard side next to a blacked-out porthole. I was comfortable and had no trouble sleeping, despite the fact that my lieutenant buddies loved to shoot craps and play poker well into the night. On day five, halfway across the Atlantic, I was asleep in my bunk about midnight when I was suddenly awakened by the sound of a remote explosion followed immediately by two similar explosions. I jumped out of my bunk and tore out down the hall barefooted and in my long underwear. I was followed by my buddies, who had been shaken out of their lethargy following a late-night poker game. As we passed through the double blackout curtains onto the deck, we saw a fully lighted ship on the horizon. My first thought, although not entirely logical, was that one of the ships in the convoy had been torpedoed and had turned on the lights to allow the troops on board to escape. It soon appeared that the ship was dead in the water, because the convoy proceeded and the ship disappeared to our rear. There were no further explosions or other unusual activities, and we finally drifted back to our cabins and went to sleep. There was great excitement and much speculation on board the next morning. The GI rumor mill was going full tilt. The most logical explanation, from the naval officer in charge of our gun crew, was that the lighted vessel was a hospital ship returning to the States from England. Such ships, which were painted white with a large red cross on the side, traveled fully lighted at night so as not to be mistaken by German submarines; in fact, the Allies notified the Germans when these ships were on the high seas. According to the Geneva Convention, the ships, as noncombatants, were allowed to proceed under the protection of the International Red Cross. When a hospital ship approached a convoy, the convoy would open up and let it pass through. Knowing this, German submarines would surface at night and follow the hospital ship closely so that the propeller of the submarine could not be detected separately from the propeller of the hospital ship. The submarine would safely enter a convoy and then attack. In an attempt to counter this, Allied navies would drop several depth charges behind any hospital ship that approached a convoy. Each of the men sleeping in the holds of our ship had a space approximately two feet by two feet by six feet for himself and his duffel bag. The bag, about eighteen inches in diameter and thirty-six inches long, held all of a soldier's personal gear. Obviously, the soldier was crowded in his bunk. Under the double loading arrangement, soldiers spent twelve hours in their bunk and the next twelve hours on deck. They would bring their duffel bags with them wherever they went, because they might not return to the same bunk. Each section of the deck was patrolled by military police (MP). One day, a private had just come up on deck, placed his duffel bag against the door of a storage locker, and settled down with one of his buddies to spend the rest of the day in the sunshine. He had no sooner gotten comfortable than the MP sergeant came by and told him he couldn't block the entrance to the door. So the private moved himself and his bag to the only other place available by the rail. A few minutes later a young second lieutenant came by and noticed the soldier lying against the rail underneath the lifeboat. The lieutenant told him that he was blocking the way to the lifeboats, not a good idea in the event of an emergency. The MP sergeant told me to

move over here, said the private, because I couldn't block the entrance to the door. I don't care what the sergeant told you, the lieutenant replied. You'll have to move back. You can't stay here. The private moved his duffel bag back against the door. No sooner had he gotten settled and started talking with his buddy than the MP sergeant came by again. Soldier, I thought I told you to move that bag against the rail. Sergeant, I moved it there and some second lieutenant told me it wasn't safe to be on the rail and to move back here. I don't care what some damn shavetail told you, replied the MP sergeant. I'm in charge of this deck, and you'll move that thing back over there like I told you in the first place. The frustrated young soldier moved back against the rail. Sure enough, a few minutes later the lieutenant came by again. Soldier, I thought I told you to move that barracks bag away from this rail. Lieutenant, I did, but the sergeant told me to move again. The young lieutenant was feeling his oats. Move that damn bag away from the rail. I don't want to tell you again, do you understand? Yes, sir. I do. The soldier moved back against the door with his bag. I've had it up to here, he told his buddy. If I have to move this damn bag again, it's going in the ocean. Shortly, the MP sergeant came back down on the deck. When he saw the soldier with his bag against the door, he was infuriated. Damn it, soldier, this is the last time I'm gonna tell you to move that bag over to the rail. Sergeant, that won't be necessary, the soldier replied. You'll never have to tell me again. With that, he stood, picked up his bag, walked calmly across the deck, and tossed the bag over the rail into the waves. The MP sergeant looked stunned. All the enlisted men in the vicinity started applauding and hollering, Go soldier, go, go. At a special court-martial convened that afternoon, the soldier was tried and convicted for destruction of government property. Aboard the LST in the English Channel, I felt much better after a brief nap in my bunk. As far as the eye could see in any direction, there were ships. Most of the combat vessels had either gone east to Gold Beach to support the British or west to Utah Beach to support the American VII Corps. Because the beachhead was about ten miles inland from Omaha Beach, there was no threat of direct fire from artillery. The LSTs circled in slow, lazy patterns as they awaited the signal to come onto the beach. This was D + 28, so all the fighting had long since cleared the beach itself. There was still threat of aircraft, but I was assured that we had adequate protection. A few moments later, a lone Me109 came screaming down the beach. Although the combat vessels were gone, it seemed as though hundreds of giant hoses sprayed liquid anti-aircraft fire in long, arched trajectories as the tracers tried to seek their target. Yet the plane continued on its path until it was out of sight. I found out later that it was a reconnaissance plane that repeated this operation several times a day. Although I had seen enemy reconnaissance planes in the searchlight beams over England at night, this was my first view of the enemy in actual combat. It was indeed an exciting Fourth of July. I had a bet with my buddy Ernie Nibbelink, who was on the LST next to us, as to who would be the first to go ashore. We were all off the Fox Orange section of Omaha Beach, awaiting the beach masters signal. The captains of the LSTs apparently also had bets as to who would go ashore first. Immediately after the signal, the ships broke formation and headed for the beach. As our ship approached, it trimmed aft as much as possible, dropped the stern anchor about two hundred yards from shore, and rammed the beach at top speed. Because an LST is most vulnerable when beached, all due haste was made to unload and get it off the beach as quickly as possible. We were all down below revving the Jeep engines and ready to debark. I had loaded on the transport as late as possible so that my Jeep would be close to the bow doors and I'd be able to get off before Ernie. He'd apparently had the same thing in mind. As we came down the landing door, his Jeep appeared to be somewhat ahead of mine. However, about thirty feet of water separated the end of the landing door and the beach, which meant that he had to wade. This should have been no problem; we had already waterproofed the vehicles to be able to operate in about three feet of water. But Ernie's Jeep came off the landing door and dropped straight out of sight. It seems that the LST had landed in a shell crater; it had to be pulled out with a bulldozer. Needless to say, I beat Ernie to the beach and won the bet. The beach operation appeared extremely well organized. The Normandy beaches were receiving an average of thirty thousand troops a day and a greater tonnage of cargo than the port of New York. In addition to this, numerous burned-out hulks of tanks, half-tracks, and other vehicles were strewn up and down the beach, as if a giant child in a temper tantrum had broken his toys and scattered them in disgust. The traffic control was well planned, and we immediately exited the beach on one of the many roads that had been bulldozed through the sand dunes to the paved roads behind the beach. Yellow tape marked both sides of the sand road and also both sides of the highway that led westward. Signs at all exits from the road and at intermediate points read, Mines clear to the hedgerows. This was a warning to be extremely careful about pulling onto the shoulder of the road or going into any field that was not guaranteed to be cleared of mines. Numerous Jeeps had hit mines; they were completely destroyed and their passengers were killed. We continued with caution to our first bivouac

area, just south of Isigny. The Bocage and the Hedgerows

The area south of the Cotentin Peninsula is the bocage country, the ancestral home of the Normans, who invaded England in the eleventh century. Now the process was being reversed. The area in peacetime had an almost storybook quality. Beautiful, quaint, small villages were scattered throughout the gently rolling hills. The villages were surrounded by fields that were separated by picturesque hedgerows. These hedgerows proved to be a death trap for the American army. The Normandy countryside has deep, rich topsoil that is free of stones. Due to this lack of stone to build walls, Norman farmers who wanted to divide their land among their sons would plant rows of hedges and trees to separate the fields, which were often only one to three acres in size. The roots embedded themselves deeply and held the soil. Natural erosion over seven centuries of Norman occupation washed away the land, leaving these hedgerow earth mounds six to eight feet high and ten to twelve feet thick at the base. Reinforced by tree and hedge roots, these natural fortifications could not be penetrated by tanks. This bocage country extended from ten to forty miles inland from Omaha Beach throughout the Normandy area. German generals could not have conceived of a more formidable defense against highly mobile armored and infantry troops. Even the vaunted Maginot and Siegfried lines paled in comparison. In spite of this terrain, the selection of Normandy as the invasion site proved fortuitous. Northwestern France is separated from the rest of the country by the Loire and Seine Rivers. Access to the area depends on bridges. Normandy and the Cotentin Peninsula are at the extreme northwestern tip of this area. For about six months prior to the invasion, the Allied air forces bombed all the bridges across these rivers. The Germans would rebuild them by night, and Allied aircraft would knock them down the next day. At the same time, the air forces heavily bombed the Pas-de-Calais area and built up a false concentration of military units in the Thames estuary. This ruse apparently worked well, because it convinced Hitler that the Pas-de-Calais area was the main invasion spot even after the Normandy landings had taken place. Hitler remained convinced that the Normandy invasion was a feint until the night before the Saint-L breakthrough. Not until then did he finally release the panzer divisions that had been held in reserve in the Pas-de-Calais area. Fortunately for the Allies, this decision came too late. The planning and execution of Operation Overlord was brilliant. Naval, ground, and air forces cooperated with precision. Logistics and supplies were well coordinated. It appeared that great lengths were taken to attend to the most minute details. A small booklet entitled *Invade Mecum* (invade with me) was given to platoon leaders before the D-day invasion. It contained detailed drawings of every hamlet and village in the Normandy area, with the location of major buildings in the village, such as the mayor's home, city hall, the public utility building, and the telephone exchange; in some cases it even gave the names of the mayor and the director of utilities. The booklets proved an invaluable source of information to the combat troops. In spite of all this planning, and even though hedgerows existed in England, somehow the tremendous defensive potential of the hedgerows was completely overlooked. If the G2 and G3 sections were aware of this, it never reached the combat units that had to negotiate these terrible obstacles. The hedgerows were to cost the Americans dearly in lives and equipment. The maintenance battalion set up its first bivouac in several fields about a mile south of Isigny. The vehicles pulled off the road between yellow taped markers, then circled the edges of the field. It occurred to us that the hedgerows would provide excellent cover. Little did we realize the price we would pay for this camouflage. Everyone was cautious about mines, particularly antipersonnel mines. After a time, however, we developed a kind of sixth sense about our surroundings. A dilapidated lean-to against a hedgerow in one corner of the field we entered was occupied by a young Frenchwoman and her little boy. They had fled Isigny when the fighting started and had been here ever since. Although thin, they appeared to be in good health. We fed them and turned them over to the military government, which evacuated them. These French civilians, the first I had encountered, impressed me with their will to survive and their ability to adjust to the most primitive conditions.

Combat Command A: Action at Villiers-Fossard

We had no sooner settled down than we were called for a briefing to inform us of the tactics that the Germans would use to oppose us in the hedgerows. They would run telephone wire completely around the perimeter of each of several fields in a row. As they were driven out of a field into the one behind it, they could hook their telephone clips into the wiring and immediately call for mortar fire in the field they had just left. This ability to get mortar and artillery fire almost instantly would prove to be devastating to our infantry and tanks who had just occupied the field. At the French village of Villiers-Fossard, south and east of Airel on the Vire River, the Germans had penetrated three thousand yards into the 29th Division area. Combat Command A (CCA), which had come in ten days before Combat Command B, was given the mission of capturing Villiers-Fossard and eliminating the German salient. After three years of training, the division was being committed for the first time. The combat command was organized in three separate task forces, each

consisting of a reinforced tank battalion with infantry and artillery support. The attack started on the morning of June 29 with two task forces abreast and one in reserve. The columns on the right and left of the highway each had one bulldozer tank to get through the hedgerows. The initial penetrations moved rapidly but soon ran into heavy small-arms, mortar, and antitank fire from a German reinforced infantry battalion. The two bulldozer tanks were knocked out early in the operation, leaving only explosives to break through the hedgerows. It was here that we encountered, for the first time, the deadly combination of hedgerows and the short-range German panzerfaust. Operated by a single man without any special training, the panzerfaust was an ideal weapon for close-range hedgerow fighting. After the two dozer tanks were knocked out, the only way to get through the hedgerows was by planting explosives and blowing enormous gaps so that the remaining tanks could pass. This, of course, warned the Germans where the next tanks were coming; they concentrated their fire at those points, with murderous effect. After two days of bitter fighting, CCA accomplished its objective and withdrew. It lost 31 tanks, 12 other vehicles, and 151 men heavy losses for an operation of this type but the lessons learned by the combat command would save many lives and much equipment in future operations. At a critique following this operation, General LeRoy Watson, the division commander, voiced his concern not only about the losses but also about our having left several knocked-out tanks in the fields. Although the maintenance people of the 32d Armored Regiment had T2 armored recovery vehicles, they explained that some of the knocked-out tanks were actually behind the German lines and others were in no-mans-land between the lines. Burned beyond repair, they were not worth the sacrifice of further lives. Colonel Joseph Cowhey, seeing an opportunity to enhance the prestige of the ordnance maintenance battalion, told the general that if the armored regiments could not recover the tanks with their T2s, he and the maintenance battalion would retrieve them. As a West Point graduate, Cowhey had stood high enough in his class to be selected for ordnance duty. Having taken considerable pride in this, he apparently became greatly concerned when lower ranking classmates, assigned to the infantry and artillery, were being promoted much faster than he was. He saw the recovery of these tanks as an opportunity to show what a combat ordnance unit could do. Because the maintenance battalion had no T2 recovery vehicles, Cowhey selected an M25 tank transporter a large, heavy-duty six-by-six tractor to do the job. Probably no other vehicle was less suitable. The colonel proceeded down the Isigny Villiers-Fossard highway with his small task group: the M25 in the lead; followed by the Jeep holding himself, another officer, and a driver; and a three-quarter-ton weapons carrier with a tank maintenance crew. Except during heavy fighting, the front lines in combat were extremely quiet and calm, as was the case this day. As the small convoy approached the last infantry outpost, the M25's 250-horsepower engine created quite a commotion. The convoy was stopped at the roadblock by an infantryman and cautioned about proceeding further. At this point, a disheveled-looking soldier emerged from the hedgerows with a Thompson submachine gun. Who in the hell told you to bring that monster down here! he yelled. The colonel got out of his Jeep and came around to the front of the transporter. I did, damnit! And who the hell are you? hollered the young soldier as he nervously pulled back the bolt on his Thompson. His helmet net did not camouflage his insignia; he was a captain. He was obviously nervous; his unit had been under heavy mortar fire. He was infuriated that anybody could be dumb enough to bring a large, noisy transporter into this area, which would call additional fire on his men simply to recover worthless, burned-out tanks. Im Colonel Cowhey of the 3d Armored Division, and Ive come to recover our tanks. Apparently unfazed, the captain pointed his tommy gun directly at the colonel. Ill give you fifteen seconds to turn around that pile of junk and get the hell out of here. If you dont, Ill blow your brains out. The colonel, who had never been talked to in such an insubordinate manner by a junior officer, yelled to the lieutenant to turn the convoy around and leave. On the way back to Isigny, Cowhey realized that what he had done must have appeared to be a grandstand play, and the captain had risked a court-martial against the chances of being killed in action. Cowhey was so humiliated that he never mentioned the incident. Some felt that, in the long run, it resulted in the survival of other officers and men in the maintenance battalion. From Publishers Weekly Without a doubt, this is one of the finest WWII memoirs ever written by an American junior officer. Lieutenant Cooper served with the 3rd Armored Division's Maintenance Battalion and saw action from Normandy to Germany in 1944-1945. One of the army's two heavy armored divisions, the 3rd lost 648 M4 Shermans and had another 700 tanks damaged, repaired and put back in service by the time the shooting ended in May 1945. Cooper, as one of the division's three ordnance liaison officers, was in the midst of the division's tank recovery operations. He writes about the tenacity of the maintenance mechanics and their ability to improvise and devise their own policies. Cooper is unsparing in his criticism of George S. Patton and other generals whose belief in mobility over heavy armor

kept the Sherman medium tank as the standard. American tank crews quickly learned that these "death traps" were no match for heavier German tanks such as the Panther and King Tiger. Cooper describes the difficult maneuvering in the hedgerow country, the confusion of the Battle of the Bulge, the liberation of Nordhausen concentration camp and the destruction of an entire column of tanks and other vehicles. Cooper demonstrates convincingly that it was the unheralded work of the maintenance section that allowed the 3rd Armored Division to maintain its combat effectiveness. This detailed story will become a classic of WWII history and required reading for anyone interested in armored warfare. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.