

# Book Review

## A review of *Operation Biting: The 1942 Parachute Assault to Capture Hitler's Radar* by CW2 Dylan Fackler, Military Intelligence

Written by Max Hastings. Published by Harper Collins, New York, NY. 2024. 384 pages.

The movie *Black Hawk Down* made the word "Irene" of Operation Gothic Serpent famous, but have you heard of "Walnut Twelve" or its associated operation? Today's special operations forces owe much of their heritage to the trailblazers of the Second World War. There is a lot of literature on the most recognizable formations, like the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) or the United Kingdom's Special Operations Executive (SOE). Much has been said of how these forces used cutting-edge technology to support their operations, but what of special operations that support the development of technologies? Max Hastings' latest book highlights one such effort during the relative lull between the Battle of Britain and the American entry into WW2.

*Operation Biting: The 1942 Parachute Assault to Capture Hitler's Radar* delves into the human aspects of the 1942 airborne raid to steal a Nazi air defense system from the coast of France. Hastings explores multiple facets of the necessity for the raid from the personal, political, military, and scientific perspectives. Special Operations seldom achieve merely tactical advantages but are nested within a broader end state spanning the operational to strategic levels of war. The Bruneval Raid, as it is known, is an early example of specially organized forces supporting scientific insight that enabled broader war efforts. Hastings lays out the successes and failures in achieving the raid in terms that are understandable and informative to military history novices and experts alike.

Readers will be immediately introduced to the key personalities of Operation Biting, as the first six chapters, out of 12, are focused on the brief biographies and their associated chronologies leading up to the raid. These chapters establish the political challenges and military realities facing the United Kingdom in the early 1940s. Hastings explores the political posturing and infighting typical of the British senior-ranking officers of the time. More importantly, he delves into what this meant for the men selected to train for and execute the mission.

Operation Biting's influence extends far beyond its historical context. You don't need to be an expert in WW2 history to grasp the measure of its impact on the larger-scale and more complex operations that followed throughout the war. Direct parallels with Operation Market Garden are made as a few of the same personalities played critical roles in both. At this point in the war, cooperation in planning and executing operations involving multiple services was an experiment. An experiment that, if successful, would unlock the tools required to defeat the seemingly unbeatable German dominance of continental Europe. This book provides valuable insights for modern special operations, making it a must-read for military personnel and history enthusiasts alike.

Operation Biting is not just a book; it's an engaging journey. Like the entertaining narrative of Richard Dunlop's *Behind Japanese Lines: With the OSS in Burma* (Rand McNally & Company, 1979), it draws you in with its surprisingly engaging and insightful technical components. The book boasts an impressively researched inventory of appendices, references, and a topically organized index, making it a must-read for military history enthusiasts.

Operation Biting is a superbly researched and easily readable exploration into the dynamics of joint service planning for special operations during politically sensitive times. Hastings expertly brings the human dimension of war to the forefront throughout the experience. Drawing on extensive interviews

with participants or those with first-hand knowledge of the raid, he accurately details the all too real personal frustrations of attempting such an operation. Poor communication between service components, missing equipment, botched rehearsals, lack of key intelligence, and poor weather played their role in that February night in 1942. Hastings keenly provides the relevant perspectives from the British and German combatants and the French bystanders, thus giving a complete and comprehensive analysis of the events. The dynamics of conducting the mid-20th-century equivalent of multi-domain operations are most relevant to current Army SOF readers. Today, tactical leaders can take much from the first-hand testimony of Major John Frost, the British ground force commander that night.

Hastings put considerable effort into normalizing the timing throughout the book, even detailing the timing standardization in a note before the first chapter. That said, the person-focused narrative does impose effort on the reader looking to understand the tactical dynamics and chronology of the various parties involved in the raid.

Max Hastings's *Operation Biting: The 1942 Parachute Assault to Capture Hitler's Radar* sheds light on how Special Operations Forces and scientific experts have influenced military strategy on the grandest scale. This is a nod towards how SOF may again do so. Army Special Operations soldiers and support personnel can draw valuable perspectives from this book. Military history aficionados or those seeking to join or support SOF may enjoy this book detailing a WW2 example of specially selected and trained forces executing Multi-Domain Warfare.

*Author's Note: CW2 Dylan Fackler is assigned as an Army Intelligence Data Platform – All Source SME to the INSCOM Data Capabilities Division at Fort Belvoir, VA. His previous warrant officer assignments include the JSOC Intelligence Brigade (JIB), 2nd BCT 82nd Airborne Division, and 4th Bn 1st Special Forces Group.*

