

LIONS OF CARENTAN, THE: Fallschirmjager Regiment 6, 1943-1945

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Summary

The Lions of Carentan is a translated, first-person account describing the trials and exploits of Fallschirmjäger (Parachute) Regiment 6, during the period of 1943 – 1945. This elite and proud unit fought through Italy, Normandy and on the Russian front with distinction. This narrative is well written and replete with fascinating anecdotes from a variety of sources within the unit, both humorous and tragic. Read it.

History

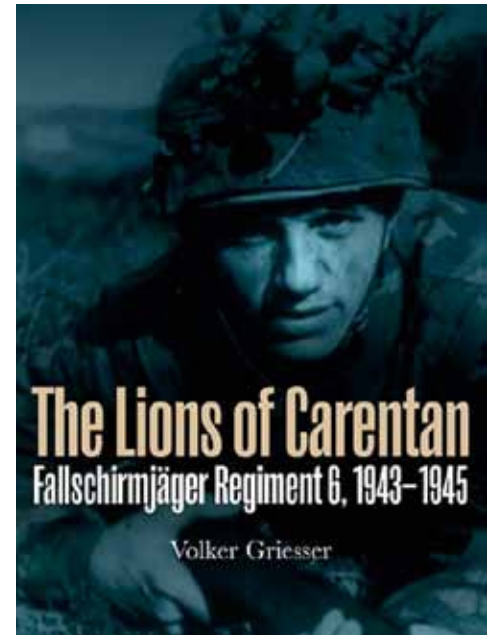
The Fallschirmjäger (paratroopers) were the elite arm of the German Wehrmacht. Herman Göring assumed control of the Luftwaffe in 1935, and the Fallschirmjäger were created from a combination of his personal paramilitary regiment and volunteer parachutists. Their subsequent outstanding achievements in World War II were based upon two major factors: voluntary enlistment

in the Fallschirm Division, and outstanding modern and demanding military training. None rivaled them in ability and motivation; they were respected within the German forces and by their opponents.

The Book

'The Lions of Carentan' is the story of an elite airborne unit, fighting on the German side during World War II. The first person account has been translated from German, and reads like an action novel from cover to cover, even when the unit was not in actual combat. The combat scenes, however, are what make this book stand out. The author personally interviewed dozens Fallschirmjäger veterans for this work, and their stories shed fascinating new light on famous battles that to date have been viewed primarily from the Allies side. The vast majority of the 220 photographs in the book have never before been published.

The paratroopers experience in Normandy against the British, Canadians and Americans give the book its title, but there is far more included between the covers. The book discusses training in Germany, the first taste of battle outside of Moscow in 1943, the intensive fighting in Italy, and the fighting-retreat across France in the face of the allied armies



and withering air power. The book ends with the unit's involvement in the Ardennes offensive, where the Fallschirmjäger performed the last airdrop behind allied lines.

Having read a variety of non-fiction books on WWII by American, British and Russian authors, I found it extremely interesting to hear from the German perspective for a change. Fortunately, unlike many first-person accounts, this book lacks the grandiose and self-inflating portrayal sometimes found in these works – no doubt due to the professionalism of the unit.

Mr. Griesser begins with a few pages about the initial organization and formation of the unit before launching directly into its first deployment

to Italy, in 1943. One of the many unique things about Fallschirmjäger units is that they were trained in what the author calls 'advanced leadership', with each member given a high degree of individual responsibility. Time and again, single soldiers, fighting alone, made the difference in battle for the entire unit. "The caste-like system that was still widespread in the Wehrmacht and other places was practically unknown in the Fallschirmjäger divisions".

Chapter three brings the 6th Regiment to Russia in late November, 1943. Having trained to live and fight outdoors, the transition to the frozen waste from Italy is taken in stride. This is where the first of many criticisms the author lays against the SS leadership and various SS 'political' units comes forth, pulled from stories obtained through interviews. A common battlefield situation arose when the SS units to the left and right of the Fallschirmjäger would break and fall back, forcing the paratroopers to do likewise simply because their flanks were thereby exposed. In those times, "every foxhole ...was transformed into a stronghold until ...supplies were exhausted".

The remnants of the unit were brought back to Cologne for refit and reorganization.

Deployment to Normandy followed in May of 1944. One of the many, many anecdotes provided in this time period was one describing the identification 'clickers' some of the American units used on D-Day: "At night, sounds carried especially far, and therefore this idea that the Americans had, to communicate in the dark with these children's toys, wasn't very intelligent. If they really had ribbet'ed like a frog, no one in the swamps would have noticed, but the sound of these metallic clickers was so clearly unnatural, that one would have to be deaf not to notice (and zero in on) it."

Another story, at the other end of the spectrum, described torture witnessed by American paratroopers: "We observed a few Americans giving one of our wounded a good once over... with their fists and butts of their weapons. When he could no longer move, one of the Americans put his foot on the soldier's head and pushed him under the water until he drowned."

Most of his animosity is saved for the SS, however, particularly the 17th SS Panzer Division stationed in Normandy; a new division created from loyal political appointees and self-entitled ranks. The

Fallschirmjäger calls it the 'Kiss My Ass Division'.

Chapter Six finds the unit posted to Holland for another round of rest and refit – just in time to unknowingly participate in the allied Operation Market Garden. One story describes a 'relocation' train full of people guarded by several SS. Shocked at the condition of the people on the train, the Fallschirmjäger try to give their meager rations to the outstretched hands, only to be frustrated by the guards. Pulling their weapons, the paratroopers push back the SS and proceed to do what they can before having to pull out themselves.

Most of the action in this period is against the Canadians, who the Fallschirmjäger all agree were very tough opponents.

The unit is then pulled out of action and moved to the Eifel region, in the area of the Ardennes to support the troops pulled off the line from the heavy fighting in the Hürtgen forest. Their ranks are again filled and they are informed that they will be making an air drop behind enemy lines in support of a great new Western offensive (now known as the Ardennes Offensive, or the 'Battle of the Bulge'). Subordinated and split into fragmented units, their goals are not met and they retreat

piecemeal back to their front lines. Their leader is wounded, dying, and delirious, and surrenders to the Americans. Even as small two and three man groups, they still end up capturing (and eventually letting go) many Americans themselves.

The final chapter in the book, and for the Fallschirmjäger, covers what they did in the defense of the homeland. This same amazing unit is now moved to the expanding bridgehead behind the still-intact Remagen bridge across the Rhine. Unable to stem the enormous flow of men

and material into the bridgehead, they are once again pulled back and sent piecemeal to other hotspots such as the Russian Front, the Ruhr and even to Berlin. On 17, April, 1945, the last remnants of what was once a proud elite division were betrayed by local villagers to the Americans, who took them into captivity.

The book ends with a summary of what the surviving members of the Fallschirmjäger did after the war, as well as several appendices containing more photographs and a chart of

Fallschirmjäger ranks and their allied equivalents.

'The Lions of Carentan' is well worth the read. Too often we accept the allied point of view as the only view, and forget that in a soldier's world, in terms of duty and sacrifice, each side is more alike than different. A truly unique perspective, this book is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the war.

I would like to thank Casemate books for providing this book for review, and to Internet Modeler for giving me the opportunity to read it.
