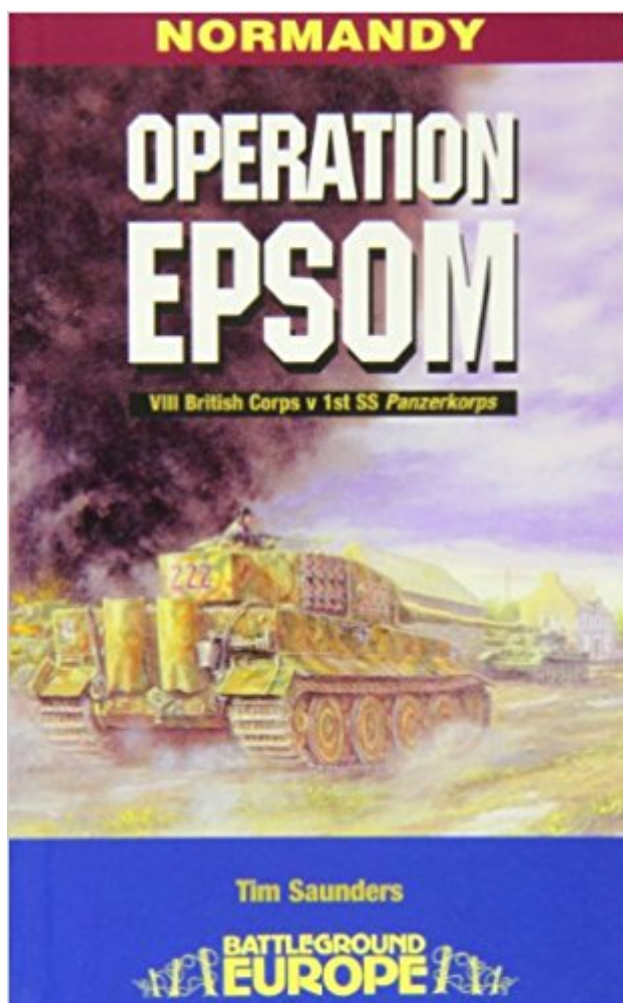




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Operation Epsom (Battleground Europe Normandy)



Synopsis

Operation EPSOM was General Montgomery's third attempt to take the City of Caen, which had been a key British D-Day objective. Delayed by a storm, the attack, designed to envelop Caen from the west, eventually began at the end of June 1944. The Territorial Army battalions of 15th Scottish Division spearheaded the attacks through the well developed positions of 12th Hitlerjugend SS Panzer Division. It was slow going and when tanks of the 11th Armoured Division dashed to the Odon Bridges they ran into the concentrated fire of dug-in panzers. However, the following day the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders slipped through the German defenses and seized a vital bridge. Armor poured across but, rather than pushing home their advantage, the British prepared to beat off a powerful counterattack from II SS Panzer Corps.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Tim Saunders is a former Army officer and author of thirteen Battleground titles on a wide range of Second World War battles. Tim is now also a script writer, programme maker and presenter for Battleground History TV. In addition he regularly leads battlefield tours, including to the scene of Glider Pilot actions in Sicily, Normandy. Arnhem and the Rhine.

Operation Epsom, by veteran Battleground Europe author Tim Saunders, is the first in five new volumes covering the British attempts to break out of the Normandy beachhead in 1944. Given the far greater attention given to D-Day itself and the American breakout in Operation Cobra, these

volumes help to fill in a number of details about the relatively neglected British operations in Normandy. Saunders volume on Epsom, a British offensive that occurred during 26-30 June 1944, is as well written as his previous volumes for the series. Indeed, Operation Epsom is a solid case history of a typical British corps-size attack in 1944. Saunders does a superb job in his introductory chapter sketching the background to the battle, including the arrival of the British VIII Corps and the German SS Hitler Jugend division and the genesis of the plan to envelop the city of Caen from the west. The author uses three 1:50,000 scale maps to depict the four phases of Epsom and its objectives, as well as German dispositions. With these maps and a tight narrative, Saunders takes the reader by the hand in outlining what Operation Epsom was intended to achieve and conditions on the ground. The author then uses five narrative chapters, each detailing one day in the operation. A brief epilogue follows, as well as notes on touring the battlefield, a table of ranks and a very detailed British order of battle. Unfortunately, the author does not provide a German order of battle or a bibliography. The photographs throughout the volume are excellent and most have not been published in other works. For Operation Epsom, the British massed the three divisions of VIII Corps (11th Armored, 15th Scottish and 43rd Wessex) under the desert veteran General O'Connor against the thinly spread SS Hitler Jugend division. With over 700 artillery pieces firing in support, complete control of the air and a 3-1 advantage in armor, the British offensive should easily have smashed through the over-stretched German lines. However, the British had not anticipated German resiliency or adaptability. Reading Saunders' narrative, it is apparent that the British conducted very little pre-battle reconnaissance and smugly believed that the German line was a mere crust defense. While the initial infantry attack succeeded on the morning of 26 June, it took much longer than anticipated to clear out the handful of front-line German infantry companies. Consequently, the commitment of British armor was delayed and when it did occur, it ran smack into the German armor reserve (which included six Tiger tanks). Rather quickly, the British found themselves in an attritional battle that threatened to derail all their plans. However, the Germans made mistakes, too. On the second day of the offensive, a small British armor-infantry force found a small gap in the newly formed German line and boldly moved forward to seize a key bridge over the Odon River. For reasons not entirely clear, the Germans dithered at this key moment - apparently due to the fog of war - allowing the British to build up a division-size force on the Odon bridgehead. Indeed, the only substantial German reaction was an amateurish attack by unsupported armor into one of the British-held towns; the British infantry had a field day, destroying five of the formidable Panther tanks at close range. On the third day of the offensive, the British got another lucky break when they were able to seize the vital Hill 112 that overlooked Caen; the Germans had failed to garrison this

key piece of terrain. Unfortunately for the British, the Germans began to recover from their string of mistakes and were able to mass the 2nd SS Panzer Corps for a major counterattack. Furthermore, the British offensive had formed a long, but narrow salient into the German lines; the interior of the salient was under constant German artillery fire and the road network was in a mess. Saunders makes clear that the decisive factor that saved the British ground forces was their superb artillery, which broke up most of the German armored counterattacks. Although the German counteroffensive - designed to cut off the British salient and annihilate VIII Corps - failed, it did force the British to end the offensive and switch to the defense. Much of the hard-won terrain, like Hill 112, was abandoned in order to shorten the line. Operation Epsom cost both sides heavily, although Saunders is vague about losses. The British had entered the battle with a number of deficiencies, particularly in armor-infantry cooperation and close air support, but these improved due to lessons learned in Epsom. If Saunders' account - which is an excellent corps-level study - teaches anything, it is that opportunities on the battlefield are fleeting and that agility and flexibility are key virtues for commanders.

Battleground Europe is as good as ever. Contains some of the most detailed tactical writings of WWII (from the British viewpoint). A view point overlooked by me for too many years. It added a more complete perspective of the war. I only wish they would move on to Italy and North Africa. Tally Ho!

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