



Welcome to our October book, Historians!

We will be meeting on **Tuesday, October 13 at 6:30** to discuss *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa 1942-1943* by Rick Atkinson. Published in 2002, the book won the Pulitzer Prize for History in 2003. Atkinson is well qualified to discuss WWII, despite having earned his MA in English literature at the University of Chicago. He is an army brat and grew up on army bases around the world. After spending twenty years as a journalist at *The Washington Post*, he turned to writing about the military. *An Army at Dawn* is the first volume of his *Liberation Trilogy* covering WWII. (I will be asking if you are interested in reading the other two volumes during Spring 2021 and Fall 2021. So think, is this is something that interests you?)

An Army at Dawn begins with Operation TORCH. It is the first time that the US and Britain will fight as partners as they launch the attacks against Vichy France's North African colonies. The plan is to take Tunisia and use that as the jumping off point for invading Italy. The US forces are naïve about the realities of this war, and the US officers have more bravado than common sense as the battles begin. Vichy forces do not come over to the side of the Allies. And the British officers sneer at their American counterparts. Overall commander of the Allied forces, General Eisenhower, described these early months of war preparation and fighting: "The

best way to describe operations to date is they have violated every recognized principle of war.”

But in the long slog to Tunisia, the Americans learn about war and the British learn better how to cooperate. In many ways, this book is about how an army of civilians becomes battle-hardened and how Allies learn to fight as one unit. But the resulting maturity of the Allied forces, which is absolutely necessary before meeting the full force of the German army in Europe, comes at the cost of thousands of lives.

It is at this critical moment that General Rommel’s Afrika Corps, which has been fighting against British General Montgomery, now joins in battle against the forces under Eisenhower and on February 14, 1943, a new and even more aggressive German offensive begins. And now General George Patton and General Omar Bradley come into their own on the battlefield.

Atkinson shows his English literature roots in his ability to transform military history into an exciting story with a true narrative flow. At the same time, all the detail makes it easy to get lost in the weeds. So keep your focus, as you read, on the commanders. This will also be our focus as we talk. Atkinson makes some important points about leadership. George Marshall suspected that Eisenhower, although green in the first months of command, would be the best supreme commander in Europe. Why? Because Eisenhower admitted his mistakes and learned from them. And he was a natural diplomat. British General Montgomery possessed neither of these qualities. Pay attention to the other commanders, British, American, and French. Who was successful and why? Atkinson clearly favors Bradley over Patton. Is he right? And why?

The other significant story, told through the stories of many ordinary soldiers, is what it takes to create a true military fighting force. What changes the man (or woman today) from a civilian into a competent soldier and a member of a team? What does it mean to become battle-hardened, and what is the cost? And what does it take to mold Allies on paper—the British and the Americans—into Allies on the battlefield?

As you can see, Atkinson in *An Army at Dawn* gives us much to think about and discuss. I am looking forward to exchanging war stories with you and giving the North Africa campaign the attention it deserves when we meet on Tuesday, October 13 at 6:30 on Zoom. See you there!

Donna McBride