

## **Welcome to our May book, Historians!**



Our next meeting is on Zoom on Tuesday, May 11 at 6:30. We will be discussing *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy 1943-1944* by Rick Atkinson published in 2007 which is Vol 2 in *The Liberation Trilogy*. Many of you read Vol 1 of *The Liberation Trilogy* on the battles in North Africa with us last spring. As he did in the first book, Atkinson does a masterful job of painting portraits of the American generals—

Eisenhower, Patton, Clark, and Truscott—and making them come alive for the reader. He is also deeply sympathetic in his detailed discussions of life for the frontline soldiers and civilians who have to live with the consequences of mistakes made by those generals. While the campaigns in Italy and Sicily were Allied campaigns, Atkinson, for better or worse, focuses on the American forces. Costly errors in judgement and in intelligence bogged down Allied forces over and over. The fog of war and the vitriol of personal animosities among the command staff hindered war planning and the execution on the ground. Yet out of this laboratory of wartime experience, American military leaders will be tested and will grow into the men they need to be to lead Allied forces to victory in Europe.

Rick 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. Presently he is working on his trilogy about the American Revolution.

*The Day of Battle* begins with the Washington conference between Roosevelt and Churchill and their military staffs as the final decision to invade Italy before Europe is made. American planners and commanders are never fully convinced this is the right plan, and the American lack of enthusiasm and the British underestimation of how difficult the Italian terrain is will adversely affect the decisions made once the fighting starts. Hitler's stubborn refusal to cede Italy to the Allies also means a war without respite will drag on until Rome falls in June 1944. While Atkinson stops at Rome, it is worth remembering that the fighting for the Po Valley will continue on for another year. On the road to Rome are the battles that we remember: Salerno, Anzio, and Monte Cassino. And Atkinson will introduce you to men and battles that you will not know but that deserve our remembrance as well. As he did in the previous volume, Atkinson lets the men tell the story of what they see and smell and feel as they battle up the boot of Italy. This is the reality of war on the

ground linked to the higher politics and strategy at the command level to give us a more complete understanding of the hard lessons learned in the Italian campaign.

In our discussion, we will focus, as Atkinson does, on how the Italian campaign molds men into leaders. Despite experience in North Africa, Atkinson argues convincingly that it is the lessons learned in Italy that make Eisenhower into the great commander that he will be in Europe. Atkinson says that it is Italy that teaches Eisenhower how to impose his will on a battlefield, rather than trying to be diplomatic with his commanders. Italy will reveal the weaknesses of Patton and Alexander and make Clark's legacy a source of controversy even today. How do these legacies differ and why? What can we learn of leadership from their hard lessons?

As always, Atkinson excels at research and at detail. You have only to look at his 169 pages of notes and bibliography to know this. Remember not to get bogged down in the details, though. Follow carefully what interests you and skim through what does not. Along the way you will meet some famous folks from home—Audie Murphy and the 36<sup>th</sup> Division from Texas—as well as continue to follow the stories of folks you met in North Africa. We will trace their stories as well.

The Italian campaign is a vicious story of war which has been overshadowed by the war in the Pacific and the war in Europe. When we meet on Zoom on Tuesday, May 11 at 6:30 to discuss *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy 1943-1944*, we will take time to honor the memories of these men and their sacrifices. I am looking forward to it!

*Donna McBride*