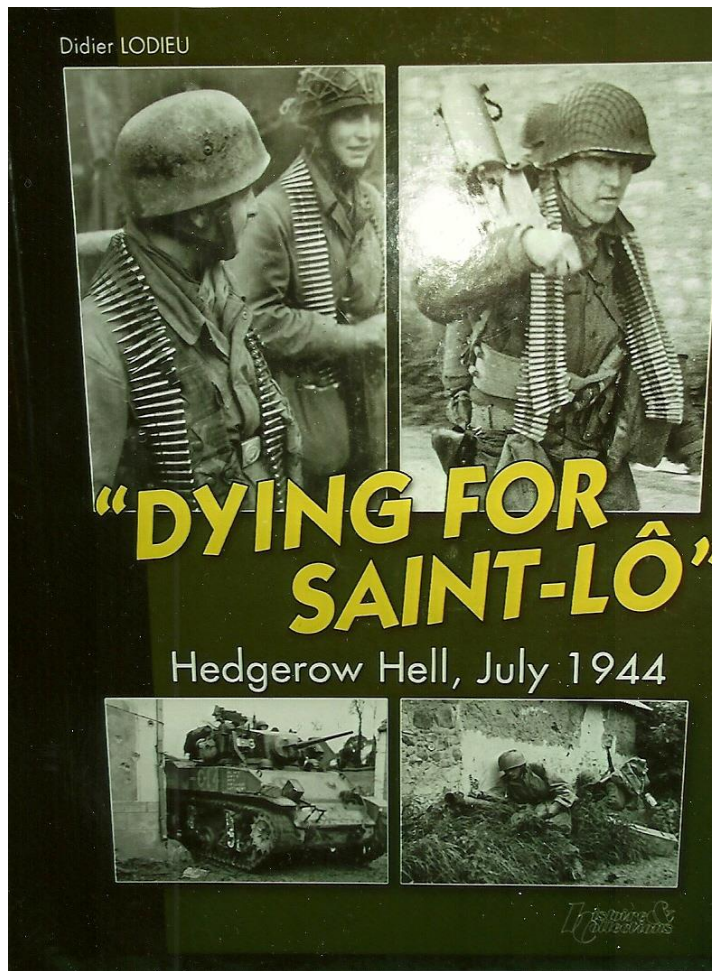


# Dying for St. Lo: Hedgerow Hell, July 1944

By Didier Lodieu; Histoire & Collections, Paris  
(2007)

## Review by Rob Morgan

In Morlaix, I came upon, and snapped up, a copy of this English language translation of a superb French volume, 176 pages, over 300 photographs of the breakout from the *Bocage*, taking of St. Lo and Allied armour's advance into France. This was the precursor to the Falaise Gap disaster, and some of the hardest close-contact fighting of the entire campaign.



During the fight for the hedgerows the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup> and 35<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the US XIX Corps faced some of the Nazi elite forces, the Panzer Lehr Division, 17<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Grenadiers, and numerous Fallschirmjager troops and several SS Kampfgruppe. Here in the text are also described the bitter fights for Hill 192; the numerous first-hand accounts are fascinating reading.

The book deals with day-to-day combat, between July 6<sup>th</sup> and July 20<sup>th</sup> and provides a sit-rep map of actions, concentrating on key sectors. The photographs, most of them new to me, are amazing, especially those of the Fallschirmjager, newly discovered. Two stand out in the book, the incredible delight of a German paratroop commander as his men bring in a captured jeep and trailer. This front-line elite unit had *no* transport at all, not

even a Kubelwagen!

There are photos of very substantial amounts of Allied captured equipment, much from the early para drops especially, being used by Germans, and shows just how poorly equipped the Germans were by the Summer of 1944. The text suggests an acute lack of (German) weapons and ammunition from 11<sup>th</sup> July onwards. Wargamers take note.

The photographs are a central feature of the book, the tale is well told in photographic form. Many of the immediate front-line Allied action shots are invaluable to the wargamer; these

photographers really were up with the troops. There are some useful photos of heavy German equipment, of Nebelwerfers, captured heavy Russian artillery and a host of SP guns and Panzers. There are, as you'd expect, numerous shots of knocked-out tanks, many referred to in 'mini-sketches' in the text about the encounters which saw them off. There are a number of pen portraits of German combatants, and their fates, taken from an SS Kampfgruppe Kompany war diary. There is enough material in this excellent book to assist in recreating the hedgerow fortresses and defence systems which abounded and which effectively held up the Allies for more than a month before St.Lo. The photos of very narrow lanes blocked and fortified are particularly valuable. It was fascinating to see the many photos of tactical use of the Panzerschreck; the 2-man team could rarely carry more than seven or eight rounds between them. Nor had I realised just how much the Fallschirmjager division relied upon the light Flammenwerfer 41 for close action, its range around 25 metres.

One US front-line training photograph shows, among Teller mines and booby traps, that very large numbers of French and Russian made grenades were in use.

The equipment of the enemy *Sturmtrups*, the Fallschirmjager, consisted initially for a unit of some 10 men and an NCO, of an lmg, MG 34 or 42, 2-FG42 automatic rifles, a sniper rifle, a flamethrower, an anti-tank weapon of some sort and a selection of Teller mines and charges. By the middle of the month, from the photographs shown, it was anything they could get hold of, and the *Sturmtrup* could be five or six strong. The ideal of a *Sturmtrup* and a single afv commanding a hedge or ditch gave way under the constant aerial attacks. There are at least 50 Panzer IV's and V's and rather fewer Pz VI's shown after they fell to the ground attack planes. The photography is well supported by uniform and equipment drawings and photos, in colour.

By July 14<sup>th</sup> the die was well and truly cast. All five of XIXth Corps divisions were closing in on St. Lo, faced by units which were either makeshift Kampfgruppe, or badly mauled like 352<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division. The photographs taken on 15<sup>th</sup> July show a German reliance on bicycles, and in one case a Section of a Fallschirmjager Division utilising a child's pram nicknamed 'Goliath' for mobility of its heavy kit! Even at this late stage, and with St. Lo doomed to fall, the Germans were using well-camouflaged heavy artillery. There's a series of photographs of a 210mm heavy field gun, weighing 22+ tons, captured by being over-run by US infantry, not destroyed by air attack, so effective was the camouflage! By the latter weeks of July, the attacks on the German side were small, and fast, more akin to the trench raids of the Great War than to the standard WWII infantry combat.

The volume ends with the taking of St. Lo on 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> July, and the last-ditch counterattacks by Panzergrenadiers and Stugs on the 19<sup>th</sup> broken up by US 155mm heavy artillery, a counterattack which included a single Luftwaffe raid by five aircraft. The battle for St. Lo ended, as the text and photographs show in utter destruction, difficult, almost impossible movement problems and for the US 29<sup>th</sup> Division an astonishing high rate of loss, 12,000 American casualties in all.

A superb book, and though obviously intended for sale, it has no marked price, the ISBN 978-2-35250-035-3 tells us little and the work ends with the intriguing comment by the editors, that Didier Lodieu has written several other titles in this series, '45 Tigers in Normandy', 'Combats of the US 90th Division' and '1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division in Normandy' among them. I wonder if I'll be able to find any of these titles?

In case you are interested, I paid only 3 puros for it.