

Bazooka vs Panzer

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By Steven J. Zaloga; illustrations by Johnny Shumate

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Review by Jonathan Aird

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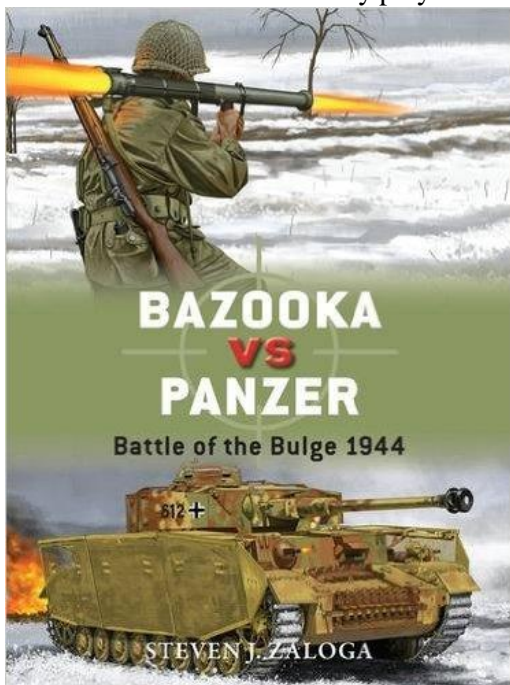
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Comments:

Steven Zaloga lays significant honours for the development of the bazooka at the feet of James L. Powers, in peacetime an engineer at a General Electric plant producing garbage disposal units but in wartime was a key player in turning the original sketchy designs for the bazooka



into a mass-produced weapon system. In 1941, there was no such weapon. Following rapid development and demonstration to the US Army and their allies, there were orders for 20,000 in place by the end of 1942. And this was only the start ó by 1945 13 million anti-tank rounds had been manufactured ó along with nearly three million smoke rockets. This rapid mass production is an incredibly clear indication of the value of the additional man-portable firepower that the short-range rocket projectile offered to the infantry.

Of course, the Bazooka -- actually the M1 rocket launcher -- was not down to just one man. As is captured in this book, the real root was the coming together of two technologies -- rocket research and the development of shaped-charge warheads, the latter being a method to punch a hole through tank armour with a high-density metal jet travelling at almost 10,000m/s causing a large amount of behind

armour damage to their targets. The original design was soon further developed ó mostly to strengthen the barrel of the launcher ó and again further into the M9 design which came apart for ease of carrying. Nothing substantially changed to the rocket launched ó a relatively small diameter warhead (when the Germans copied the design from captured examples they opted for a much larger calibre), and a maximum range of about 700m, with effective range at most 300m.

There were initial problems concerning the deployment of a new secret weapon to the extent that the original issue was to troops who had had no training and no real understanding of what they were supposed to do with the new device, leading to them to not bother with it. Once understanding came, though, the infantry found the bazooka a far more useful weapon than the towed 57mm anti-tank gun that had been their main defence against armoured vehicles which was found to be especially unwieldy to use in the French countryside following the D-Day landings.

Partially in response to the development of infantry borne anti-tank weapons, the Germans developed a range of close-in protection weapons to supplement the existing ball-mounted machine guns and pistol port that were already present in the Panzer force. These are well described in the text, and there is a very nice double-page illustration of various smoke and fragment grenades, as well as small anti-personnel mine dispensers and the ingenious assault rifle fired through a curved barrel section in a ball mount. There is a general sentiment against the use of the mines and shrapnel grenades expressed in quotes from tank crews to there being a combination of opinions that one should never get into a situation where they were needed, and if one did then they were as likely to kill any supporting infantry as they were the enemy due to the difficulty of accurate sighting. Issues on limited vision are neatly represented in another two-page drawing which contrasts the bazooka user's view through his sights with the more limited visibility through a panzer vision block.

In addition to the active defence measures made available to the panzer force, there were also passive defences in the form of additional side-armour plates. Initially solid plates, these were replaced on the non-turret areas by a wire mesh design which retained the capability to prevent armour penetration by Russian anti-tank rifle rounds. An interesting aside is made on the development of zimmerit paste which was a solution to a non-existing problem, introduced when the German assessment was that the Russians would follow their own designers down the route of developing an effective magnetically attached and hand-deployed anti-tank weapon.

A good section on the initial combat experience with the bazooka to including the reality of battlefield assessments against the exaggerated claims and, frankly, tall tales of some users to leads into a final section concentrating on a particular use. The Ardennes offensive of late-December 1944 allowed the Germans to deploy tanks in relatively large numbers due to the safety from air attack provided by cloud cover. However, whilst this removed the ground-attack aeroplanes from the equation, it also provided the bazooka with the elements it needed to show greater than usual utility. The bazooka was incapable of penetrating the front armour of most German tanks, but at quite short ranges could do well against the sides and rear. The poor visibility that prevented allied aeroplanes intervening in the Ardennes offensive was a boon to the bazooka teams who found they could get very close to German tanks without being detected. Stephen Zaloga concentrates on the American defence of the Lausdell crossroads and the twin villages of Krinkelt-Rocherath, capturing well the confusion of assaults by night and in snow, the resolute defence put up by a mostly infantry force, and the various methods that were used to destroy enemy tanks to by mines, artillery, friendly tanks and last, but not least, the bazooka. There is more than enough detail provided to allow for wargames to probably at the skirmish level -- to be produced which allow for some of the special conditions that were encountered.

The book concludes with an honest assessment of the bazooka as an effective anti-tank weapon, with some useful comparative statistics against other methods of achieving the same result. This somewhat downplays the weapon's usefulness, however it is noted in several places in the

text that it was also found useful for attacking non-vehicle targets such as infantry dug in to defended buildings. If there is one statistic missing ó and this would be very difficult to find, I suspect ó it is the contrasting casualty rate for bazooka teams. Getting near a Panzer with a main armament including HE rounds, several machine guns and an array of close-in defence weapons was not something that could be attempted without encountering a great hazard to life.

There are other titles in the Osprey Weapon series which cover the Bazooka and the *Panzerschrek* in greater detail ó however this volume provides a good overview of the development, an interesting contrast with the countermeasures produced to cope with this new infantry capability, and a detailed, if rather unique, combat-use assessment. All this wrapped up in a very readable and engaging text ó making it a recommended read for anyone interested in the later years of WWII.