

(often) unrewarding challenge, providing engineer advice and support against a backdrop of insufficient expertise, manpower and resources.

This is a very useful work and one which provides a marvellous insight into the Royal Engineers and military engineering in the Peninsula. It is not, however, exhaustive for there are still gaps to be filled in the area of a detailed study into military bridging (mobility and counter-mobility) in the Peninsula, a more comprehensive and up to date work on the Peninsular sieges, an examination of military survey and cartography during the war and a lesser work, by way of a comparison, of the French engineer resources and capabilities.

NICK LIPSCOMBE

**Richard Overy, *A History of War in 100 Battles*, London: William Collins, 2014. Bibliography, Index. 384pp. ISBN: 978-0-00-745250-7. Hardback. £25.00.**

As anyone who has casually explored the history shelves in the big book chains or glanced at the top sellers of the leading online retailers knows, military history books are in huge demand. Much of what is on offer is, however, of questionable quality, especially the lavishly illustrated coffee-table books dedicated to weapons, uniforms and battles that often appear in the run up to Father's Day and Christmas.

Richard Overy's *A History of War in 100 Battles* shows that a popular format and real scholarship can be combined into a richly illustrated and compelling survey that deserves a wide readership among enthusiasts and students alike. Capturing 6,000 years of military history in under 400 pages is no easy task. Doing so without conveying superficial Darwinian assumptions about war – that it has been a constant in human history because humans are by nature a violent and competitive animal – is an even harder task. As Overy rightly argues, the archaeological evidence shows that violence among human communities in the last 20,000 years has been sporadic and at times unusual. Warfare must therefore be explained in historical and cultural rather than evolutionary terms. The idea of 'battle' as a distinct event with its own rules, norms and choreography dates as far back as ancient Egypt. The study of how battles have been organised and conducted over the millennia reveals much about how the prevailing historical and cultural conditions of the time, especially the way in which political communities have organised themselves, shaped war. The sieges and stalemates of the late medieval period stand in sharp contrast, for example, with the mobility and firepower of contemporary war.

To make illuminating contrasts and to underline the constants about battle, Overy organises his short narratives of a hundred battles into six themes that usually

## REVIEWS

combine in some way to produce victory: decisive leadership, winning against the odds, innovation in technology, organisation and tactics, deception, courage in the face of fire, and of course luck. Leadership and innovation are familiar factors, the importance of which are amply illustrated by a selection of examples ranging from Hannibal's brilliant pincer plan against the Romans at Cannae in 216 BCE to the critical edge that radar gave the Royal Air Force fighters against the Luftwaffe's bombers in 1940. Deception and winning against the odds are exemplified by the role of the Trojan horse in the fall of Troy (1200 BCE) and the astonishing defence of Rorke's Drift in 1879 by a hundred British infantry against a Zulu army of 4-6,000 warriors. As Overy reminds us, the prerequisite to success in battle is the courage of individuals and formations of combatants in the face of the enemy, an important factor explored through experiences as diverse as those of the Athenian infantry at Marathon (490 BCE), the Christian crusaders at Arsuf (1191) and the US Marines at Guadalcanal (1943). Battle for individuals becomes a kind of community cut off temporarily from the rest of the world, in which nothing matters more than prevailing over the enemy and avoiding death. Ultimately, chance, frequently in the form of reinforcements arriving in the nick of time or few projectiles striking at the right time and place, plays a huge part in determining who wins and who lives. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 to Sultan Mehmet owing to a door left open and unprotected by the defenders, the last minute arrival of General Blücher's Prussians at Waterloo in 1815, and the crippling torpedo attack by a few British Swordfish aircraft that doomed the battleship Bismarck in 1941, all make the point clear.

No doubt some specialists will conclude that Overy's one to two-page descriptions of his hundred battles barely penetrates beyond the surface of the complexity and brutality of war in the last 6000 years. But this book is meant to be a grand survey, a primer on the history of war, not unlike the coffee-table book of decisive battles I read in my early teens that sparked my interest in the history of war many years ago.

JOE MAIOLO  
King's College London

**Huw Bennett, *Fighting the Mau Mau, The British Army and Counter-Insurgency in the Kenya Emergency*. Cambridge, 2013. 307pp. ISBN: 978-1-107-65624-6. Paperback. £19.99.**

It is always a pleasure to review a first class book of analytic history, one such work is Huw Bennett's excellent study of British counter-insurgency warfare in the Kenyan emergency from 1952-9155. It is also a timely book as recently William Hague, the then Foreign Secretary, settled out of court a long running damages claim by Kikuyu tribesmen that they were tortured by the British army during the insurgency. It is frequently argued that in the bitter conflicts that mark the post 1945 anti-colonial