

TURNING PAGES

~ book reviews of interest to the aviation professional

The Guns at Last Light:

The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945

By Rick Atkinson. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC. 876 pages. Available in hardcover, paperback, Kindle, audible, and CD formats at <http://www.amazon.com/Guns-Last-Light-1944-1945-Liberation/dp/0805062904>

A book review by CPT Sean Clement

Rick Atkinson delivers the Liberation Trilogy, capped by his work *The Guns at Last Light*, in a visceral, goosebumps inducing way that will have you swearing you can reach out and touch the hedgerows, smell the smoke in the dank bunkers of the German high command, or feel the

you're provided with much more additional context that so many other works gloss over. The frosts of England stunting fruit production, wild flowers growing in bombed out lots, nightly blackouts, and the feather like contrails of the flying fortress ripping across the sky. In its more than 600 pages we are taken on a ride along with famous generals, heads of state, common people caught in the crossfire, privates in the foxholes, and the proud but nervous families they left behind.

There is a characteristic chaos to Atkinson's story telling that can sometimes be hard to follow. As he shifts between differing accounts and battles he paints a messy but coherent picture of cause and effect, of engagements, happenstance, victories, defeats, fratricide, and the seldom thought of the challenges of leading an army penetrating deep into enemy territory. Each one of these small, sometimes seemingly irrelevant stories, begins to provide, piece by piece, pixel by pixel, a rich and enthralling look into World War II. In addition to this rich

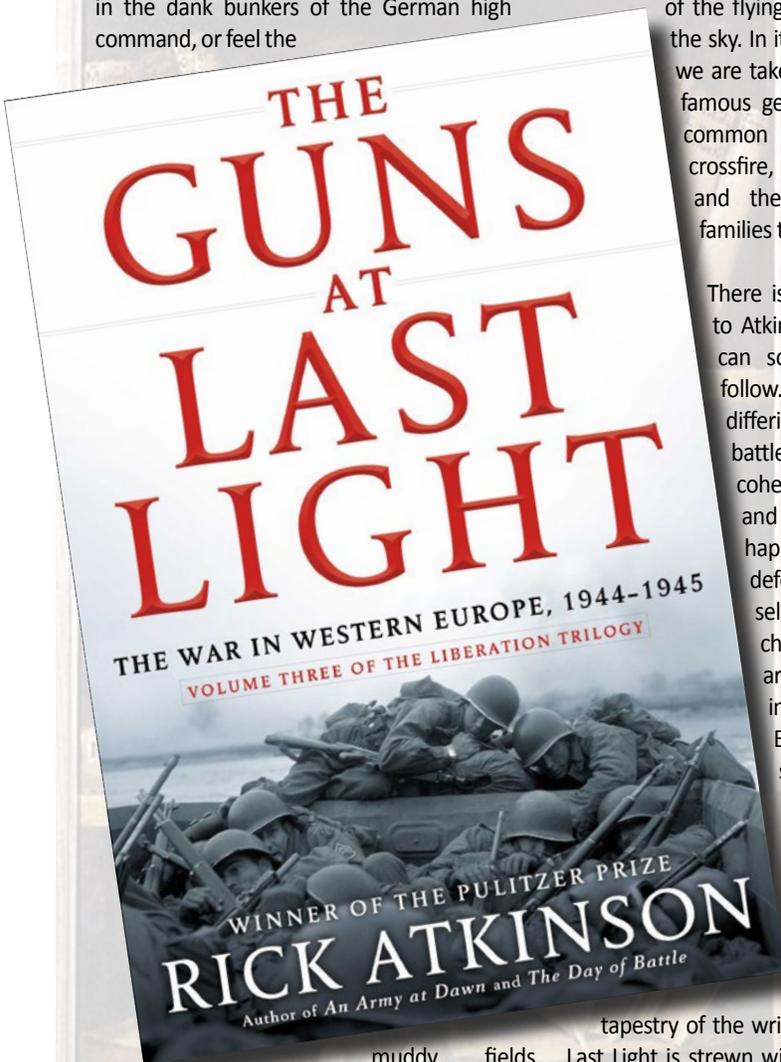
tapestry of the written word, *The Guns at Last Light* is strewn with maps of all kinds as well as pictures from all over Europe and the war's effects on her.

In addition to personal accounts and the human aspects of war, the technological advances are also discussed at great length. For example the American proximity, or posit, fuse equipped on anti-aircraft and artillery rounds later in

the war. The posit fuse, by some estimation, "the most remarkable scientific achievement of the war" except for the atomic bomb" as it made anti-aircraft fire up to five times more effective and made artillery effective against even the most entrenched enemy forces. While the Germans amassed a fleet of rockets and jet technologies, the Americans employed a weapon that, as one German prisoner put it, "The devil himself could not escape."

While no doubt the modern battlefield brings with it its own challenges and complexities, there are innumerable lessons to be learned from review of past conflict. In *The Guns at Last Light*, we glimpse back into a world at war in a conflict spanning thousands of miles and involving millions of combatants. Lessons on working with partner nations and the delicacies of alliances under fire are aspects of war that will likely never change. The hardening or Franco-American relations after the failures of the 1st French Army and 2nd French Corps to attain victory in the Colmar pocket are relatable experiences to anyone who has spent an extended time with coalition allies. Even the best of international "friends" can be frustrating to work with for any number of reasons.

The Guns at Last Light is a superbly woven literary tapestry which closes the final chapters of World War II in stunning detail and specificity. The entire series is detailed yet easy to read and back with hundreds of pages of source material. In his catalog twilight hours of the last world war, Rick Atkinson delivers us a look back into the martial struggles of our previous generations. Full of cautionary tales, personal accounts on the brutality of industrialized warfare, and the heroics of ordinary people thrust into extraordinary circumstances, Atkinson's work stands as a testament to the power of historical literature. Anyone searching for a more holistic understanding of the Western Front as seen by American forces in World War II need not look any further.



muddy fields of France under foot. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Atkinson won the Pulitzer Prize for his work on the series, specifically attributed to the first book *An Army at Dawn* but all three works are of consummate quality and depth. In his last book, Atkinson covers the period of January 1944 until the surrender of the Third Reich in 1945. Beginning in the Prologue, as you read,

