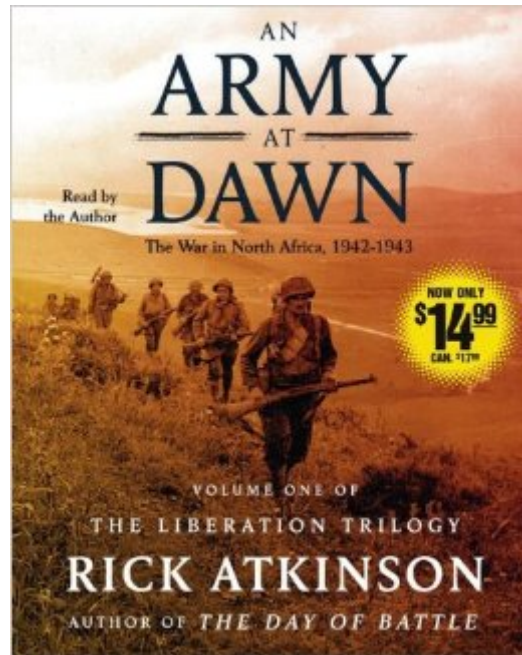


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An Army At Dawn: The War In North Africa (1942-1943) (The Liberation Trilogy)



Synopsis

Beginning the trilogy that continues with *The Day of Battle*, *An Army at Dawn* opens on the eve of Operation TORCH, the daring amphibious invasion of Morocco and Algeria. After three days of hard fighting against the French, American and British troops push deeper into North Africa. But the confidence gained after several early victories soon wanes; casualties mount rapidly, battle plans prove ineffectual, and hope for a quick and decisive victory evaporates. The Allies discover that they are woefully unprepared to fight and win this war. North Africa becomes a proving ground: it is here that American officers learn how to lead, here that soldiers learn how to hate, here that an entire army learns what it will take to vanquish a formidable enemy. In North Africa, the Allied coalition came into its own, the enemy forever lost the initiative, and the United States -- for the first time -- began to act like a great power.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I read the first two pages of the prologue to this hefty volume and I was HOOKED! Mr. Atkinson writes beautifully, sensitively, and fairly about this huge, complex historical era. The first of a projected three volumes about the U.S. role in the World War II liberation of Europe, *An Army at Dawn* deals with the North Africa campaign, which many general readers have tended to neglect in favor of Italy, Normandy, and beyond. Atkinson admirably addresses this problem. Somehow, the author has found just the right mix of detail -- from personal notes out of soldiers' diaries and letters home, to the reparations paid to Algerians for traffic fatalities caused by Allies -- versus big picture

aspects, from the British and American political maneuverings at Casablanca to the larger troop movements and battle strategy. I got a kick out of the references to GI passwords in various battles, jokes and ditties (although it's not clear whether Atkinson realizes the couplet quoted on p. 526 is from Spike Jones's wartime hit, "Der Fuehrer's Face"), as well as the graver tales of triumph and tragedy. Don't let the size of this tome intimidate you (541 pages of text, 83 pages of notes, 28 pages of bibliographical source listings) -- because the book reads smoothly and compulsively. And there are plenty of excellent maps sprinkled throughout the book, at just the right places. The author does not spare us the details of Allied political and personal squabbles (particularly British condescension toward American battleworthiness and courage -- not altogether undeserved, but not fair, either), absurdities, and atrocities.

Rick Atkinson has been writing military history for about a decade now. He started with books on West Point (which covered Viet Nam rather thoroughly) and the Gulf War, and now he's turned his sights on World War II. He definitely has a modern appraisal of war: the one previous reviewer who complains about Atkinson not recounting any acts of "selfless heroism" by U.S. troops is basically correct. The difference is in focus, though, not that Atkinson doesn't want to portray American soldiers as brave. He doesn't recount any instances of selfless heroism on the part of Germans, Italians, or British soldiers either. To Atkinson, war is a nasty, merciless, vicious, bloody mess, where mistakes cost lives, and almost everyone makes these mistakes, at least starting out. For one thing, while the book does concentrate a good deal on the front-line soldiers and their ordeals, it spends more time concentrating on the command structure of the U.S. Army, and its compatriots and opponents. While he doesn't name *every* regimental commander, he sure names a lot of them, and the division commanders in the American army at least are described in some detail. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., son of the first president Roosevelt and cousin of the second one, gets a wonderful portrait that makes you sympathize with him, and almost gives you the feeling you know him, though he died in 1944. The author's particular favorite among the generals (he's said this in an interview) is Terry de la Mesa Allen, the commander of the 1st Infantry Division (and Gen. Roosevelt's boss), but even he isn't spared when he makes an unwise attack and loses several hundred casualties. There are things the book doesn't cover, that's true.

This book will be the definitive work, from the American point of view, on the war in North Africa, covering the period when the United States got involved (November 1942) up until the German surrender in Tunisia (May 1943). Mr. Atkinson effectively sets the stage by showing the sorry state

the U.S. military had fallen into prior to the decision to invade North Africa. He points out that in September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, the U.S. Army had ranked seventeenth in the world in size and combat power, just behind Romania. When 136 German divisions conquered Western Europe in the Spring of 1940, our War Department reported that we could only field five divisions! Mr. Atkinson writes, "Equipment and weaponry were pathetic. Soldiers trained with drainpipes for antitank guns, stovepipes for mortar tubes, and brooms for rifles...Only six medium tanks had been built in 1939.....This in part reflected an enduring loyalty to the horse...The Army's cavalry chief assured Congress in 1941 that four well-spaced horsemen could charge half a mile across an open field to destroy an enemy machine-gun nest without sustaining a scratch." This sort of information helps you to appreciate what had to be overcome in order for us to play our part in the expulsion of the Axis forces from North Africa! Mr. Atkinson doesn't fail to show us what other problems had to be overcome...Eisenhower having to learn "on the job" how to be Supreme Commander; having to build and then hold together the Allied coalition...this was very difficult, as many top men in the British military had nothing but disdain for Eisenhower's abilities and also for the abilities of the American troops (and many of the top American brass, such as Eisenhower, Bradley and Patton were Anglophobic, so it worked both ways!

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