

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Janice E. McKenney.** *Organizational History of Field Artillery, 1775-2003.* Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 2007. xviii + 394 pp. \$44.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-16-077114-9; \$42.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-16-077115-6.

**Reviewed by** Boyd L. Dastrup

**Published on** H-War (December, 2008)

**Commissioned by** Janet G. Valentine (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College - Dept of Mil Hist)

## Organized to Fight

Over the years, the U.S. Army's Field Artillery has played a critical role in combat. At the Battle of Trenton on December 25, 1776, during the American Revolution, Continental Army field cannons commanded by Captain Alexander Hamilton cleared the streets of Hessian soldiers. Two years later on June 28, 1778, American field guns drove the British from the field at the Battle of Monmouth. Almost sixty years afterward, at Palo Alto on May 8, 1846, American gunners under Major Samuel Ringgold and Captain James Duncan viciously repelled Mexican attacks at the outset of the Mexican War of 1846-48. In these battles and others, including those of Operation Desert Storm of 1991 and Operation Iraqi Freedom during the first years of the twenty-first century, American field artillery played a key role in defeating enemy ground forces. Such actions have attracted the attention of numerous historians. Frank E. Comparato's *Age of Great Guns: Cannon Kings and Cannoneers Who Forged the Firepower of Artillery* (1965), Fairfax Downey's *Sound of the Guns: The Story of American Artillery from the Ancient and Honorable Company to the Atom Cannon and Guided Missile* (1955), and Robert H. Scales's *Firepower in Limited Wars* (1990), to name a few, focus on battles and leaders, and the accomplishments of field artillery in action.

Former Chief of the Organizational History Branch, U.S. Army Center of Military History, Janice E. McKenney approaches the history of field artillery from a dif-

ferent perspective. Rather than concentrating on battles, she examines the Field Artillery's organization since its creation in 1775, making her book a unique contribution to the literature that complements William E. Birkhimer's *Historical Sketch of the Organization, Administration, Materiel and Tactics of the Artillery, U.S. Army* (1884), and Boyd L. Dastrup's *King of Battle: A Branch History of the U.S. Army's Field Artillery* (1992). With this focus, McKenney takes the reader behind the scenes. She writes about staffing, training, organizing, and equipping field artillery units during peacetime and preparing them for battle. These activities, although unglamorous, provided the Field Artillery with the ability to supply effective fire support on the battlefield. The author concentrates on different people than the more traditional histories about field artillery in combat.

The author, therefore, discusses the contributions of Captain Alfred Mordecai who served on a board to examine foreign artillery during the early 1840s. The board's report, better known as the Mordecai report, detailed smoothbore artillery material with exact detail and specification, and divided American artillery into siege, coast, fortress, and field. His system was eventually approved for adoption by the secretary of war in 1849. Almost forty years later, the American army introduced its first steel field guns. Here, the author examines the work of Brigadier General Stephen V. Benét, the chief of the Ordnance Department. Under his direction, the Ord-

nance Department developed the M1885 3.2 inch steel field gun mounted on a steel carriage. Although it gave the American army a long-range, powerful cannon, the M1885 still failed to keep pace with smokeless powder steel breechloaders with on-carriage recoil systems being introduced by the Europeans.

McKenney discusses the evolution of equipment, including the adoption of nuclear field artillery cannons, rockets, and missiles in the 1950s; precision munitions in the 1990s; and automated fire control systems, such as the Field Artillery Digital Automated Computer, the Tactical Fire Direction System, and the Advanced Field Artillery Tactical Data System. In addition, she writes about the creation of the Corps of Artillery in 1901, and the separation of the Coast Artillery from the Field Artillery in 1907 as advocated by Brigadier General Joseph P. Story, chief of Artillery. He saw the need for organizing the Field Artillery into battalions and regiments to bring it into line with the lessons learned from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. These actions placed the Field Artillery on equal footing with the Coast Artillery for the first time in American military history. Beginning in 1775, when McKenney begins her analysis, with few exceptions, the Coast Artillery received most of the attention and funding because it was the country's first line of defense against an enemy naval attack.

Other of her unsung heroes are Major Carlos Brewer, Major Orlando Ward, and Lieutenant Colonel H. L. C. Jones who were directors of the Gunnery Department at the Field Artillery School in the 1930s. With assistance from their instructors, these individuals' efforts led to the development of the fire direction center, a critical breakthrough that permitted shifting and massing fires effectively and responsively on the battlefields of World War II and after. Major General David E. Ott, the commandant of the Field Artillery School in the 1970s is an-

other key figure. Under his supervision, the school developed the fire support team that revolutionized forward observation by making it organic to maneuver units for the first time.

By discussing the evolution of equipment, organization, training, and staffing through 2003, McKenney's book adds a critical dimension by going beyond reciting the story of field artillery in battle, and furnishes a much needed corrective to the history of the American army's Field Artillery. Equally as important, she examines the relationship between the Coast Artillery and the Field Artillery when they formed composite artillery regiments between 1775 and 1901.

In telling the history of artillery, McKenney takes the story from the days when small guns were attached to infantry brigades for close support to battalions or brigades, and concludes her analysis at the beginning of the twenty-first century when division and corps artilleries dominated field artillery organization, and when precision munitions were becoming more widespread to give the Field Artillery the ability to hit within six meters of a target to destroy it with a minimal amount of collateral damage. She also notes that the creation of brigade combat teams with their organic field artillery battalions replaced the division as the army's chief fighting organization, and, thus, decentralized Field Artillery operations.

McKenney does a solid job of describing how field artillery is organized to fight, how the fire direction center ties the firing batteries together into a team to facilitate massing fires on targets, and how the forward observer is tied to the fire direction center. This explanation certainly gives readers without any background in field artillery organization and operations a fundamental understanding of the branch and its role on the battlefield. Without a question, her book should occupy a spot on the bookshelf of any serious student of the Field Artillery.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Boyd L. Dastrup. Review of McKenney, Janice E., *Organizational History of Field Artillery, 1775-2003*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23115>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.