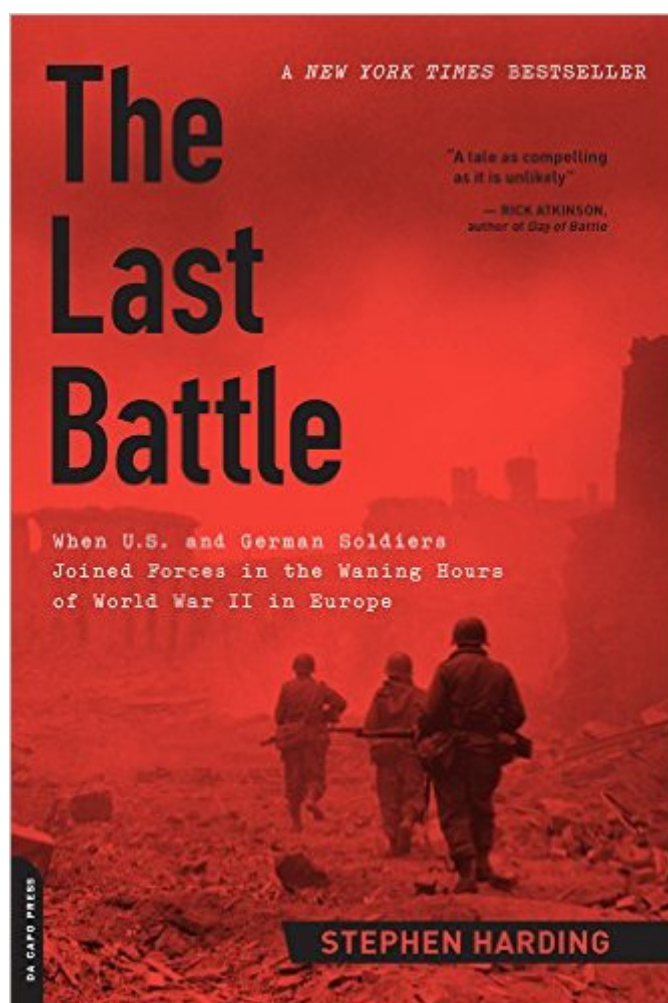


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The Last Battle: When U.S. And German Soldiers Joined Forces In The Waning Hours Of World War II In Europe



Synopsis

SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE May, 1945. Hitler is dead, the Third Reich is little more than smoking rubble, and no GI wants to be the last man killed in action against the Nazis. The Last Battle tells the nearly unbelievable story of the unlikely battle of the war, when a small group of American tankers, led by Captain Lee, joined forces with German soldiers to fight off fanatical SS troops seeking to capture Castle Itter and execute the stronghold's VIP prisoners. It is a tale of unlikely allies, startling bravery, jittery suspense, and desperate combat between implacable enemies.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Da Capo Press; First Trade Paper Edition edition (June 3, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0306822962

ISBN-13: 978-0306822964

Product Dimensions: 5.4 x 0.8 x 8.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (465 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

I've been on a WWII kick since reading Beevor's *The Second World War* recently. Although I am no history buff, I thought I knew about WWII. Beevor's book convinced me I was wrong. I loved Beevor's overarching account of the war, but it was just that: overarching. While it has touches of personal stories of the actual soldiers fighting the war, it was much more focused on a description of the battles and the tactical chess match of the war. After I finished it, I was looking to "zoom in" a bit on the war. At first I watched *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific*, two excellent HBO miniseries. I enjoyed both, but they are definitely centered on the American soldiers. Not that there is anything wrong with that, but after reading Beevor, I was looking for something that focused a little bit more on other nationalities. In no way am I trying to discount the sacrifice of Americans or the large role they played in bringing Germany to its knees, but WWII was really about Europeans than it was Americans. This is often lost on the U.S. audience. When I saw a description on *The Last Battle*, I

decided to give it a try. I'm so glad I did. It almost seems too good to be true: American soldiers pairing with German soldiers to defend an Austrian Castle and the French VIP POWs housed there in the waning moments of WWII in Europe.

In the hands of a writer with a flair for the dramatic and the ability to turn a phrase such as Cornelius Ryan (author of a book by the same name about a very different and larger battle), W.E.B. Griffin, Tom Clancy, or Donald Burgett, this book would have been a compelling read. However, Stephen Harding managed to turn a tale of German/Austrian officers and soldiers, bloody-handed SS types, concentration camp prisoners, members of the Austrian Resistance, combat-hardened Americans, and querulous Frenchmen into a dull trudge of boredom. Part of the problem is that Harding spends a great deal of time on biographical background of the players on all sides; only about 35 pages of the 170 page text (the rest of the 230 page book is prelude, acknowledgments, index, bibliography, and footnotes) concerns the Battle of Schloss Itter. Perhaps this was necessary at this remove from the time of the action; but to me it gave the book the affect of Prince Humperdinck from *The Princess Bride* muttering to the Bishop at the wedding, "Man and wife! Say 'Man and wife!' " as the reader waits for the action to commence. Harding presents the facts of the establishment of this Prominente prison, the fight to hold it and protect the VIP prisoners held there, and the actions that led up to the battle with all the charm of cold pancakes without butter and syrup. As a writer, I know that if you are going to give a long lead-up to the heart of your story, you had better do something to insure your readers don't become so fed up waiting for something to happen that they throw the book across the room. This lesson Harding has yet to learn. Another problem from my point of view as the reader is Harding's decision to have a separate footnote section instead of footnoting at the bottom of each page.

The Last Battle: When U.S. and German Soldiers Joined Forces in the Waning Hours of World War II in Europe by Stephen Harding (Da Capo Press, May 2013) brings to light one of those rare twist-of-fate moments in military history that deserves to be a movie. **[[from the press release] *The Last Battle* is under option to Stellar Productions as a theatrical motion picture. The screenplay adaptation has been written by Bryce Abel, 2008 winner of the Writers Guild of America long form original screenwriting award. I interviewed this author for *The Politics and Patriotism Show*. You can find that episode online or through iTunes. Historians have known for centuries that big battles win wars, but small battles change lives. The men and women affected by the outcomes of these fights in little known out of the way places don't always earn the interest of historians or the ink of

publishers for reasons which can sometimes be selfish or unsavory. Stephen Harding reveals just such a little known life-changing event in *The Last Battle*. Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally on May 7th of 1945 after nearly six years of brutal war. A paradoxical battle took place just three days prior to that capitulation that most of us are not aware of. The site of this unlikely engagement is Castle Itter, located in the Tyrolean region of Southernmost Austria, not far from the Italian border. It's an ancient stronghold overlooking a scenic mountain pass. The walled structure has a grand history that dates back to 902 CE, when it was first built to protect valuable trade routes.

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