



Bracketing the Enemy: Forward Observers in World War II

John R. Walker

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After the end of World War II, General George Patton declared that artillery had won the war. Yet howitzers did not achieve victory on their own. Crucial to the success of these big guns were forward observers, artillerymen on the front lines who directed the artillery fire. Until now, the vital role of forward observers in ground combat has received little scholarly attention. In *Bracketing the Enemy*, John R. Walker remedies this oversight by offering the first full-length history of forward observer teams during World War II.

As early as the U.S. Civil War, artillery fire could reach as far as two miles, but without an “FO” (forward observer) to report where the first shot had landed in relation to the target, and to direct subsequent fire by outlining or “bracketing” the targeted range, many of the advantages of longer-range fire were wasted. During World War II, FOs accompanied infantrymen on the front lines. Now, for the first time, gun crews could bring deadly accurate fire on enemy positions immediately as advancing riflemen encountered these enemy strongpoints. According to Walker, this transition from direct to indirect fire was one of the most important innovations to have occurred in ground combat in centuries.

Using the 37th Division in the Pacific Theater and the 87th in Europe as case studies, Walker presents a vivid picture of the dangers involved in FO duty and shows how vitally important forward observers were to the success of ground operations in a variety of scenarios. FO personnel not only performed a vital support function as artillerymen but often transcended their combat role by fighting as infantrymen, sometimes even leading soldiers into battle. And yet, although forward observers lived, fought, and bled with the infantry, they were ineligible to wear the Combat Infantryman’s Badge awarded to the riflemen they supported. Forward observers are thus among the unsung heroes of World War II. *Bracketing the Enemy* signals a long-overdue recognition of their distinguished service.

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