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Book Review: Red Army Tank Commanders: The Armored Guards

Robert J. Bunker
Claremont Graduate University

Recommended Citation
Tanks For the Memories by Aaron C. Elson, Chi Chi Press, Hackensack, N.J., Phone: 1-800-807-TANK. 1994. $10.00.

Walk into any bookstore in the U.S. and you will find an almost overpowering number of Vietnam "I was there" books detailing life as an infantryman, Marine, or Long Range Patrolter. Some books about the Gulf War are beginning to appear. All of these books detail what war feels like to you. You will find an almost overpowering numb- er of these books, but there is a difference. These books detail what war feels like to the participant who fights dismounted. You will find an almost overpowering numb- er of these books, but there is a difference.

The book is a work of love by Aaron C. Elson. Mr. Elson's father was a replacement officer assigned to the 712th Tank Battalion in World War II. He served from June to December 1944 in the 712th before being wounded and evacuated. While Mr. Elson's father would tell stories of new tank warfare, Elson could not remember them. After his father died, Elson began to attend reunions of the 712th Tank Battalion Association. He began to record what members of the battalion told him about the battalion. The story is not complete because he normally recorded information only from veterans of A and C companies.

The 712th Tank Battalion was an independent tank battalion, not permanently assigned to any division. During the Normandy invasion it supported the 90th Infantry Division and 52nd Airborne Division. Later it worked with the 8th Infantry Division before returning to attachment with the 90th, with which it stayed for the remainder of the war. It was the seventh tank battalion to land at Normandy, but the first to land with virtually all of its equipment. Units in the battalion won three Distinguished Unit Citations.

The book is organized chronologically, with individual members of the battalion saying what they did before, during, and after a battle. The book includes acts of heroism as well as the mundane and sometimes funny facts of life as a tanker. In one case he tells how a tank came to participate in a friendly fire incident; in another, what it feels like to have a mine go off under your tank. There are some grisly parts, like having to clean out a tank after it was hit, incinerating the crew in a fire of 100-oc- tane fuel. There is not much talk of the technical mistakes regarding German weapon-ry. But overall, Red Army Tank Commanders: The Armored Guards is a first-rate work which not only explores a lit- tle-known subject area, but the process of doctrinal change, a relevant topic in light of current issues (e.g. non-Western military environments vs. traditional battlefields, advanced technologies and unmanned AFVs, and budgetary constraints) facing U.S. Army doctrine today.

For a book with such great potential and promise, Armored Forces is an extravagantly priced, myopic failure. Touted by the publisher as a "teaching tool and reference guide for teachers and students of military history, current events, and professional soldiers," this book just does not measure up to its goals, its claims, or its price. It will be especially disappointing to readers who know anything at all about the development and history of armor.

The author, Robert Citino, is a university-level associate professor of history with two previously published books to his credit. However, his credentials for writing this book are obscure and may explain this book's lack of depth and detail. His writing is clear and succinct, but his research and presentation are sadly incomplete for a book which claims to be a "sourcebook." Armored Forces is organized into four major sections — armor history, bibliograph- raphic essays, biographical profiles, and appendices. Citino's recreation of armored forces history is textbook material, dry and un-.unleavened, without the power and drive that armor deserves. He does hit some bright spots in his discussions of armor his- torical personalities such as Konstantin Detractions from this exceptional work by Robert Citino, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn. 1994. 328 pages. $75.00.

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As with his armor history, Citino's append-ices are weak and poorly presented. The brief chronology of important dates is basi-