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Book Review: Red Army Tank Commanders: The Armored Guards

Robert J. Bunker
Claremont Graduate University

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BOOKS

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 Patroller. Some books about the Gulf War are beginning to appear. All of these books detail what war feels like to the participant who fights dismounted. You will look hard and unsuccessfully for a book about fighting from armor, from the viewpoint of the tank crew. Recently, a new book, *Tanks For the Memories*, was published that talks about tank warfare in World War II. It is hard to get by the title, as it is a classic pun, detested by most tankers, but it is a must read for any tanker, and should be purchased by all libraries near an armored unit.

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 about World War II, Aaron 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 the 82d 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-octane gas. The gore is not there to shock, but rather as a discussion of what it was like to fight in a tank battalion from Normandy to a concentration camp in Germany.

Tanks For the Memories contains few details about the strategy of World War II. It does contain some tactical insights, but it is mainly a story about how a unit really functions in wartime. There is a monument to the 712th outside the Patton Museum at Fort Knox. On the monument are 97 names listing all but one of the men killed in action in the battalion. You may compare this list of casualties with that of the Gulf War and realize that this was indeed a battalion that was in a hard-fought war. Their story is one well worth reading.

GERALD A. HALBERT
Earlysville, Va.

Red Army Tank Commanders: The Armored Guards by Richard N. Armstrong, Schiffer Publishing Ltd., Atglen, Pa., 1994. 475 pages. \$24.95.

This book is comprised of six individual essays on the combat careers of Soviet tank army commanders (Katukov, Bogdanov, Rybalko, Lelyushenko, Rotmistrov, Kravchenko) during World War II. Each essay makes for fascinating reading concerning the personality, command style, and operational perceptions of the Red Army's leading World War II tank army commanders. The author is well qualified to write on this subject, given his expertise in Red Army operations and military history, and has gathered an impressive collection of Soviet sources.

This work represents a significant contribution to armor scholarship for two reasons. First, it approaches armored warfare on the Eastern Front from the Soviet commander's perspective. This is a subject usually given to a German bias. Second, it addresses the evolution of armor doctrine during the course of a war — a doctrine based on prewar theoretical concepts which, unlike those which developed in Germany, were unable to fully mature in a peacetime environment.

In each essay, the commander in focus is seen developing his operational skills by means of a trial and error process with ever-increasing forces (e.g. brigade, corps, army) under his command. The outcome of this process held the life of the individual Soviet tanker in the balance. The Soviet penchant for night operations and ability to quickly recover and repair damaged tanks to sustain operations represents two lesser themes which also run through many of these essays.

Detractions from this exceptional work are relatively minor and specifically concern technical mistakes regarding German weaponry. But overall, *Red Army Tank Commanders: The Armored Guards* is a first rate work which not only explores a little-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.

DR. ROBERT J. BUNKER
Associate Professor
American Military University

Armored Forces: History and Sourcebook by Robert M. Citino, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn. 1994. 328 pages. \$75.00.

For a book with such great potential and promise, *Armored Forces* by Robert Citino is an extravagantly priced, myopic failure. Touted by the publisher as a "teaching tool and reference guide for teachers and students of military history, history buffs, 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, bibliographic essays, biographical profiles, and appendices. Citino's recreation of armored forces history is textbook material, dry and unleavened, without the power and drive that armor deserves. He does hit some bright spots in his discussions of armor history personalities such as Hart, Swinton, Lutz, and Fuller ("All of Fuller's books are written with the intention of annoying someone."). Citino's early history of armor in the Great War is the best-balanced, best-supported and most interesting. As Citino moves through the interwar years, World War II, and into modern tank warfare, he seems to lose steam or interest. For example, although published in 1994, well after the Gulf War, Citino devotes only four paragraphs to the greatest modern tank battles since Kursk. His synopsis of tank battles in the Iran-Iraq War is credible, but to virtually ignore armor in "Desert Storm" is to ignore the present and future of armored forces. Technical information is also thin and sketchy, and again only four paragraphs are provided for discussion of modern tank ammunition and armor design. Hardly a comprehensive approach to a subject of such vast scope and detail.

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