

BOOKS

Knight's Cross — A Life of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel by David Fraser. Harper Collins Publishers, N.Y., 1994. 601 pages, chronology, maps, bibliography, notes. \$30.00.

Even young Armor troopers who can't tell you where El Alamein is have heard about Rommel and his exploits during the early days of World War II. In this book, General David Fraser, a distinguished British biographer and historian, takes an unbiased and objective look at Rommel, both the legend and the whole man, and gives us the very best book on Rommel to date.

The Legend doesn't suffer from Fraser. Indeed, Rommel's remarkable story is given in fine detail, from his youth to his heroism in World War I (when he won Germany's highest award for bravery) to his sensational campaigns across North Africa. Fraser emphasizes what others called Rommel's *Fingerspitzengefühl*, his sixth sense, "his almost animal response to the dangers, the chances, the currents of battle" that distinguishes a great battlefield commander. "No man has ever been more conscious of time, of the fleeting nature of opportunity, of the rapidity with which the commander must act or react." Fraser shows how Rommel continually focused on what might or could shift the balance in battle, particularly when that balance could be affected by his own presence on the scene. "He [Rommel] always believed in personal intervention and inspiration at the critical point in battle. The critical point may not always be where shot is flying; on 29 May [1942] the critical point for Afrika Corps was where a supply column was attempting to reach 15th Panzer [Division], and Rommel placed himself at that critical point and ensured success" by personally leading that column to 15th Panzer at four o'clock in the morning over a route that everyone else had missed!

Yet Fraser is careful to balance this heady stuff with the factual, and not so glorious, facets of Rommel that the world didn't see (or chose not to). This includes Rommel's successful efforts to cultivate a friendship with Hitler and later to take advantage of that friendship. Rommel first met Hitler in 1934 when his battalion provided an honor guard for Hitler's visit to Goslar. "Hitler had a message for all generations: he comforted the fears and consoled the resentments of middle age, as surely as he appealed, with considerable success, to the idealism of youth... Hitler was, it seemed, promoting modernity [in the army], whether in attitudes to mess-management or in his evident interest in weaponry. That was good. By his...show of confidence in the army, Hitler was proclaiming to Germany that to be a good sol-

dier was again a proud, honored thing. That was very good."

Rommel found nothing disturbing about Hitler or the Nazi attitudes toward the army, and he continued steadfastly in that belief well beyond the time when other senior German officers became alarmed at Hitler's demands.

Fraser also points out some of Rommel's less distinguished adventures, and how his impetuous drive to move immediately against any perceived enemy had occasional setbacks. The first Tobruk campaign was one. Rommel was convinced the British were on the run, that the defenders would have insufficient time to recover their balance and nerve, and that speed and determination could take Tobruk. He was wrong. The 9th Australian Division showed little inclination to roll over. "Their artillery fire was heavy and accurate on every oc-



casions; their strongpoints were manned and fought with tenacity...Tobruk was formidable." It took Rommel 14 months to crack that defense.

Another interesting section of the book deals with a particularly objective (for an Englishman!) analysis and comparison of Rommel and Montgomery. The conclusions are enlightening!

Fraser also looks thoroughly at Rommel's activities in France just before and during the Allied invasion. There is a very interesting presentation of the argument between Rommel and General Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of Panzer Group West, on how best to defend against the coming invasion. It was agreed that "it would be absolutely vital to counterattack such penetrations as fast and as strongly as possible." Rommel argued that he must have control of sufficient armor from the start and that it must be deployed near the coast because during the early hours of invasion, time was more important than overwhelming strength. The other side of the

argument was "that the best and only way to deal with [a major enemy deployment] would be by maneuver with the maximum concentrated armored strength, strength reserved for the maneuver and not frittered away on operations of only local significance." Field Marshal von Rundstedt, Rommel's superior, sided with Geyr and history provided the outcome. Nevertheless, this is an important and valid argument, one that the Armor School might well use as a teaching point.

This book is replete with real-life lessons for every Armor leader. Battle field communications. Tactical intelligence gathering. The importance of personal leadership of troops in battle. Demanding training. Logistics. Lots of logistics! "The first and most enduring criticism [of Rommel] is that he either failed to understand or paid inadequate attention to logistics." Numerous examples are given of units up to division strength forced to halt in the midst of battle simply because they ran out of fuel. "In a sense the criticism is fair: Rommel believed — and the belief has historic justification, not only in Panzerarmee Afrika — that to set the pace and scope of operational ambition primarily by calculations of supply may be to risk little but is often also to achieve little." The commander who never risks running out of fuel is inclined to risk nothing, and he who risks nothing seldom wins.

As good as this book is, it has one major fault: the poor quality of its maps. The battle descriptions are precise, fast moving and detailed, but there is no way the reader can follow the action on the few maps which have only the most general topographical information. Maps like those in von Mellethin's *Panzer Battles* would add considerably to this book. Even so, this is a first-rate look at one of the great captains of Armor, and a fine enduring addition to every Armor leader's bookshelf.

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Mogadishu! Heroism and Tragedy by Kent Delong and Steven Tuckey; Forward by Ross Perot. Praeger Publishers, Westport, Conn., 1994. 144 pages, \$19.95.

Mogadishu! provides a definitive examination of U.S. forces operations during October 3-4, 1993. Purportedly, more decorations for valor "were given for actions during this evening than in any other single action of this size in U.S. military history."

Relying heavily on interviews with the participants, the book's somewhat over-

drawn style is reminiscent of General S.L.A. Marshall's action histories. *Mogadishu!* is disturbing. The authors picture an American force that was complacent, over-reliant on extant standard operating procedures and inadequately reinforced. Critical readers may find the authors' fund of general military knowledge disconcertingly sparse.

Mogadishu! focuses on the events that resulted in 18 American dead, Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant's public captivity, and the posthumous award of two Congressional Medals of Honor. During a special operations mission to capture indigenous politico-military personnel, two helicopters were shot down by heavy small arms and rocket fire, which also fixed the special operations teams and the supporting force of U.S. Army Rangers. Massed fires from rotary wing aircraft and relief forces mounted in wheeled vehicles were unable to provide freedom of maneuver to the initial assault force. Light armored vehicles positioned in the area of operations by the governments of Pakistan and Malaysia proved necessary to extract these U.S. forces.

The accounts narrated depict a rapid transition from monotony to violent action and emphasize the need for American forces to have access to mobile firepower and combat shock action in every contingency. The book is a worthwhile read without the dryness of many battle accounts.

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A Doughboy With the Fighting 69th: A Remembrance of World War I by Albert M. Ettinger and A. Churchill Ettinger. Pocket Books, N.Y., 1992. 339 pages, \$5.99.

Seventy-seven years after the armistice that ended WWI, the Great War still fascinates us. Here, in vivid detail, is the story of an individual soldier who served in the 69th New York National Guard (165th United States Infantry). Dedicated to the foot soldiers of the regiment and their comrades of the 42nd Rainbow Division, *A Doughboy With the Fighting 69th* is a series of related vignettes about the soldiers who went "over there" to battle the Kaiser in 1917.

At the time of his enlistment, the author was an "emphatic, adventuresome youth of 17, quick to take offense, and inclined to cherish both friendship and enmities." Joining the regiment's pioneer platoon, Albert "Red" Ettinger later served as a regimental dispatch rider, where he occasionally met the Rainbow's inimitable chief of staff, COL Douglas MacArthur. Ettinger's greatest thrill

occurred when MacArthur described him as "a good soldier."

Here are the stories of the regiment's most distinguished heroes, later immortalized in the 1940 Warner Brothers film, "The Fighting Sixty-Ninth." Readers will recognize COL "Wild Bill" Donovan, later the founder of the OSS, as the regimental commander. "Fighting" Father Francis Duffy served as the senior chaplain of the regiment and, according to Ettinger, the unit's military success was due as much to the men's bed-rock confidence in this inspirational priest as it was to the talents of its combat officers. Also present are first-hand accounts of the poet Joyce Kilmer, who urged the author to keep a diary before Kilmer's own death at the Ourcq River on July 28, 1918.

What makes these reminiscences so interesting is the foot soldier's perspective of military life and the horrors of combat. Like most soldiers, Ettinger and his comrades complained about the chow, prepared for inspections that never took place, trudged along on grueling marches, and were too "young and dumb" to think much about the hazards of going AWOL. Yet, when they marched into the Meuse-Argonne, they faced the prospect of death without flinching, convinced in the righteousness of their cause.

The author died in 1984 and his son, A. Churchill Ettinger, prepared his father's reminiscences for publication. Surprisingly, the junior Ettinger ponders the difficulty for today's generation to comprehend why one and a half million Americans enlisted to fight in an overseas war having little perceptible threat to the country's national security. Perhaps the secret lies in an America that has long since vanished from our consciousness. That America, as is this book, is a story about a "remarkable breed of two generations past, many of whom were truly heroic."

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Company C: The Real War in Iraq by John Sack, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1995. 256 pages. \$22.00.

The Gulf War has generated its share of historical accounts, including official and unofficial histories, articles in professional journals, and memoirs by senior officers. What has not yet emerged is the story of the individual men and women who fought the war. John Sack attempts to fill this void with his in-depth look at the experiences of Company C, 2-34 Armor, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division, between December 1990 and May 1991.

John Sack was a war correspondent in Korea, Vietnam, and in the Gulf. In each

war, he stayed with soldiers during their training and later during combat. He was one of the few reporters who was with a combat unit during the ground offensive into Iraq — the result of the Pentagon's press policy which kept most correspondents far behind the action. Unfortunately, CNN proved a poor substitute for Ernie Pyle (of World War II fame) and other reporters like him who got to know soldiers intimately by living among them for extended periods of time.

Company C is an account of the soldiers who fought in Iraq and Kuwait at the tip of the spear in the largest armored battle in American history. Sack writes of their preparation in Fort Riley and of their lives at home, church, work, and "play." He does not discuss strategy, operations, or tactics, techniques, and procedures. Readers interested in those topics will be disappointed by this book and would be better served by referring to the numerous articles that have appeared in professional publications since the end of the war. *Company C*, rather, is a story of some of the soldiers who fought the war, soldiers who had as much in common with Sherman tank crewmen in France in World War II or armored cavalymen in Vietnam as they had with soldiers serving to their rear in Saudi Arabia. This was the war denied to the public on television but real enough to those who fought it.

One of the striking aspects of the story is the degree to which the fear (and reality) of friendly fire dominated the actions of commanders during the battle. The commander of Company C nearly paralyzed his unit at times by ordering his tank commanders to get his permission before engaging targets. This policy undoubtedly saved lives, since Company C neither suffered nor inflicted any friendly fire casualties and lost no one to enemy fire. It would be dangerous, however, to extrapolate this experience to future conflicts against potentially more capable adversaries. The commander who tries to over-control his forces in a fast-paced armored battle — which is at best organized chaos — invites disaster. Company C's story validates the pressing need for effective thermal identification systems for armored vehicles on today's battlefield.

The author's prose is targeted towards a civilian audience and reads more like a novel than a non-fiction account. The book could use more photos to help the reader identify with the soldiers (the only photo is the one on the cover) and a map to assist in visualizing where Company C fought in Iraq and Kuwait. Nevertheless, the story is a quick and interesting read and a valuable addition to the existing literature on the Gulf War.

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