

"He's enough to restore your faith in the S2..."

Ralph Peters' Novels: More Than Just a Quick Read

Red Army (1989)

The War in 2020 (1991)

Twilight of Heroes (1997)

by Ralph Peters. Pocket Books, Inc., New York, N.Y.

Next time you're hanging around the Intermediate Staging Base, or standing in the commander's hatch waiting for the Sava River to drain, chances are good that you'll reach into your cargo pocket for whatever you grabbed at the PX before heading down to the motor pool. Tankers and cavalrymen have made millionaires out of Max Brand, Louis L'Amour, Stephen King, and Clive Cussler. Living cheek to jowl with three other guys for months on end can lead one to appreciate a few moments of solitude. After all, casual small talk is not too manly. But reading a good paperback? Well, any trooper could go for that.

Most of us do, and when we do, we reach for some brain junk food, like westerns, or detective novels, or spy books. But being soldiers, we often pick up something military in theme. There is no shortage of such stuff on the racks down at Wal-Mart. Most of it is pretty harmless, and some proves mildly informative in a professional sense. But if you're like many of us, you want something that's really useful, but not straight history, and not written like the -20 manual. What you want is a damn good military novel, real armored warrior stuff.

In that case, stick with fellow professionals. Some still swear by Tom Clancy, although he's approached the level of self-parody in his last few Jack Ryan novels. At bottom, brother Clancy remains a "wannabe," an overweight former insurance salesman who pals around with high-ranking officers and has an inordinate interest in firearms and modern weaponry. Like Howard Cosell on Monday Night Football, he never played the game. Sometimes, it shows. You can't learn only by watching, folks.

No, if you want real Army stuff, stick to novels by real soldiers: Ed Ruggero, Harry Coyle, or Leonard Scott, among others. Best of all, check out the most gifted American military writer of them all, a lieutenant colonel of military intelligence named Ralph Peters. He's enough to restore your faith in the S2. If you haven't read Ralph Peters, you haven't read a good war book lately.

Peters has written numerous books and articles, but three of his novels in particular will appeal to tankers and cavalrymen of all ranks. They're all in paperback, and widely available. Taken as a trilogy, they trace the arc of our once and future Army.



For openers, try *Red Army*. This 1989 work describes the invasion of Western Europe. Back in the 1980s, such World War III books were all the rage. General Sir John Hackett, Brigadier Shelford Bidwell, and Tom Clancy, wrote three of the best. Peters turns the genre on its head and gives us a very honest, exciting, and (dare I say?) sympathetic portrayal of our Soviet enemies, a great armored army on the attack. The book is about people, warriors both like us and, yet, not like us at all. The hardware is in there, but in a Peters book, the tanks and guns remain tools, not stars. His wars, like real wars, are fought and won by men.

The stories in *Red Army* grip you. When you read the gruesome story of Major Bezarin's running tank gun battle in and among a panicked German refugee column, or follow an outnumbered air assault team's lonely, courageous stand at an encircled bridgehead, you cannot help but marvel that this massive juggernaut never did cross that well-patrolled border. Ever wondered how the big one would have turned out? *Red Army* offers one very sobering version.

The author also gives enough high-level insight to put the reader in the big picture. As long predicted, the Soviets in *Red Army* push their main effort through the North German Plain, smashing up the British and West Germans. The Americans down south make an appearance, but Peters does not dwell on their role. The Soviet soldiers, from motor rifleman to front commander, hold center stage. You can't help but admire them, even as you give thanks that this bloody war never happened.

Looking at *Red Army* almost ten years later, you see the American Army's past in stark relief. For more than forty years, our armor battalions and cavalry squadrons held the line against the Soviet mechanized hordes. To see what your regimental CSM or battalion commander means when he talks about the Cold War, and why it consumed us as an Army and a nation, read *Red Army*. Those are the guys we beat.

For a look at the uncertain, dangerous world of the present Army, look at Ralph Peters' 1997 effort, *Twilight*

of Heroes. You won't find a tank in the book, but you will find a lot of great characters fighting an undeclared war on narcoterrorists in the badlands of Bolivia. The book is the story of a Cold Warrior in his final days, Colonel John Church. Named for the gaunt, overage-in-grade commander who succeeded to command of the 24th Infantry Division in 1950 after the North Koreans snared Major General Bill Dean, Peters' protagonist holds the line far from home. Church is the face of today's Army, outnumbered, out in the backwaters of the Third World, fighting phantom enemies who can kill you just as dead as any Soviet sabot round.

Church does not fight alone. Readers will recognize familiar faces, including a Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Southern Command who bears an uncanny resemblance to the Gulf War commanding general of the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized). The bad guys come in several flavors, all drawn believably: drug dealers, elderly Nazis in hiding, and slick-tongued D.C. bureaucrats playing fast and loose with our lads out on the firing lane. At the climax of the book, with the Yankees encircled and desperate, armored troopers will find themselves wishing that Colonel Church and his comrades had a platoon of M1A2 Abrams tanks on hand. But in *Twilight of Heroes*, the Americans live by wits and character, not big guns. In an Army with a lot fewer tanks than any of us might wish, that's reality. Ralph Peters shows us the face of today's small, ugly wars.

Continued on Page 53

Ralph Peters' Novels

(Continued from page 51)

But what about the future? Peters has written about that, too. By far his darkest, most depressing work, *The War in 2020* offers, in Peters' own words, "a book about nightmares." Do you ever wonder what might happen if everything really went to hell? Peters has, and his 1991 novel serves up a pretty grim scenario. Even so, the author presents his usual stress on character and people, not things. The future may be bleak, but the U.S. Army is still in there swinging, just the way we'd want it.

The world of 2020 is an even bigger mess than most of us could imagine. A remilitarized Japanese state stands opposed to an exhausted America. Arming and assisting unsavory allies, including intransigent Iranians and other bellicose Central Asian powers, the Japanese unleash their high-technology war machine on the rotting corpse of Russia, half-heartedly re-Communized following an aborted fling at democracy. It is the Russian Civil War of 1917-20 again. This time, though, the United States helps the enfeebled Reds.

Leading the small but potent American expeditionary force, Colonel George Taylor's 7th Cavalry Regiment brings into play a true wonder weapon. America's last major Army unit, the 7th relies on the new M-100 "Flying Frog," a sort of armed V-22 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft on steroids. The M-100s are chocked to the gills with stealth capability, jammers, and an unerring electromagnetic gun, not to mention great cavalry troopers. Guided by the brilliant intelligence analysts and collectors of the 10th Cavalry Regiment, Taylor's 7th joins with the ramshackle Soviets to try to stop the powerful Japanese and their numerous fanatical friends. If Force XXI ever goes to war, will it look like this, great flying cavalry raids spanning near-continental distances?

The War in 2020 strikes the reader as visionary, exciting, and disturbing, all at the same time. For a country enjoying a peace dividend, busily carving up the remnants of our Cold War armed forces, Peters provides a wake-up call. Peace is not at hand, now or in the future. And when the great war comes, in 2002 or 2020, our Army will be only as good as its mounted arm of decision.

This, then, is Ralph Peters' contribution: three well-written military novels guaranteed to interest and challenge all professional soldiers. Peters clearly understands the art of soldiering, and that shines through on every page. He has made the best use possible of his own military experience. The books ring true because the author has been there. He has marched in our boots, and is marching still. Shove a Peters novel in your cargo pocket next time. You won't regret it.

LTC DANIEL BOLGER
Carlisle Barracks, Pa.