

BOOK ESSAY

He Rode Up Front For Patton by Brig. Gen. Albin F. (Al) Irzyk, Pentland Press, Inc., Raleigh, N.C., 1996. 388 pages. \$32.95.

There is a tantalizing, final glimpse of horse cavalry operations that opens this account of transition and employment of armor during WWII. Cavalry is fast, able to get around the enemy, but has no firepower. Animals die, even in training. Armor will change that.

The author's perspective encompasses this change, because he starts his career as a new horse cavalry lieutenant in 1941, and by the end of the war in Europe, he is a lieutenant colonel and an experienced commander of the fully mechanized 8th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division.

It is the frequent assignment of the 8th, "The Rolling Eight-Ball," to be in the lead of Patton's 3rd Army, which is the focus of the book.

The author is a fighting commander who is twice wounded, and who knows tank operations not only from the platoon, company, and battalion level, but also from the perspective of combat command (in the 4th AD, the 8th functions most often as part of Combat Command B).

The action in Europe falls essentially into three sections: heavy fighting with rapid progress across France punctuated by enforced breaks, the relief of Bastogne, and entry into Germany and victory.

The 8th and the author are not only part of some of the best-known battles of the war, but also many others of great importance which have received less attention. First-hand experiences include fighting out of hedgerow country, backtracking and fighting at Lorient, and covering an amazing 328 combat miles across France in 12 days to be within 63 miles of Germany by September 1, 1944. The author is in command of an advance guard that establishes the first bridgehead across the Moselle on September 11.

While much has been written about the encirclement of Nancy, the Arracourt tank battles and the great success of CCA, the author expands the record by describing his combat experiences in heavy fighting in CCB at Fresnes en Saulnois, the other half of the encirclement that made success possible (CCB knocks out 23 German Panther and Tiger tanks). In spite of inflicting staggering losses on the Germans, for a second time supplies are diverted, the 4th AD is stopped for a full month.

The author has been a major and battalion S3, but he regularly commands an advance guard. In December, at the age of 27, he is given command of the entire 8th Tank Battalion, one of three in the 4th; the other two are commanded by his counterparts, LTC Creighton Abrams, and LTC Delk Oden.

His first combat after receiving command is at Singling, a situation he inherits, and he describes what he did to resolve it, and in an after-action summary analyzes its relative importance.

These highly useful summaries are included at key points, and are based on the author's thoughts and knowledge at the time. They are often combined with straightforward appraisals of the decisions of those with whom he serves, including the well-known, such as then-LTC Creighton Abrams, COL Bruce Clarke, Generals Wood, Gaffey, and Patton, as well as company commanders, platoon leaders, and platoon sergeants.

Appraisals are based not just on personal impression, but are supported by descriptions of what went right and what went wrong. They are there for you to agree with or not, and regardless, they are fascinating reading.

The 8th is in the front of Patton's 3rd Army to relieve Bastogne (161 miles in 22 hours), and makes the initial contact with the 101st. The absorbing analysis of the commitment and recall of Task Force Ezell highlights the interplay of decisions among General Holmes Dager (CCB Commander), General Omar Bradley, and General Patton, decisions which could have both lost the entire CCB, yet ultimately saves TF Ezell.

The author is wounded at Chaumont when his tank is hit, but he takes the town on December 25th. On December 26th, CCR with the 37th and 53rd, break through to the 101st, and on the following day, the 8th links up with the 101st. In January 1945, the author is promoted to lieutenant colonel.

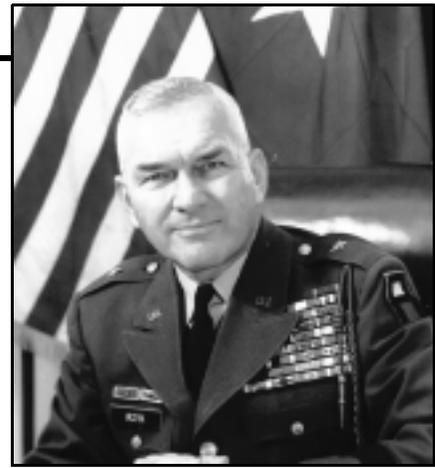
In Germany, the author is wounded again in taking St. Johann, when he leads an attack and his tank is hit by a panzerfaust, but he continues the fight which ultimately succeeds. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

With the 8th in the lead, the 4th AD crosses the Rhine on March 24, 1945. In addition to its many combat experiences, the 8th liberates North Stalag III concentration camp. The author is division chief of staff when the 4th is deactivated in the spring of 1946.

In addition to crediting his troops and their training for the accomplishments of the 8th, the author cites mission-type orders instituted in the 4th AD by MG John S. "P" Wood, and supported by CCB commander BG Holmes Dager. Regularly, when the author is given a job to do, he makes the implementation decisions himself.

The above is only a brief outline, for on rough count I come up with descriptions of nearly 40 engagements with the enemy in this book, including the author's growing "battle sense" and outstanding employment of armor at Marthille, and his insightful use of artillery in taking Voellerdingen and the bridge over the Eichel (with which he is credited by General Patton in his personal war diaries), all bonded together with descriptions of what life was like for soldiers in the field.

Additionally included are the author's evaluation of weapons, both U.S. and enemy, based on his being on the firing and receiving end: the M5, M4, M4A3E8 tanks, the German Panther and Tiger tanks, the Panzerfaust, and the 88. While German tanks had higher velocity guns, the 360-de-



BG Albin F. Irzyk in April 1970.

gree power traverse of the Sherman turret allowed U.S. gunners to get off more accurate shots faster. The Sherman could travel great distances, and its simplicity made it possible to perform major repairs in the field.

The only illustrations are maps, some of which are dark and hard to see, but the path of movement is clear. For me, the most valuable part of the maps were the contour lines, which give a good idea of the terrain involved.

The book does not suffer from lack of other illustrations. Still, a few would have been useful, such as photos of the M3 (Stuart) in which the author starts his training, the M5, which he uses a lot in Europe, and the M4 Sherman, which would graphically show the evolution of armor that occurs in a short time.

While this is the story of the 8th from the author's vantage point, he writes in the third person which is a little disconcerting at first. However, in a short time this becomes quite comfortable for the reader.

Quite simply, I found this is to be an outstanding book, both in terms of content and the absorbing writing style of the author. General Irzyk knows how to tell a story, and there is an immediacy and freshness to the narrative that makes you feel as if the action happened recently (for an example, see his account of several meetings with Patton in "Patton Revisited," *ARMOR*, March-April 1995, which are also found in this book). The tempo stays up, and more than once I found myself awake at 3:00-4:00 in the morning, reading to find out what happens next.

As time grows between the present and WWII, the value of this book will increase because it is a first-hand account of major combat action from a soldier's point of view. It is not retrospective after many decades, but rather based on his experiences as they happened to him, and General Irzyk is eminently successful in conveying this.

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