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Michael Green, *War Stories of the Tankers: American Armored Combat, 1918 to Today*. St. Paul: Zenith Press, 2008. Pp. 320. ISBN 978-0-7603-3297-9.

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Vietnam grunts called tanks “mortar magnets” for their propensity to draw enemy fire. Unappreciative grunts complained they were big, loud, and stunk like a fleet of city buses. Infantrymen walking behind a 50-ton M-48 Patton tank breaking brush in 110 degrees thought it gave the term “breathtaking” a whole new meaning. So did its 90mm main gun, firing “beehive” into an occupied enemy bunker line. You never heard a grunt complaining about *that*. The tiny, dart-shaped flechettes that filled the vicious anti-personnel rounds gave “getting nailed” a whole new meaning as well. Grunts loved tanks when they ran into the enemy. It certainly made surviving such an encounter considerably more likely.

Michael Green lets the men who take tanks to war tell all about it in *War Stories of the Tankers*. The author of several popular examinations of specific tank models,¹ Green offers aficionados and combat action junkies an anecdotal history of American armored warfare through all of its major evolutions. He introduces the participants and their stories, starting with the Great War, the first “war to end war.” Soldiers who in 1917 didn’t know a tank from a threshing machine six months before tell what it was like to drive an 11-ton British heavy tank or a “light” 8-ton French Renault that looks like a cartoon caricature of tanks to come. They convey the realities and romance of driving a clumsy, nearly blind thresher of men that would as soon asphyxiate the crew with exhaust fumes as kill the enemy.

Beads of perspiration stand on your forehead. Hot work this. The combination of powder and gasoline fumes, the smell of hot oil and the exhaust begins to daze you, but you pull yourself together and rumble on. The infantry swings along behind, bombing dugouts and “mopping up” assisted by your running mate, a female tank armed with machine guns only [Army 2nd Lt. Paul Haimbaugh] (14).

The author quietly uses participants’ narratives to examine American doctrine and tactics that forward thinking officers began developing almost as soon as the British coined the name “tank,” to hide the existence of the first tracked behemoth. He lets his witnesses explain how the vehicle was created to pulverize the enemy with mobile, overwhelming firepower. With the finesse of a writer who knows his subject, Green has selected his players carefully, so that their stories intermesh to take readers beyond the mere visceral thrills of combat sequences.

For instance, Green introduces us to Army Corporal Clarence Smoyer, in 1945 an untested gunner on the untested M-26 Pershing heavy tank, America’s much belated counter to the Germans’ deadly Panthers and Tigers. Until development of the Pershing, the Panz-

¹ See the following, all published by Zenith Press: *Panzers at War* (2005), with Gladys Green; *M1 Abrams at War* (2005), with Greg Stewart; *M2/M3 Bradley at War* (2007), *M4 Sherman at War* (2007), and *Tiger Tanks at War* (2008), with James D. Brown.

ers decimated both the ubiquitous American 32-ton M-4 Sherman medium tank armed with a puny 75mm gun and their more heavily armed British cousins. Frustrated gunners reported that their rounds literally bounced off the frontal armor of German tanks.

The Army brass wanted to see what the 42-ton Pershing could do before pushing it into combat at Cologne, Germany. Smoyer was ordered to show his stuff with his new 90mm main gun, reputedly as powerful as the Tiger's fearsome 88mm.

Once we began hitting the houses with our 90mm gun, they made it even harder for us by telling us to shoot at the chimneys on the distant houses. The chimneys soon began disappearing in a series of explosions. They kept increasing the target distance on us to test our skill. And for the final one they chose a house 1,500 yards away with two chimneys (76).

Fifteen hundred yards was almost three times the effective tank-killing range of the M-4's gun. In effect Smoyer is testifying that American armor technology had finally caught up with German ingenuity, something that was not broadcast till after World War II.

I remember announcing that I was going to attempt to get the first chimney on the right side of the house. I fired, and the chimney went up in pieces. The one on the other side was a red brick chimney, and just the top of it stuck over the roof. We set up and fired, and the red brick flew all over the place... (76).

By the time Green's warriors fight their way through Korea, Vietnam, and the Cold War, the narratives become more technical as the tank evolves from a simplistic, optically sighted, human-operated gun platform to a multi-function weapon system directed by sensor arrays and digitalized command and control mechanisms. Noticeable, too, is a higher level of sophistication in the descriptions of the weapons systems and the ranks of the narrators explaining them. By Iraqi Freedom, the common soldier has lost his say except as a bit player. Thus, Army Maj. Clay Lyle writes as follows of a combat encounter with Saddam Fedayeen:

It was tight terrain and everything is occurring in close proximity of the town. I began using my FBCB2 (a wireless tactical Internet system) to request artillery right at the edge of town on likely dismounted infiltration routes. From that moment forward Lieutenant Wade and I would process almost constant indirect fire missions to my mortars and the artillery battery throughout the remainder of the night (259).

Despite Green's care and ingenuity in picking his stories, the book will disappoint the persnickety historian who want "just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." But American soldiers and marines, whatever their age or rank, cannot be held accountable for their flights of fancy and failure to pinpoint who was where when and why. The fog of war, no doubt magnified by the isolation of tanker crews inside a hot steel box, was often impenetrable. Other impediments to objectivity are pride of service, parochialism, and pressure to succeed in the twenty-first century, zero-defect environment of techno-war. Green never intervenes to correct that.

Mitigating this inadequacy is a fine selection of pictures, including a complete suite of tank images, starting with the British heavy tank and the French Renault and reaching to the super futuristic M1A2 Abrams Main Battle Tank, arguably the most effective of the

present generation of tanks. Too bad there are no color plates to enhance and highlight the changing times.

All in all, *War Stories of the Tankers*, like the tanks and tankers it features, has its ups and downs, but it certainly deserves a home on the bookshelves of devotees of combat narration.