

Reviews

Reflections On LZ Albany by James T. Lawrence, Marietta, GA: Deeds Publishing, 2014, 187 pages with photographs, maps and appendix, \$19.95.

The Ghosts of the Green Grass by J.L. "Bud" Alley, Signal Mountain, TN: Codi Publishing LLC, 2015, 394 pages with photographs, maps and appendix, \$29.99.

The dictionary defines fear as "a feeling of alarm or disquiet caused by the expectation of danger, pain, disaster or the like." How men master their fear is the focus of two recent publications on the often-overlooked November 1965 engagements at Landing Zone (LZ) Albany. Written by participants, both books explore the battle from different perspectives.

The action at LZ Albany came about as a subset of the larger Battle of the Ia Drang. Fought over a four-day period in November 1965, it was the first combat action involving Americans from the newly arrived 1st Cavalry Division and the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN).

The initial PAVN assault against 1st Battalion, 7th Cavalry, on LZ X-Ray took place Nov. 14-16, 1965. Under the command of then-LTC Hal Moore, the Americans inflicted heavy losses upon the PAVN. Following the action, the division inserted 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, along with 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, into the area.

Both books concern themselves with the actions of 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry, as they moved from LZ X-Ray to LZ Albany for extraction.

James T. Lawrence is the former reconnaissance-platoon leader and executive officer of Delta Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry. His moving account of his Vietnam experience with the battalion during their action on LZ Albany is not so much a battle narrative as a reflection on overcoming personal fear in the midst of the chaos of close combat. He begins his work with an observation on his encounter with a hotel clerk and waiter upon his return from Vietnam: "And for the first time, the young ex-officer realized that the people back home, with the exception of family and close friends, had no idea what was going on in Southeast Asia, and could care even less." Lawrence takes this phenomenon and writes an amazing narrative about fear, sacrifice and pain. Writing in the third person, he relates that "for the first time, the young lieutenant felt fear, the fear of combat, the fear of death; the fear that he had trained to overcome in Airborne School, in Ranger School, and had thought about a hundred times on the ship coming over and back at base camp; but he had no warning and no idea, no idea whatsoever that this fear would be so all-consuming, that its hold would be so paralyzing, so relentless, so unyielding." These are powerful statements on the thoughts that flash through the minds of people caught in the sudden rush of combat. His writing will cause many to reflect on their own experiences in combat.

Complementing Lawrence's work is that of J.L. "Bud" Alley. Alley approaches the battle from a different perspective. An infantry officer, Alley was the battalion communications-platoon leader. As such, he writes about the action from the perspective of the battalion command group. He begins his narrative as the 2nd Infantry Division transmutes into the airmobile 1st Cavalry Division.

Alley describes the organized chaos of moving the division from Fort Benning, GA, to Vietnam in exacting detail. Along with tactical employment aspects, the author weaves into the narrative commentaries on housing, pay, staff actions, family life and preparing for the emotional trauma of departing for combat.

Once in Vietnam, the narrative gains momentum as Alley notes, "You cannot imagine dark until you are ten thousand miles from home in a jungle, the likes of which you have never seen before, in enemy territory, where people will kill you if they find you. Throw in a little rain, noise and wet feet, and staying in one position for hours and you might be able to fathom dark."

His detailed description continues as he takes us on the journey from LZ X-Ray to LZ Albany. The PAVN lie in wait for them after "some bright person" burns some huts along the line of march. Capturing two prisoners, LTC Robert McDade – in command for the past three weeks – called his company commanders

together to discuss further moves. The PAVN forces chose this moment to attack the troops, many of whom were low on or out of water and bone-tired in the heat.

Recalls Alley: "I had no idea what to do now, but I wasn't ready to lie down and die. Slumped into the ditch, wounded [PVT] Jimmy Harrison asked me, 'Sir, will you get us out of here?'" How they eventually survive the ambush forms the heart of this spellbinding portion of the narrative.

It would be a simple matter to relate that with the battle over, the wounded were evacuated, the dead mourned and the survivors left with their memories. However, both Lawrence and Alley provide us a sensitive discussion on the notification process, the reuniting with loved ones and the deep respect they have for their fallen comrades.

These are two well-designed and superbly written narratives on the Vietnam War.

The books, however, are not without shortfalls. In both works, there is an attempt to parallel the actions of 2nd Battalion with the battle of Little Big Horn. At times, this is a tenuous linkage that distracts from the narrative. Also, Alley's work suffers from unnecessary minutiae. For example, we are given a detailed description of his hitchhiking from Columbus, GA, to his home; a detailed explanation on the use of a forklift to load supplies; and a tedious recounting of shipboard life enroute to Vietnam. This type of data detracted from the overall narrative. However, once Alley begins his battle narrative, the pace of the story gains a momentum that lasts until the final pages of the book.

These are two fine works on men in combat. As such, they are a noteworthy addition to our appreciation of how a valiant group of men overcame fear during combat operations in Vietnam.

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The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917 by David R. Stone, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015, 359 pages with maps, notes, index and photographs, \$34.95 hardcover.

The popular image of World War I is lethal stagnation: hundreds of miles of continuous trenchworks, where gains are measured in yards and casualties in thousands. Tanks are only introduced late in the war to breakthrough the interlocking fields of machinegun fire and provide an opportunity for maneuver. This is an accurate portrayal of the war in Western Europe. But World War I was also fought in the Alps, in Southern Africa and on the Arabian Peninsula, where maneuver was decisive. Maneuver also dominated Eastern Europe where the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires battled the Russian Empire, and hundreds of miles of territory changed hands in days or weeks. Tanks were not a factor, but fast-moving horse cavalry played a dominant role.

David R. Stone, a rising Russian/Soviet historian, has produced a remarkable work on a little-studied and less-understood theater of a global war. Using Russian archives, Dr. Stone has produced a clear, concise portrayal of Russian participation in World War I—a fight that destroyed the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires and strongly factored in the destruction of the German Empire. The Soviet Union rose from the ashes of the Russian Empire and factored heavily in the political and military interests of Europe and the United States for 70 years. Now, Russia is again a major political and military interest of Europe and the United States. Lessons leap from the pages of this book on Russia's ability to endure, Russia's bond with fellow Slavic peoples, Russia's ability to mobilize the economy to outproduce more advanced industrial powers.

The first key point I take from the book is that Russia was too faithful an ally. If France was in a jam, Russia would launch a diversionary offensive, regardless of whether or not the Russia army was in a position to do so at that time. The second key point is that Russia would launch an offensive when a deliberate fighting withdrawal made much more operational sense.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire, the land was torn by a violent civil war, where maneuver dominated the fight. Horse cavalry, armored trains and foot-weary infantry fought across this vast open land. The experiences of World War I and the Civil War greatly influenced the doctrine debates of the

1930s, where the offensive deep battle doctrine of Marshal Mikhail Tukachevskiy finally dominated. It influenced the early love affair of the Soviet army with the tank and the melding of artillery and maneuver power into an operational force that eventually crushed the Third Reich.

The writing and research are first rate. The maps are not. Unfortunately, there are too few maps, and they are printed on a dark grey background, making it very difficult to see the rivers, the towns and the whereabouts of the Russian army. The seas are in white and easy to find, but nothing is going on there. Unless the reader has a 120-watt bulb in the bedside lamp, reading the maps is a chore. I solved this problem by keeping a good detailed atlas beside the bed, but that is not an option during air travel.

Three cheers to Dr. Stone for a usable history. I strongly recommend this book to students of military history, officials dealing with Russia and Central Europe, and regional scholars.

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Acronym Quick-Scan

LZ – landing zone

PAVN – People's Army of Vietnam

The Fires of Babylon by Mike Guardia, Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2015, 248 pages with photographs, \$32.95 hardcover.

The Fires of Babylon focuses on Eagle Troop's encounter with the Tawakalna Brigade of Iraq's Republican Guard during the Battle of 73 Easting Feb. 26, 1991. Commanded by then-CPT H.R. McMaster, Eagle Troop, 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, was the lead element of VII Corps' advance into Iraq during Operation Desert Storm. Eagle Troop's mission was to "find and fix the Republican Guard" as the ground phase of Operation Desert Storm began.

Tankers may remember that the mighty M1A1 Abrams main battle tank had not been combat-tested after coming on-line in the 1980s, nor had the Soviet Union's T-72, and the Cold War between the superpowers had waned by 1990. As Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein fielded Soviet-built T-72s in his invasion of Kuwait Aug. 2, 1990, the tiny emirate collapsed. Saddam Hussein massed his forces along the Saudi Arabian border and dared the world to stop him from next invading the Kingdom of Saud. In response, the United States led the world community in a coalition of nations to eject the Iraqis from Kuwait.

There was apprehension: the Iraqi army, after its long war with Iran, had more combat experience than the U.S. Army. Could the coalition beat the world's fourth-largest army on its home ground?

Guardia sets the scene thus: "The Iraqi version of the T-72 tank, known as 'The Lion of Babylon,' had a 120mm main gun that could destroy targets at more than 2,000 meters. Weighing in at [41] tons and covered in armor up to [12] inches thick, the Iraqi T-72 could reach speeds in excess of [40] miles per hour. Despite the aggressive air campaign, Saddam still had more than 1,000 of these tanks sitting combat-ready along the Iraqi defensive lines. These T-72s were supported by hundreds of lighter armored vehicles, including the Soviet-made BMP.

"Headed straight for them was VII Corps, with more than 1,000 of their own tanks and hundreds of Bradley Fighting Vehicles. Their M1 Abrams tanks were more than [30] tons heavier than the T-72, but just as fast, and with better armor protection. By sunrise on the morning of [Feb. 26, 1991], these two opposing forces lay only nine miles apart."

As Eagle Troop took the lead for [2nd ACR], "waiting for them were [39] tanks [T-72s and T-55s], [14] BMPs and [40] assorted other armored vehicles and trucks, together with [200] infantrymen sitting in the defense," recalled Douglas Macgregor, then the squadron S-3.

Fires is a day-by-day account of Eagle Troop's breakthrough of the Iraqi lines. The 12 American tanks – which by any calculation didn't stand a chance – destroyed more than 50 enemy vehicles within 23

minutes and plowed a hole through the Iraqi front. America's armored force more than proved itself able to overcome the T-72. Guardia characterizes the Battle of 73 Easting as "the largest tank battle in American history and [it] has since been regarded as 'the last great tank battle of the [20th Century].'"

Frankly, the Iraqis couldn't fire accurately, and after a number of American kills, "[a]t this point in the battle, most of the Iraqis were confused," Guardia writes. "The explosions around them were happening so quickly that the Iraqis thought they were under attack from American aircraft. Yet, by the time they realized what was happening, it was too late – the speed and rapid fire of the oncoming tanks had overwhelmed them. The enemy simply couldn't believe that a heavy armored force could close on them so quickly." Within a minute of the opening shot, Eagle Troop had killed seven enemy tanks. The Iraqis panicked; "most of what remained were scattered dismounts, running helter-skelter trying to get a handle on the American juggernaut." In a matter of minutes, Eagle Troop's nine tanks had eliminated all 39 tanks defending the Tawakalna Division's sector.

"The Iraqis had set up a pretty sound defense," McMaster recalled. "It had a reserve; it had a counter-attack planned; it had a minefield to disrupt our movement. But the fatal flaw was that we gained surprise over them."

At around midnight Feb. 27, 1991, 2nd ACR passed the battle on to 1st Infantry Division. The Big Red One passed through 2nd ACR's lines to destroy what remained of the enemy's defenses farther east.

This book is not a sweeping, through-a-general's-eyes book on strategy. Perhaps retired GEN Fred Franks captures *Fires'* value best in his foreword: "Impeccably researched by interviewing those who were there in E Troop, and setting the actions in the context of the [2nd Squadron] (and indeed of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment and VII Corps), [Guardia] captures the deadly serious tone of the close-combat arena plus the often frustrating but good-humored accounts and the intense devotion the troopers had for each other and their troop commander, then-CPT H.R. McMaster. He captures the family dimension as well."

"We surprised the enemy on [Feb. 26]," McMaster summarized. "That surprise and the bold action and teamwork of the troop's soldiers contributed to the rout that is now known as the Battle of 73 Easting. In general, the Iraqis were unprepared for the [U.S.] Army. Americans are better trained and better equipped. The true decisive factor, however, was the American soldier. He is the best at what he does and absolutely dedicated to serving his country. Our soldiers were aggressive in battle yet demonstrated great discipline and compassion for their enemy."

Since the book portrays individual men at war, those who want to get right into the tank action may find the personal vignettes at the book's beginning a bit slowing, and that is the book's greatest flaw (if "flaw" is what it can be called). A side note that should be of interest is Chris Hedenskog's unsettling description of the rapid culture change in West Germany when the East/West German border fell and Americans on border duty were confronted by angry West German mobs – it is an aspect of the Cold War of which many are unaware.

Overall, this book is a solid contributor to the lore on Operation Desert Storm.

LISA ALLEY
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