

# AN ARMY OF TWO

A WORLD AT WAR 85 NOVEL



BRAD SMITH

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This novel is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.



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# INTRODUCTION

Antony and Cleopatra. Lewis and Clark. Lennon and McCartney. Han and Chewbacca.

There's a certain appeal to the recurring theme of duos in human folklore and history. The best of these stories showcase the dynamics between two people who complement each other's weaknesses and strengths. These differences are what allows them to work together to accomplish great things. At the same time, they are also the forces that threaten to rip them apart. This tension makes the duo's fate unpredictable and keeps things interesting. In this book, you'll find several such pairings. Some of them succeed while others fail. Some are illusions while others are all too real.

"Army of Two" directly follows the events of "First Strike" though newcomers to the series should be able to enjoy this book without having read the first one. This book is a re-write but also an expanded edition of my previous book titled "Enemy Lines." After changing some details so it better fit into Keith Tracton's "World at War '85" setting, I saw greater potential for this book and ending up re-writing nearly all of it. "Army of Two" is an original story that lifts its own weight.

As I write this introduction, the “World at War ’85” game is at the printers and is nearly ready to be shipped. From my occasional chats with David Heath and Keith Tracton, I’ve a strong impression that they are being careful to make sure the product is of the highest standards. The same is true of this book!

David gave me the time and freedom to take the story in this direction while Keith offered a sober look at a second draft that was too ambitious for its own good. Four more drafts led to the story you have in your hands right now and I’m quite proud of the result. I’m equally proud that these books serve as a companion to such a high-quality product as the boardgame.

Before I go, I need to thank several people who worked behind the scenes to make this book possible. A huge thanks goes out to Hans Korting, who has edited my books and offered constructive feedback. My sincere gratitude goes to Blackwell Hird, who always does a terrific job with layout.

Thanks to David Heath for the support throughout this project. A big thanks to Othello Lofton for lending your golden voice to the audiobook narration. Marc von Martial did an excellent job with the illustrations for this book and for that I am extremely grateful.

Last but not least, I offer my thanks to my family. My wife, Maya has been beyond patient and supportive throughout the writing of this book. My son, Hiroto, still hugs me even though dad hasn’t been around much to play lately. Thank you, buddy!

Brad Smith  
September 2019







# PROLOGUE

Heaps of wounded men clung to the hull decks of the American armored personnel carriers that raced southwest in full retreat.

Two Soviet tanks a half kilometer away fired a pair of parting shots at the ragged column. Both rounds missed their targets, crashing instead into the opposite bank of the nearby river. The impacts sent fiery plumes of smoke and giant clumps of earth leaping up toward the iron gray sky.

Colonel Ted Mackinsky cursed as he watched the remnants of his task force scramble toward the only remaining bridge that led back west to the relative safety of friendly lines. Of the three companies under his command at the start of the battle, only Bravo was left. In all, he had a few battered M113s and a TOW Jeep.

Mackinsky barked out orders into the jeep's radio. No matter how much he yelled and swore, the ungainly procession of beaten troops refused to fix their jagged formation. He could hardly blame them. Bravo had gone through Hell and back in the last twenty minutes. Even the colonel, a combat veteran of a former war, had to suppress the urge to flee from this place of fire, death, and misery.

Mackinsky set the radio handset back in disgust and closed his eyes as the driver weaved the jeep through the knots of men and vehicles rushing for the safety of the nearby bridge.

As the engine roared and more rounds whooshed over the column, he soaked in the bad luck and poor decisions that had brought about such a monumental failure. How could everything have gone so poorly?

The mission had been simple— he was ordered to take three companies and conduct a counterattack against the Soviet flank to the north of Fulda City. The American force was to reclaim two captured bridges near the towns of Hemmen and Lüdermünd. Once that was done, the commander of the 8th Infantry Division was to pour reinforcements in to consolidate their hold on the objectives.

They never arrived. Soon after recovering from the initial blows, the Russians sent what must have been an entire armored battalion his way. Chaos ensued as the American victory was transformed into a messy defeat.

The Soviet counterattack was swift and unrelenting. Mackinsky lost all contact with two of his companies operating to the east of Lüdermünd. Presumably, they had been overrun and were now dead.

When the T-80s charged at his position in the town, things were so messed up that Mackinsky was using the wrong call sign over the radio. Confusion added to the panic like jet fuel to a bonfire.

In a last-ditch effort to salvage things, Mackinsky told his fire support officer to call out “Broken Arrow” over the airwaves. In response, a hailstorm of American artillery slammed down on the outskirts of Lüdermünd at dangerous close range.

Though the oncoming Soviets suffered terribly, the fire mission had savaged the Americans. His only remaining Abrams was knocked out and not one of his soldiers was left uninjured by the blasts. The dust settled, and what little was left of the enemy force picked off the few American vehicles and infantry that remained. Now they were running for their lives.

Mackinsky took some satisfaction in knowing that a NATO airstrike would soon arrive to cover his retreat. Though the battle was already lost, he relished the thought of spiting the Russians with a rain of bombs from the sky. He recalled the words of Herman Melville as his jeep neared the bridge.

*From Hell's heart, I stab at thee.*

Halfway across the bridge, his jeep's radio crackled to life. A string of panicky words spat out over the static-filled airwaves:

FIREFOX MAIN TO WILDMAN ... WITHDRAWING. OBJECTIVE KNIGHT... ENEMY TANKS IN SIGHT.

Mackinsky yelped and punched a fist in the air. Fox Troop was still out there! The radio message seemed to suggest that the cavalry unit was pulling back west toward Lüdermünd. The enemy tanks they had sighted were no doubt part of the Russian pursuit force that was headed his way right now.

If Fox could manage to fight its way through the gauntlet, they might join in the retreat. Though the battle was lost, there was still a chance to save American lives. Mackinsky's cautious optimism soon turned to dread.

The air strikes would be here any minute. Fox Troop would be caught out in the open when they hit. He broke out in a cold sweat at the horrifying prospect of his men and tanks incinerated by NATO planes.

Mackinsky roared over the handset.

THIS IS WILDMAN! DISENGAGE! AIR STRIKES IN-BOUND. DISENGAGE IMMEDIATELY!

No answer. He ordered the jeep to halt and gazed back east.

More than a dozen T-80s appeared along the top of the long ridge about half a kilometer away. Just behind the enemy tanks were scores of infantry running alongside. As they rushed down the slope toward Lüdermünd, Mackinsky's driver screamed.

"Sir! Blow the bridge now! Blow it or we're goners!"

Mackinsky knew the corporal was right. If the bridge remained standing, the pursuit force would chase them straight across the river and corner them. On the other hand, blowing it would trap Fox Troop on the east side of the river.

FIREFOX TO WILDMAN. ENGAGING ENEMY FORCES.

Fox Troop's M1 tanks drove along the ridgeline and fired deadly accurate shots down into the rear of the Soviet tank company. A T-80 erupted just as it reached the flat stretch of ground that lay between the hills and Lüdermünd. A fireball leapt from its turret ring and the vehicle shuddered to a halt.

A BMP was struck next. The whole thing flipped on its side and tumbled into a deep shell hole. Enemy ground troops were cut down by the Abrams' coaxial machineguns. The neat ranks of Russian soldiers collapsed like rows of wheat struck down by a scythe.

Despite such losses, the Soviets did not stop or slow down. Not one bit.

The last vehicles of Bravo Company reached the west side of the Fulda River. Mackinsky sat in the jeep and pondered the fate of Fox Troop. If he didn't call off the planes right now, they were doomed. Mackinsky turned to his driver and screamed.

"Get out!"

The corporal gawked at him as if the colonel had just grown a second head. Mackinsky repeated the order while shoving the man out of the vehicle and climbing over into the driver's seat. The only way to stop the airstrikes was to use the powerful long-range radio in the FIST vehicle.

Although there were plenty of short-range radios among the tanks and APCs of his task force, only the FIST had the ability to communicate with the airborne command aircraft that circled far overhead. Unfortunately, the FIST was back in Lüdermünd. The vehicle had been abandoned after it was damaged by the explosion of a nearby artillery round. He had to get to it. It was the only way.

Without bothering to explain, he threw the jeep into gear and drove straight back east across the bridge. As he crossed to the other side, he lifted the radio handset and tuned the frequency to speak with Captain Harris, the commander of Bravo.

THIS IS WILDMAN. BLOW THE BRIDGE! CODEWORD CHECKMATE!

The force of the ensuing blast was enough to levitate the jeep for a split second. The ground welled up underneath and heaved like a ship in rough seas. Behind him, the bridge crumbled. Huge concrete chunks tumbled into the rushing waters of the Fulda. Mackinsky was trapped on the east side of the river. His fate was now tied with that of Fox Troop.

The jeep swerved and leaned up on two wheels as he swung the steering wheel hard to the left. Mackinsky's vehicle bounded over the uneven ground just outside of Lüdermünd.

Fifty yards inside the town limits, he spotted the stricken FIST lying on its side on a mound of rubble. The jeep squealed to a halt and he dismounted.

A machinegun popped off a steady drumbeat of rounds in the distance. Little fountains of dust kicked up near his feet as he ran. Spasms of terror clutched at his muscles. Mackinsky battled the instinct to dive to the ground.

He grunted and strained the final yards to his destination. Though it seemed he should already be at the FIST, his legs pumped in slow motion as though he were in a nightmare. Wading through the thick heavy air, he gulped down ragged breaths then wrenched open the FIST vehicle's rear ramp and dove inside.

On hands and knees, he groped along the hard metal floor of the dark interior. When at last he sensed the radio headset in his grasp, a surge of relief nourished the tiny but growing sense that he just might succeed in calling off the airstrike. Two fingers stabbed at the radio transceiver's power button and Mackinsky heard himself cackle as its cracked crimson light blinked on.

Two turns of the dial were enough to tune the set to the right frequency. The words leapt out of him too fast at first. He stumbled over the consonants like a drunk at closing time. After briefly admonishing himself, Mackinsky gathered his wits together and spoke again – this time with grammar-school enunciation.

ALL AIR UNITS! THIS IS BEARCLAW. ABORT. I SAY AGAIN – ABORT YOUR MISSION! FRIENDLIES ARE IN THE TARGET AREA.

A hiss of static was the only response. Mackinsky scanned the floor around him and picked up a trail of loose and broken wires that connected the handset to the radio. The damn thing was broke. No wonder they hadn't heard him!

His sweat-slick fingers worked feverishly to tie the loose ends back together. It was hard to see in the dim light of the vehicle, so he took his best guess as to which wire went where. After twenty seconds of practicing blind supposition and baseless optimism, his makeshift repair job was deemed “good enough.”

Ted Mackinsky got on the radio again and demanded the impending airstrike be aborted.

Without intending it, he found himself cursing over the airwaves and promising grievous bodily harm to any pilot who so much as thought about dropping their ordnance near here.

Mackinsky set the radio down and gathered the courage to return outside to find better cover. As he stood, an ear-shattering metallic clang signified the loss of his jeep. A jet engine whined and a giant hammer blow struck down upon the earth.

The gale-force impact ripped apart Mackinsky's senses. In the next instant, he was flung headlong against the interior wall. The steel hull rushed toward him like a speeding locomotive.

Everything went black.