

STORM AND STEEL **SECOND WAVE**

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

Welcome to the second edition of “Storm and Steel” which we updated the title to Storm and Steel Second Wave. When David Heath asked me to write this new edition of the book, I wasn’t sure what I would add or change. The original seemed to be enjoyed by many people so why mess with it? Upon re-reading the book, I soon realized there were many reasons to update the story.

The first thing I wanted to do was make some alterations to the tone. My original intention was for the second act to feel similar to “Apocalypse Now” or “Heart of Darkness” as Mohr travels through a hellish landscape that takes him deeper and deeper into a nightmarish ordeal. I had overwritten some of the scenes where it would have been better to leave things to the reader’s imagination. Sometimes, less is more. In other cases, I expanded on things that weren’t clear or were confusing.

The writing is much smoother in this new edition with an emphasis on “show don’t tell”. Descriptions of character actions are inferred rather than spelled out directly in most places now. Hopefully, this lends the action a greater sense of immediacy and a “you are there” feeling to the battles. Some changes to the writing are the equivalent of a plastic surgeon’s nip or tuck. Others were more drastic.

After finishing the original book I regretted not building up the tension between Captain Mohr and Lieutenant Schmitt. Despite

spelling out the source of their animosity in the book's early chapters, the confrontation at Platling felt rushed. To that end, I added a prologue that goes deeper into the problems of 2nd

Company and more fully explains Mohr's impossible task and the opposition he faces.

For those who are interested in the hardware, I've included a fictional magazine article about the Leopard 1 that is written long after the war. It describes the basic advantages and drawbacks of the MBT and how it performed in the war. This helps shed further light on why Mohr chooses certain tactics and expands on the dangers he faces while fighting in an aging tank.

The production values for the book have increased exponentially. As a self-published author, I had little money to spend on illustrations and book covers for the first edition. I had to turn to Photoshop tutorials to learn how to make maps. Against my better judgement, the awful but functional map of Grafing made it into the first edition of the book. This time around, the reader benefits from a professional illustrator and a company that gives the reader a quality product from top to bottom.

I should add that this book moves the action to Keith Tracton's "World at War 85" setting and I have adapted certain aspects of the story in order to agree with his the canon of his universe. Keith was kind enough to offer advice on various aspects of the story and for that I am grateful. I am also humbled that he took several scenes from this book and adapted them for an expansion to the game series. Thank you, Keith.

I'd also like to say a huge thanks to David Heath, the owner of Lock 'n Load Publishing, who saw the potential in my books and myself and took a chance. The patience and guidance he has shown throughout this process has been immeasurable.

Brad Smith

DEDICATION

For Maya and Hiro.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again, I find myself in debt to Keith Tracton and David Heath. It was Keith who read and enjoyed “Storm and Steel” then recommended it to David, who then got in touch with me. One e-mail led to another and the rest, as they say, is history. I want to give Keith another huge thanks for using that golden voice of his to breathe life into the audiobook.

As always, I owe thanks to my family. My wife, Maya, put up with the stress of living with a writer whose mood shifted as he steered an unsteady course over each successive chapter until the book was finally ready to be published. My son Hiro was there to remind me to take a break once in a while and be a dad. Thanks buddy!

My inspiration for book came from many places but many were modeled with the help of Jim Day’s “MBT” expansion “FRG”. Though the Czechoslovakians weren’t available, I used comparable Russian equipment to fill out their order of battle. The flow of the first battle in this book owes as much to Scenario 13 as it does to my own imagination.

I would like to thank the wargaming community as a whole, which showed an incredible amount of enthusiasm for my books and games. I am humbled by your support and I hope you enjoy this story.

STORM AND STEEL

SECOND WAVE

A WORLD AT WAR 85 NOVEL

BRAD SMITH

PROLOGUE

April 1, 1985

Grafenwöhr Training Area, West Germany

“You’re all dead!”

The American judge stood in the road and waved a palm across the breadth of Captain Kurt Mohr’s three tank platoons. After announcing their gloomy fate, he glanced down at his watch and declared a break for lunch.

The morning’s training exercise was over and the West Germans had suffered yet another loss – the third in three days. Mohr shook his head and jumped down from his Leopard 1 into the high wet grass.

Behind his vehicle sat the hulking angular outlines of four M1s of the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment. Somehow, the Americans had plowed straight through Mohr’s rear and snuck up behind the main body of his company. Another minute more and Lieutenant Kessel’s platoon would have finally taken up an ambush position while Unger and Meier’s men provided overwatch on the valley below.

How on earth had that happened?

Lieutenant Schmitt had been ordered to guard against such a possibility by taking on the role of rear security. Mohr had told him to deploy his tanks on the ridgeline to the north. The long strip of high grass provided an excellent view of the only possible

enemy approaches to their position. Despite that, the Americans had found their way through the perimeter without a scratch and “killed” everybody. It was hard for Mohr to shake the feeling that he had been sabotaged.

The Abrams platoon wheeled right in a tight column formation and drove off east, no doubt headed for the giant mess hall near Tower Barracks. Their squadron commander would surely be waiting for them, ready to heap on the hearty praise that came with beating the West Germans on their own soil.

Mohr let out a long breath and wondered how he would explain the loss to his battalion commander, Colonel Donner. The old man had made his frustrations clear when Mohr transferred into the unit less than two weeks ago. Listening to the colonel grumble about all the headaches caused by 2 Company had been an eye-opener.

Gunnery scores? Consistently the lowest ranking in the battalion. Third worst in the entire division. Somewhere in the bottom ten for the West German Armed Forces.

No less than three major inspections failed in the last six months.

To top it off, a locker drinking party in January had resulted in an huge drunken brawl that ended with two arrests – both of the suspects were enlisted men from 2 Company.

Five years ago, the poor behavior and low performance rating would have been swept under the rug. That became impossible with the implementation of Army Structure 4. Now there was increased accountability across the board along with higher performance standards and an overall push for training and re-training as needed. Stones were being kicked over from on high and it was time for NATO’s conventional forces to address the rot that had set in from the early 1970s.

To that end, Colonel Donner had stared at Mohr with pleading eyes and confessed. “There are big problems in 2 Company. I need you to fix them. Fast.”

Mohr then spent two miserable weeks working closely with the company to prepare for this exercise. It gave him a chance to

observe the men very carefully. It didn't take long before the problems became apparent. The enlisted men were excellent. It was the platoon leaders that needed a good kick in the rear.

For years, they had been pampered by the previous company commander, Captain Harting. As a result, their egos had grown unchecked and there was an overall tendency to do things the easy way. Training had lapsed and the enlisted men were without positive guidance. While the rest of the army had been quick to take on the new mandate of overall improvement, 2 Company had ignored the memo. Now the wound was festering.

Mohr would have to work feverishly to undo the damage or the division commanders would disband the unit entirely.

If that happened, the men would be scattered to the four winds of administrative hell in the German army. Promotions and choice assignments would elude Mohr for the rest of his career.

The two weeks had rushed by and Donner had made it clear he expected positive results from this exercise. Instead, things had gone bad from the very start. The only thing good to report was that there was still a shred of hope based on today's performance.

Lieutenants Meier, Kessel and Unger had at least grudgingly tried to do what Mohr had proposed in the briefing. Though their platoons bumbled along in sluggish formations, Mohr saw potential. There was no question it would take time to smooth out the bad habits - but he had an idea that might help.

After today, he would give the platoon leaders a refresher course on modern tactics. Since it wasn't always possible to always go out in the field and practice using real vehicles, Mohr would train them on paper maps with cardboard counters. Results would be determined by rolling dice and consulting charts.

It wasn't anywhere close to the real thing, but it would help teach the basics of movement and fire that they had all apparently forgotten.

While the tank crews stretched their legs and smoked cigarettes in gloomy silence, Schmitt's three Leopards rolled down the muddy trail and halted just short of the clearing.

Mohr pushed down the urge to lash out. Perhaps there was some very good reason for the SNAFU - though his mind failed to conjure forth any real possibilities.

“What happened?” he asked, trying to keep his tone free of accusation.

“I told you it was a bad plan,” said Schmitt. “Doomed to fail from the start.”

Mohr bristled from the insolence. Who did this man think he was? A flurry of rage-filled expletives filled his mouth like cotton candy. With so many choices, his mind failed to select a single one. What fell out instead was a spluttering cough mixed with muddled syllables of disbelief and anger.

The edges of Schmitt’s mouth twitched into the slightest of smirks and Mohr caught himself as he realized he was being baited into a trap.

A glance around him revealed its nature.

Kessel, Meier, and Unger were riveted on the scene. None of them looked at Schmitt. Their gaze clung to Mohr, as if they were studying a specimen. Having grown up in a small town, it wasn’t the first time he had seen such looks. These faces were reserved for newly arrived outsiders whose every action was under close scrutiny. Instantly, Mohr’s perception of the situation shifted like the change of a TV channel.

I am being judged.

One wrong move now could wipe out his chance of ever gaining the respect he needed to do his job. Though 2 Company needed drastic change, it was also true that if he pushed too far and too fast, he would lose just the same. Despite the danger that 2 Company now faced, the junior officers had been slow to accept the reality of the situation.

Schmitt was the worst of them. The only thing larger than his ego was the battalion-sized chip on his shoulder. Instead of seeing Mohr’s early attempts to change the company for the better, all he seemed to detect were threats to the order of how things had always been done.

Maybe it wasn’t too late. Maybe the man could yet see reason. Mohr took silent measure of the smirk on the lieutenant’s face and saw it for what it was - a taunt.

Try to pull rank and see what happens. Do it.

Mohr sidestepped the trap.

“Lieutenant Schmitt, I’d like to have a word with you in private, please. Everyone else, you’re dismissed.”

The smile on the lieutenant’s face withered. Only the glare remained.

Mohr watched the other tanks disappear off down the forest road until the two men stood alone in the clearing. Lieutenant Schmitt took a wide stance and checked his watch as if he were a headmaster awaiting the arrival of a chronically late pupil.

Neither man said a word as Mohr lit a cigarette and took a long soothing drag before he spoke.

“What seems to be the problem, lieutenant?”

“The problem is that you have no idea what you’re doing.”

“Please enlighten me then.” It was time for both men to put their cards on the table. If Schmitt could be redeemed, he needed to know right now. The sabotage and backstabbing had to stop here.

“You don’t know these men like I do. Captain Harting knew what it took to lead us. When to push. When to let go. You do not.”

“Well, you’re right about that,” said Mohr. “I’ve only been with this company for two weeks. I need you to give me some time to acclimate. On the other hand, changes need to be made. Colonel Donner has made that clear enough to me.”

Mohr hated to name drop but if that was what he needed to do in order to turn Schmitt from enemy to an ally, then so be it. The job of transforming the company would be so much easier without his stubborn resistance.

“So what do you recommend, lieutenant? I’d like to know,” said Mohr. “Speak frankly.” It was an invitation as much as it was a dare.

“Quit.”

The word shot out like a bullet.

Mohr’s world turned crimson until he reminded himself that he told the man to be honest. He asked the junior officer to repeat himself.

“Look, I know you’re working very hard, but the men don’t respect you,” said Schmitt. “And frankly, neither do I. You cannot hope to gain their loyalty. But I know them well enough to lead them.”

The words hung in the chill air. In a matter-of-fact tone without a trace of hostility or anger, Schmitt had spelled it out for him and dispelled any illusions of possible redemption. The truth was apparent now. Lieutenant Schmitt was a cancer that needed to be excised. The time for tact was over.

“Lieutenant Schmitt, I’m not going anywhere,” said Mohr. “Whether you like it or not, I’m in command of this company by right of rank, training, and commission. From now on, you will obey every order I give to the letter. If you have objections to that, I’m willing to listen in private. But don’t you ever question me again in front of the men. Is that clear?”

Schmitt clicked his heels together as though he were back in basic training.

“Understood, sir,” he shouted.

The words were slathered in sarcastic tones. Without waiting to be dismissed, Schmitt stalked off towards the Wolf jeep. Its Mercedes engine revved and the gear crunched before the vehicle shot out of the clearing and off down the road.

Mohr was left alone to figure out how to get rid of this man. The answer seemed clear enough. He would crush him with officialdom.

It would take mountains of paperwork and careful documentation. Each of Schmitt’s missteps would be written down in detail and submitted as part of an official record. When at last there was enough ammunition, he would request a formal dismissal for the lieutenant.

It would take months. But time was surely on his side

HILDEBRAND AND HADUBRAND

May 1985

Headquarters, 24th Panzer Brigade

Landshut, West Germany

Captain Kurt Mohr stood in the officer's mess hall and rubbed his tired eyes. It was nearing midnight and he would normally be in bed after a long day of training with the men of 2nd Company. Before he could catch a wink of sleep, the brigade commander had ordered all the officers to watch President Reagan's primetime speech to the American people.

The lively conversation that normally filled the place was completely absent. Instead, everyone was glued to the big TV set perched up near the ceiling in the corner of the room. The brigade XO checked his watch and turned up the volume. A Volkswagen advertisement faded out, replaced by the image of President Reagan sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. He wore an expression as grim as a funeral.

In somber tones, he started off his address to the American people, informing them that he was about to reveal the shocking extent of Soviet treachery and lies. His next stern words were directed at the men in the Kremlin. In no uncertain terms, he warned them against taking any kind of military action that might threaten NATO members or American allies around the globe.

“America will honor its commitments to its allies and partners in full,” he said.

Reagan then announced that the American military and several private companies had worked together for the past two years to create and develop new software to enhance photographic imagery. The fledgling technology had only been installed two weeks ago on the cameras of America’s premier spy plane, the SR-71 Blackbird. During a rare overflight of Eastern Europe, one of the aircraft had taken photos that provided shocking proof that the Soviets had been disingenuous in their recent efforts to foster world peace.

The camera zoomed out and the American president then stood up and pointed to several reconnaissance photos on display next to his desk. The first image was a top-down color photo of a forest just east of the Inner German border. Nothing was visible except for its green treetops. The screen changed to show the same forest but now the white outlines of hundreds of tanks and vehicles were clearly visible underneath its canopy.

“Despite announcing a phased drawdown of its forces from Eastern Europe six months ago, the Soviets have done the opposite,” Reagan claimed. “They have been playing a rigged shell game with their army. While one regiment withdraws to the USSR, two more are secretly transported into Eastern Europe by civil rail and air to take its place. In some cases, entire divisions have been disbanded on paper only to be renamed and repositioned in hidden locations near the West German border.”

A collective gasp swept through the room. Mohr stood there in disbelief. All signs had shown that the Cold War was slowly winding down. The tensions between the two superpowers had been receding lately. Things weren’t perfect but it seemed like the possibility of war was much lower than only a few years ago.

First, the Soviets had surprised everyone by unilaterally withdrawing their intermediate missiles from Eastern Europe. Met with scepticism at first, international teams of military observers had confirmed that they had done it in record time.

Next came the partial withdrawal from Afghanistan. Without delay, the Soviets pulled back a majority of their divisions while leaving a skeleton constabulary force behind in Kandahar to train the fledgling army.

There was even serious talk of relaxing the situation at the border between the two Germanys. And now he was being told that the Russians were planning to invade. It seemed like a sick joke. Was the American president senile?

Reagan finished by stating that under advisement from the joint chiefs, he had raised the alert level of the United States Armed Forces to DEFCON 2 – the highest it had ever been since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Mohr's confusion turned to a sour heavy shock that gnawed at his stomach as the realization set in. He had stumbled into a living nightmare.

The brigade commander stormed into the mess hall and announced all leave was canceled. NATO's colored alert level was now Orange. Such an alert indicated a high probability of an enemy attack within 36 hours. Reams of paper with marching orders were doled out among the officers.

Mohr stubbed out his cigarette and picked up the ink-smearred sheaf of papers that ordered the battalion east towards the border with Czechoslovakia. His tank company was only a small cog in the big wheel of the 1st Mountain Division, but he was determined that it would do its part to keep the West Germans safe from the Red Army.

By 0200, the entire 24th Panzer Brigade was heading east along Autobahn 92. Their mission was to mount a mobile defence of the main roads and highways that would take the Czechoslovakian tanks west over the Danube River, towards Landshut, and onwards to Munich. Mohr's company belonged to the 244th Panzer Battalion, one of the two tank-heavy forces in the brigade.

By the time the brigade had completed its eighty-kilometre road march, Mohr was already drained. Though the men of 2nd Company were exhausted, everyone began the drudgery of digging into their initial positions near the small town of Grafing. Mercifully, an engineering team showed up with a bulldozer to create the high berms from which the tanks could fire behind.

Pits were also dug into the nearby hills for the Leopards to shoot from, their hulls afforded cover by the surrounding ground. The infantry slaved away among the pine trees, digging foxholes and trenches. All around Mohr was a buzz of activity.

Just before sunrise, his tanks and infantry were finally in concealed positions on a hillside, waiting for World War III to begin.