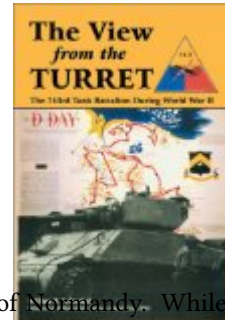


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William B. Folkestad. *The View from the Turret: The 743rd Tank Battalion during World War II*. Shippensburg, Pa.: Burd Street Press, 1996. vi + 146 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-001-7.

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Published on H-War (November, 1996)



In *The View from the Turret*, William B. Folkestad sets out to correct an error of omission and rescue the men of the 743rd Tank Battalion from the historical anonymity that has befallen many of the small units that fought in World War II. In the process of chronicling the combat experiences of the 743rd, the author also draws attention to one of the “least known and poorly understood tragedies of the American military industry of the Second World War,” namely the mass production of the inferior M4 Sherman tank (p. 127).

Folkestad attributes the forgotten status of the 743rd to historians’ relying too heavily, “though understandably,” on the first official U.S. Army histories of the Normandy Campaign, namely Taylor’s *Omaha Beachhead* and Harrison’s *Cross Channel Attack* (p. viii). Intent on avoiding the same pitfalls, Folkestad makes extensive use of personal interviews, After Action Reports (AARs), battalion operations journals, and the 743rd’s unit history to provide a tank commander’s view of combat in Western Europe.

Beginning with the 743rd’s D-Day landing at Omaha Beach, and continuing on through the battles for Normandy, the Bulge, the piercing of the Siegfried Line, and the final drive to the Elbe River in 1945, Folkestad’s narrative, interspersed with first-hand accounts, brings to life the day-to-day combat experiences of the battalion. The author draws special attention to the crucial role played by the 743rd at Omaha Beach, where the unit was the only full-strength tank battalion supporting both the 1st and 29th Infantry Divisions. It is here that the difficulties in coordinating actions between armor and the infantry they support, a problem that persisted throughout the war, become painfully evident.

Once off the beaches, the tankers of the 743rd found

themselves in the bocage country of Normandy. While the 743rd used the hedgerow-busting plow fashioned from German beach obstacles with some success, the preferred method was the dynamiting of hedgerows timed to coincide with an armor and infantry attack (p.39). Folkestad differentiates between the tank battalions of an armor division, which were designed to exploit breakthroughs and strike deep into the enemy’s rear, and those like the 743rd, whose mission it was to fight alongside the infantry they supported. For the 743rd, this often meant fighting static battles with superior German armor.

The inadequacies of the M4 Sherman tank—insufficient firepower, too high a silhouette, insufficient armor protection, gasoline engines, narrow tracks—are brought up time and again by the tankers of the 743rd. Of particular interest are the innovative means devised for offsetting the Sherman’s shortcomings such as sand-bagging the hull to make up for insufficient armor protection, and welding additional ammunition-ready racks in the turret to provide easy access to the additional ammunition needed to score a kill on German armor. Despite these innovations, the 743rd lost 96 M4 Shermans and suffered 141 killed, 22 missing, and 316 wounded. The total casualties, 479, represented the battalion at nearly full strength (p. 126). By comparison, the Third Armored Division lost 780 M4s and the equivalent of 583 tank crews (p. 127). As Folkestad so poignantly notes, “the price for technical inferiority was tremendous” (p. 127).

The book’s strength, the story of the 743rd Tank Battalion, is also one of its weaknesses. Those unfamiliar with the campaigns in Western Europe can easily lose sight of how the 743rd and its supported units fit into the larger picture of winning the war against Germany. In general, the book would benefit from a bit more back-

ground information on the various campaigns in which the 743rd participated, as well as additional maps and graphics. Likewise, the discussion of the inadequacies of the M4 Sherman would be enhanced by the inclusion of charts showing the characteristics and capabilities of the M4 Sherman and its German counterparts.

Shortcomings aside, *The View from the Turret* is a welcome addition to the combat histories of World War II.

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**Citation:** William S. Nelligan. Review of Folkestad, William B., *The View from the Turret: The 743rd Tank Battalion during World War II*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 1996.

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