

Arms & the Man

Victoria Murphy, Forbes Magazine, 12.24.01

Collectors Guide

Dogged pursuit of his obsession has made Jacques Littlefield the Patton of collecting.



One good turret deserves another: a fleet the size of Botswana's.

Jacques Littlefield's workshop is a field hospital for military vehicles. Here a bare chassis on a stand, there a set of tracks being repaired or a piece of armor plate in need of patching. His passion is tank restoration. History does not excite this man. You won't find him poring over accounts of the Maginot Line or the Yom Kippur war. What turns him on is technical perfection--the hunt, say, for a two-gallon oil can made for nearly every U.S. World War II-era tank. The oil cans were usually discarded and hence are rare. "I bet in some old warehouse there're probably 20 of them just sitting there," he muses.

Littlefield bought his first tank for \$20,000 in 1982--an M5A1 Stuart, rushed into production in 1942 as America rearmed. He has since amassed a fleet big enough to go one-on-one with Ireland or Botswana, 55 tanks in all. A rival collector with a mere seven tanks says admiringly, "He has tons of really rare things that no one else would bother with."

There's the Conqueror, a clunky, 74-ton British tank built in the mid-1950s. When fired it shook so powerfully that the sights of its 120mm gun easily got misaligned. Gunners never had much luck hitting anything with that monster. He has a Sturmgeschutz, a German self-propelled 75mm gun mounted on a tank chassis that zoomed out in advance of infantry with direct explosive and antitank fire. Its gun fired forward only.

Today these souvenirs of military might sit locked away in six warehouses totalling 70,000 square feet on 470 acres of

rolling hills in the heart of Silicon Valley. Littlefield bought the property in the 1970s and could probably get a tidy sum for it now, but he's not about to give up his tanks. Inside the 5,000 square feet of garage and work space, a 15-ton overhead crane takes out turrets and removes engines. Nine full-time mechanics restore four tanks at a time, typically, over a two-year stretch.

While another collector might get his kicks thrashing his Sherman through the mud or parading it down Main Street on Veterans' Day, Littlefield rarely takes his out for fear that they may "leave a mark on the street" or "annoy the neighbors." Besides, he could wreck the precious hardware. So fastidious is he that he asks guests to remove their shoes before stepping into these former killing machines.

Every detail of a restored Littlefield tank must be perfect--the color of paint on each handle, extra ammo stowed in the back corner of the turret, the props for the canvas cover that was likely never used in battle. He often uses his board seat at the Fort Knox Cavalry Armor Foundation to get access to the Army Museum's fleet. Last month he spent seven hours crouched inside the turret of an M26 Pershing. He's fixing up a Pershing of his own, and he needed every measurement. Three years from now, it's a safe bet Littlefield's specimen will be more authentic than the Army's.

His biggest current project--restoring the Sturmgeschutz--has cost him, so far, \$200,000 (double the purchase price). It has required fabrication of 250 parts, not including the original manufacturer's logo-marked nuts and bolts. "I can't think of anything that's inaccurate on this tank," he says. The gunner's periscope on his M60 tank, used during the Cold War, is in such good condition that designers from United Defense, a military contractor with an office in nearby San Jose, have dropped by to take notes. "That's the mother's milk of this hobby for me," says Littlefield, 52. "I have this knowledge that no one else has."

Littlefield set out to emulate his father. Edmund Littlefield, who died recently, amassed a \$1.7 billion fortune by running the family construction and mining company, Utah International, and merging it with ge. Following those footprints wasn't to be. After getting an M.B.A. at Stanford and spending five years as a product manager at Hewlett-Packard, Jacques realized he wasn't cut out for budget meetings. "My father used to ask me to picture myself at age 65. He'd say, 'Is the Earth a better place since you've been here, or are you just kind of a drag on the program?'" Jacques considers his collection "a significant contribution," even if it isn't "inventing a new vaccine [or] starting the Guggenheim."

"It's an eccentric hobby," Littlefield goes on. "It labels you as different. And 'different' doesn't work for a lot of people." Especially when it comes to shelling out the dough. The tanks themselves aren't that expensive--\$35,000 each, on average, plus another \$6,000 to get one into the U.S. Restoring just eight tanks and repairs on another ten have run to \$2 million. Total tab so far: \$5 million.

Littlefield can deduct some of this money as a contribution to the educational foundation he set up to maintain the collection. After his demise he plans to leave enough to cover operating costs so the tanks can stay together. His kids will decide whether to keep all that hardware on the ranch or relocate it.

The hunt for tanks takes adventurous collectors to such far-flung spots as the Australian outback, where American and British tanks were shipped after World War II for use as farm equipment. Littlefield works through dealers who keep in contact with foreign governments and military museums. "He is the best customer I could have," says Robert Fleming, a British dealer who has sold Littlefield ten tanks. In 1995 Fleming spent two weeks armed with a revolver, a 9mm semiautomatic and \$10,000 in cash (for "commissions") to score his client a few U.S. Army M18 Hellcats in Bosnia. He got word from the Ministry of Defense in Sarajevo that NATO was offering 15 of them in a village near the eastern town of Srebrenica. Fleming bought over 13 tanks and had them trucked over Serb, Bosnian and Croat territory down to the Croatian port of Ploce, where they were shipped to Liverpool, England.

Each country has its own rules about the degree to which a tank must be deactivated before it can gain entry. To get the Hellcat into Britain, which has relatively permissive laws, and then into the U.S., workers had to torch a hole roughly the diameter of the muzzle into the barrel's side and cut off the rear end of the gun. The tank was sprayed with disinfectant to prevent the spread of animal diseases in this country.

A hiccup in this process can cause big delays. Two years ago Fleming brokered a deal to get Littlefield a Scud B missile on a truck bed. He insisted it wasn't live, but U.S. Customs disagreed, and confiscated it.

Littlefield shrugs off such setbacks. At the top of his Christmas list: a German Tiger I tank from WWII. Legend has it that

in battle it took four U.S. Shermans to destroy a Tiger--and three of them might end up as victims. Only 1,300 were made, and most of those that survived battle were melted for scrap. "People call me saying some guy somewhere has come across a Tiger," Littlefield says. He knows the odds, and compares them to finding a Rembrandt in a barn in Iowa. Says he: "Show me the metal."

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