

INSTRUCTOR TRAINING DIVISION
GENERAL INSTRUCTION DEPARTMENT
THE ARMORED SCHOOL
Fort Knox, Kentucky

ADVANCED OFFICERS CLASS #1

25 FEBRUARY 1947

MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: **Technique of the Tank Platoon as the Point in an Exploitation.**

SCOPE: **Formations, movement and control of the tank platoon as the leading element during an exploitation by an Armored Division.**

42-6

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TECHNIQUE OF THE TANK PLATOON AS THE POINT IN AN EXPLOITATION

The writer was a tank platoon leader in an Armored Division and, as such, was often called on to be the point commander in exploitation missions.

The division used a "married" formation throughout. Consequently, when a tank platoon was assigned to the point, the armored Infantry counterpart also became part of that point.

Riding in the leading vehicle in an armored exploitation can, and often has proved to be, rather deleterious to one's health. At the very best, it is something of a strain to the nervous system. Of course, there is no way to make this task just wholesome, clean fun such as would appeal to any red-blooded American boy. However, certain techniques learned over a long period of time, by trial and error, and from watching and noting the trials and errors of others, (coupled with an abundance of the "luck of the Irish") have worked well for the writer.

Ordinarily it was left to the tank platoon leader to command this group and to decide on the formation to be used. Many, many variations were tried out by platoon officers. Several factors had to be considered. Flexibility was an important item. Terrain, weather, expected enemy resistance, and speed of the advance all entered into the picture.

One very troublesome factor was the lack of communication between the half-tracks of the Infantry platoon. If a fight developed and these half-tracks were scattered, the problem of control was acute, (particularly after replacements had been made).

As has been previously stated, several variations became somewhat standard. One of these was tank and half-track alternately. This formation has several disadvantages. For example, it spreads the tank fire power out too far and makes the tank platoon leader's control problem more difficult. Then, too,

the Infantry control problem is extremely arduous. An outstanding tank platoon leader used this formation, however, and it worked pretty well while he lasted. His chief argument for it was the fact that each infantry squad could protect the tank ahead of it from close-in antitank measures.

However, the writer believes the disadvantages outweigh the advantages in this case.

Another formation used by many platoon leaders, was three tanks, the Infantry platoon leader's half-track, the other two tanks, then the four other half-tracks of the Infantry platoon. This system enabled the Infantry platoon leader to be far enough forward to see and size up the situation or to confer with the tank platoon leader when necessary. In addition, his platoon was all together and far enough back so that it wasn't necessarily under fire and could form and attack as a unit.

This formation worked out quite successfully but it left a thin-skinned vehicle rather far forward and the Infantry platoon leader was still too far from his platoon. Then, too, the half-track hampered, to a degree, the firing of the two tanks behind it. The writer used this formation for several months but finally lined up with the tanks in front and the Infantry behind in column and all together.

This formation put all the tanks up where they could be fired and maneuvered at will. Each tank supported the one in front, each had its sector to cover and opposition quickly felt the weight of the combined fire. Several instances occurred when a tank was hit but seldom did the anti-tank weapons get more than one.

The Infantry riding as a group were in good order and could, and did, dismount and get into action quickly on several occasions. A feat seldom, if ever, achieved by the other formations which have come to the writer's attention.

A great deal of eyewash has been written and spoken about the subject of riding infantry on the tanks. This was the rule in certain outfits. It was not uncommon to see a half dozen thoroughly uncomfortable doughboys, often wet, often cold, and always unhappy, clinging precariously to the deck and sponsons of the leading tanks.

They were there as close-in anti-tank protection. Peculiarly, many died when the bazooka hit. Others were killed by anti-tank gunfire, machine gunfire et cetera. If they hadn't been there the tanks by using wing man tactics and reconnaissance by fire had little or nothing to fear from bazooka men. If you were bazook-ed in an exploitation, you were sleeping!

Of course, in a night movement, two or three doughboys on every tank is a good idea and will offer some protection to the tank when it is standing still. Even then they should be relieved often so that they will be alert and energetic in playing this role.

In this advance party, where should the platoon leader ride? In our division and others, he rode the lead tank. As the late General Patton said, "You can't push a piece of spaghetti, you've got to pull it". Actually, of course, there were several advantages, chiefly the ones of Officer prestige and platoon morale. However, it was not good for the morale of the platoon leader's crew necessarily, although the writer detected a bit of quiet swagger creeping out in his own.

Also, a trained Officer should have been able to follow a prescribed route more easily. Unfortunately, this wasn't always the case. In fact, it is the writer's firm conviction that had the Germans torn down the sign posts, half the American armor would have been lost, or at least, noticeably slowed down.

The "Book" says the point should be a tank section, then the platoon leader, then the other tank section. This is a good idea. It is sound and workable. Too often when the platoon Officer was in the leading vehicle,

he became embroiled in a fire fight and was too busy properly to employ his platoon. Too busy, in fact, to report the situation to his company commander. This was confusing, ineffectual, and time wasting all around.

If the platoon leader was riding third he might have that moment or two in which to make his dispositions and to report, before becoming locked in the old 'do or die' business.

Another advantage is the one of rotating the point job among all the tanks, keeping a fresh, alert man in front. Then there is the obvious saving in platoon officers, to train whom the government spends certain sizable sums.

Once the formation or order of march is decided upon the question arises: how should this advance party move? In the exploitation phase speed is of paramount importance. Speed makes for surprise and saves lives and cannot be underestimated. The fact that a swift, aggressive advance actually saves lives in the long run is indisputable. Nevertheless, there are certain methods of movement the advance party can use which will offer a better chance for survival, while accomplishing the mission, than others.

In short, there are certain small techniques which, if employed meticulously, contribute to a fast, uninterrupted advance and minimum losses. The most commonly overlooked of these techniques, apparent in many of our Armored Divisions, was caused by self styled 'aggressive' commanders, who in a mistaken lust for speed 'threw the book away'. This error which caused needless confusion and actual loss of time was the one of allowing no distance between elements of the advance guard.

What occurred was this. When the leading element ran into fairly stiff resistance it was committed piecemeal, chopped up, and a delay was occasioned by the resultant confusion. If there had been an interval, that is to say,

a distance between the point, the advance party and the rest of the advance guard, the situation would have developed more slowly and clearly, and the commander of each element would have had time and space to exercise his command function and use his troops in a deliberate, sound, tactical manner. Thus he could have brought to bear the necessary force quickly to overcome the resistance.

Of course, the distance between elements should not be great, as one of the precepts of exploitation is to hit 'em hard and quick. However, a blind hammering, taking unnecessary losses, is not a part of the art of war, dependent, as it is, on the tank production capacity of the home front.

How should the point platoon move? Should it move in column down the road at an uniform pace? This was the usual manner in most divisions in exploitation phases. However, it is not the most intelligent and it is not the fastest. Furthermore, it is not the steadiest.

The best method in every sense is a movement by bounds; that is, within the advance party. The way it has worked superbly is this: the Advance Guard commander (leading tank company commander) rides behind the point platoon at some distance. This distance, of course, varies with the terrain, but usually should be eight or not more than five hundred yards. This Advance Guard commander rides at an even pace (often set by the combat commander). He is accompanied by an artillery forward observer, and possibly, by a forward air controller.

In front of him the point platoon works. The leading three tanks moving rapidly from cover to cover under protection of the second section. Great speed can be obtained by making these bounds in an alternate manner. When resistance is met the Advance Guard commander stops, sizes up the situation and takes action immediately. There is a distance between him and the point

and he is free to employ his support intelligently or to by-pass obstacles or strong points without the necessity of back-tracking and reversing the column.

This system was employed by the writer in the latter stages of the war during the advance to the Elbe River. It was discovered that by moving this way the Advance Guard actually had to be requested to slow down by an exceptionally fast moving Combat Commander.

While on the subject of movement let us consider the method of advance employed by this lead platoon. As has been stated, the lead three tanks move quickly from cover to cover under the support of the other section. By quickly is meant top speed. In addition these moving tanks should take what might be called evasive action (only, of course, if contact is believed imminent). If possible, terrain and weather permitting, these tanks should move abreast or in a modified wedge formation. Usually one on either side of the road and one continually criss-crossing the road. The writer has said they move from cover to cover. Naturally the distance from one covered position to another may be great, in which case the length of the bound is limited to good fire support from the stationary section. Better not make it more than six hundred yards. These tanks now halt suddenly and the other section moves up fast.

The fastest method is for the platoon leader to pull out in front of this second section and lead it in a fast alternate bound. The safest way is to displace forward successively because the forward section, while halted, has had a chance to size up the route ahead, pick the next stopping place and perhaps reconnoiter by fire. This seems a good place to take up the small matter of the use of binoculars.

The writer feels he can state without fear of contradiction that binoculars

intelligently, quickly and ceaselessly used by tank commanders saved many and many a tank. As is readily apparent to anyone who has tried they cannot be employed in a moving tank, even on the smoothest of roads. All of which is one of the greatest of arguments for movement by bounds. A hasty reconnaissance through the glasses saves many a round of ammunition as the alternative is reconnaissance by fire. This, too, is the reason the writer stresses the fast move and the sudden stop.

Early in the writer's experience, in fact, during his first hour or two of combat, he made the discovery that his driver was too well trained in the smooth stop. When ordered to halt, he coasted to a nice, easy stop. The writer put his binoculars to his eyes as the tank slowed and tried to observe ahead. The vibration made this absolutely impossible until the vehicle actually came to rest. During this fifteen or twenty yards of coasting, the writer was virtually blind and the tank was an easy target, not having even the small advantage of relative speed. Needless to say, it became a part of the driver's technique to halt as abruptly as possible when commanded.

This mention of binoculars leads naturally to a discussion of reconnaissance in general. In the exploitation phase of an armored advance, speed and surprise are essential ingredients. There will be no covering force, no reconnaissance ahead of this leading tank platoon. However, if this platoon leader wants to give himself a chance for survival, he resorts to three types of reconnaissance (always remembering, though, that speed and surprise are potent advantages for him and must not be marred by wishy-washy, over cautious progress). These forms of reconnaissance are: use of binoculars, reconnaissance by fire, and personal dismounted reconnaissance. Added to these might be a fourth. This fourth one is beyond words to describe. It is incredible to many people. This

is the much sneered at "nose for Krauts", which many of us believed, and still believe, we had.

Be that as it may, we can discuss the more orthodox methods. The use of binoculars has already been discussed to some extent. It is nearly superfluous to say that scrupulous care must be taken of them. Cleaning material must be handy to wipe away dust and rain. There is a nice, very precise length of the neck strap. Naturally the focus settings must be known, in fact, they must be instinctive. It might be mentioned here that, as he moves, the tank commander picks his danger spots and as soon as he stops, quickly scans each one, then goes back over them again more slowly.

We come now to that highly controversial subject: reconnaissance by fire. On this subject the writer had two complete changes of opinion. During his first days in combat, he employed it extensively. Later it seemed to be distracting, to destroy the element of surprise. The writer began to depend on observation. Then he gaily rode into a neat ambush just across the Rhine. From there on in he fired on everything remotely suspicious on the ground that it was German in any case. Of course, the life span of tractors and other farm vehicles of suspicious silhouette was short indeed.

More seriously it should be said that reconnaissance by fire is almost a necessity if moving steadily. It is sometimes a waste of ammunition but it has a decided morale factor. It is good for your morale and decidedly disturbing to the other fellows. However, it should be carefully controlled and done intelligently. A movement by bounds, permitting a good look through the glasses eliminates much firing. It is good also to have some sort of signal to notify those behind that you are merely reconnoitering by fire. Say two short bursts from the co-ax. If this isn't done some of the Infantry behind in the half-tracks will start shooting thirties, fifties, and rifles

at everything in sight, thereby thoroughly confusing the issue (which last phrase is a very polite way of saying FUBAR). Certain conditions call for fire reconnaissance such as heavy woods, hedge lined roads, isolated buildings on the flanks and others. The ammunition supply, particularly that readily available in the turret must not be depleted and in some cases may be an important factor restricting this probing fire.

The third type of reconnaissance is the one most often overlooked by tank officers. That is the dismounted personal reconnaissance. Often there wasn't time. More often the writer is inclined to believe it was merely an unwillingness to leave that steel shell and expose one's person in that lonely, lonely and so very quiet no-mans land. Drawing again from his own experience, the writer became a believer on the third of August, 1944 when in Yvre, France he turned a right angle corner in a narrow street and came face to face with a MK IV tank at the ridiculous range of thirty yards. The tank was manned and obviously waiting. Thanks to a gunner who needed no urging nor even a command, the writer is presently able to pen this paper.

Thereafter, the writer dismounted and took a peek whenever it seemed indicated. It is better to sneak a peek over the crest of a hill and around the corner than to barge over or around with a tank. You can stretch your luck just so far!

Much has been said about control. Control of the individual tank, the platoon and the company. First things must come first. Until one is able to control a tank almost as readily as a good rider controls a horse, he is not ready for the designation, Tanker. This control is by interphone but that doesn't tell the whole story. First there must be a system, a code, a standard procedure. Incidentally this should be standard in the platoon and the company at least. Actually it should be standard throughout the Armored Forces. Coupled with this procedure are certain other factors less tangible but mainly

based on a close understanding of each other by the commander and driver. This obviously can only be achieved through long practice and, while highly desirable, is not necessary as long as there is a standard procedure. That this procedure pays off was evidenced to the writer during the recent misunderstanding in Europe when, because of breakdowns and losses, it was necessary for him to fight with seven entirely different crews for varying short periods.

Once this control of the individual tank is achieved (incidentally it involves set procedures between the turret crew members as well, (a gesture or a poke or a slap is quicker than the interphone) we move into control of the section and platoon. For speed and ease hand and arm signals are a must and are only limited by the intelligence, state of training and ingenuity of the people involved. Another factor which makes these signals a necessity is the constant radio failure. This ever present failure was due not to design but to the tremendous abuse it was necessary to give the tank radios in pursuit operations. They were turned on constantly and no time was available for maintenance.

Closely coupled with hand and arm signals was the setting up of simple but rigid standard operating procedures. Some of these were simple plays something like the plays used in football. Others were the sectors of responsibility. Each tank commander had his own and stuck to it. A system the writer employed involved his tank and the first section. When he halted or signalled a halt, the #2 tank habitually pulled up abreast, if possible, and on the right and immediately scanned in that direction. The #3 tank performed in like fashion on the left. The following section took the responsibility for the extreme right and left flanks and prepared to move in either direction upon receiving a signal.

Connected with this is a lesson we learned through bitter experience. The German anti-tank guns, whenever possible, were sited to be mutually supporting and designed to suck one in, that is to say, to mouse-trap the unwary. At first while using the system outlined above the #2 and #3 tanks would pull into their positions in good style. However, if the platoon leader was firing to his front their attention naturally was attracted and without order they began to fire at targets to the front. Some of our people then got knocked out by fire from the flanks - the worst part of which was the fact that no one saw where the shot came from. This experience made it necessary for the #2 and #3 tank commanders to ignore the front and to cover their own areas. Naturally they glanced quickly every moment or two towards the platoon leader for orders but rigidly covered the sector for which they were responsible.

It can be said that control within the platoon depends on many things. Experience and practice, of course, are the best ways of developing this control. Then there is the method of control often listed as the final resort in the texts. This is usually referred to as 'example of the Commander'. Nothing can take the place of this method. However, it will have no effect unless the Commander has achieved a reputation for intelligence, for skill and has been able to inculcate in his people an unswerving all for one, one for all spirit. While the writer doesn't necessarily advocate this policy for units larger than a platoon, he is convinced that nothing short of unqualified respect will do. If coupled with this respect, he can generate a spirit of absolute, utter comradeship his path will be easier; his chances for success then will be most likely.

The tank platoon leader is faced with a situation unique among officers. Each crew has five men. He is part of the crew of his tank. Obviously as a tank commander he has many menial, purely physical duties to perform. He must help with the refueling. He must clean guns. He must help change tracks.

He stands guard duty in combat. It is necessary for him not only to perform these duties but he must do them expertly. He cannot ever exhibit fear for he must zealously guard the morale of his men. During an exploitation when men and machines are pushed to the limit, his job is multiplied many times. These are the times when his good nature cannot, even momentarily, fail. All this can be accomplished easily if the leader has a genuine affection for his men and thoroughly understands their weakness and their strength and respects their inherent nobility.

This paper has no footnotes, no references but it is the result of one man's research, his trials and errors and the trials and errors of many others who are now represented by a white cross somewhere in Europe.