

# Combined Arms – Shaping Maneuver Operations Starts With Arguing Merits of Operational Concepts

by GEN Donn A. Starry

The combined-arms team and Armor are frequently thought of as synonymous. In some ways, they should be – the concept was introduced into our Army at Fort Knox, KY, not by anyone now on active duty to be sure, but by a small group of our distinguished predecessors. The concept has been developed, protected, husbanded, expanded and even criticized at Fort Knox. In fact, everyone who has served there has participated in at least some of those activities.

We might say all is well with Armor and the combined-arms team. We could mutually congratulate ourselves, smug in the knowledge that Armor has the inside track on all that is necessary to win the critical battles of the next war – a tempting security blanket, but not a real one.

The Army is not that homogeneous in its outlook, nor is the world in which it lives. In the Army today, parochialism exists that challenges and sometimes even denies many things about the combined-arms idea. That parochialism sometimes may concern leadership or tactics or administration, or any of a hundred other things. It is easy to get confused, even discouraged, on finding that everyone does not understand the message, as do those in Armor. It is also all too easy to join the throng that is quick to point out problems but offer no solutions.

Not all the question-asking is bad. It is a necessary part of Army dialogue – in progress for 200 years – and we probably should not want it any other way. Despite field manuals, how-to-fight and the other written paraphernalia with which we surround ourselves, approved doctrine on any matter is often the opinion of the senior officer present. Now, while that may give me no small measure of satisfaction, it does not help anyone else – nor did it satisfy me when I was younger.

However, it points out a strong feature of our system – we can and should argue the merits of operational concepts

with which we intend to fight. Operational concepts are important; they set the framework for tactics, organization, equipment development and training. They are the guts of our Army; therefore, a consensus about them is important. However, be cautioned. A common starting point is necessary for any intelligent dialogue to proceed. Each “discussant” must recognize that everything for which the other stands is not inherently wrong. To believe that is folly, a folly that rejects the value of dialogue.

It is this failure to recognize the merits of a dialogue, and its bounds as well, that troubles Armor and the combined-arms team. Instead of listening intelligently to one another, we are dividing into two or three strident camps. In one, the tank is supreme. In another, it is the armed helicopter. In still another, it is the antitank guided missile. There is no room for compromise; rationality is not a virtue in any camp; all draw their best examples from the same source, the Yom Kippur War. Listening carefully, one wonders if in October 1973 there were several wars or just one.

While we chorus our huzzahs for the combined-arms team, in a quite parochial aside, we add “fine, but helicopters/tanks/ATGMs – insert one of your choice – is the real answer.” So, at this point, a summing-up seems appropriate, followed by suggestions for a perspective that might help cope with the dilemma in which we find ourselves.

The Armor combined-arms team in our Army was the creation of a few farsighted men – Chaffee, Van Voorhis and others – who persisted against a lot of entrenched tribal wisdom. Their victory was short-lived, but it lasted long enough to win World War II. Then, in a rush to get back to “real soldiering,” we disbanded our large Armor formations – all we really needed was a few tanks to support infantry. Many still believe that. Today, this group would have us believe ATGMs have taken over and the tank is dead.

The antitank helicopter is a new and attractive dimension in battle. It is so new that those who understand it the least have made it the center of too much attention. Its singular advantage – the ability to move rapidly from one part of the battle to another – has given rise to mistaken notions about what it really can do. Ignoring the limitations of weather, terrain, air defenses and the inability to occupy ground, enthusiasts raise up the helicopter as the answer to the warrior’s prayer. Some would even trade battalions of tanks for squadrons of attack helicopters.

Then, there are the tank purists; after cursory study of the Yom Kippur War, they re-decided in favor of more tanks to the exclusion, or at least neglect, of other combined-arms team members. All we need is an elite, sophisticated, highly proficient tank force.

Versions of these arguments have passed by us all at one time or another. All contain some tempting arguments. Their failing is that they defy everything the combined-arms team was designed to be. Most alarming is that they interact most violently in the ranks of Armor. The Armor Soldiers of our Army seem unable to speak with one voice. Every one of us who has successfully commanded a unit of tanks, mechanized infantry, cavalry or attack helicopters is an expert at how those units should be organized, equipped and employed.

Unable to put aside the nearsightedness of personal experience and embrace a broader combined-arms team perspective, we debate endlessly. We continue to talk long after saluting would be a more appropriate gesture.

So my appeal is for perspective not parochialism, for rationality not rashness, for teamwork not lip service.

If the Yom Kippur War demonstrated anything, it strongly affirmed the utility of the combined-arms team with strong emphasis on the operative word “team.” A team that embraces a balanced force of artillery, mechanized infantry, tanks, air defense, engineers and

supporting arms and branches, and a team that draws its effectiveness from balancing the capabilities of these systems and from the synergism of their combined efforts. True, the balance is constantly changing, but it is always interrelated. Armor is part of this interrelationship. As legatees of the combined-arms team idea, Armor Soldiers have a special duty to ensure correction of imbalances.

We all must be willing to understand and logically examine each proponent's advocacy in terms of what is best for the combined-arms team. If we don't, I predict our detractors, aided by some well-meaning voices in Armor, will destroy or imbalance the team and ultimately jeopardize our chances for victory. The team, combined-arms team, deserves a better fate.

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*Retired GEN Donn Starry graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1948 after having enlisted in the Army in 1943. His early career included command and staff assignments in Germany, Korea and Vietnam. Command included 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 32<sup>nd</sup> Armor, in Germany; 11<sup>th</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, Vietnam and Cambodia; commanding general, U.S. Army Armor Center; V Corps, Germany; commanding general, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command; and his last assignment, commander-in-chief, U.S. Readiness Command. His staff assignments included director of force management, Army Staff. As TRADOC's commanding general from 1977 to 1981, he is credited with formulating Air-Land Battle doctrine, which prepared the Army for*

*warfighting in the 1980s-90s and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century. His military education includes Army Command and General Staff College, Armed Forces Staff College and Army War College. His awards and decorations include the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, two awards of the Army Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Bronze Star with "V" device, Soldier's Medal, Purple Heart, Legion of Merit with two oak-leaf clusters, Distinguished Flying Cross and Air Medal with nine oak-leaf clusters.*

#### ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**ATGM** – anti-tank guided missile  
**TRADOC** – U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command