

Mobility, Shock, and Firepower:

Light Armor-Infantry Operations in the Past, Present, and Future

1LT STANLEY DIDDAMS

For the last few years, the U.S. Army has begun a major shift in training to focus on countering near-peer, well-equipped, and well-funded adversaries fighting with an assortment of mechanized infantry and armored platforms far more capable than the typical insurgency. This means a transition from attempting to win a low-tempo “hearts-and-minds” game to winning a high-tempo, large-scale, combined arms fight against a smarter, modern enemy. This transition to better engage a differing mix of enemies reflects the nature of war itself. Tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) are constantly evolving as the enemy encounters our weapons’ effects, just as we upgrade our weapons and training to counter his advantages. This is especially true in our infantry brigade combat teams (IBCTs), which have limited resources to counter bunkers, tanks, and other protected adversarial assets. In response to this deficiency, the 82nd Airborne Division has begun experimenting with a Mobile Protected Firepower (MPF) company to augment its light battalions. The MPF platform promises to be a 30-ton tracked vehicle equipped with a 105mm direct fire precision weapon system. Currently, the role has been filled with Marine Corps light armored vehicles (LAV-25), equipped with the appropriate laser engagement system (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System [MILES]) to simulate the MPF. The Army has chosen two prototypes to evaluate within the 82nd Airborne in 2021. The product of this and other evaluations will determine the platform of the proposed MPF units to be activated within the IBCTs in 2025.

The concept of augmenting expeditionary, light infantry organizations with armor is not new. Examples include general headquarters (GHQ) tank battalions that were tasked to support light infantry in World War II and Korea, or the 73rd Armor Regiment which air-dropped Sheridan tanks into Panama. These and many more historical, doctrinal evolutions produced a plethora of lessons learned on the subject of light tank-infantry integration. However, in the 82nd Airborne Division, which has been without an armored component since 1996, many of these lessons have been lost or discarded. It is valuable, therefore, to examine history as we develop our plans for



In the photo above, 82nd Airborne Division Paratroopers integrate armor enablers to support combined arms training. Soon, Infantry brigade combat teams will have organic light armor mobile protected firepower companies to provide them with additional firepower to counter near-peer threats. (Photo by SSG Jason Hull)

the future. This article will examine several relevant historical vignettes and then discuss the lessons learned and how they apply to the development of future light armor doctrine.

Operation Torch and the Development of Tank-Infantry Tactics

The Army published doctrine prior to the invasion of Africa that would be tested and developed throughout the duration of Operation Torch. Field Manual (FM) 7-5, *Organization and Tactics of Infantry - The Rifle Battalion*, governed infantry tactics altogether. In this manual, infantry leaders were instructed that when their attacks were supported by tanks to advance their units as close behind the tanks using the same maneuvers they would if not supported by tanks.² The manual instructed infantry leaders to assume that the tank units would conduct battle the same as they would without infantry as well. FM 17-10, *Tank Platoon*, which governed tank tactics, allotted GHQ tank battalions to be attached to higher echelons and distributed amongst infantry organizations as needed. The FM still assumed that infantry would follow behind, as dictated by FM 7-5, except for when they encountered anti-tank weapons. Infantry units would be expected to destroy anti-tank weapons using “stalking and infiltration tactics.”³

While there was consistency in doctrine for both tank and infantry leaders, it would take a number of failures before commanders could effectively employ the tanks with the infantry. The armored units employed in Africa were not GHQ battalions and were therefore not trained to work with the infantry. The mass attacks that tank commanders had expected to conduct were not possible in the rugged terrain of North Africa.⁴ Tanks were forced to be dispersed as infantry support in much smaller numbers than what was originally planned. Infantry commanders did not know what to do with the tanks when they received them. Initially, infantry units, attempting to locate and fix their enemies while leaving their tanks behind, would be pinned down and destroyed with indirect fire. In other cases, when tanks were moved to the front, they would move too fast for the infantry to keep up, running themselves into anti-tank fire. When the infantry did keep close, they would often absorb fire meant for the tanks.⁵ The tanks were being moved around so often they were typically unable to develop cohesion with their infantry counterparts as a combined arms unit and to develop effective TTPs. They also had trouble accessing spare parts and crew replacements. The chief of the Armored Force, LTG Jacob L. Devers, wrote the following to GEN George Marshall in 1942: “Economy of force and unity of command go together. You get little of either if you get a lot of attached units at the last moment. Team play comes only with practice.”⁶ Devers’ note to Marshall reflected what the Americans had been learning while fighting. In Africa, organizations in which tanks and infantry were attached together for extended periods ultimately became highly capable in battle.⁷

The 504th and the 740th Advance on the Siegfried Line

On 28 January 1945, C Company of the 740th Tank Battalion (GHQ) was attached to the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) of the 82nd Airborne Division for the advance on the Siegfried Line. They were equipped with M4 Sherman tanks each with a 76mm cannon, two 30-caliber coaxial and bow machine guns, and a 50-caliber pintle-mounted machine gun on top of the turret. One tank platoon from C Company was attached to each of the three battalions of the 504th. Their objective was the town of Herresbach, Belgium, and they would be the right flank of the 1st Army. The 3rd Platoon from C Company of the 740th and 3rd Battalion of the 504th would lead the attack. Snow and fog covered the advance down a single narrow trail. Single tanks led Paratroopers marching in columns of two spaced at platoon interval.⁸ For the first 7,000 yards of the advance, the column encountered only minimal resistance consisting of machine-gun and small-arms fire. At that point the column was notified of a German counterattack to their north. Four tanks assembled at the front of the formation, and infantry climbed on to maneuver towards the suspected enemy.

The German and American columns stumbled upon each other, and without hesitation American Paratroopers and tanks jumped into action, seizing the initiative. The lead tank opened with its full complement of machine guns as well as its main cannon while Paratroopers on the ground charged forward, firing from the hip. The violent combined arms action was over in 10 minutes with the 504th reporting more than 100 Germans killed and approximately 180 captured. Not a single American casualty was reported.⁹ The town of Herresbach was seized within an hour.

Interspersing tanks among infantry platoons along the canalizing trail to Herresbach allowed for optimal security and firepower spread throughout the formation. Upon notification of contact, the ability of riflemen to ride towards



Soldiers from the 740th Tank Battalion and 82nd Airborne Division push through the snow near Herresbach, Belgium, on 28 January 1945. (U.S. Army photo)

the enemy on top of a platoon of tanks no doubt increased the concentration and tempo of the movement to contact. The ability of the tank-infantry team to react to such a large enemy force so decisively in so little time was a result of mobility, shock, and firepower that would have been lacking without armor support.

The Infantry-Armor Task Force in Korea

As the war in Korea progressed into 1951, especially in the west where terrain was more forgiving, American and United Nation forces were regularly conducting combat operations in infantry-armor battalion task forces. Typically, an infantry regiment consisting of three battalions had a tank battalion of four companies in support, and each battalion would have one or two tank companies attached in addition to other enablers such as engineers, artillery, and reconnaissance companies. These infantry-armor task forces were successful in limited objective attacks such as the attack on Osan-Suwon on 15 January 1951. The 27th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) was organized into three task forces of the 27th Infantry Regiment, supported by the 89th Tank Battalion. Task Force Baker — consisting of Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment and C Company, 89th Tank Battalion — spearheaded the attack on Suwon. Their rapid advance coupled with the shock effect and firepower of their armor enablers caught the defending enemy off guard, inflicting 200 casualties. The RCT continued towards and into Suwon on the 16th and 17th with additional air support. With shock and surprise, the RCT engaged enemy forces on top of and inside buildings, flushing them out onto the street kill zones with air and ground fire. By the end of the operation, an estimated 1,150 enemy were killed at the cost of a single American casualty.¹⁰

Similar infantry-armor task-force concepts were put to use successfully in several additional operations of this time period. Notable is Operation Punch in February of 1951, in which the 25th Infantry Division would attack to seize two hilltops outside of the town of Suwon. Two separate task forces were assembled from the 64th and 89th Tank Battalions and the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 27th Infantry Regiment. The plan consisted of the tank battalions launching penetrating attacks to the flanks and rear of the hilltops while infantry attacked up the hills themselves. The armor teams were not meant to seize or secure any terrain, only to disorganize and disrupt the enemy to inflict maximum casualties and then withdraw. In the flanking maneuver, each tank company was teamed with an infantry company, and both commanders remained together, physically, for the duration of the operation. Typically, the infantry commander would ride on the back deck of the armor commander's tank. The operation ended with a reported 4,251 enemy killed at the cost of 100 allied casualties.¹¹

3-73 Armor and Operation Just Cause

In the early morning of 20 December 1989, C Company, 3rd Battalion, 73rd Armor Regiment, air-dropped 10 M551A1 Sheridan tanks to the east of the Tocuman-Torrijos Airport in Panama as part of Operation Just Cause. The light tanks of this unique division-organic tank battalion were equipped with a 152mm main gun, 7.62mm coax, and the commander's .50 caliber pintle-mounted machine gun. Of the 10 vehicles dropped into Panama, eight were made operational and organized in sections to each of three parachute infantry battalions present, with one section establishing a blocking position at the entrance of the airport.¹² Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry Regiment made direct contact with the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) when they were ambushed by a machine-gun position while clearing an obstacle not far from the drop zone. The lead tank commander immediately opened fire with his .50 caliber machine gun, and his wingman, upon acquiring the enemy location, fired a single 152mm high explosive (HE) round, causing the side of the building occupied by the enemy to collapse. Enemy fire ceased, and the infantry battalion reduced the obstacle and continued. Later on the same route, Sheridans and infantry encountered another obstacle consisting of an apparent vehicle-borne improvised explosive device. The obstacle was reduced by firing a single 152mm HE round. When the smoke cleared, the tanks pushed the wrecked vehicles aside, and the route was open.¹³

Elsewhere, Sheridans were being put to work on the offensive against the PDF's Commandancia complex and airborne and ranger training base. In the former, Sheridans used their main cannon to knock down walls and open areas for dismounted maneuver. They fired HE rounds into buildings as preparatory fires prior to the infantry entering and clearing. The HE rounds killed occupants and drove the enemy into a state of confusion and discord before being swept away by the precise urban maneuver of the Paratroopers. In the latter, the company commander of the armor-infantry team took his position at the deck of one of his attached Sheridans and manned the dismount telephone to coordinate direct fires, putting tanks to good use while preventing fratricide.¹⁴ In contrast to prior infantry-armor operations, the Paratroop commanders knew the capabilities of their permanent armor enablers, and likewise the Sheridan crewmen knew how their infantry counterparts fought. Together they produced a lethal and highly successful team. Tanks were available to assist their infantry counterparts in the joint forcible entry almost immediately after hitting the ground and provided much-needed mobility, shock, and firepower to keep Paratroopers moving from the airhead to their objectives while minimizing casualties. C Company accomplished its mission and returned home from Panama with only one crewmember wounded.



An M551 Sheridan sits outside the Apostolic Nunciature, the Vatican's embassy, during negotiations for Manuel Noriega's surrender during Operation Just Cause. (U.S. Army Center of Military History)

A Company, 4th Battalion, 68th Armor at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC)

In June 2019 at JRTC at Fort Polk, LA, the 82nd Airborne Division's MPF Company brought three platoons of Marine Corps LAVs equipped with MILES simulating a 105mm auto-loading cannon and 30 tons of armor. The company supported the 1st Brigade Combat Team in the airborne joint forcible entry, followed by defensive and finally offensive operations against a near-peer mechanized enemy. The initial plan was to task each of the three platoons to a habitual parent infantry battalion, with one platoon being air-dropped and the other two arriving by air-land. Immediately upon air drop, a platoon of MPF vehicles were made available to the brigade commander to support the infantry battalions as they expanded their control over the airhead. After encountering minimal resistance, the platoon was attached to the 2nd Battalion, 501st PIR and assisted in repelling multiple mechanized infantry counterattacks over three days until it was finally destroyed by enemy armor.

The morning after, a two-vehicle section that was initially attached to the 1st Battalion, 504th PIR was re-routed to the 2nd Battalion, 501st PIR in order to supplement that battalion's defense. The receiving company commander provided clear and brief guidance to provide a defensive battle position (BP) facing down a narrow road with platoons of infantry occupying BPs at the flank. Around midnight an enemy armored battalion column approached the company engagement area. As planned, infantry attempted to engage enemy armor first with their dismounted anti-tank systems with limited success. The MPF section then began engaging enemy armor with immediate effects. Initially, the enemy focused on the dismounted infantry arrayed in the tree line at their flank. A few BMPs identified and fired back at the engaging MPF section, but their 30mm cannons had no effect on the frontal armor of the MPF platform. The section expended all of its ammunition in the space of 20 minutes, destroying a company-sized element of T-80s and BMPs. Continuing to receive only 30mm fire, the section arranged its vehicles to form an effective road block, and the enemy armored column was completely halted. It was the first time in recent history that a light brigade had been able to effectively stop the advance of the armored counterattack at JRTC.

Following the defense, the MPF Company was reconstituted and divided up into three armor-infantry teams, two of which were tasked with breaching enemy defenses around the stronghold town of Sangari and passing dismounted Paratroopers onto the objective. These teams were augmented with M1A2 72-ton main battle tanks in addition to the MPF platforms. On the approach, the teams took little contact until a section of both MPF vehicles and M1A2s were mistaken for enemy armor and destroyed by friendly dismounted anti-tank systems. After absorbing this significant loss, the teams continued to the objective, meeting and destroying enemy armor and successfully opening the breach for infantry to follow through.

Lessons for the Future

The bottom line is that success of the light armor-infantry team, as with any enabler, is predicated first on the combined understanding of each other's capabilities and limitations by both armor and infantry leaders, leading to harmonious coordination between crew members and dismounts. This is best achieved through repeated MPF-infantry maneuver training at battalion and below level with organic or habitually attached MPF crews. In a mission-command environment, the efficacy of armor enablers in training and the development of strong TTPs is limited to a well-informed commander's creativity and willingness to take prudent risk. Once this habitual training relationship is achieved and strong TTPs are established among leaders, success on the battlefield will follow.

While this formula for success may seem trivial to commanders who have spent their careers in armored and mechanized organizations, IBCTs typically lack personnel with mechanized experience or understanding of armor doctrine. This general lack of understanding of armored capabilities and doctrine among leaders in IBCTs is also dangerous in that it has created a prevalent attitude of rejection towards the armored force. Light infantry commanders and staff typically believe they can accomplish their mission without armor because they have been doing so for decades. History has shown, however, that permanent light armor augmentation is an incredible force multiplier, which will allow the IBCT to accomplish much more.

Whether light infantry commanders want it or not, the MPF company will become a part of IBCTs in the near future. For those commanders who find themselves with armor enablers for the first time in their formations and don't know how to employ them, I offer that there is no right answer, but experience and history has taught us to adhere to these key principles:

(1) The MPF requires local security provided in the form of dismounts or a wingman vehicle. Successful combined arms teams can be formed between two or more MPF platforms, an MPF and a machine-gun-equipped HMMWV, or preferably an MPF and a squad of riflemen. Dismounts are ideal because it is critical to cover the dead space around the vehicle and prevent infiltration.

(2) Avoid deliberately maneuvering the MPF platform off road through low ground or loose sand and soil. A thorough terrain analysis should be conducted at a minimum via a map reconnaissance to determine severely restricted terrain. You don't want your vehicles to get stuck.

(3) Make use of engineer assets to provide hull defilade fighting positions. The MPF platform benefits from the smallest silhouette possible while still being able to traverse its turret.

(4) Give the MPF clear lines of sight and maximum standoff. The MPF is equipped with precision, high-velocity, direct fire, laser-ranged weapon systems firing both kinetic and chemical ordinance. These weapons systems can affect every perceivable land target accurately and easily at least 3,000 meters away.

(5) Plan to make Class III resupply available to the MPF on a daily basis and plan to make Class V resupply available DURING offensive or defensive action against armor or armored targets. The MPF in contact with armor will run out of main gun ammunition quickly. Ensure that the MPF platoon sergeant and battalion S4 have made contact during logistical planning.

(6) The infantry planner should have constant access to the MPF platoon leader prior to execution. During execution, the combat commander should prioritize his control of the MPF. The MPF will most likely be the combat commander's most casualty-producing weapon system and best enemy detection system. Employing it at the center of mass of the operation is critical and enabled by keeping the MPF leader physically with the tactical planner prior to (and decision maker during) combat operations.

Adherence to these principles and the lessons history teaches us, coupled with the application of common sense, will set your operation up for success. When the platform arrives, its technical specifications will no doubt affect its maneuverability and combat capabilities. The key is to train together, take risks, and make mistakes, then train again, and again, and again.

Notes

¹ MG James M. Gavin, "The Future of Armor, *Infantry Journal* (January 1948): 7.

² Field Manual (FM) 7-5, *Organization and Tactics of Infantry — The Rifle Battalion* (1940), 73.

³ FM 17-10, *Armored Force Field Manual: Tactics and Technique* (1942), 394-395.

⁴ John W. Washburn, "Integration of Armored Forces in the U.S. Army Infantry Division," U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 29.

⁵ Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 13-17.

⁶ Washburn, 29.

⁷ Doubler, 17.

⁸ "After Action Report 740th Tank Battalion January thru April 45" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army, 1945), 8.

⁹ "History of the 504th Parachute Infantry 18 December 1944 to 11 January 1945" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Army, 1945) 6.

¹⁰ *Employment of Armor in Korea – The First Year Volume II* (Fort Knox, KY: U.S. Army Armor School, 1952) 142-144.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 166-175.

¹² K.J. Hammond and F. Sherman, "Sheridans in Panama," *Armor* (March-April 1990): 9-10.

¹³ F. Sherman, "Operation Just Cause: The Armor-Infantry Team in the Close Fight," *Armor* (September-October 1996): 34.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

At the time this article was written, **1LT Stanley Diddams** was serving as a platoon leader in A Company, 4th Battalion (Airborne), 68th Armor Regiment (Provisional), 1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division. Special thanks to Dr. Robert Cameron for research guidance and CPT Aram Hatfield for editing.