

What can we learn about tank-infantry coordination by examining
WWII German Assault Gun employment?

Notes on German Assault Guns

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Chapter 8: The Armored Guerilla

1. **Erich von Manstein invented the assault gun – a self-propelled infantry gun, mobile, heavily-gunned, and armored, similar to a tank – to increase the combat power of infantry units.** He believed that **the German infantry** was too dependent on artillery support, and **needed an assault gun to shoot HE into machine-gun nests, AT guns, houses, and enemy tanks.**

This preserved tank units for concentrated employment.

His assault gun idea was similar to the British, French, and American ‘infantry tank’ concept. **Because an assault gun would fight with infantry, it would not need to provide its own security.**

2. **The armored assault gun could maneuver throughout the battlefield.** It could move under enemy artillery fire, enter a ‘hot’ battle, and also withdraw under direct and indirect fire.
3. **Clever tactics made the assault gun an effective antitank weapon.** Ambush positions permitted assault guns to wait until the decisive moment. In 1942, the assault guns of the Grossdeutschland Division killed more tanks than the division’s tank units.

In the attack, assault guns supported the advance of tanks and infantry from covered positions.

4. **The assault gun was more survivable than the tank.** **Integrated combined-arms employment, greater reliability, lower silhouette, better observation for the commander, and better training** insured that by late WWII, **the life expectancy of an assault gun was seven times greater than a German tank.**
5. **Assault gun units increased in importance during the war.** They were added to armored reconnaissance units, replaced some tanks in armored divisions, and replaced *all* of the tanks in the tank battalions of the Panzergrenadier (armored infantry) divisions.
6. **In a unit whose tactics Guderian considered exemplary, assault guns were employed in direct cooperation with attached infantry platoons.**
7. **Even though the assault gun was designed to fight with the infantry, training foot soldiers and vehicles to fight together was still a challenge.** If untrained infantry kept its

distance, the vehicle was deprived of spotters for land mines, difficult terrain, and AT guns, and no one was available with small arms and machineguns to suppress, keep at a distance, or repel close assaults by Russian sappers. If the infantry got too close, they were deprived of micro-terrain cover and suffered from enemy anti-tank fire directed at the vehicle.

Proper training was required. In April 1943, an experimental *Assault Gun Escort Company* attached a platoon of infantry to each assault gun battery. Regular infantry was freed to focus on their tasks.

Escort infantry leaders served as liaison between assault guns and supported units. Each squad included an engineer for finding, avoiding and disabling mines, and a dismounted pathfinder, an *experienced assault gun crewmember*, for recognizing unsuitable terrain.

Assault Gun Escort Company soldiers were trained to:

- Protect the vehicle
- Suppress AT gunners
- Liaise with infantry units
- Communicate with supported units
- Locate mine fields, and find, avoid, and disable mines
- Negotiate difficult terrain: trenches, creeks, bridges, bogs, cliffs
- Reinforce bridges, roads, and ground
- Recover or destroy crippled assault guns
- Call artillery and infantry support weapons to suppress AT weapons
- Stand watch over vehicles
- Identify and designate targets for the assault gun
- Provide covering fire for attacking vehicles

Chapter 10: Breakthrough

1. **British, Canadian, and American infantry divisions used tanks to do what their German opponents expected infantry support weapons to accomplish.**
2. **1st Infantry Division had sophisticated tank-infantry cooperation. Four-man infantry escorts were assigned to each tank of the attached 745th Tank Battalion.**
3. **Intimate tank-infantry cooperation was found in both Army and Marine forces in the Pacific.** One tank battalion supported each infantry division. Pacific terrain and enemy dictated that small tank units be attached to infantry regiments, battalions, and companies.