

Tank-Infantry Teamwork At Its Peak In The Armored Division

by Major Emerson G. Hurley*

IN the first and second years of World War II the combined training of tanks and infantry in the armored divisions was nonexistent. The armored infantry regiment and later the armored infantry battalions were a thorn in the side of maneuver directors because of the planning required to give the foot soldiers something to do in the large-scale armored operations.

In the early desert training one example was a 23-mile night march across a mountain range as a separate operation for an armored infantry regiment. During the Tennessee maneuvers in the spring of 1943, successful combat command commanders were using the armored infantry half-tracks to precede tanks to explode mines and draw antitank fire.

It was not until the spring of 1944, in England, that the first 100 per cent tank-infantry team was formed in an armored division. During the first month of the fighting in Normandy, Major General Lunsford E. Oliver of the Fifth Armored Division, performed a marriage ceremony between his tank companies and infantry companies that catalyzed the growing belief of the need for each other. At that time it was to be only one of the division SOP formations, but it immediately became so successful and popular that it was used practically all the time this division was in combat.

This plan called for three equal combat commands. The three rifle companies and the three medium tank companies in each combat command were welded together into what may be called three armored organizations. The tank and the infantry half-track and personnel now became one squad. It consisted of five men inside the tank and 10 men outside the tank. Sometimes the men outside rode in their half-track, sometimes on the tank. But the men outside had one job—stay with that tank. Their primary mission was to fight with the tank while their presence near the tank offered some protection from enemy individual weapons, such as the bazooka, magnetic charge, and hand grenade. Their

secondary mission was to dig the enemy out of foxholes, cellars, and houses. We called it the armored squad.

The armored infantry platoon contained five squads which made an equal union with the tank platoon. The mortar and machine-gun squads in the infantry very seldom used their crew-served weapons in this formation. They became rifle squads. The armored platoon consisted of five squads, and the armored company of three platoons.

Each company now had two captains, each platoon two lieutenants, and each squad, two sergeants. At first thought, surely this would be too many commanders. And another thing, how would these three large companies be divided between the two battalion staffs?

Now, looking back at that situation, those were not questions at all. The combat commander gave two of these companies to the tank battalion staff and one to the infantry battalion staff. The other attachments were divided evenly which resulted in a light task force and a heavy task force in each combat command.

COMBAT COMMAND DIVIDED INTO TWO COLUMNS

Light Task Force
Married Platoon
Assault Gun Platoon
Mortar Platoon
Command Group
Reconnaissance Platoon
Married Company (—)
Engineer Platoon
Headquarters Company
Battalion Command Post
Tank Destroyer Platoon
Medical Detachment
Service Company
Artillery Battalion

Heavy Task Force
Married Company
Assault Gun Platoon
Command Group
Reconnaissance Platoon
Engineer Platoon
Married Company
Headquarters Company
Battalion Command Post
Tank Destroyer Platoon
Medical Detachment
Service Company
Artillery Battalion

The control of the unit was performed through the tank radio net—the same as the tank company alone. The infantry vehicular radios were very seldom used. The presence of the infantry among the tanks did not interfere with the usual good control that is characteristic of all tank units. The tank commander issued orders to both men inside and outside. They became one large squad.

These married companies moved into the Salisbury Plain in late June and trained together. They ate from

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the same kitchen or the same 10-in-1. They slept around the tank and half-track. They went through combat firing problems together. They planned bivouac security and cleaned weapons together. The tank and the half-track were always together.

The comradeship and brotherly love that is formed from close association had been planted. The men began to hope they would not be separated when they reached Normandy.

It was on August 2, 1944, that this column went down the Normandy Peninsula behind the Fourth and Sixth Armored Divisions. After passing Avranches the Fifth Armored Division struck out on its own to Vitre and Lemans. It was tank, half-track, tank, half-track all the way.

Lemans was one of the first large cities in France to be surrounded. It was done in a matter of hours after arriving there. Combat Command B was given a third of the city's outer perimeter to cut. This was divided between the two task forces. A line of roadblocks was quickly made. The armored squad (tank and half-track) can make a powerful roadblock by itself.

With the tank and half-track hidden, two soldiers got out in front of the tank near the bend in the road. They turn, each raises one hand. The tank commander looks down at the gunner. Yes, he can see them.

These two Americans are confident, cocky men. Brave? Yes. But it is more than that. They actually want something to come up that road so they can raise a fist in the air. That's their private signal to Howard, the gunner, to put a tank shell down the road in front of them. Ralph and Frederick feel they are more than just two soldiers on a roadblock. They have the power of an American medium tank behind them. They can afford to be brazen and reckless because Howard, the gunner, is one of their team.

It was he who told Frederick to get larger shoes back in England. Howard had worked as a boy in his father's shoe shop in northern New York and knew all about shoe fitting. Yes, after the war he would look up Howard.

That is a type of teamwork with which Combat Command B of the Fifth Armored Division fought the war. It was used from the beginning to the end except for short administrative groupings.

From Lemans it was tank, half-track, tank, half-track to Argentan, Dreux, Paris, Sedan, Luxemburg. Here a tank had been hit in a fierce, local fight. It had started to burn. Machine-gun fire was hitting the tank and the trees near by. The crew bailed out. Howard was halfway out the turret when machine-gun fire hit him.

He lay unconscious in the turret of the burning tank. In an instant, a soldier jumped up on the tank and carried the wounded man to shelter in the rear. Howard was seriously wounded but before he started back he gave a ring to Frederick and asked him to give it to his mother after the war. A medal was given to Frederick. The citation read, "an infantry soldier had disregarded

withering machine-gun fire and climbed upon the tank and rescued a member of a tank crew. This is not the whole story. To the men of this armored squad it was one member helping a buddy.

As the winter approached these armored squads were fighting in northern edges of the Hürtgen forest. The half-tracks were back in an assembly area and the armored squads were living and fighting around the tank. In forcing the Germans back across the Roer, the mortars from the other side were having a field day. For the tanks it was a series of short, fierce attacks, and longer waits. During this waiting, the tanks were in firing positions with the outside members securing it. For the tanks that were forced to wait in the open, the men outside dug in under the tank for protection from the mortar fire. The men inside would exchange places with those outside during these waits. It was not uncommon to see a bow gunner or a loader in a foxhole on security duty with an outside member of the squad. Surely this was the highest example of teamwork. These men had learned to appreciate each other's job. They had become a single unit.

These armored squads continued the advance across the Roer in February and on April 1, crossed the Rhine. Eleven days later, they were on the Elbe, 43 miles from Berlin.

Figures can be made to speak for or against anything by rearranging or omitting. But when figures may represent human lives, they become precious numbers. The following table has been taken from the record of the armored divisions that fought in France and Germany.

Armored Division	Date Committed	Killed and Wounded	Tanks Lost
3	29 Jun 44	8,940	632
4	17 Jul 44	6,236	216
6	27 Jul 44	5,194	196
5	2 Aug 44	3,043	116
7	14 Aug 44	4,781	360
9	20 Oct 44	2,894	162
10	29 Oct 44	4,009	181
8	24 Jan 45	1,392	58

The above table indicates that casualties in the 5th Armored Division were not more than would be expected. It would not be wise to conclude more. But those who were in that unit are convinced the close cooperation of infantry and tanks conserved men and matériel on many occasions.

The secret of combined infantry and tank fighting is to keep the same infantry squad with the same tank crew all the time.

The commander who thinks he can form the infantry-tank team by moving infantry into the tank assembly area and move out into an attack is groping in the dark. The winner of the next war may not be decided prior to the close combat.

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