

Armor for the Infantry

A love-hate relationship needs to change

by 1stLt Corey Blankenship, USMCR

The Marine Corps has a love-hate relationship with armor, especially with the relevancy of tanks. The contrasting opinions of tanks amongst Marines are apparent within many conversations had by senior leaders. For instance, during an address to three hundred soon-to-graduate lieutenants, retired LtGen George R. “Ron” Christmas emphatically stated, “When you come to a problem where you require a tank, only a tank will do.” However, eighteen months later, Col Michael S. Styskal, Commander of the 3d Marine Regiment, wistfully commented to the junior armor officers attached to his Marines, “I love tanks, but I don’t think there is a use for tanks in the future fights [of the Marine Corps].” Unfortunately, many Marines follow Col Styskal’s line of thinking as opposed to Gen Christmas’. Even as we prepare for near-peer threats, the Marine Corps consistently opts to replace tanks with other assets. This trend is concerning as an armor officer. However, more than mere personal career progression, I am concerned the Marine Corps has forgotten the advantages that tanks provide on the battlefield. This article intends to begin the dialogue necessary to remedy that decline and remind the institution of the value tanks bring to the infantry in our future fights.

According to the *Marine Corps Concepts and Programs*,

The tank provides the MAGTF commander with the ability to attack, disrupt, and destroy enemy forces through armor protection, shock effect, rapid maneuver, and precision long-range direct fires. These effects are both physical and psychological.¹

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Ultimately, tanks provide the infantry with all-terrain, all-weather direct fire and psychological dominance on the battlefield. When aircraft cannot fly, tanks will still support. When artillery cannot reach, tanks will continue to close with and destroy the enemy. Where up-armored Humvees cannot endure heavy machine-gun fire, tanks will punish the enemy for fixing themselves in entrenched positions. Tanks provide the necessary firepower, survivability, and maneuverability to aid the infantry in penetrating the enemy’s defenses to break his coherency com-

pletely—an endstate both *MCDP 1, Warfighting*, and *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, desire. The mission of the tank platoon or company is not to merely act as an anti-armor asset; tanks thrive on disrupting the enemy’s infantry formations, destroying his logistics, and penetrating gaps to attack deep into his rear. In the coming fight, tanks will enable mechanized infantry to close with and seize objectives without the significant loss of life. Tanks sustain tempo for the long fight.

Far from being a purely anti-armor asset, tanks have always been an infantry-destroying device. The Abrams possess three stabilized machine guns and a 120mm stabilized main gun, which means it can fire them to their maximum effective ranges on the move. These tanks are capable of carrying over 10,000 7.62mm rounds, 1,000 .50



Tanks provide many advantages on the battlefield. (Photo by SSgt Dengrier Baez.)

caliber rounds, and 36 to 41 120mm main-gun rounds, making them long-duration assets for the suppression and destruction of infantry in the open and fortified positions. Furthermore, the Marine Corps has purchased two rounds that increase the lethality of tanks against infantry platoons. The canister round is effectively a shotgun shell filled with 1,100 tungsten balls, the relative gauge of a 7.62mm round. Its destructive fan ranges 500m deep and 50m wide. The multipurpose high-explosive round is the newest to the tank's arsenal, which explodes a tungsten sheath into 7,000 fragments followed by 7,000 of the canister's tungsten balls. This round enables the long-range destruction of dismounted infantry in the open, in trenches, and in bunkers. The combined effects of these rounds on massed troops are staggering. When used against our near-peer threats with their larger infantry forces, tanks enable MAGTF commanders to build effective offensive and defensive operations.

This idea is demonstrated by a typical scenario from the Integrative Training Exercise currently conducted aboard Marine Air-Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms, CA. The Mechanized Assault Course requires infantry company commanders to utilize their platoons alongside combined anti-armor team (CAAT), AAV, and M1A1 attachments in order to defend against an enemy's mechanized company counterattack. The commander typically places his tanks in an engagement area forward of his main engagement area, has them knock out four to six BMPs, and then displaces to join the main defense. Next, the trend is to instruct the tanks to hold their fire until the enemy is within range of all weapons systems, mounted and dismounted.

As an armor officer, armed with the tools referenced to in the previous paragraph, I prefer to offer the commander the opportunity to destroy the enemy's horde of BMPs before they overwhelm our positions. Let the tanks strike at their optimum standoff distance to the enemy to deploy and dismount early. Once dismounted, the enemy's platoons then have to race over open terrain while four tanks pound them



Infantry platoons operate alongside mechanized forces including the M1A1. (Photo by Cpl Kevin Payne.)

with 64,000 pieces of tungsten every 5 to 10 seconds.² As they close, .50 caliber and 7.62mm machine guns precisely engage the remaining enemy BMPs and troops alongside the machine guns from the CAAT, the AAVs, and the weapons platoon. Should any enemy survive, the remaining forces must face the entire company's firepower. The combination of the tanks' interlocked fields of fire, with the final protective fires, and the final protective lines established by the infantry commander, destroy any element that reaches the final 500 meters in front of the company's battle positions. The destruction provided by these infantry-centric rounds is sudden, systematic, and substantial.

This is only one example. Tanks provide mobility and survivability for offensive and urban operations. It is a common maxim among tankers that "without tanks, infantry companies can expect to sustain 65 to 85 percent casualties in [military operations on urbanized terrain]. With tanks, that drops to under 10 percent." In an unofficial after-action report on Operation PHANTOM FURY, Sgt Earl J. Catagnus, Jr., and his colleagues assessed that

by far the best two supporting arms used were tanks and CAAT. Tanks and CAAT were the infantryman's best friend. The battle would have been

incredibly bloodier if it hadn't been for tanks and CAAT.³

The Marine Corps has frequently acknowledged the coming fight to be multi-dimensional, increasingly urbanized, and asymmetric. When examining all of the armor assets available, the tank remains a force multiplier for the infantry in these coming battles.

Despite the proliferation of anti-armor weapons, tanks remain relevant. The advent of machine-gun teams was the demise of horse cavalry; however, the expansion of anti-armor has not stopped our enemies from investing heavily in armor. Our near peers recognize the psychological and physical value of armor. While they utilize maneuver in support of fire, these threats have made increasing efforts to make their armor assets faster, more lethal, and more robust. In our pursuit of fire in support of maneuver, tanks provide the powerful nexus of firepower and mobility necessary to enhance the survivability and effectiveness of their infantry counterparts. Tanks will hazard much to ensure the main effort of the Marine Corps wins our Nation's battles. They will fight next to their dismounted partners. They will cover their movements into trenches, buildings, courtyards, and bunkers. They will fix enemy mechanized units in order to allow

infantry to close with and destroy the enemy up close and personal. If given the chance, tanks will penetrate deep in order to usher infantry in for the killing blow against the enemy's supply lines and lines of communication. We must keep all tools on the table for our MAGTF commanders and honor the time-proven fundamentals of maneuver warfare. Tanks enable the infantry to do what it does best.

I do not fault Col Styskal for his remark about tanks. His comment reflects the institutional misunderstanding of armor. Unless an officer goes down the 1802 pipeline or fights extensively alongside tanks, most leaders perceive tanks as an anti-armor weapon meant to fight Russians in the Fulda Gap. Basically trained officers generally receive one tactical decision game incorporating tanks into an urban fight (interestingly, it is usually a scenario from then-Lt Christmas' fight in Hue). Junior infantry officers receive two separate two-day integration classes with a platoon of tanks. After that, a commander may never work with tanks again until coming to an Integrated Training Exercise. This brief exposure leads to an institutional ignorance of the capabilities, requirements, and applications of armor. Armor officers then face the unique challenge of selling their trade



Don't misunderstand armor capabilities. (Photo by Sgt Williams Quinteros.)

in snapshots, short exercises, and random conversations. This increasing obscurity drives this conversation. I want the Marine Corps to thrive in its coming missions. I want the infantry to continue to receive the highest quality of support in the tough fights ahead. The Corps has the opportunity to refine its tank-infantry integration instead of becoming overly reliant on assets from other Services. When someone pointed our tanks' weakness to dismounted anti-

armor teams, Gen Christmas said, "Provide them with fire teams for security. You are not losing four men. You are gaining one tank." In our current task organization, if you give one squad to protect a section of tanks, you gain two tanks—the relative firepower of an infantry company minus. Keep armor with the infantry, and it will continue to keep the infantry in the fight.

Notes

1. Headquarters Marine Corps, "Abrams M1A1 Main Battle Tank (MBT)," *US Marine Corps Concepts and Programs*. (Washington, DC: 2014), available at <https://marinecorpconceptsandprograms.com>.
2. This is based on an average crew reload time of four to seven seconds per round.
3. Sgt Earl J. Catagnus, Jr., et al., "Lessons Learned: Infantry Squad Tactics in Military Operations in Urban Terrain During Operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, Iraq," *Black Five*. (Online: 2005), available at <http://www.blackfive.net>.



The Marine Corps can refine its task-infantry integration so it doesn't need to rely on assets from other Services. (Photo by SSgt Dengrier Baez.)