

The Four-Tank Platoon: Maximizing Combat Power and Leader Development

by Major John B. Richardson IV

The organization of the four-tank M1-series tank platoon provides the ultimate in combat power (maneuver, protection, leadership, firepower, information) and leader development. I take serious issue with the alternative outlined in the article by MAJ Stringer and MAJ Hall (*ARMOR*, March-April 2001) advocating a three-tank platoon in the heavy division of the 21st century. Though I agree that a three-tank platoon would be more cost-effective to maintain (obviously 10 tanks are cheaper to maintain than 14) and collective training would be more efficient, I disagree that a three-tank platoon enhances leader development and is as effective at accomplishing its mission as a four-tank platoon, due to advances in technology and digital communication.

I disagree with anyone who is charged with our nation's defense and responsible for the lives of our soldiers, who would be bold enough to state, "Current and future threats...do not appear to offer the kind of Cold War challenge that required fielding massed armored formations on the battlefield."¹ If that were the case, we could scrap the Legacy Force right now. How many TF Smiths or Kasserine Passes do we have to endure to learn our lesson? *Lest we forget*. Luckily for us all, our Chief of Staff's vision is multi-dimensional and much more realistic than that. His vision provides unbeatable security for today and the assurance we will be ready to dominate the battlefield twenty years from now.

I left my last tank battalion in 1999. On my way out the door, the S3 was putting together the tank battalion's plan to transition from a four-tank company MTOE to a three-tank company MTOE. The authors advocating the three-tank platoon use a number of similar arguments for transitioning to a three-tank platoon that were used to justify the reduction in the number of companies in a tank battalion. The problem is, the arguments are not doctrinally parallel in nature and cannot be



Photo by Robert L. Stevenson

shared. I always considered the fourth company in our tank battalion structure a luxury, extra combat power for the battalion S3 and commander to use in mission analysis. Taking a tank company from a tank battalion still leaves the battalion commander an overwatch element, a maneuver element, and a reserve.² There is no shift in doctrine, and if you accept the premise that the technological advances in the M1A2 provide the M1A2 tank battalion equivalent firepower with the three-company structure as a four-company M1A1 tank battalion, then there is no loss in **combat power**. But this is not the case in a three- versus four-tank platoon.

Maneuver and Protection

Maneuver and protection are drastically affected when converting a tank platoon from a four-vehicle to a three-vehicle structure. *FM 3-20.15* (formerly *FM 17-15*), *Tank Platoon* is based on the wingman concept. "Under battlefield conditions, the wingman concept facilitates control of the platoon when it operates in sections. The concept requires that one tank orient on another tank on either its left or right side. In the absence of specific instructions, wingmen move, stop, and shoot when their leaders do. In the tank platoon, Tank 2 orients on the platoon leader's (PL) tank, while Tank 3 orients on the platoon sergeant's (PSG) tank. The platoon sergeant orients on the platoon leader's tank."³ Doctrinally the tank platoon is not designed to fight alone,

rather as part of a CO/TM. However, in many instances, it is expected to provide its own fire and movement (maneuver and protection). The CO/TM commander expects the platoon to have the following capabilities outlined in *FM 71-1 (Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company/Team)*: That "it has the necessary manpower and equipment to effectively develop the situation. It can conduct operations requiring firepower, mobility, armor protection, and shock effect, and it can employ maneuver (a combination of fire and movement) to destroy enemy tanks, fighting vehicles, anti-armor systems, and emplacements."⁴ *FM 71-1* also states, "The tank platoon is the smallest maneuver element within a tank company."⁵ The platoon leader must have the capability to "employ his forces on the battlefield through movement of combat forces in relation to the enemy, supported by fire, to gain potential advantage from which to destroy the enemy" in support of the company's mission.⁶

To do that, the platoon leader must have the flexibility to use his sections to perform fire and movement independent of the company. He *maneuvers* his platoon to place it at an advantage over the enemy in support of the company mission and commander's intent.

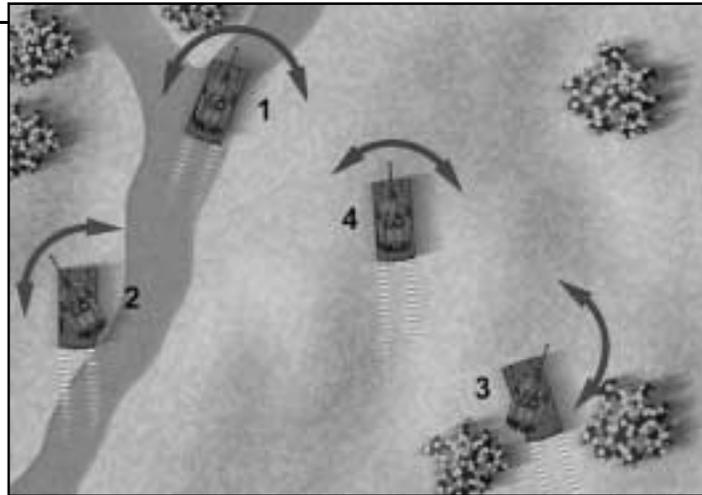
The three-tank platoon cannot maneuver independent of the company without violating force protection at the most basic level. The opening sentence of *FM 3-20.15* states, "By itself, any

tank can be vulnerable in the face of diverse battlefield hazards... and situations; these vulnerabilities are significantly reduced when tanks are employed as units.⁷⁷ Sure, the three-tank platoon in bounding overwatch could set the PSG in overwatch, and the PL and his other tank could bound forward, but who is watching the PSG's back, and can one tank provide the necessary support as the PL's section bounds forward in contact? Who is covering the PL and his wing tank when the PSG seeks an alternate position?

What the three-tank platoon structure does is it strips the PSG or PL of his wingman. The tank platoon is now nothing more than a three-tank section, requiring another three-tank section (platoon) to overwatch it as it moves. The tank platoon can no longer maneuver independently; it will require another platoon to provide its cover. This severely hamstringing the CO/TM commander who now has to be personally involved in moving his platoons. No longer can the commander tell 1st Platoon to, "Move to SBF 1 and report set," he will have to personally escort him to the SBF using the assets of another platoon. Are commander's required to do that at times? Absolutely, based on METT-T, but now there is no option. A commander, unless completely sure there is no enemy in the AO, can never send a tank platoon anywhere alone. The only way the three-tank platoon structure would work, while allowing the commander freedom to think two-up instead of focusing one-down, would be to make a CO/TM an organization of four three-tank platoons, with two sets of two platoons serving in a habitual maneuver relationship. This would negate the only two valid arguments made for the three-tank platoon in the article advocating this "revolutionary transition," cost effectiveness and training efficiency.

Leadership

"The most essential dynamic of combat power is *competent and confident officer and noncommissioned officer leadership*. Leaders integrate maneuver, firepower, and protection capabilities in a variety of combinations appropriate to the situation."⁷⁸



The worst argument for the three-tank platoon is that it would, "offer the Army the opportunity to concentrate on the development of junior armor leaders."⁹ As company XO, I remember my commander sitting the platoon leaders down and telling them, "I'm not training you to be platoon leaders, I'm training you to be company commanders."¹⁰

This enlightened approach to leader development is supported by the four-tank (or even the old five-tank) platoon. We learn the most by *doing*. Our training doctrine and supporting CTCs are based on this developmental approach to learning our profession, the management of violence. The three-tank platoon reduces the platoon leader to a glorified section leader. He is a section leader who is unable to maneuver his unit, unable to DO. Even a five-tank platoon paradigm would be more in the spirit of leader development, where a platoon leader in his own tank maneuvers his two sections while maintaining complete situational awareness of the higher unit's mission, just as a CO/TM commander maneuvers his platoons in support of the BN/TF mission.

The four-tank platoon is truly the premier leader development organizational structure in close combat. The tank platoon leader is not only required to maneuver his platoon as part of a CO/TM, oftentimes using fire and movement at the platoon level, but he is fighting his own tank as an integral member of his platoon. The four-tank platoon PL is a platoon leader, section leader, and tank commander simultaneously while maintaining situational awareness of higher units two levels up. Though the advocates of a three-tank platoon point to the fact that a "three-vehicle concept places the platoon leader at the spearhead of his pla-

toon..." accentuating the leadership principle "set the example," anyone who has served as a tank platoon leader or platoon sergeant knows that there is a great deal more to mounted combat leadership than charging at the front of your platoon formation.¹¹ I argue that there is no greater challenge, and therefore developmental experience, on the battlefield than that of a four-tank, tank platoon leader or four-BFV mech infantry platoon leader in close, high-intensity combat.

Firepower

In close combat, the tank and mech platoon is where the battle is won or lost. The platoons are the killers. Keeping that at the forefront, we must remember, "the fundamental mission of the tank platoon is to close with and destroy the enemy."¹² We've discussed the fact that the three-tank platoon's ability to *close* with the enemy is severely reduced compared to the four-tank platoon. I submit that, despite the target acquisition advancements in the M1A2, the firepower of a three-tank M1A2 platoon cannot match the firepower of a four-tank M1A1 platoon using the wingman concept. The advantage of the four-tank platoon providing mutual supporting fire within the section and platoon allows the platoon to mass fires more effectively and continuously. Clearly, massed volley fire from four tanks is more devastating than massed volley fire from three tanks. The wingman concept also allows the platoon to keep two tanks up at all times, providing continuous firepower on the enemy while maintaining sufficient protection to the platoon as wingmen seek alternate positions. The three-tank platoon will often only have one tank at any one time up and firing. Fire control and distribution will become increasingly difficult to control. Loss of this control will ultimately result in less efficient killing.

Ultimately, the four-tank M1A2 platoon would provide the maximum firepower to destroy the enemy. Coupling the M1A2 advances with the teamwork of the wingman concept doctrine in *FM 3-20.15*, will increase the volume of fire by over 25 percent in the platoon's sector. The argument that four M1A1s

or three M1A2s can both kill X number of enemy vehicles between TRPs A and B is great. But if *four* M1A2s can kill X+10, then that's the firepower I want in the platoons I employ as a company or battalion commander.

Information

The recent addition of information as an element of combat power really doesn't effect the tank platoon structure either way. As the Army transitions to the Objective Force, the size and structure of a maneuver platoon *should be revisited* based on the capabilities of the FCS. However, this is a Legacy Force organizational structure debate and, as such, the elements of combat power used to design the Legacy Force equipment and its supporting doctrine should focus on the elements of combat power that were used to design them.

Quick Fixes: Personnel, Maintenance, and Training Time

The article espousing the three-tank platoon referenced arguments that the new structure would solve many of our personnel shortage problems and alleviate maintenance and logistical problems of the fourth tank motor pool burden. It states that, because of personnel shortages, "the reality of current manning levels often shows that this [fourth] crew is already missing from many platoons..." and that "the three-tank platoon actually increases the chance that armor platoons will be fully manned, despite reduced personnel intake, because fewer spaces will need to be filled."¹³ This argument is weak at best. It is all relative, as is the issue of parts and maintenance of a four- versus three-tank platoon. If we argue, due to personnel shortages, a typical tank platoon of 16 tankers is usually manned at 12-14, then yes, often the platoon is reduced to a three or three and a half tank platoon. But this platoon, if called, could deploy, fight, and win as a three-tank platoon if necessary. We've all been around long enough to realize that if we reduce a tank platoon to a 12-tanker organization, we will still be short personnel. Considering the nature of the U.S. Army, we will always have 10 percent coming, 10 percent going, and 10 percent missing. Now what do we have in our three-tank platoon? Two, maybe two and a half, tanks manned. Now, if called, could that tank platoon accomplish its mission? I say it cannot. As for training efficiency, MAJ Stringer provides unique insight into the Swiss Army based on his first-hand

experience with their force structure changes since the end of the Cold War. The Swiss recently transitioned to a three-tank platoon, and it is working very well for them. The fact that "the Swiss Army is essentially a militia army based on universal conscription with a very small cadre of professional instructors" provides the very argument why we, the U.S. Army, should not model our heavy forces in the same light.¹⁴ I agree, if we only trained together "three to four weeks a year" as a unit, we should consider a tank platoon where we don't expect too much from our platoon leaders and NCOs at the platoon level; however, that is not the case in our Army. The American Army is a full-time, all-volunteer Army. It is a professional Army that not only expects more from junior leaders, but is obligated to develop them for greater responsibility. I applaud the Swiss Army leadership for maximizing their time by structuring their force based on METT-T. We must do the same, and for the tank platoon of the Legacy Force, that is the four-tank platoon.

Conclusion

Our Army is in the midst of a major transformation. For the first time in our Army's history, instead of reacting to the next adversary, our senior leadership is proactively thinking deep, looking forward at our future security issues and tailoring our forces to fight our future adversaries instead of preparing to fight our last battle, again and again. General Shinseki's vision will ensure our national security is maintained for our watch, while setting the conditions for the next generation to maintain it on their watch. His plan to transform the Army over the next 15 years while maintaining the forces necessary to protect tomorrow is genius. Part of that plan is maintaining a creditable and unbeatable Legacy Force, unmatched in the world. That Legacy Force's smallest maneuver element on the heavy battlefield is the four-vehicle platoons of M1 tanks and BFVs.

If we choose to change the tank platoon structure and go to a three-tank platoon, make no mistake of it, it will be for MAJ Stringer and MAJ Hall's main point thread throughout their article: cost-saving efficiency.¹⁵ Let's not hide behind personnel issues, technological advances, or the Swiss Army. If we go to a three-tank platoon it will be because we want to save money to apply it to other programs in the Transformation. If our senior leaders believe

the world security issues will allow us to accept that risk, then we accept it on that basis. But let's all be clear, the four-tank M1-series tank platoon provides the maximum combat power and ultimate leader development platoon structure in the world.

Notes

¹Major Kevin D. Stringer and Major D. Andre Hall, "The Three Tank Platoon, A Consideration For Army XXI," *ARMOR*, March-April 2001, Vol. CX, No. 2, p. 24.

²*FM 71-2, The Tank and Mechanized Infantry Battalion Task Force*, 17 August 1994, Chp. 3.

³*FM 3-20.15, Tank Platoon*, 1 November 2001, Chp. 1.

⁴*FM 71-1, Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company/Team*, 26 January 1998, Chp. 1.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*FM 101-5-1, Operational Terms and Graphics*, 30 September 1997.

⁷*FM 3-20.15*, Chp. 1.

⁸*FM 100-5, Operations*, 14 June 1993, Chp. 2.

⁹Stringer and Hall, p. 23.

¹⁰CPT (MAJ) Keitron Todd, "Platoon Leader OPD," Commander, C Company, 4-67 Armor, July 1993.

¹¹Stringer and Hall, p. 23.

¹²*FM 71-1*, Chp. 1.

¹³Stringer and Hall, p. 24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

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