

“Fight Your Tank, Sergeant”

by Master Sergeant Dennis White



This article was MSG White's entry in the Draper Leadership Essay Contest. Although it did not place in the top three entries, we believe it deserves to be published in ARMOR.

“Bravo, one five, this is Charlie niner two,” announced the tower at range 118. “Clear and elevate all weapon systems and proceed to the base of the tower. A maintenance team will be on site to troubleshoot your tank.”

I was a young corporal at the time, the gunner on tank B-15 in B Troop, 3-12 Cavalry in the fall of 1986. My tank commander (TC) was SFC Thomas “Pappy” La Fontaine, a man I would grow to do my best to emulate. Our problem was that the tank thermal sight (TTS) was out and our laser range finder (LRF) was flashing triple niner five.

Most TCs would follow the tower's instructions. Pappy, however, was not your average tank commander. He replied, “Negative! We will complete the last two engagements using degraded mode.” The next thing I hear him say was “Index one two hundred, battle carry sabot, crew report!” I was now concerned that our gunner score would not be as high as I had hoped due to our systems failure. Our wing tank reported, “Targets up, TRP two.” The TC overrides my power control handles and lays the gun on. He screams, “Gunner, battle sight tank.” Our crew responds with, “Up, Identified. Fire. On the way.” “BOOM.” Our tank rocks back from the recoil. Our wing man yells, “Over Line!” Pappy responds with, “Over, drop one half form. Fire.” I squeezed the trigger again. “BOOM,” it seemed like an eternity before Pappy yelled, “TARGET, cease-fire, crew report!”

We all had a sense of relief as we made our way to the tank crew evaluation (TCE) tent. We bypassed the grill where LTC J. W. Thurman was cooking “Bolo Burgers” for those crews that didn't shoot so well. We had done as we had trained at the tank crew proficiency course (TCPC) at home station. We had done as Pappy had always said, “Fight the Tank!”

Though this was only my first gunnery, I soon realized that technology was only a tool, and that the most important thing

for a tank crew was to be able to fight your tank, regardless of the circumstances.

In May of 1990 at the National Training Center, it was the last rotation fought by BLUFOR using the M60A3 main battle tank. As a newly assigned TC, I was fortunate to have an outstanding and loyal tank crew that I will always think of with fondness. My platoon was attached to an infantry company that called themselves “The Hell Raisers.”

During a movement to contact in the central corridor, our crew luckily survived the initial wave of OPFOR. But, true to Murphy's Law, something went wrong with our beloved panzer. The stabilization in the fire control system went out. The timing couldn't have been worse as the AGMB was headed our way. So, we went to ground north of the Racetrack. My driver, PFC Robert “Bull” Van Slyke, found a great defensive position in a narrow cut at the base of the ridge along the north wall.

In our struggle to survive the ensuing OPFOR attack, we didn't realize that our position would provide us superb concealment and keyhole shots into the flank of the enemy. Enemy vehicles passed our position and, my gunner, SGT Roland “Sporty” McEachin steadily picked them off, one by one, using degraded gunnery techniques. Again, we were “Fighting the Tank!” After the dust settled, we learned that we had destroyed over 40 enemy vehicles before a BMP finally located our position and shot us in the grille doors. It was a wonderful day to be a tanker!

Five years later, I was assigned as a platoon sergeant in 3-8 Cavalry at Fort Hood, Texas. We were the first unit to draw the latest main battle tank in the Army's inventory, the M1A2. On draw day, I anxiously climbed into the turret of my new panzer and sat in the TC's seat. I could not believe my eyes. I looked around and was overwhelmed by the technological advances. I asked myself, “Is this a tank or a cubicle in someone's office?” Some of the advances were far beyond anything that I could imagine. The addition of a commander's independent thermal viewer (CITV) is, in my opinion, the most significant improvement made to the M1 family of

tanks. The “Designate” capability enables the crew to engage targets much faster by allowing the TC to acquire targets while the gunner engages another target simultaneously. But, the rest, to me, was “Jedi Tanking,” for lack of a better term. We went through new equipment training on our new panzers with great zeal and enthusiasm. We learned how to operate all of the digital systems of the tank. But, something wasn't right. We were being told to get down inside to fight the tank. I heard new terms like “Check your mail box!” I just may be an old DAT stuck in his ways, but this felt strange.

I am quite sure you are wondering how all of this relates to “Leadership in the Digital Age.” It is quite simple. Leadership is about *people*! My concern with the eye in the sky technology is we will lose sight of the real weapon we have in our inventory, that being the *American soldier*.

The new technologies such as IVIS, Pluggers, e-mail, and PowerPoint, to name a few, are only tools designed to enhance our capabilities. We must remember and continue to teach our soldiers the basics — to estimate range with the naked eye, read a map, walk across the street to speak to a colleague, stick your head out the hatch and assess the surrounding environment. These technologies can take us, as leaders, away from our troops if we allow them to. Interacting with our comrades instead of sending them a “digital burst” should always remain the preferred method.

In closing, I understand that many people in the Armor Community will throw stones at me for these random thoughts on the Digital Age, but I will always say, “*FIGHT YOUR TANK, SERGEANT!*”

MSG Dennis White is currently assigned to CMTC Hohenfels, Germany. He has served as tank platoon O/C, tank company O/C team NCOIC, and is currently the BRT Mustang 20 Team NCOIC. Prior assignments include PSG, A Co, 3-68 Armor and B Co, 3-8 Cav, 1st Cav, which was the first battalion to field the M1A2. Email: denniswhite surf.lde