

Operation Just Cause: The Armor-Infantry Team In the Close Fight

by Major Frank Sherman

Based on my experiences in Panama as the commander of Company C, 3rd Battalion (Airborne), 73rd Armored Regiment, I would like to highlight the versatility of the M551A1 Sheridan light tank. Its 152mm main gun, and its .50 caliber and coax machine guns, coupled with the modified M60A3 tank thermal sight (TTS) — arguably the best tank-mounted thermal sight in the force — produce an awesome amount of firepower, while its armor affords the crew a moderate level of protection. Because of the vehicle's compact design, light weight, parachute deployability, and modest support requirements, Sheridans deploy and maneuver where other heavier vehicles would bog down or be restricted. In short, the Sheridan remains the only armored, direct-fire weapon that can accompany the Airborne Infantry, beginning on the drop zone at P-hour.

Strategic Forcible Entry

On two separate occasions during the Panama operation, the Sheridan demonstrated its ability to strategically deploy. The first involved secretly air-landing one platoon of four Sheridans, two pallets of ammunition, two HMMWVs, a trailer, and 25 personnel on a single C5 Galaxy transport into Howard AFB, Panama. Once on the ground, four HETs quickly moved to the rear of the aircraft, and the Sheridans were off-loaded, covered, and moving out the front gate, on their way to their hide position — all before daylight. The second and larger deployment of ten Sheridans attached to 1st Brigade, 82d Airborne Division conducted history's first combat heavy drop of armored vehicles from six C-141 aircraft, into enemy territory, with

eight surviving the drop. As the Sheridans were readied for combat and crewed, they formed the nucleus of the brigade's firepower. Initial missions were to deter counterattack and support the infantry's simultaneous assault on four D-day objectives.

Striking the D-day Targets Forcing Roadblocks

Our first encounter with the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) occurred as the infantrymen of 1st Battalion, 504 Parachute Infantry Regiment, were establishing a supply route from Tocumen International Airport to their initial objective of Tinajitas. The convoy had only moved a few kilometers when it stopped to clear a roadblock located on a bridge. As the Sheridans moved to the edge of the highway to support the infantry, SSG Troxell, the lead tank commander, called me on the radio and stated, "This is a hell of a place for an obstacle, buildings all around and no cover. It looks like swamps on both sides of the road." As the infantry dismounted and began to execute their obstacle drill, they began receiving automatic weapons fire from the buildings no more than 50 meters away. The lead tank commander opened up with .50 caliber fire as the wing tank commander screamed to his gunner to identify the threat. A moment later, SFC Freeman, 1st Platoon sergeant, yelled, "I got 'em, concrete building, second floor, fourth window from the right." He fired a 152mm heat round at the target, ripping through the room, collapsing the right side of the building. The enemy fire stopped and the infantry finished clearing the roadblock.

Later that day, along the same route, we encountered another roadblock.



This barrier was well made, with cars wired together and what appeared to be propane tanks inside. Quickly analyzing the situation, we decided against the normal obstacle drill and opted to clear the roadblock with a 152mm heat round instead. The TC identified the middle red car, and the gunner engaged the target. We had to wait a few minutes for the fire to subside, and smoke to clear, then a Sheridan moved forward, pushing its way through the wreckage. There was no enemy response to our obstacle reduction, even though we were exposed for over five minutes. Maybe they had heard about their buddies guarding the other roadblock?

Urban Fighting at the Comandancia

At about the same time, fighting in and around La Comandancia was heating up. The remaining PDF defenders were going to stay and fight, so U.S. forces were preparing to go in after them. The 3rd Platoon leader, LT Kozar, knew from the radio traffic that fighting on the south wall of the Comandancia was intense. He was not surprised to be ordered to move there with a tank section and assist in the evacuation of wounded personnel. What did surprise him when he turned the corner was to see a burning M113 and PDF soldiers using the Comandancia's 10-foot-high wall as cover, shooting in all directions. LT Kozar ordered his gunner to, "take the wall out," and with one round make a hole large enough to drive his tank into the building's courtyard. As the Sheridan climbed what was left of the wall and began to enter, a bus attempting to block its advance was halted by the 152mm battlecarry HEAT round. With



Above, a 152-mm HEAT round from a Sheridan impacts on the Comandancia, military headquarters of the Panamanian defense forces.

Above left, the concrete wall surrounding the Comandancia after being penetrated by a 152-mm HEAT round.

At left, the remains of the bus that attempted to block LT Kozar's move into the Comandancia.

enemy fire subdued, LT Kozar backed his tank out, and the wounded were evacuated without incident.

APERS Engagements

The next day, LT Jennings, 2d Platoon leader, and his wingman moved slowly through the jungle and over a light bridge guided by an infantry squad from 4th Battalion, 325 Airborne Infantry Regiment. The battalion was preparing to assault the PDF's Ranger, Airborne, and Air Assault training base. LT Jennings was tasked to support by fire.

When the order was given to assault, the infantry commander used the Sheridan's rear deck telephone to lift and shift the tank's fire, helping to prevent fratricide. The wingman overwatched a road that was obscured by dense forest, which the AC-130 (SPECTRE) could not cover. During this assault, enemy personnel were identified moving along this road, and the Sheridan responded by firing a flechette round.

No enemy personnel attempted to counterattack down that route.

The rules of engagement specified that we identify a PDF soldier with a weapon or a combatant about to commit a hostile act before we could engage; hence, most of our engagements were directed at stationary targets at a range of 50-400 meters. Only once did we engage a moving target which occurred immediately after shooting two

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rounds into a building and the infantry moved forward to sort out the EPWs. The tanks were in the process of repositioning when, from around the building, came a yellow Toyota Corolla carrying PDF members attempting to escape. SGT Pennington, the tank's gunner, identified, fired, and hit the car before it could enter the highway...at a range of 100 meters.

Uniquely Suited to Armor-Infantry Close Battles

While the M551A1 General Sheridan has served the Army longer than any mount since the horse, it remains a lethal and versatile weapon system. Despite its age, Sheridan OR rates remain in the high 90s. Its unique ability to be delivered by parachute during the crucial airborne assault phase of a forced entry operation provides planners enormous flexibility — and the commander on the ground an enormous advantage. In contingency operations where METT-T often will not require a system capable of defeating massed formations of state-of-the-art main battle tanks, where airframes are always scarce, and where the in-country road net frequently limits the utility of our near 70-ton MBT, the M551A1 Sheridans of the Army's parachute tank battalion continue to offer the commander the decisive edge.

Major Frank Sherman is the operations officer of 3/73 Armor, Fort Bragg, N.C.