

# Korea, Vietnam, And Desert Storm

by Lieutenant Colonel Kris P. Thompson



M48 of the 34th Armor busts jungle in Vietnam.

After the refinement of mobile warfare in WWII, all nations in the civilized world breathed a collective sigh of relief and proceeded to dismantle their military forces. National will, eroded by costly world wars in two successive generations, caused a loss of priority, resources, and public support in the U.S. armed forces. In the midst of this degenerative period, the Army was asked to fight two undeclared wars.

## Korea – Constrained by Terrain

The failure to properly employ mobile units in both Korea and Vietnam serves as an example that an army can make the same mistake in two consecutive conflicts. Armor was helpful to the infantry in Korea, but was not employed in enough numbers to be a campaign winner. The armored units which were sent to Korea were broken up and employed by platoon or company the vast majority of the time. Even the breakout from Pusan in September 1950 — which could have and should have been a great opportunity for a blitzkrieg or COBRA-type breakout — was characterized by small armored task forces leading (mostly) motorized infantry divisions up mobility corridors. After a delayed breakthrough on the Naktong Line, MG Hobart Gay, commander of the 1st Cavalry Division, said “From now on, it’s a tank battle.”<sup>1</sup> Wishful thinking.

The spearhead of the Pusan breakout was Task Force Lynch, consisting of the 70th Tank Battalion and 3/7th Cavalry. Hardly the concentration of mobile forces

one would hope for to make an operational level exploitation and pursuit. Three days after TF Lynch began operations, General Walton Walker, commander of the Eighth Army, formed two other armor task forces hoping for a COBRA type breakout. It was not to be.

TF Lynch provides examples of the variety of problems faced by mobile combat units during the Korean War. The first problem was that the mission of TF Lynch was to link up with the Inchon invasion force, in furtherance of Eighth Army’s mission statement — which was to pressure the North Koreans to their front, preventing them from moving north to defend Seoul, and to link up with the invasion forces. This was not an inspired concept, as it did not contain a defeat mechanism, nor did it result in decisively winning a campaign.

MacArthur intended for the Seoul invasion forces to “cut the enemy’s supply line and seal off the entire southern peninsula.”<sup>2</sup> Only the first part of this purpose was accomplished. The problem here was that the vast majority of the few available mobile forces were not assigned to the enveloping force landing at Inchon, but instead they were with the direct pressure force, the Eighth Army, inside the Pusan perimeter. There is no doubt the Inchon invasion was highly effective in many respects. It cut the North Korean supply routes through Seoul, captured the largest airfield in the country, and had great psychological effect on both sides. But the failure to seal off the peninsula allowed large numbers of North Koreans

to retreat northward, prolonging the war until the Chinese could intervene.

The main problem, of course, was lack of mass. The final linkup was accomplished by TF Lynch after a hard firefight just south of Seoul. That was it. No sweeping movements across the enemy rear. No overrunning of enemy command posts and supply bases. No blocking of enemy retreat routes. No destruction of enemy artillery units. It sounded good in the press but, in reality, it did not have much effect at the operational level.

## Vietnam - Operational Chaos

Because of the experience with Pacific rim terrain in Korea, and the unfortunate results of the French in Indochina, planners for the Vietnam War initially ignored armored forces. Engineers completed an early terrain analysis which was very conservative in labeling GO - NO GO terrain. This stands in marked contrast to the Germans having Heinz Guderian, an armored officer, personally certify the Ardennes as trafficable for the 1940 campaign. In 1967, revised terrain studies indicated that armor could move cross country through the majority of South Vietnam. Battlefield experiences verified the decisiveness of armor in close combat, and the deployment of armor to Vietnam steadily increased between 1966-1970. By 1970, 46 percent of the combat troops were armored battalions.<sup>3</sup> This rose to 54 percent in 1971.

A new type of platform for mobile warfare came to fruition in Vietnam — the helicopter. Initially, helicopters were used

primarily as transports, but their tactical effectiveness led to innovative, aggressive development of many other ways to employ them. Because of their high value, both armor and aviation units found themselves being broken up and employed piecemeal. Better motor and suspension technology for tracked vehicles, along with the increased mobility of supporting aviation assets, gave mobile combat units even greater speed of movement than in WWII. 3d Squadron/11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) moved 200 miles in two days in order to be at the line of departure for the attacks into Cambodia in May 1970 during Operation Toang Thang 43. This particular operation illustrates the problems caused by piecemeal commitment and indecisiveness at the operational level.

The purpose of the operation was to attack enemy sanctuaries in Cambodia, which had been previously off limits. U.S. forces involved in the operation included 1st Cavalry Division (Air Assault), 25th Division, and the 11th ACR. Brilliant use of aviation and armor in mobile warfare led to success at the tactical level. Surprised enemy units were encircled and annihilated. Huge stocks of individual weapons, crew-served weapons, ammunition, and rice were captured. The penetrating forces overran an extensive logistics base with a fully equipped motor park, complete with grease racks and spare parts.<sup>4</sup> The 11th ACR was assigned two additional engineer companies to handle all the added demolition work. By the end of the operation, almost 10,000 tons of materiel and food had been destroyed and over 11,000 enemy soldiers killed.

Not all went well, though. One armor battalion had to be withdrawn after only a few days in the fight. This was in large part due to the piecemeal employment of the battalion previously with resulting logistical breakdowns. And, in the midst of this devastation on the enemy base of operations, President Nixon declared he was satisfied with the results and that American forces would be pulled out of Cambodia within 7 weeks. This prevented the operation from having decisive effect at the operational level. The value of the operation was to provide time for the South Vietnamese forces to build up and the U.S. forces to continue redeployment out of Vietnam — important, but certainly not a campaign winner.

We all remember the post-Vietnam era as the lowest point for mobile warfare since the early '30s. Everyone thought

the tank was a “has-been.” The '73 Arab-Israeli war supposedly proved that the ATGM was now the dominant tactical weapon. The artillery arm and the Air Force were still claiming they could win a war by themselves with new technology. Light infantry tactics were the “in” thing. Grenada and Panama were touted as the blueprints for all future conflicts.

There was constant pressure to conduct simulations, experiments, and studies on how to make the armor force relevant in a low intensity, light infantry fight.<sup>5</sup> The light cavalry regiment, AGS, and light/heavy concepts were the hot, current ideas. We felt we were on the verge of being ignored out of existence.

### Desert Storm

When older veterans compare Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, the difficulty and desperateness of the close fighting in Korea and Vietnam sometimes tend to cause them to mitigate the magnificent success of mobile forces in Desert Storm. Yet the result of Desert Storm and the resulting low casualty rate is a strong indication that the use of mobile forces in this campaign was of a very high order — by far the best use of mobile forces in the United States Army since the invention of the tank.

Because Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi senior leaders exercised very centralized control, the theater CINC, General Norman Schwarzkopf, felt Hussein's national communications facilities were a center of gravity. He also felt the Republican Guard, as the heart and soul of the Army, was its center of gravity. Destruction of the Republican Guard would leave Hussein without a means of enforcing his will — and, as a result, national will would quickly deteriorate. Thus, the target of the mobile forces was the Republican Guard. This is somewhat reminiscent of Sheridan's first attack against Stuart's cavalry. But there is an important distinction between the two, as Stuart's cavalry was not a center of gravity, while the Republican Guard certainly was. Schwarzkopf's method was a four-phased plan:

- Disrupt enemy command and control with air/smart weapons power;
- Gain air superiority;
- Cut enemy supply lines with air/smart weapons;
- Destroy the Republican Guard.<sup>6</sup>

The concept involved massing of mobile forces, surprise, indirect approach,

and destruction of the enemy center of gravity.

First, despite doubts as to whether surprise was feasible in the information age, both the fact of the attack and the location of the attack were totally unexpected by the Iraqis. Schwarzkopf intentionally waited until the air campaign had stopped Iraqi reconnaissance flights to displace VII Corps and XVIII Airborne Corps to the west. This prevented the Iraqis from detecting the movement.<sup>7</sup> The lack of a road net in the intended area of attack probably also led the Iraqis to discount the chances of an envelopment from the west.

Second, the plan called for an unprecedented massing of mobile forces in the main effort. To put things in perspective, in VII Corps — the main effort — General Franks commanded over 1,200 M1 series tanks, 1,400 Bradley Fighting Vehicles in US formations, as well as the 1st (UK) Armoured Division. This represented over 3,000 armored fighting vehicles — more than the entire German Wehrmacht fielded on the Western Front in 1940, and more than were in Patton's Third Army. In addition, XVIII Airborne Corps (paired with VII Corps in the envelopment) had a mechanized division, a light armored division, a light (motorized) division, and an air assault division. Since they were on the outside arc of the turning movement, it made sense for this corps to have predominantly lighter, faster units.

The maneuver concept for Desert Storm, according to General Fred Franks, came from General Colin Powell, who sketched the scheme of maneuver on hotel stationary for General Norman Schwarzkopf.<sup>8</sup> This episode somehow did not find its way into Schwarzkopf's book, where Schwarzkopf takes credit for the idea.<sup>9</sup> The scheme of maneuver called for the mobile forces in VII and XVIII Airborne Corps to envelop the Iraqi forces by moving through the lightly defended inland positions. This allowed the two corps to move around the main Iraqi linear positions along the Kuwait-Saudi border and into the Iraqi rear towards their main target — the Republican Guard. They avoided the strongly held enemy positions between their launch point and their objective. This put them into the enemy rear areas quickly, before the enemy could react.

The speed of the movement into the enemy rear was unparalleled. VII Corps attacked 170 miles in 89 hours — or about 45 miles a day.<sup>10</sup> One unit, 1st

Cavalry Division, moved almost 150 miles in one day during the attack. The 24th Infantry Division (Mech) probably moved further than any other division. It moved sixty miles into Iraq on the first day alone. These units moved at this incredible speed through sandstorms, rain, and the Republican Guard. And this, while each armored division was consuming 500,000 - 750,000 gallons of fuel per day.<sup>11</sup> This rate is comparable to the daily consumption of First and Third U.S. Armies in WWII of 850,000 for all 18 of their divisions combined. The corps as a whole consumed 6.2 million gallons of diesel fuel and 2.2 gallons of aviation fuel in 89 hours.<sup>12</sup>

### Projecting Into the Future

In 1936, the new French Chief of Staff, General Gamelin, smugly asserted, "All our information shows that it is our doctrine [as compared to the German panzer doctrine] which is correct."<sup>13</sup> Gamelin's smugness was based on the doctrine of defense, continuous front, containment, and fortification which had proved successful in WWI. Yet, only four years later, Gamelin said he was utterly "surprised," "shocked," and "astonished" by the German method of mobile warfare.<sup>14</sup> When prodded by Churchill about when he was going to counterattack the penetration of the panzers, Gamelin responded:

*"Inferiority of numbers, inferiority of equipment, inferiority of method' — and then a hopeless shrug of the shoulders. There was no argument. Here was the admission of the bankruptcy of a whole generation of French military thought and preparations."*<sup>15</sup>

Our Army certainly has justification for patting ourselves on the back for recent success, as well as a rich history of successful campaigns. We must not be drawn, however, into the same rigid, fixed mindset as the pre-WWII French high command, who relied on recent success to ignore developments in mobile warfare at the operational level. What do the trends of mobile warfare tell us about the characteristics of successful mobile warfare in the next generation?

#### *Use of Mobile Units in Mass at the Operational Level*

One lesson that seems to be continually relearned is that mobile units are most effective when massed at the operational level. That is to say, that mobile units

have decisive impact at the operational level where corps or armies are formed with units that move at the same speed, with the same level of mobility. It seems there is a countertrend of "critics" who appear after each war and pronounce the day of the tank and mobile warfare over. This train of thought normally appears very attractive to budget analysts and exponents of artillery or air power. Yet, time and time again, this has been proven wrong.

Thus, our force planners must stay focused at the operational level when task-organizing mobile forces for a campaign. The vast majority of available armored and mechanized divisions in a theater should be massed into a corps or multiple corps operating together. The smaller the deployed force is, the more important it is to mass mobile units. There are force developers who claim longer ranges for direct fire weapons mean fewer weapons systems are needed in a given space. While this theory holds true when comparing Napoleonic weapons systems and battles to weapons systems and battles in the 20th century — this theory has a limit imposed by terrain. If the average line of sight in Europe is 1500m, the utility of ground or near ground (e.g. helicopters in NOE mode) systems able to fire 4500m is minimal. Even Desert Storm, conducted in terrain which favors longer range weapons, proved that mass is still a necessary component of mobile warfare. Mass enables the attacking force to overcome enemy fires, the friction of movement — such as maintenance breakdown and inefficiency in road marches, and it enables the attacking force to attack along multiple supporting thrust lines.

Also, the drastic downsizing in the size of our active duty armored force severely hampers our ability to project a massed, mobile force of significant "weight" into a combat theater, let alone two theaters, while retaining a strategic reserve. We all recognize that we do not have the size of army necessary to even conduct one Desert Storm type of operation. Mobility, and the ability to shift combat power rapidly in a theater of war, is of critical importance in this environment.

The National Guard tank and mechanized infantry battalions, as well as their brigade and division headquarters, have now assumed a critical role. There is a current move afoot to wipe out these units and relegate the guard to CS and CSS roles. The argument for doing this is

illogical. Using Desert Storm as a blueprint, the Army does not have enough mounted units to deploy a sufficient amount to two "nearly simultaneous" regional conflicts, while maintaining a strategic reserve. Force planners are prostituting themselves to political or career pressure if they say otherwise. National Guard combat arms units are absolutely necessary to execute the stated strategy in the event of regional conflicts. If they are done away with, and the two "nearly simultaneous" conflicts occur, it would surely result in a splitting or piecemeal commitment of our few precious mounted units to the two different theaters. To expect units to fight in the first theater, then deploy "nearly simultaneously" to a second theater for another campaign, is pure fantasy. Consider for a moment how long it took to build up for Desert Storm with an army twice the size of what we have now.

#### *Is Surprise at the Operational Level of War still possible?*

One need only consider the number of campaigns which have been launched in the last 30 years which were a surprise to the opposing side — the Israeli preemptive strikes of 1967, the Tet Offensive of 1968, the Yom Kippur assault of the Egyptians in 1973, the Russian incursion into Afghanistan, the Panama invasion, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the Desert Storm offensive. Indeed, the improvements in communications, transportation, mobility and speed of weapons systems, have enhanced the ability to achieve surprise in a campaign.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Always, Always, Always, use the Indirect Approach*

Up until Desert Storm, the American fixation on firepower has repeatedly been a distraction from our development of mobile warfare. Of course, there is certainly nothing wrong with using firepower to inflict damage on the enemy, but firepower by itself — without movement — cannot win a campaign. One trend of mobile warfare is the repeated success shown in campaigns where the opening penetration by mobile units was through an enemy weak point. Manstein did not think his plan for the invasion of France in 1940 was anything particularly brilliant:

*"After all, we just did the obvious thing; we attacked the enemy's weakest point."*<sup>17</sup>

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One area to be on guard about is the tendency to underrate the ability of terrain to carry mounted forces. This turned out to be a critical factor in a number of campaigns including the 1940 campaign in France, the Ardennes in 1944, Korea, and Vietnam. Our terrain analysts at the strategic and operational levels must strive to include experienced armor officers and practical experience with armored vehicles in their studies.

*Faster, Deeper Penetrations or Envelopments to Operational Depth*

There is no doubt that the mobility and speed of mounted forces during penetrations and envelopments has consistently increased during modern warfare. We need to make changes which enhance our ability to take advantage of this trend.

- Cut the aviation units loose in their own corps and divisions. In articles and studies, it was mentioned that “It” would not be able to achieve breakthrough on its own, and that it was not independent enough. Further, “It has to go ahead, but then must return for fuel and supplies.”<sup>18</sup> In the initial operations where this weapon was used, critics complained of high breakdown rates (up to 30%) and that it was incapable of lengthy, sustained movement.<sup>19</sup> It was constantly threatened and suppressed from reaching fruition by other, older arms of the Army. Is this aviation we are talking about? No. Critics made these charges about armored forces prior to WWII.

We in the armor and infantry branches are guilty of close-mindedness regarding aviation. In the same way Sheridan and Guderian did not want to be “tied down” to the speed of the infantry, we should not tie the aviation units to the speed of movement of armor and mechanized units. The air assault and attack helicopter units should be used in mass (in divisions and even corps), to lead breakouts and envelopments into the enemy rear. They would fulfill the same function of light horse cavalry, and the light tank units in WWII. Using aviation in mass in the soft areas of the enemy rear — against command and control centers, logistics sites, and enemy reserves — would set the stage for the massed armored thrusts following on the ground. While the aviation units are not as well armored as armor and mechanized units, their speed of movement is obviously much higher. We should use each arm in a way that takes advantage of its respective strengths.

Of course, the aviators must be willing to “go cross-FLOT” with all their aircraft, operate using minimal planning time, and be responsive, flexible, and aggressive in movement. Their leaders must operate with the forward units from helicopter platforms, using “saddle orders,” and take initiative in the same way the leaders of high speed armored penetrations have in the past.

- Smaller, more mobile headquarters and staffs. Our headquarters at all levels are too fat. Reviewing the size of headquarters and the method of command used in successful mobile operations in the past discloses the need for small, very mobile headquarters. Desert Storm was a rude awakening for many battalion and brigade XOs forced to operate out of command posts on the move. General Franks’ method of commanding his corps was very similar to Rommel, Guderian, and Patton — forward with his subordinate units, giving saddle orders on the spot. The utility of a huge headquarters apparatus in the rear is significantly less in the mobile environment.

Armored divisions now have about the same number of tanks and tank battalions as their predecessors in WWII. Yet, headquarters are bigger, and there are more combat service support soldiers in the divisions. Further, technology has made leaps and bounds in communications and information management since WWII. One would think all this progress would reduce the number of people necessary to run a headquarters. Could we form more tank battalions by cutting headquarters personnel at all levels by 50 percent? You bet.

Also, we should eliminate any 2½-ton, 5-ton, or HEMTT truck which is supposed to carry “baggage” for headquarters or any unit for that matter. By this I mean trucks which carry duffel bags, tents, plywood map boards, folding chairs, tables, cots, etc. Fewer trucks in march units means greater throughput of units on routes of march.

- Reduce fuel consumption. Our Achilles’ heel in mobile warfare with our current and projected combat vehicles is fuel. The engines which propel tanks, Bradleys, and helicopters achieve unprecedented speed for weapons systems...while consuming unprecedented amounts of fuel. Fuel will no doubt be, and always has been, necessary for movement. But, any reduction in the con-

sumption rate would enhance overall speed of movement and make losses incurred by our fuel truck fleet less devastating. We need a new tank engine that significantly cuts fuel consumption. Reducing consumption also means fewer fuel trucks moving on a route, which would again increase throughput of units on the route.

- Train for operational level penetrations and envelopments. We have a total absence of training for operational level penetrations in the units which must execute them. Neither CTCs nor Warfighter exercises train operational level movements. We need a training mechanism which complements these great tactical training events with training in long range, sustained movement. We have all heard stories about horse cavalry and armor units before WWII conducting road marches hundreds of miles in length. We should do the same periodically. We should have some simulation exercise for staffs at brigade, division, corps, and army level to conduct penetrations and envelopments with mobile units to operational depth.

What should mobile units aim for when they penetrate or envelop an enemy force? There seems to be no clear agreement or trend on “the best” target for mobile units after they have penetrated or enveloped an enemy force. Sheridan and Swartzkopf aimed at the enemy mobile reserve. Guderian and Patton preached avoiding enemy strengths and aiming at isolating enemy units, destroying or displacing the “soft” targets, and disrupting enemy command and control. Our current operational doctrine says that the essence of operational art lies in being able to mass effects against the enemy center of gravity.<sup>20</sup> Since each potential enemy may have a different center of gravity, perhaps there is no “right” target for mobile combat units. Having said that, planners must take advantage of the relative strengths of armor/mechanized units (characterized by heavier armor, moderate mobility, and heavier firepower) and aviation units (characterized by lighter armor, higher mobility, and lighter firepower).

We should also continue to develop anti-tank missile technology. Having ATGM units available which can provide defense against enemy tanks will allow us to mass armored units at the operational level for attacking the enemy. If our light infantry is unable to defend it-

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self against tanks, and requires attachment of tanks in a defensive mode, it will reduce our ability to concentrate forces at the operational level. The further our drawdown goes, the more important this phenomenon becomes.

One must also acknowledge that the characteristics of armored forces and aviation are slowly drifting towards each other. The tank and infantry fighting vehicle is getting faster, and the helicopter is carrying heavier armor and weapons than previously. Perhaps 50 or 100 years from now the difference will not exist — there could be one platform able to operate on the ground with heavy armor and firepower, but able to move through the air. That, as they say, is another story.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hoyt, *On to the Yalu* (Jove Books, 1991) p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Crest Books, 1965) p. 397.

<sup>3</sup>Starry, *Armored Combat in Vietnam* (Arno Press, Inc. 1980) p. 199.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>5</sup>CPT John Wintels and I authored an article for the September-October 1990 issue of *In-*

*fantry Magazine* entitled "Tanks with Infantry" in large part due to this type of mindset.

<sup>6</sup>Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (Bantam Books, 1992), p. 381.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>8</sup>Clancy and Franks, *Into the Storm: A Study in Command* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1997) p. 218.

<sup>9</sup>Schwarzkopf said the plan he briefed his commanders on was "a fully realized version of the envelopment I'd proposed to Powell three weeks before." Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (Bantam Books, 1992) p. 382. Schwarzkopf, after making snide remarks about General Franks throughout his book, admitted that "...I'd been too harsh in my criticism of VII Corps slow progress during the ground battle." (emphasis added) Franks led the largest armored corps in *U.S. Army history* in the fastest penetration in *history*. Tom Clancy and Franks address Schwarzkopf's criticisms in fine style in their book — which is a much better read, too.

<sup>10</sup>Clancy and Franks, p. 445.

<sup>11</sup>Clancy and Franks, p. 414.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>13</sup>Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (Penguin Books, 1988) p. 105.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 426, fn.1.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 447.

<sup>16</sup>Ephraim Kam, as quoted in Summers, *On Strategy II: A Critical Analysis of the Gulf War*

(Dell Publishing, 1992) p. 218.

<sup>17</sup>Horne, p. 659, fn. 8.

<sup>18</sup>Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940*, p. 105.

<sup>19</sup>Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (Ballantine Books, 1972) pp. 34-5.

<sup>20</sup>*FM 100-5 Operations* (1993) pp. 6-7.

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LTC Kris P. Thompson is the commander of 2-185th Armor, California Army National Guard. He has previously served as cavalry troop commander, squadron S4, and troop XO with the 1/11th ACR, headquarters troop commander for 4/11th ACR (Air Cavalry), staff officer with VII Corps during Desert Storm, brigade S3 for 2d Brigade, 40th Infantry Division (Mech), and battalion XO for 2-185th Armor. He is a graduate of CGSC and the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff Course. He received a B.S. in accounting from Kansas State University and a J.D. (law) from the University of Kansas.