



Photo by Robert L. Stevenson

The Bugle Calls:

Armor on the Modern Battlefield

by Major James K. Morningstar

Is there a role for armor on the new modern battlefield? This article examines that question and finds there is a role for armor, a vital role, but one that will require a change in armor structure and thought.

For many years, the United States Army was organized and trained to act in concert with the other services to meet and defeat the forces of the Soviet Union in battle on the fields of Europe.

In large part this strategic mission translated into a requirement to have a robust armored force that could defeat masses of Soviet tanks. Through nuclear deterrence and massive retaliation, through flexible response on a deep battlefield, to high maneuver Air-Land Battle doctrine, America's armored force prepared to stop a Soviet attack and then seize the initiative. The fact that the Soviets had a well defined and publicized tactical doctrine, evolved from linear methods employed since Napoleon, enabled American planners to fine-tune strategy and tactics to meet the threat.

With the collapse of the Soviets, this specific threat also collapsed. Still, the

nation faced challenges from proxies who employed Soviet equipment and tactics. On battlefields like Iraq in 1991, the Army proved supremely prepared to meet such challenges. The armor force, fielding unmatched 70-ton M1 Abrams main battle tanks, demonstrated surprising dominance in combat.

In the ten years since, the world has sought to evolve in adaptation to the performance of America's arms. The United States military has, in turn, searched to identify the characteristics of the next threat so as to redesign itself to maintain the ability to win. As former Soviet clients fell away and others lost faith in the doctrine and weapons employed by the Iraqis, new varieties and asymmetric methods appeared on the threat horizon. For the American military, especially during fiscally tight times, the new environment posed a very difficult question: how does one build a force to win possible simultaneous engagements in places as diverse as Korea, the Middle East, and unforeseeable Third World locations? The range of possible engagements stood in stark contrast to the previously expected

fields of battle for America's armor force.

The changing post-Cold War strategic environment met the austere military budget that typically follows whenever America overcomes a major threat. This combination led the U.S. military establishment to agree on one point: America's armed forces would have to be deployable. Forward positions in Europe were of little help if the threat was elsewhere, and no money was available to build forces everywhere. For the armor community, this task was daunting in many ways. The U.S. Air Force's largest transport aircraft, the C-5, can only carry one 70-ton M1 main battle tank and then only at a high cost to its operational capability. On a given day, the Air Force has about 120 available C-5s, the Army has purchased 7,880 M1s since 1981, and the two systems are usually located far apart.

By 1994, armor doctrine confirmed that, "The land warfare strategy of the U.S. military has changed,"¹ and noted "large, forward-deployed forces" were being replaced by "rapidly projecting combat power from CONUS." Armor

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leaders prepared doctrine to employ a lighter than 25-ton M8 ‘light tank’ (the Armored Gun System) that could deploy and “operate with light infantry-based contingency forces worldwide.” Armed with the low-recoil 105mm M35 main gun and reconfigurable armor, M8 crews were expected to provide “...security, reconnaissance, and anti-armor firepower to the light infantry division (LID)...” and “...engage and destroy enemy forces using mobility, firepower, and shock effect in coordination with other combat arms.”² In 1993, the Army requested 237 M8s for \$1.3 billion, but fiscal austerity reduced those figures to 26 vehicles for \$142.8 million in 1996 and then altogether eliminated the program in 1997 as a money-saving measure.³

The M8 was touted as a means to support operations other than war, to include: counterinsurgency, anti-terrorism, relief operations, shows of force, noncombatant evacuation, and peace-keeping operations. In war, it could support the infantry during close assaults, reduction of bunkers and roadblocks, urban operations, defense, mobile reserve, and rear area operations. Light armor was anticipated to provide exceptional security and reconnaissance support. When enemy anti-tank capability was not present, the M8 could conduct standard armor missions of movement to contact, hasty attack, deliberate attack, exploitation, and pursuit.

The problem with the M8, and the rationale for its cancellation, was that there already existed a weapon system that could perform these missions: the M2/3 Bradley Fighting Vehicle. In essence the M8 was a Bradley with a larger main gun, no TOW launcher, and less infantry carrying capability. If you were an infantry commander, which vehicle would you prefer to support you?

The short life cycle of the M8 left an important lesson. It was born out of a need to have an armored vehicle light enough to deploy quickly to meet the threat wherever it may appear. It died because it could not offer significant ability to meet the threat in comparison to existing systems. Simply put, it was designed to meet operational limitations (lift capability), not operational needs (specific threat abilities).

Now the strategic environment once again seems to change. In the current war against terrorism, we see the outlines of the modern battlefield. Operations against small bands of guerrilla forces in Africa, Afghanistan, or the Asian periphery are becoming the norm. In such operations, a tank can be very persuasive, and the absence of a tank can be downright tragic.

These threats cannot be considered disabled by the mere presence of an armored vehicle. Equipped with recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and anti-tank mines, small enemy bands in Mogadishu and Kabul do not fear light armored vehicles. Some reports claim a Soviet-built RPG-7V shaped charge round can penetrate the equivalent of 12 inches of cold-rolled steel. The proliferation of future fire-and-forget anti-tank weapons will decrease the effectiveness of light armored vehicles in such environments. In field tests and the Gulf War, however, the M1 tank demonstrated near invulnerability to these threats.

On the battlefields in Afghanistan, the combination of Special Forces teams supported by indigenous militia and combined with air-delivered precision munitions proved more than adequate to turn the tide against a once respectable Taliban ground force. And they did it with almost no armor support. The Special Forces teams hunted down enemy positions, sometimes containing single tanks, and guided devastating airpower against them. Allied tribesmen provided manpower for hasty defenses and attacks when needed. Against such a force, Taliban armor proved little more than a target for the United States Air Force.

What role would American armor play on this modern battlefield? Maybe none, in a place like Afghanistan. If, however, we look at what happened in recent fights in places like Somalia, and what could have happened in Kosovo, a role for armor becomes clear and necessary. In Somalia, clan militias caused havoc with heavy machine guns mounted on the back of pick-up trucks. In Kosovo, a well-equipped modern army modified its operations to mitigate the effect of American airpower.

In his letter to Congressman Murtha following the Battle of Mogadishu, Task Force Ranger Com-

mander MG William F. Garrison wrote, “Armor reaction would have helped but casualty figures may or may not have been different.”⁴ It is hard to believe the disastrous outcome could not have been alleviated by support from a single Abrams tank platoon. Parting mobs, suppressing militia positions, and breaking through ad hoc roadblocks, tanks would have protected the force, enabled quicker operational tempo, and drawn fire away from more vulnerable personnel and equipment. Although the entire operation seemed vexed, it seems assured that tanks there would have saved lives — American and Somali.

In Kosovo, the ability of airpower to nullify enemy armor appears open to debate. Although NATO claimed to have destroyed 93 Serb tanks and nearly 500 other military vehicles,⁵ the Munitions Effectiveness Assessment Teams found only 26 tank hulks (also reported by some as 14 tanks and 12 self-propelled artillery vehicles) and 18 armored personnel carriers and assumed the other 500-plus kills had been removed by the Serbs.⁶ Air Force Colonel Ed Boyle of the Combined Air Operations Center said civilian traffic and bad weather allowed the Serbs “...periods during this entire campaign when they could freely move around the battlefield, move equipment, and reposition it.”⁷

In later testimony before the House of Commons regarding the BDA tallies, Vice Admiral Sir Alan West, the British Chief of Defense Intelligence said, “I think probably they were optimistic.”⁸ Photos appeared of plastic bridges and tanks used to effectively decoy bombers away from actual targets. On 15 May 2000, *Newsweek* magazine openly challenged the validity of the BDA claims and reported actual results were far lower.⁹

I must confess that I am a true believer in airpower. As a tank company commander in the Gulf War, I passed too many smoking Iraqi hulks to doubt the power of the United States Air Force. That said, one must allow for the limitations of airpower. Weather can turn bad. Decoys can be effective. Enemies can develop anti-aircraft capabilities. Close air support aircraft are

not always available.¹⁰ Even when they are, the need for targeting support from systems ranging from ground-based radar to reconnaissance satellites might require too large a footprint to be feasible in certain operational environments. In these situations, the accurate and heavy firepower of tanks would be a highly desirable presence supporting forces engaged.

Does the infantry community think tanks can play a part in modern combat? Their doctrine says: "Heavy forces help infantry by leading them in open terrain and providing them a protected, fast-moving assault weapons system. They suppress and destroy enemy weapons, bunkers, and tanks by fire and maneuver. They also provide transport when the enemy situation permits."¹¹ My company team (and three others) provided all this support and more to the infantry units of the 1st Infantry Division during the attack into Iraq.

Infantry doctrine also points out (and this is key): "However, tanks and infantry must work closely. In most operations where they work together, infantrymen must establish direct contact with individual tanks. They will not have time to designate target or direct fires through the platoon chain of command. Infantrymen and tankers must know how to communicate by radio, phone, and visual signals."¹² I never worked with the infantry platoon assigned to my unit prior to our arrival in the Gulf. In the small unit operations on today's battlefields, platoon and section leaders must be able to work closely with infantry and Special Forces teams on the ground. That kind of cooperation requires a high degree of training and familiarity with specific tactical missions.

What kind of tactical missions would armor have to perform on the modern battlefield? The same kind foot soldiers currently face. Out of the broad spectrum of current American armor missions, today's fights focus on relatively small, light, and fast-moving operations. With the threat breaking free of the rigid Soviet tactical doctrinal model, and most likely not capable of massed armor attacks, modern combat is reduced to raids, ambushes, and movements to contact. Of course any conflict with countries like Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and China would probably require massed armor engagement, but these countries would most likely first test American strength in smaller proxy conflicts.

Raids, ambushes, and movements to contact are not unknown to the cavalry; they are the tactics of the western frontier. To win in them, one requires speed, firepower, protection, and maneuverability — the very characteristics of armor. One must also be able to operate with relatively slower, lighter, and more vulnerable infantry. In the scale of battle found in Somalia and Afghanistan, these operations do not require large formations of tanks. The requirement is not lighter *tanks*, but lighter *formations*. Most importantly, it requires teams highly trained for movement to contact operations.

Armor can make a vital contribution in today's combat environment if tankers are properly trained to conduct raids, ambushes, and movement to contact as part of a small team with Special Forces, infantry, and indigenous allies. They must be able to operate in an uncertain environment without doctrinal templates of enemy formations and situational templates of enemy positions. The tankers in such an operation must be able to contribute planning considerations for armor and teach others how to work with tanks. Currently, at the small unit level, armor does not train for raids, does not emphasize ambushes, and does not adequately conduct movement to contact with allied dismounted infantry.

Infantry doctrine defines an ambush as "a surprise attack from a concealed position on a moving or temporarily halted target."¹³ The armor definition deletes the reference to a concealed position.¹⁴ How many armor lieutenants have trained with infantry in constructing a hasty or deliberate, point or area, linear or L-shaped ambush? How many infantry lieutenants would like to have a tank section to assist them in an anti-armor ambush? Constructing a well-covered kill zone with obstacles, employing assault, support and security elements, and executing a well-timed operation are skills requiring training.

A raid is defined as "a combat operation to attack a position or installation followed by a planned withdrawal."¹⁵ Infantry does not conduct squad-level raids; they are rather highly choreographed platoon- and higher-level operations. Is there a role for tanks in a raid? The initial operation to seize warlords in Somalia was a raid, and clearly tanks could have gotten the convoys through, helped secure the buildings and crash sites, and broke through to the crashed helicopters.

Armor leaders are familiar with movement to contact, but we do not do it well at the small unit level. Junior officers and NCOs need to read the terrain and anticipate how an enemy, free of the constraints of "threat doctrine," would use it — and how friendly dismounts would use it. They must understand how concentrating fires differs from massing troops. Finally they must have the confidence in their independent decision-making required to maneuver on the enemy and get every gun into the fight. They need these abilities and more, without a company or battalion commander spoon-feeding them instructions.

This last point cannot be emphasized enough. When I was a tank battalion S3, I sat down with nearly every lieutenant from our unit who had decided to leave the Army. I would ask them why they were leaving and, inevitably, they would say they were given little opportunity to lead their platoons. Training schedules were full of sergeant's time, command maintenance, family time, consideration of others training, and other command-directed events. There were so few opportunities to go to the field that most of these events were dominated by company commanders anxious to exercise their chance to command. Even PT was dictated by three-star policy on when to begin, when to end, what exercises to perform, and how far to run. On the rare occasion when a lieutenant could decide his own course of action, many felt discouraged from taking a chance for fear of failing and earning a lower rating. Some said they knew a 'three block' on a platoon leader OER meant never getting a chance to command a battalion. Who wanted to stick around in that kind of Army?

Now we need those guys. The threat environment demands the presence of Armor, not battalions but platoons. We need independent thinking lieutenants who can take command, take a risk, and take the fight to the enemy. We need to develop men everyday who can perform that role under the conditions faced in places like Afghanistan. To build such tank commanders, leaders and trainers just have to keep in mind the original motto of the United States Armor Corps: "Treat 'Em Rough!"

Some say we need a new light armor system to get to the modern battlefield. Maybe, but probably not. Because the small scale and tactical composition of current operations requires fewer tanks

in support of infantry, and the enemy is able to face up to light armor systems, we can and should use our existing main battle tank. We may only be able to fly one Abrams tank per C-5 or C-17, but the requirement for fewer tanks means we can get by with current means. That is not to say a future 30-ton tank is not desirable, but it is not absolutely necessary. As Patton said, "The best is the enemy of the good. By this I mean that a good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan next week." The M1 is plenty good.

If we do operate with a few forward-deployed platoons, we must make some changes in their support network. Large forward-deployed maintenance depots will not be feasible for forward-deployed platoons. Forward-deployed spare tanks are feasible. A small maintenance team may go forward and rotate the crew to a fresh tank when necessary and extract broken tanks out of theater for repairs.

Fuel and POL will also have to be delivered and packaged in new ways. Armor can borrow Forward Air Refuel Point (FARP) techniques from aviators. Envision a blivet C-47 flying to a forward rendezvous point when necessary to refuel M1s on the move. We did something similar when I was an S4 for 1/4 Cavalry in 1988. It can still be done.

A possible immediate solution to the challenges of providing armor to the global hotspots today would be the creation of two companies of deployable platoons. Locating one at Fort Lewis and one at Fort Bragg would enable cross training with Special Forces and co-location with air transportation assets. They could be manned with highly qualified volunteers, cross-trained for special skills like FARP fuel handling, and outfitted with satellite communications gear. I'm certain many old commanders like me would gladly take a reduction in rank to be a part of such a unit.

Armor can play a role on the modern battlefield. After watching the depiction of *Black Hawk Down* in the theaters, most Americans are realizing armor must play a role on the modern battlefield. The benefits tanks offer to our soldiers in combat is immense. Support and technical challenges can be overcome with a little brainpower and administrative muscle as long as forward-deployed armor elements are small but effective. The bigger challenge is in breaking the mindset that platoon and section leaders cannot op-

erate without company and battalion commanders. This can only be solved by instilling in the Armor Corps a little of the old cavalry and tanker mindset.

Notes

¹See introduction *FM 17-18, Light Armor Operations*, 8 March 1994.

²Ibid.

³See Military Analysis Network at <http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/m8-ags.htm>.

⁴MG Garrison letter "Operation on 3/4 Oct. '93 in Mog" addressed to the House National Security Committee to be shown to President Clinton and Secretary of Defense Aspin.

⁵NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe briefing 16 September 1999. Based on an assessment made by 35 experts, under USAF BG John D. W. Corley, examining 429 bombing sites on the ground.

⁶See Stephen T. Hosmer, *The Conflict Over Kosovo: Why Milosevic Decided to Settle When He Did*, Chapter 7, "Damage to Military Forces and KLA 'Resurgence' Generated Little Pressure," the Rand Corporation, p. 83.

⁷Quoted by John Tirpak in "Survey Shows NATO Close on Serb Damage Estimates" in *Air Force Magazine*, November 1999, Volume 82, Number 11.

⁸House of Commons Select Committee of Defence Testimony Minutes of Evidence, 29 March 2000.

⁹John Barry and Evan Thomas, "The Kosovo Cover-Up," *Newsweek*, May 15, 2000, pp. 23-26.

¹⁰For example, Task Force Hawk's AH-64 Apache attack helicopters in Kosovo never got into the fight.

¹¹*FM 7-8, Infantry Rifle Platoon and Squad*, section 2-44.

¹²*FM 7-8*, section 2-45.

¹³*FM 7-8*, section 3-17 through 3-22.

¹⁴*FM 71-1, Tank and Mechanized Infantry Company Team*, section 6.

¹⁵*FM 7-8*, section 3-23.

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