



HQ 33 from A/1-77 Armor guards a Serb church in Klokot, Kosovo province.

An Armor Battalion in Kosovo

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Sending a tank battalion to the Balkans to conduct peace operations is no longer as strange an idea as it might once have seemed; in fact, it is now routine. The implementation of a tank battalion as part of KFOR (Kosovo Force) is still, however, fraught with challenges. This article will highlight some of the unique aspects of the mission faced by a U.S. Army tank battalion deployed to Kosovo. It will begin with some general points concerning the mission as a whole, then move on to address specific lessons learned by the Steel Tigers of the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor, and will close with some thoughts for future deployments of tank battalions to the region.

KFOR's mission is to (1) enforce the provisions of the Military Technical Agreement (MTA) between NATO and the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) and the Undertaking for the Demilitarization of the Kosovo Liberation Army, (2) to establish and maintain a safe and secure environment including public safety and order, (3) and to provide assistance to the UN Mission to Kosovo (UNMIK), to include providing core civil functions. At the battalion task force level this translates into: (1) enforcing the terms of these international agreements with the Serbian military along the border with FRY and inside Kosovo with the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), (2)

providing law and order at all levels by serving as the police, and (3) working with the UN to establish local civic administrations and supervise their functioning, and working with the IGOs/NGOs to provide relief to the region.

An Unstabilized Situation

The mission in Kosovo is not just another Bosnia mission with a new name. Although nearly all active-duty tank battalions now have soldiers who are veterans of a deployment to Bosnia, previous Balkan experience proves to be a double-edged sword. The situation in Kosovo is in no way stabilized and the nature of the

mission changes on a weekly basis. The mission of KFOR is more akin to IFOR, not SFOR; the routine has yet to be established. There is no zone of separation, no effective international police force, no functioning civic governments, very few public services, and the economy is just above subsistence level. For most intents and purposes, KFOR serves as the military, the police, and the government.

Tankers as Nation-Builders

Tankers in Kosovo can expect to conduct a lot of tactical and road movements, sometimes coming under and returning fire. They can expect to function as police for crime prevention, apprehension, and investigation, and adjudication of property disputes. In the area where TF 1-77 is now deployed, a major operational issue is the protection of the minority Serb, Croat, and Roma (Gypsy) populations against random and deliberate acts of violent revenge by Albanians. They should be prepared to work with business owners to set up work rules for ethnically mixed work forces.

Tankers may also find themselves developing school registration and districting policies. Tankers will spend time guarding everything from their own company CPs, to religious structures, to schools, to medical facilities and finally, providing convoy escort for civilian vehicles as they traverse ethnically hostile areas. They should be prepared to clean up the gruesome aftermath of fatal machine gun, mortar, RPG, and grenade attacks on civilians, including children, and to treat traumatic gunshot and fragmentation wounds as well as other injuries.

As in Bosnia, there are no clear "good guys" or "bad guys." Yet unlike Bosnia, ethnic populations in Kosovo are interspersed with one another in either mixed communities of mutually hostile Albanians and Serbs, or Serb enclaves surrounded by hostile Albanian communities committed to revenge. The international police force is just now beginning to arrive in Kosovo and is a long way from providing normal police functions. The majority of a unit's time is spent doing police work.

Although ethnic tensions are commonplace throughout Bosnia, what immediately distinguishes Kosovo is the high level of violence occurring on a daily basis. Usually the violence is directed against the minority population and only occasionally against the soldiers of KFOR. In the first six weeks of peace operations in our area of operations (AO),

there were at least 11 homicides and over 100 acts of armed attacks, arson, and looting. Although the violence has diminished somewhat by September (time of this article), there is little chance that it will disappear completely.

Another difference from Bosnia is the disposition of U.S. forces. Rather than being confined to a base camp with daily missions originating from and finishing in the base camp, the vast majority of maneuver units' assets are positioned and live within the assigned areas of responsibility. Day-to-day operations are conducted at the company level and lower, with the battalion task force providing guidance and resources; this is a platoon- and company-level "fight." Operating in this fashion creates a number of benefits and challenges. By living within the local area, leaders and soldiers are able to develop a thorough understanding of the ethnic makeup of the population, identify local concerns, and establish meaningful relationships with the people in the area. Instead of doing a "drive-by" patrol once or twice a day, soldiers are always present in the community and, in turn, reassure a threatened minority population.

Naturally, living within the AOR and outside of Camps Bondsteel and Monteth involves risk as well. Force protection is more difficult, and those resources dedicated to maintaining command posts, living support areas, and force protection detract from other missions, such as presence patrols and manning checkpoints. In the current fluid situation, such risks are far outweighed by the benefit of having a continuous presence. Living and operating with the local community provides the only hope of understanding the dynamics on the ground and being able to respond to disturbances in a timely fashion. It is also the long-term presence and continuity of personnel that allows the civilian population to trust the tankers.

Specific Issues Related to a Tank Battalion in Kosovo

When it comes to shock effect, mobility, and sheer intimidation, the M1A1 has no rival in peacekeeping operations. It provides the maneuver commander with a tremendous asset that allows rapid and unmatched escalation in times of crisis. The arrival of M1A1s during a firefight or a civil disturbance serves to quiet the situation rather quickly. It is vital that a tank battalion remains in the American sector of Kosovo for it provides a useful deterrent against any cross-border intervention from Serbia. Usually, it is a combination of assets: tanks at a checkpoint

in combination with intensive dismounted patrols and occasional mounted patrols that provide the best solution. At the battalion task force level, we are task organized with two tank companies, one mechanized infantry company and one airborne infantry company, giving us a very flexible set of capabilities.

Implementing a tank battalion in the Kosovo environment also presents some unique challenges of its own. First of all, the sheer size and weight of the M1A1

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tank makes its use in the rural Vitina Obstina (county) of Kosovo a daily challenge. The transportation infrastructure of Kosovo was already fragile before the bombing campaign, and it is now even more precarious. While trafficability in itself is not a problem for our tanks, the damage they cause works against the long-range goal of bringing Kosovo to an improved state of economic viability. Simply put, over the long run, our tanks (and Bradleys) will destroy the roads and bridges, and will worsen those fields and parking areas where we place them. Thus, the use of the tanks must be weighed against the damage they will do in every situation in which they are used.

Maneuvering in a Small Place

The crowded nature of the villages and towns of Kosovo pose a second problem in the use of armored vehicles. Narrow streets and congested traffic serve to complicate an already bleak urban situation. The overabundance of curious children and reckless drivers increases the risk of civilian casualties every time tanks are employed. The arrival of up-armored HMMWVs (M1114) in the near future should alleviate a majority of these problems.

Even though it was sometimes difficult to integrate the use of armor into the symphony of peacekeeping operations, the presence of heavy forces did provide a great opening movement to display to the local population that law and order



A soldier from TF 1-77 Armor provides security during a search of the village of Zitinje.

had arrived. An initial “thunder run” throughout the AOR served to announce that our major combat forces had entered the area and communicate our high level of resolve. Initial visibility was further enhanced by using tanks to support traffic control points (TCPs) along major MSRs, and by using tanks to conduct mounted patrols between villages. How better to protect a facility at risk than to park a 70-ton chariot of destruction next to it? We let the population know what our priorities were by placement of our tanks. This tactic was especially effective when the facility was located adjacent to a major LOC. Also, clamping down on an area of increased violence usually meant an increased presence of tanks at TCPs or on commanding terrain overlooking the area in question. The psychological effect of armor provides a distinct advantage but only if ones takes conscious measures to increase its visibility.

Coupled with the tank’s psychological effect, the weapons capabilities of the M1A1 bring a lot to peacekeeping operations. From well-chosen terrain, a tank can observe and engage targets over one mile away in all weather conditions. This capability proved very useful in providing security for Serb farmers harvesting their crops and for deterring the “bad guys” from attempting to dismount and bypass secured and established KFOR checkpoints along roads. Mounted OPs utilizing the tank’s thermal sight (TIS) are extremely effective in anti-mortar and other security operations. The TIS can also be used to vector friendly dismounts to suspected “bad guys” from a great distance. When addressing the subject of using tanks for security missions, technology, terrain analysis and a little discipline can go a long way in stretching your span of control.

In Kosovo, tankers must be prepared to participate not only in traditional mounted operations but also in dismounted patrols as well. The necessity to get in close with the local population and the shortage of infantrymen require that

tankers dismount to patrol. This is a role for which most tankers are unprepared. Therefore, tank battalions preparing to deploy to Kosovo must train dismounted patrolling.

Instead of throwing our hands up in disgust, we chose to adapt. We quickly accepted the fact that our tankers would dismount and addressed the following shortfalls:

Organization: Faced with only 16 soldiers in the platoon (versus 30 in an infantry platoon), we created small four-man “fire teams” based on the tank crews. Presence patrols are normally conducted at the fire team or squad level. We essentially use the tank crew and section as an infantry fire team or squad, with a contingency to “mount up” when required. It also allows the other section to perform security, maintenance, and serve as a QRF if needed. Additionally, this maintains the normal command relationships essential to maintain small unit integrity.

Equipment: Once we created our fire teams, we faced the problem of how to equip them. Each tank platoon has only eight M16s, no dismounted communications, and no crew-served weapons. While only two of the crewmembers are qualified on the M16s, we accepted that it is better to have a rifle than a pistol on a patrol. We conducted familiarization firing prior to deployment in an attempt to offset the qualification problem.

In order to provide dismounted communications, we transferred some of the dismount radio kits from the scouts and mortars to the tank companies. We have not yet been fielded the M240 dismount kit. Luckily, our scouts and headquarters fielded the M240B. Instead of turning in the displaced M60s, we transferred those to the tank companies for their use.

Training: While not accustomed to conducting dismounted operations, our tankers proved they could rapidly adapt. Based on TTPs learned from the various

infantry manuals (FM 7-7, 7-8, 7-7J), our small unit leaders quickly developed SOPs to deal with the missions we are likely to encounter. These missions include vehicle and personnel searches, reacting to a sniper, reacting to direct fire, entering and searching a building, and detaining suspects. Combat Lifesaver training is an absolute must; the more tankers trained to do this the better. The battalion developed SOPs on threat assessment, mission planning, pre-combat checklists, and risk reduction to aid platoons and companies in their daily operations. We also learned a great deal from having an airborne infantry company attached to the battalion task force.

Learning and applying the ROE and operating with live ammunition on a daily basis proved to be more challenging than we expected. In comparison to other deployments, the liberal ROE establishes a lower threshold for firing and using deadly force, and grants that authority to leaders at the lowest level. Leaders must apply their best judgment in a very complex environment. USKFOR has also developed a Weapons Control Status (WCS) which guides the use of ammunition and weapons. Soldiers must clear their weapons before entering a base camp, WCS GREEN. Soldiers must load a magazine whenever they leave their base camp, WCS AMBER. Any leader is entrusted to order WCS RED (round in the chamber) or WCS BLACK (round in the chamber and weapon off SAFE) if they believe their mission requires it and to open fire when necessary without permission from higher headquarters. Ensuring that leaders and soldiers understand the ROE and WCS policies is a matter of life and death.

Of course, no professional discussion of employment of armor would be complete without discussing logistics. We took great measures to get our breaching assets (tank mine plows and rollers) fully mission capable prior to deployment. The first two weeks of operations included numerous hours of mine clearing and proofing, resulting in a significant increase in our use of class IX suspension parts. Due to the added weight of the mine plow and rollers, the battalion used 350 road wheels during the first two weeks of operations in the AOR. Units should stock or pre-order the most commonly broken and replaced tank plow and roller parts in order to keep their breaching assets operational. Bottom line: if you plan on conducting mine-clearing operations, anticipate significant increases in replacement of class IX tank suspension and plow replacement parts.

In their roles as both soldiers and police, tankers of A/1-77 Armor search Albanian detainees for hidden weapons.



During the first 30 days of operations, we experienced six times the normal optempo rate in our M1A1 fleet (a half year of optempo in only one month). This also led to a noticeable increase in the use of suspension and automotive parts. The wear and tear on all vehicles, especially the M1A1s, proved to be an operational readiness rate challenge. As we became more familiar with our tactical situation, we overcame the OR rate challenge by moving units closer to anticipated trouble areas within our AO. Additionally, the time lag within the supply system was eventually reduced, allowing the mechanics to work their magic. The normal deployment lag of the class IX repair parts system, coupled with the high optempo experienced while operating in an unfamiliar environment can have severe impact on readiness if not properly anticipated.

Conclusion

In preparation for deployment to Kosovo, tank battalions should definitely continue training for the mid- to high-intensity level of conflict. Soldiers in USKFOR and TF 1-77 have been in-

involved in firefights with both Serbians and Albanians. Combat is still a possibility and the worst thing a unit could do would be to deploy to Kosovo under the impression that combat was unlikely. Soldiers should also be prepared to fight as infantrymen on dismounted patrols. Furthermore, they should arrive with a decent understanding of the unique historical events that have led to the ethnic hatred so widespread throughout the region; read at least one of the many books that have been recommended elsewhere. (See "Books on the Balkans," May-June '99 *ARMOR* - Ed.) In addition, negotiating skills and crowd/riot control are essential tasks that need to be trained *prior* to deployment.

The nature of the mission here has changed significantly since we arrived in late June and will be different still for follow-on battalions. The relative division of labor for us has shifted from enforcing the peace agreements, to quelling violence and establishing some kind of law and order, to performing civil affairs functions. Leaders at every level must be prepared to adapt their focus and tactics as the situation on the ground develops.

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