

1-12 Cavalry Fields New Abrams M1A2 SEP Tanks

by Specialist Jonathan Del Marcus, 1st Cavalry Division Public Affairs Office

The 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, became the first unit in the division, and only the second in the Army, to begin fielding the new Abrams M1A2 SEP main battle tank, at Fort Hood, July 9-13.

As America's First Team transitions from the 'legacy force' into the Force XXI structure, the M1A2 SEP (System Enhancement Program) is among many new pieces of equipment that will add the capability of digital connectivity to the division's arsenal, gradually integrating the new technology fully into the division by the end of fiscal year 2003.

The most important characteristic of the Abrams M1A2 SEP that distinguishes it from its predecessor, the Abrams M1A2, is an embedded battle command system that allows soldiers to communicate with each other, within and across echelons, to relay and share information, said Cathy Oldham, Chief of Force Integration, 1st Cav Division.

This ability increases command and control as well as situational awareness on the battlefield, Oldham noted.

"Unlike an analog system, all M1A2 SEP tank crews will have instant access to the latest information on battlefield conditions, and everyone will have a common operating picture through the use of the same graphics," said Major David Farlow, Public Affairs Officer, 1st Cav Division.

The commander's display unit (CDU) displays a map showing terrain features with grids that show your tank's location, the location of your unit's tanks, and any known enemy locations or equipment, said Sergeant Michael W. Steward, gunner, Co. A, 1-12 Cav. The CDU can also send and receive e-mail messages.

There is also a second-generation forward-looking infrared sight, with five different powers of magnification, that displays the environment outside of the tank on the commander's independent thermal viewer, added Staff Sergeant Derek J. Hall, master gunner, Co. A, 1-12 Cav.

"What the SEP tank will do as part of the modernization of the Army is give us the digital systems — what's called the Army battle command systems — and it will allow tank crews to know where they are on the battlefield, where the rest of the formation is and where the enemy is. That's pretty powerful stuff," said Major General David D. McKiernan, 1st Cav Division commander.

"The best description I heard used some years ago was from then Chief of Staff of the Army Gordon Sullivan. He said, 'You know what's really important is that a soldier knows where he is, knows where his buddy is, and knows where the enemy is,'" McKiernan explained.

1-12 Cav's tank crews spent much of the work week in the motor pool preparing the new tanks to standard for use as lethal, digitally capable, and combat-ready chariots of fire.

Before they could draw the new tanks, the tankers spent more than three months on the arduous and tedious task of readying their M1A2 tanks for turn-in.

"It's not like going down to the Ford dealership, saying 'here's my old car, give me some trade in on it, and let me drive away in my new car,'" McKiernan said. "They have had to do thousands, literally thousands, of supply transactions — moving equipment around, reorganizing soldiers — how they battle-roster soldiers, and the most glamorous part of it, the biggest part, is turning in their tanks and drawing new tanks. But, it's only one of many equipment issues that they are working on.

While the process was demanding for 1-12 Cav, the ends have justified the means. "I know I'm excited, and my sense is the soldiers are excited about getting this as well," said Lieutenant Colonel Robert Forrester, 1-12 Cav commander.

"We'll start a fairly structured new equipment training program for about 50 days, and then we'll go into platoon-, company-, and battalion-level training

exercises, all of the time trying to hone the skills that we are going to need so we can employ the SEP tank to its full potential," he said.

Much of the anticipation for fielding the M1A2 SEP surely stems from one other new addition to the tank.

The M1A2 SEP adds a new air conditioning system, an air-handling unit that will bring the temperature inside the tank down 22 degrees from 110 degrees to 88 degrees, Hall said.

This will add to the comfort of the crews, particularly in places like Texas, as well as possible deployments in other hot environments, said Specialist Marion Saunders, loader, Co. A, 1-12 Cav.

Not only are the leaders and soldiers in 1-12 Cav pleased, the fielding of the M1A2 SEP will undoubtedly add much excitement within many units in the First Team.

Each of the First Team's four maneuver brigades will field new equipment, successively, in the next three fiscal years, beginning with 1st Brigade during fiscal year 2001 and finishing with 4th Brigade by the end of fiscal year 2003.

October will be a busy month for 1st Brigade. 2-5 Cav will start fielding the new Bradley M2A3 and 2-8 Cav will draw the Abrams M1A2 SEP.

By the end of fiscal year 2001 alone, approximately 6,700 pieces of equipment will have changed hands within the division, said Major Frank Schneck, Division XXI Project Officer.

After the change has been made to outfit all of the tank units with the M1A2 SEP, the division will require fewer tanks to do the same job, Oldham said.

The Force XXI conversion process is a "comprehensive process for modernizing and preparing for the challenges of the 21st century. It provides our soldiers with the necessary doctrine, organizations, the most realistic training and the best equipment and weapon systems that our nation can provide," Schneck said.