

Armored Expeditionary Forces

by Ralph Zumbro

Gentlemen, in order to be effective in the 21st century, we're going to have to learn how to fly, not only strategically, but on a tactical level as well. There is precedent, from the glider assaults of WWII to the successful movement of 22-ton M41s in RVN reported by Colonel Battreall. It is also known that there were 13 M24s with the French Foreign Legion at Dien Bien Phu, but most people don't realize that they were broken down into planeloads, flown in, and assembled in place. Used a bit more aggressively, they might have prevented that particular debacle.

So, we can fly light armor into any place with relative ease. It's the airborne deployment of the heavies that gets sticky. But do we need the Abrams or even an M60 in most small-scale operations? The Rangers in Somalia could have been extracted by mech infantry supported by ACAVs. What we desperately need is a TO&E in which light armor is so embedded in a combined arms unit that it CAN'T be left behind by some bureaucrat. That means that the APC must be able to act in the light armor role as well as being a battle taxi.

This postulated unit needs to be easily deployable by air, in self-sustaining, tactically-viable combined arms groups. It must have armor, infantry, artillery, and heavy lift helicopters in the TO&E. We're going to need this capability in the near future, both because of America's worldwide interests and the growing needs of our diplomatic stepchild, the United Nations. What we require is an American based and commanded force that can be used at will by our government or "loaned" to the U.N., but still under American control, keeping our national interests as its basic operating tenet. In other words, we need a permanent Armored Expeditionary Force.

To that end, we should develop doctrine and test it in the field. *ARMOR* is the forum in which these ideas are being discussed and refined, but we need to get some hardware out in the hills and test these developmental concepts. The old rule is "you go with what

you've got," and what we've got are the new AGS, the Bradley, and the many permutations of the old, reliable M113. Properly used and modified, they can do 90 percent of the work that we'll be seeing in the next few years, including establishing an airhead and seizing an airfield that will allow, if necessary, the insertion of enough Abrams tanks to secure the area against any unpleasant surprises. We need, however, to get combined arms, including integral airlift, as low in the table of organization (T.O.) as possible and there's precedent for that, too.

The old "Blackhorse" T.O. of the Vietnam era serves as a jumping-off point, and if it is combined with the Pentomic organization of the late fifties and early sixties, it might just serve as the perfect framework, at least for experimentation. In *Ringed in Steel*, available from Presidio Press, COL Michael Mahler, who was the squadron exec back then, briefly describes that organization. Basically, it was the standard cavalry squadron of the times. Each troop owned nine tanks, 23 assorted ACAVs, three mortar tracks and a retriever. The kicker was the squadron aviation troop!

Right down there at squadron/battalion level, was a troop that owned nine scout birds, 11 UH1B slicks and three Huey gunships. A tracked armored cavalry unit had its own air force! Unfortunately, although the system worked, next higher command took their air away from them most of the time and used it at brigade level. When the birds came home, though, the squadron was the unit that maintained them. The cavalry squadron was their home, because that's where the mechanics were. Hal Spurgeon informs me that, as recently as 1985, he commanded a sabre troop in 1/18 Cavalry and that the squadron operated an air troop, under a major. Now 2ACR is experimenting with air squadrons and the Quarterhorse is using air troops along with ground troops. But we're using the wrong helicopters.

Supporting armor requires BIG birds, not utility choppers. Getting ammo and fuel to a moving armored task force

cannot be done with Hueys or scout choppers; even the Blackhawk simply can't lift the amount of combustibles that ACAVs and tanks can burn. One Chinook, however, can lift a basic load for a tank, AGS, or Bradley platoon, plus a couple of fuel bladders, MREs and the mail. What is needed is an air troop with CH-47s, and this opens up a whole new box of capabilities. We've all seen the pictures of a CH-47C lifting a mired ACAV out of a paddy, and the photos of a CH-47D hauling a 13-ton rapid deployment force/light tank through the air. That combination has possibilities.

The connection needs to be made that heavy choppers can LIFT light armor. If the armor in question is M113-based ACAVs, they can be made to fly. If we use that old squadron T.O. and assign choppers big enough to lift the ACAV portion of our force, we've got battlefield mobility like no other force in history. And with the CH-47, we've also got the availability of a gunship that makes an Mi-24 look like a light observation helicopter!

Back in 1967, the 1st Air Cav in Bin Dinh Province, RVN, got two new gunships to test. Technically, they were designated ACH47As but the troopers called them "Go-Go" ships. They were described by General Tolson, who commanded the Air Cav then, in an article in *Vietnam Combat* magazine, #2, 1988. Basically, they were CH-47s that carried a pair of 20-mm Vulcans, a pair of 2.75-mm rocket pods, a 40-mm automatic grenade launcher and "assorted light machine guns." It could also be used as an impromptu bomber by rolling fuzed drums of napalm off the tail ramp. That is serious air support, and the big ships can carry enough ammunition to set down away from the contact area and reload their rocket pods.

If we keep the basic aviation company T.O. and retain the light observation choppers, we've got aerial scouts. Remove the utility choppers and replace them with the heavy ships, and there's enough airlift for any humanitarian mission that we can see coming

up. If the mercy birds are fired on by intransigent warlords, they simply lift the refugees out and ferry back a few ACAVs, supported by a Go-Go ship. That should take care of whatever international "varmicide" necessary to clear the way for the humanitarian missions or non-combatant rescue. The aviation company or troop should be able to equip the big ships with as many assault kits as necessary for developing situations.

Since most of the areas where this type of unit would be used present no MBT threat, an ACAV will serve the light tank role. The nine tanks in the T.O. can be replaced with Bradleys, and suddenly we've got an armored force that is fully amphibious without preparation. The existence of the heavy lift capability means that light armor can leap tall buildings at a single bound... or the Great Rift Valley, the Shatt al Arab or the Isthmus of Panama.

ACAVs, at least, can be made to fly. The heavier combat machines would have to go by ground, of course, as would the retrievers, but we can fly light armor around ambushes. There are ways to counter the Stinger menace, if they can be detected soon enough. Future armor is going to have to live in a web of detection frequencies, and we may have to add an ECM track to the HQ platoon. There are also AA turrets, such as the GE Blazer, that will fit either the AGS or the Bradley Fighting Vehicle.

So, we can fly tactically and accomplish most missions, but how about strategic projection? In the May-June 1994 issue, the article by COL Battreall proves the concept. Light to medium armor can be airlifted if a suitable airfield or level stretch of road can be acquired as a landing field. We have GOT to have this capability, and that means that tankers must also become paratroopers! Pre-positioned navy ships full of Abrams tanks will not survive military attack. They are unarmored, and many Islamic nations are rapidly buying submarines. Germany, of course, is back in the commercial U-Boat business, along with the French and the Swedes. Now England, of all nations, is offering to LEASE their *Up-holder*-class subs out to the highest bidder. This means that we must be able to go by air, all the way from the U.S. to our objectives.

As Major Spaulding and Mr. Crist point out, what we badly need is a



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Above, a CH-47 slings an ACAV out of a rice paddy in Vietnam.

light, air-transportable, multi-role vehicle. We already have two of them, the Bradley and the M113. You don't need an Abrams to beat up a T-54 or a BMP, and a quick perusal of *Jane's* serves to locate most of the world's mechanized menaces.

Africa, for instance, concentrates most of its heavy armor in the northern segment, where Libya and Egypt are in an uneasy face-off that's been going on since Ramses II, in biblical days. The Sudan, which is coming increasingly under Iranian influence, has some modern armor and could get sticky, but for the most part, there is no serious MBT threat in the nations of central Africa, which seem to be rapidly de-civilizing, and will create a power vacuum. We depend on the stability of those nations to provide the chromium, cobalt, and molybdenum that keeps us in the forefront of the hi-tech revolution. More importantly, those unstable little political entities need to be defended against local power grabs by greedy neighbors with foreign backing. If Somalia, for instance, came under Iranian sway, one small missile base on the horn of Africa could cut off the flow of oil through the Red Sea. There's a civil war going on across that sea, in Yemen. The point is, sooner or later, we're going to get called out again, as part of the global 911 system, and we'd better have an armored force ready to go, or be sent in piecemeal again, with predictable results. Training and the T.O.

are what we need to address, and quickly.

First off, what type of parent organization will be needed? We need large companies, so the HQ had better be big and flexible. A full regiment might just be too big, though. Back in the 1950s, when I first enlisted after JROTC in high school, the Army was mostly Pentomic and the major tactical unit was the battle group, which fell between the battalion and regiment in size. It had five line companies — real big companies, and a look at their organization is instructive. In the five active years of that enlistment, I worked almost all the MOSs in a line airborne company, below E-6, and was in on the formation of the 8th Division's first light airborne field artillery (105 towed) battalion at Baumholder, so I can perhaps open a window into the past which could help us now. Those old units were quite flexible and could operate in many configurations. A-2/504, for instance, once operated for two months away from Ft. Bragg, running graduation exercises for the Special Forces in the mountains of West Virginia, back in 1962. Lordy, was that a lot of fun. We even used horses.

The battle group headquarters consisted of a HQ company with its own integral infantry platoon, a scout platoon in jeeps, and a large transportation platoon, as well as the usual HQ necessities. There were enough deuce and a

half in that transportation platoon to move one of our infantry companies in one convoy. The supply section had its own transport and could handle several auxiliary units, such as engineers, with no problem. We had a surgeon and enough medics for each line platoon. The mess section, while normally divided up into company units, had consolidated into a battle group mess, but when we went to the field — Baumholder, Wildflecken, Grafenwohr, etc., they went with us in their own trucks.

Support artillery for the battle group was a 4.2-in. mortar battery with (I think), five platoons of four tubes each. In the present proposal, a full battery of 105-mm light howitzers might be more effective. There is an anti-helicopter 105-mm round under development and it could fit that tube, just by changing shell casings. There's also a 105-mm HEAT round available that can be made to fit the howitzer, giving the battery, and the HQ base camp, a long-needed self-defense capability. We used to use 3/4-ton trucks, two per gun, as prime movers for a 5,000-pound M-2 howitzer, so a Hummer should have no trouble with the new light gun. A second HMMWV with a trailer would supply the basic load and would be part of an airdrop, LAPES, or assault landing. If mortar-locating radar was part of that battery's equipment, the LZ would be mortar-proof. In addition, that radar could render much artillery useless, stopping the shelling of civilians.

The main force of the battle group was five line companies, each consisting of four infantry platoons of 44 men each, and one weapons platoon with three 81-mm mortars and three 106 recoilless on special jeeps. The infantry squads had 11 men, a squad leader and two fire teams, each with a BAR. The platoon weapons squad had two M1919A6 Brownings and two 3.5-in. Bazookas. If the outfit was supported by ACAVs or Bradleys, the armored vehicles would replace the weapons squad. Possibly we could have two infantry squads and an ACAV per section and call two sections a platoon.

There's room for a lot of experimentation here, especially with the new types of hard-shell body armor that are available. This is an important concept. If the infantry has its own body armor which is rifle resistant, they don't even need APCs for most operations. Besides being a tank commander and running an ammo/POL operation in RVN,

The ACAV - Weights and Loadings

In the present proposal, the M113 in an ACAV configuration would serve as a light tank with a few dismountable infantry. With a one-man gun cupola, it can still carry eight infantrymen to provide local security and forcible entry teams. Considering the empty weight of the M113 to be 9,926 kg and the max lift of the CH47D to be 13,000 kg, we are left with 3,074 kg of discretionary stores and armament weights. Here are some examples of the M113 with various available armament.

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| M163A1 Vulcan, 20-mm gun | 13,310 kg combat loaded |
| Arrowpointe 90-mm turret | 11,870 kg empty, two-man turret |
| Cadillac Gage, 40mm/12.7mm | 10,994 kg empty, one-man turret |
| FMC 25-mm electric turret | 11,335 kg empty, one-man turret |

If one of the lighter turrets were fitted to the M113, it should still be heli-portable. Fit a 90-mm turret to a Bradley and you have essentially a medium tank with dismounts. When the AGS comes on line, the unit would then have its Assault Gun/Tank Destroyer capability.

Source: *Jane's Artillery and Armor, 1987-88*

I've been a light infantry squad leader (airborne, both divisions), and have ridden all over Germany, both Carolinas, West Virginia, Southern France, and the Canal Zone in the back of a deuce and a half. An infantry squad can live in the back of a truck very handily, thank you. Is it possible to create a platoon that consists of two ACAVs and four squads of body-armored grunts in trucks with the ASP 30mm on gun rings on the cabs? Or can we use lightly armored wheeled APCs like the LAV that the Marines have adopted?

What about the weapons platoon? Can we simply replace it with four up-gunned Bradleys and plug in the AGS when it becomes available? That little beastie would make a good assault gun as well as a tank destroyer. The 105 tank gun is also a creditable artillery piece, and if the training is given and the artillery controls are fitted to the turret, the AGS could do duty on the gunline. Come to think of it, there are just 18 guns in a howitzer battalion and about 15 in a tank company. There's a bit of flexibility to be thought about here. Could an AGS company simply replace the artillery battery? We'd have not only long-range support but an armored reaction force, but no high-angle capability.

If one of those oversized line companies were replaced with the heavy aviation company discussed earlier for airlift and gunship support, a battle group, all by itself, could give most nations a lot of grief. For the record, the T.O. of one of those line companies was 260

officers and men. The battle group T.O. was 1500 men and was commanded by a full colonel, in our case, COL "Wild Bill" Welsh, who later wound up in charge of the expansion of the Special Forces. Maybe it is now time to consider the creation of a small, airmobile, armored, combined arms special force. The big divisions can handle the Saddams of the world, but we desperately need troubleshooters and forcible entry teams. Time's a'wasting.

Ralph Zumbro served as an NCO in each of the combat arms, including combat service in RVN. He has commanded tanks in Vietnam, USAREUR, and CONUS, and served as a gunnery and demolitions instructor. *Tank Sergeant*, a memoir of his service in Vietnam, is in its second printing in paperback by Pocket Books and is available at bookstores. He has written articles for *ARMOR*, in addition to writing two novels, *Jungletracks* and *Puma Force*, co-authored with his former XO, James Walker, also published by Pocket Books. Currently, he is writing an oral history of American tankers who fought in all battles of the 20th Century. *Tank Aces* is scheduled to be published in 1996.