

Tank Combat Training: Tactical Tank Table VIII

by Captain Pat White and Lieutenant Colonel Karl Gunzelman

Standing around the “deadpool” waiting for the platoon observer/controller to start his after-action review, the commander of A-11 looks around at the blinking yellow lights. He finds it hard to believe that the entire platoon was destroyed by one T-80 tank. After all, his platoon averaged 921 on Tank Table VIII. His was the low score, and he still ended with 897 points. At the time, he was a little disappointed that he didn’t get a distinguished score, but a superior score is pretty good, isn’t it? After all, the crew qualification table is challenging, if not stressful and, according to FM 17-12-1-2, the table should be realistic within the safety and resource constraints of live fire tank ranges.

After thinking some more, maybe he should have ‘performed reconnaissance by fire’ on the woodline. Maybe that would have drawn the T-80 out. And, what about “Actions on Contact”? After initial contact, the platoon didn’t respond. Nobody returned fire, and he didn’t receive a contact report in time to develop the situation. At least this was just a training experience, one he wouldn’t forget, and one he was sure the platoon observer/controller wouldn’t let him forget.

The training program hadn’t been a complete waste of time. At least gunnery went well.

Comparing tank gunnery scores with results at the Combat Training Centers, a clear-cut problem surfaces; platoon leaders need a combined leader and tactical training program. The Armor force does not offer platoon leaders an adequate chance to transition from precision gunnery to combat training. Moreover, our tank combat training program does not accurately depict what platoon leaders might encounter at a CTC or in combat. If the platoon fails, the company fails, and so, shouldn’t we at least consider changing a training program developed some 30-odd years ago?

The reason to change is to focus tank platoon proficiency on warfighting skills and platoon leader proficiency in fighting a platoon. Changes in environ-

ment no longer allow gunnery to be a crew-focused event, and as a platoon-focused event, the focus must be on the platoon leader. Current tank and tactical tables fail to provide a realistic challenge to Force XXI tankers. The training of the tank platoon via qualification of Tank Table XII, and achieving the optimum training experience offered at the CTCs, should become the focal point in development of a Tactical Tank Table VIII which fully integrates the platoon leader, thus optimizing the training of the platoon. As TT VIII currently stands, the platoon leader participates only as a tank commander. The platoon leader is not involved in tactical decisions, or much in the development of his crews. Consider the two primary training events in the development of a tank platoon leader: semi-annual gunnery and a CTC rotation. How does TT VIII help in preparing the platoon leader for TT XII? More importantly, how, in the overall readiness and training of a platoon, does TT VIII prepare a platoon leader for combat? Truthfully, TT VIII doesn’t; in essence, the Armor Corps is missing an excellent opportunity to train the platoon leader, who is quite often one of the youngest, most inexperienced members of the platoon. Yet the platoon leader is responsible for the safety, welfare, and training of the platoon.

Gunnery tables should support maneuver through more tactically sound execution with direct involvement of the platoon leader, especially given the conditions our gunnery manuals depict, “the tank platoon is the smallest maneuver element within a tank company and the tank platoon is organized to fight as a unified element...” The training of the platoon, and thus the platoon leader, clearly becomes the purpose of revising current tank gunnery tables.

Chapter 2, FM 17-15, further states “the command and control of combat elements are the biggest challenges faced by combat leaders on the modern battlefield... command has two vital components: decision-making and leadership.” Control at platoon level is defined further by the wingman concept. “Under battlefield conditions, the wing-

man concept facilitates control... tank 2 orients on the platoon leader’s tank, while tank 3 orients on the platoon sergeant’s (PSG) tank. The PSG orients on the platoon leader’s tank.” Again, the platoon leader is the focus.

Situational awareness is another critical factor in understanding and mastering control. Situational awareness is described as “the ability to maintain a constant clear mental picture of the tactical situation... For platoon leaders and PSGs... the key to making sound, quick tactical decisions. It allows them to form logical conclusions and to make decisions that anticipate future events and information.” FM 17-15, Chapter 2, section II. Developing situational awareness as a skill is difficult, but paramount to success as a combat leader.

Seeing the battlefield, based on reports from the platoon, is critical to success and the development of platoon leaders. Too often, platoons and platoon leaders who are successful in gunnery fail to achieve similar results during CTC rotations. Primarily, this is a direct reflection of the platoon leader’s ability to react and act in unfamiliar situations. All gunnery tables are rote. Learn the fire commands, G2 the course, and you’re guaranteed some level of success. The problem is that the OPFOR doesn’t react the same way; it doesn’t deploy on a given piece of terrain the same every time. Is it realistic to expect the platoon leader to generalize those skills from TTVII to the fluid battlefield? So, why are we training precision gunnery to an expected, unrealistic opposing force? Train proficiency in battlefield awareness, and success in gunnery and CTC rotations should increase. Only then will a platoon be able to accomplish what FM 17-15 says it can, “At the most fundamental level, battle space is the three dimensional area in which the platoon can acquire enemy forces and influence them with effective fires.”

The first major maneuver training experience for a platoon leader is a CTC rotation. The learning curve is often too steep, and doesn’t afford the platoon an

opportunity to digest and learn, because immediately after CTC rotations, it's back to garrison for three to four months of gunnery prep (again, that precision training broken-up by weeks of duty company). With shrinking training funds and downsizing almost complete, the Armor community needs to rethink the focus of tank combat training. The Gunnery and Tactical Departments at Ft. Knox should combine efforts in development of a training concept which complies with advanced technology, limited funds, advanced simulations, and audacious leaders in the Armor Corps. More challenging tables, combining leader and tactical development with precision gunnery techniques, would be more applicable.

With the focus on training platoon leaders, the time has come to rethink our training strategy. Chapter 16 of FM 17-12-1-2 states that, "tank gunnery tables are designed to develop and test the proficiency of individual, crew, and platoon gunnery techniques at the basic, intermediate, and advanced levels for both the active and reserve components." Chapter 16 further states that "the series of engagements on each is intended to duplicate... typical battlefield tasks under realistic firing conditions and against likely enemy target arrays. Thirty years ago or more, when the tank tables were developed, Unit Conduct of Fire Trainers, platoon gunnery trainers, and numerous gunnery training devices did not exist. Knowledge and technology have advanced greatly, and changes should be considered for tank combat training. The changes need not effect the 'gate' system, but merely reemphasize that the 'gates' will be based on training the platoon leader.

Currently, the Armor Corps is presented with a double standard. FM 17-12-1-2, Chapter 14 states, "The tank tactical tables parallel the gunnery tables; together these tables overcome the deficiencies inherent to range training. Preferably, the tactical tables are conducted in concert with the gunnery tables." Honestly, how often does that happen? How often does a unit train tactical tables in conjunction with the gunnery tables? According to our doctrine, together the tables overcome the deficiencies! Great! Of course, now we have to refer to two separate FMs in order to train Abrams tank gunnery and tactical proficiency through platoon level. How can we combine the tactical tables and gunnery tables, providing a realistic training experience for the platoon leader and the platoon? First, the

Armor Corps must link gunnery to doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures of the developing Force XXI. We must link gunnery to FM 17-15 and ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP, and, as mentioned, refocus the 'gate' system to accommodate a Tactical VIII. The improved gate system would still contain individual qualification, crew qualification, and platoon qualification.

Individual qualification consists of the Tank Crew Gunnery Skills Test (TCGST), but *all* crewmembers would be required to pass *all* stations. The focus of individual qualification would become familiarization and proficiency with all aspects of the tank, possibly through a written test as well. Once the individual effectively qualifies the TCGST and proficiency exam, Gate 1 is complete.

Gate 2 would begin with crew certification, and be completed upon crew qualification. The platoon leader (PL) would begin training by fully participating in the crew certification program. All PLs would have to be Instructor Operator (IO) certified. This serves two purposes. First, it fully integrates the PL into understanding the functions and use of the Unit Conduct of Fire Trainer. Second, the PL would begin his training in the tactical portion of Tactical VIII. As the IO, the PL begins tactical reporting, command and control, and decision-making. As targets appear, the scenario is relayed as such, "A12, this is A11, enemy tanks vicinity TRP 2, engage and report, over." The tank commander then takes action, but must also report tactically through contact reports and spot reports. Of course, the tank commander must also issue a fire command. Using the advanced matrix, commanders can also utilize the current TT VIII scenario to train crew technical proficiency. The UCOFT is a great tool for training crew proficiency in fire control malfunctions. The ability to induce subsystem failures greatly enhances the level of preparedness of crews prior to firing any main gun ammunition; however, the battalion and company commanders must stress proper IO feedback. And, again, the platoon leader would be the primary trainer, the quality control manager, of the training of his crews. Thus would begin the tactical training, reinforced by the technical aspects of UCOFT.

Crew certification also consists of TT IV (Tank Crew Proficiency Course). This is the first time the platoon leader would begin training from his fighting

platform. Stress must be placed on the platoon leader in reporting, directing, and moving his tank during TT IV. FM 17-15 designates the platoon as the lowest level of a tank company. Field Manual 100-25 directs that we train one level down, and evaluate two levels down; therefore, the platoon leader would initiate engagements for his tank commanders on TT IV similar to UCOFT; however, during TT IV, the platoon leader would report battlefield information to the company commander. This training would reinforce UCOFT and prepare the platoon leader for Tactical VIII, and TT XII.

Crew qualification would begin with training intermediate tank gunnery tables consistent with current standards; however, the platoon leader would again be involved with reporting, disseminating information, controlling his tanks, and moving on his tank. Crew qualification is complete upon qualification of the second gate, Tactical VIII.

Platoon certification focuses on the use the Platoon Gunnery Trainer (PGT), Simulations Network (SIMNET), and a Platoon Tactical Proficiency Course (PTPC). The PTPC would be a combination of platoon MTPs and current tank tactical tables G and H. The tanks would be equipped with the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System II. Platoon qualification would be qualification of TT XII.

Use of simulations, such as the Unit Conduct of Fire Trainer (UCOFT), Platoon Gunnery Trainer (PGT), and SIMNET, in conjunction with home station certification programs, would ensure maximum training for platoon leaders and bring crew proficiency levels up to a standard where the gunnery experience more fully focuses on the platoon leader. Simulations are excellent for teaching the technical aspects of gunnery. Leaders can induce errors and malfunctions into the fire control system, and help the crew learn to deal routinely with those malfunctions.

The proposed qualification course consists of any of a number of varying scenarios; scenarios based on guidance from the company commander, recommended by the battalion commander, and approved by the division commander; scenarios driven by the tactical decisions of the tank commander and platoon leader; scenarios which offer a standard, but challenge the tank crew and platoon leader and are based on any variety of "threat" doctrinal templates.

Development and execution of Tactical VIII scenarios focuses on the platoon leader. Scenarios for Tactical VIII are developed by combining FM 17-15 and ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP. Focusing on the leader tasks in ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP, and applying these tasks to doctrinal concepts in FM 17-15 increases the proficiency of our platoon leadership. Reconnaissance by Fire is an example of an engagement in a proposed scenario. Perform Reconnaissance by Fire, (17-3-0218) is an uncommon task which is often not applied in a tactical environment, often to the detriment of the platoon, but is an easy task to rehearse and practice.

The conditions for Recon by Fire state, "The platoon is operating in a tactical environment, as part of a company team attack where Threat contact is expected. The commander gives the platoon permission to develop the situation through reconnaissance by fire to flush the threat out of a suspected position. The threat consists of no more than a platoon in hasty defensive positions." Task standard is "The platoon flushes the Threat from its position or determines that there is no Threat in the position, with minimal expenditure of ammunition and time. No friendly losses are incurred." By studying the Task Condition and Standard, Recon by Fire could be the initial engagement for Tactical VIII scenarios involving Attack or Defense — the two primary missions of a tank platoon.

There are five leader tasks under Recon by Fire, 1) The platoon leader (PL) identifies the expected location(s) of Threat contact, 2) The PL identifies overwatch position(s), 3) The PL issues a FRAGO to the platoon to occupy the overwatch position and to prepare to conduct reconnaissance by fire, 4) The PL or PSG utilizes indirect fires, and 5) If indirect fires are not available or the indirect fires do not flush the Threat, the PL orders the platoon to conduct reconnaissance by fire. The scenario would be constructed in the following manner. The commander issues a FRAGO to the PL via FM, while the platoon occupies an attack position. The PL determines likely Threat positions and issues a FRAGO to the firing tank to occupy an overwatch position on the course. The firing tank moves to identified position, reports set, and prepares to engage. The PL issues the order, and the firing tank begins Recon by Fire of designated areas — first with crew served weapons. The tower then presents Threat targets for the fir-

ing tank to destroy with main gun and machine gun. The PL leader sends appropriate reports to the commander and Tactical VIII continues based on decisions by the company commander.

Execute Actions on contact (17-3-0221) is a very necessary drill that must be practiced to perfection, and should be included within the Tactical VIII scenarios. Again, Actions on Contact is an easy scenario to develop. Conditions are "the platoon is conducting offensive operations in a tactical environment, is moving, and encounters a moving or stationary Threat tank or motorized rifle platoon. The Threat force engages the platoon." Task Standard is "the platoon returns fire, and the platoon leader orders a contact drill within 15 seconds. No more than one tank is lost to hostile fire." Leader tasks for this scenario include, PL directs a platoon battle drill; PL informs the commander of Threat contact; and the PL sends a complete spot report to the company team commander.

Following Recon by Fire, the PL could issue FRAGO for the firing tank to begin movement to a designated Phase Line. The firing tank reports REDCON 1 and begins movement. As the firing tank moves, the tower presents Threat targets which present signatures representing enemy fire. The firing tank returns or initiates fires to destroy or suppress the enemy, seeks cover or concealment, and alerts the platoon leader with a contact report. The PL then directs a battle drill, and the firing tank completes destruction of the enemy with direct fire.

Meanwhile, the PL informs the commander of Threat contact. Upon destruction or suppression of the enemy, the PL sends a complete spot report to the commander, and Tactical VIII continues.

Scoring and evaluation would be similar to current standards. The changes to scoring would involve target exposure time, engagement range, and incorporation of tactical scoring. Qualification standards would only vary based on scenarios, 70% target destruction or suppression within allocated times still being a standard for qualification. The scoring still involves crew cuts to include correct reporting procedures (SALT format). Consideration to target presents may alter, but not the 70%. How often in war do we get a chance to pull off the range, conduct diagnostics, and continue when we are ready?

Integrating FM 17-15 and ARTEP 17-237-10-MTP into Tactical VIII offers Armor the much needed combination of Tactical Tables with Gunnery Tables. The integration allows home station training to focus on one training event, and the result will be more competent, aggressive platoon leaders. Tactical VIII will also provide the base for success on TT XII, and CTC rotations. Development of a Tactical VIII would be more challenging, realistic, and would better prepare crews, platoons, and the platoon leader for combat than our current gunnery models. Similar to any new concept, there are plenty of bugs to be worked out, but with current simulations, the advances in technology, and the quality of armor/cavalry crewmen, let's present a challenging, gratifying training experience based on the M1A1/M1A2 series tank, not a series of tables — tactical and gunnery — based on the M48/M60 fleet.

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