

Marine Tanks: The Corps' Indispensable Asset

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Marine Tanks: The Corps' Indispensable Asset

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Historically, Marine tanks have played critical roles in the success of the Corps' combat operations. From WWII to Iraq, the commander's ability to effectively employ Marine tanks has provided him with a devastating direct fire capability. Today, the Marine Corps' M1A1 Abrams tanks are the most lethal direct fire and survivable weapons system within the arsenal of the ground combat element.¹

-Lt Gen James Mattis

Although the United States Marine Corps remains the country's forward deployed force in readiness, it is currently experiencing an undeniable transformation. This transformation stems from the challenges of shifting from fighting conventional warfare, to focusing on the unconventional and asymmetric fight in the global war on terror. The Marine Corps' ground combat element (GCE), to include its armored force, is the focus for such changes that could affect how the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF) operates in the future. This shift has also brought about a question regarding our ground forces that

¹ FM 3-12 Marine Corps Tank Employment

has lingered in the Corps for decades: do we really need tanks?

Background

For the second time within thirteen years the Marine Corps will disband one of its tank battalions. The liquidation of 3rd tank battalion in 1993 came shortly after the Corps' largest use of tanks since WWII. This year, the Marine Corps will eliminate a number of units, including the 8th Tank Battalion, in order to better suit the fight in the global war on terror. As determined by the Marine Corps force structure review board in 2004, two companies and the headquarters element of this battalion will disband, and force the Marine tank community to shrink from four active and reserve battalions to three total battalions. This restructuring could not come at a more inappropriate time for the Marine Corps. The need for Marine tanks in all aspects of operations is underestimated. In May of 2003, Marine tanks including activated reserve units, paved the way to Baghdad. Recently, Marine tanks played a pivotal role in operation Phantom Fury, the largest combat operation on urban terrain since Marines fought in the streets of Hue City, Vietnam. Although Marine armor is a key component of the GCE, the

tank community continues to shrink, thus eliminating vital capabilities of the MAGTF.

History of Marine tanks

The important role that tanks have played in Marine battles from Guadalcanal to Fallujah cannot be overstated. The first Marine tanks were adopted in the early 1900s as platforms for the machine gun. These early tanks were intended to support advancing and defending infantry.² Seeing their first combat in the Pacific campaign, descendants of these early tanks were an undisputable success. Lessons learned in the Pacific directed that tanks had priority in the landing order, once the initial troops established the beachhead, thus providing the advancing infantry with greater firepower. More recent battles fought by the Marines are no different. During the 1991 Gulf War Marine tanks spearheaded the attack into Kuwait. In 2003, Marine tanks blazed a path to Baghdad. Finally, in November of 2004, Marine tanks played a key role in clearing the city of Fallujah during operation Phantom Fury. Although the times and places change, tanks still remain a key instrument to success.

² Kenneth W. Estes, *Marines Under Armor* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 5.

Why tanks belong in the MAGTF

Tanks provide unequalled firepower in a survivable platform. The tank provides both firepower and survivability regardless of the operating environment. Within the last twenty years tacticians and tankers alike believed that tanks could never fight effectively inside cities. Not only have tanks proven themselves in open terrain such as the deserts of Kuwait, they have fought inside built-up areas with devastating results, as part of the combined arms team.

Captain Rob Bodisch's tank company fought inside Fallujah alongside both 3rd Bn 1st Marines and 3rd Bn 5th Marines in November of 2004. Based on this battle, the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned compiled after action reports relating to tank and infantry tactics, techniques, and procedures. As stated by this tank company's after action report, tanks excel at bringing fires exactly where they need to be. "Due to our precision weapons systems, tanks were the weapons of choice against enemy in strong points, in order to minimize collateral damage."³ Not only was the tank a weapon of choice, but the most survivable weapon as well. Captain Bodisch's own tank was hit more than seven times in one day by rocket-

³ Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned website (www.usmc.mil/mccll/aar/)

propelled grenades. Making only a quick exit to make minor repairs, he continued the fight in the same tank.⁴

Overlooking our greatest assets

If tanks are one of the Marine Corps' greatest assets, why is it that they are often disregarded? And most importantly, why are Marine tank units being disbanded at such a high rate? Although rare, common misunderstandings throughout all levels of Marine Corps leadership lend themselves to the misuse and disintegration of the Marine tank community.

Small unit leaders, even at the NCO level, may one day be responsible for tank attachments and their tactical employment. During engagements in Fallujah it was not uncommon for Marine Lance Corporals to work directly with a tank and its crew in order to direct that tank's weapons systems on to an enemy target.⁵

Intermediate levels of leadership also show occasional lack of understanding for tanks and their implementation. After action reports from infantry units, available at the Marine Corps Center for Lessons learned, point to such misunderstandings and at times, lack of training

⁴ Conversation with Capt. R. Bodisch 10, November 2004

⁵ AAR C Co 2nd Tanks/email w\ Bodisch

precedence. In some instances, units actively seek more tank and infantry integration training while others do not. One of the Center's own Operation Iraqi Freedom II pre-deployment documents states;

Those units that had worked with armor, particularly during the second battle for Fallujah, had very high praise for the performance of armor in the urban environment. The tank/infantry integration training conducted at March Air Reserve Base (MARB) was given high marks, and there was a strong desire for integrated infantry/armor live fire training as well.⁶

The document later request's greater emphasis from the urban warfare-training center at MARB to conduct training on tank/infantry integration in restrictive terrain.⁷

Removing tanks from operation

Without tanks, the MAGTF is a weaker team with less armor support than what it truly needs. When tank units are not large enough to support a MAGTF, either by an insufficient task organization or a lack of available tank

⁶ MCCLL website

⁷ Ibid

units, the mission is accomplished at a higher cost.

Prior to operation Phantom Fury in Fallujah, I MEF requested help from the U.S. Army for heavier armored support. The First Marine Expeditionary Force did not have the tank units necessary to accomplish the mission.⁸ Help came in the form of an Army cavalry unit. The 2/7 Cav was fully capable and battle hardened, yet their way of conducting operations differed significantly from the Marines. Charlie company commander of 2nd tank battalion, Captain Rob Bodisch spoke about Marine tanks and their differences from the Army unit during the operation:

RCT-1 just needed more tanks than my one company. But even then, 2/7 CAV kept their tank company in their Bn, keeping them on the main Line of Communication (LOC) as combat outposts. My tanks were the ones that did the detailed clearing with 3/1 and 3/5 for over two months. As for survivability, I would say our M1A1s are better in that area. The .50 cal machine gun proved to be vital in our fight, the

⁸ Bing West. *No True Glory A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah*: (New York, Bantam Dell, 2005).

M1A2 SEP tank when buttoned up (as they were the whole time) completely precludes the use of their .50 cal.”⁹

In this situation, the MAGTF needed more Marine tanks, but didn’t have them.

Conclusion

Regardless of the battlefield environment, the Marine on the ground will always need the fire support provided by the tank’s survivable platform. Whether on peacekeeping missions or deliberate attacks, no substitute exists for the Marine tank.

⁹ Capt. Bodisch email correspondence

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