

# The Need to Mobilize Armor in Afghanistan

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## Historical Background

In late 1941, equipped with M3 light tanks, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalions were officially formed in anticipation of ground combat in World War II.<sup>1</sup> Since then, Marine tankers have been actively deployed to fight our nation's enemies for the past 67 years. Noteworthy deployments of Marine tank units include the Korean War, Vietnam, Desert Storm, and most recently, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). During this recent event in Iraq, Marine tanks have taken pivotal roles in mission success during operations in OIF I and especially during the seizure of Fallujah in November of 2004. Even with these proven recent successes in Iraq, the Marine Corps has still failed to capitalize on the use of tanks in Afghanistan. The Marine Corps needs to employ tanks in combat operations in Afghanistan because of the increased combat power it will bring to the battlefield, the positive effect it would have on the Marine armor community, and the perception it would have to the nation of Afghanistan on the overall commitment for success.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth W. Estes, *Marines Under Armor* (Naval Institute Press, 2000) 34

## **Increasing Combat Power**

Having tanks in Afghanistan significantly increases the amount of combat power that ground forces can bring to engage enemy forces. The Marine Corps continuously advertises a combined arms approach to fighting its battles. Main battle tanks are a necessity to achieve the maximum potential of the combined arms mentality. According to MCDP1, the keystone document of Marine Corps doctrine, combat power "is the total destructive force we can bring to bear on our enemy at a given time".<sup>2</sup> As a Corps, let us not use logistics or counterinsurgency theories to lessen our efforts to achieve a military victory against our opponent. Instead, let us focus on what assets which we have available to build our combat power to engage our enemy.

Tanks bring a dramatic increase of combat power against a primarily dismounted enemy. The tank can travel great distances in otherwise non-permissive land that a HMWWV or a MTRV would consider restrictive. The tank can provide long-range direct fires out to 4000 meters utilizing day or thermal sights that standard dismounted infantry cannot reproduce. The tank brings a shock effect that deters enemy from entering certain areas due to the

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<sup>2</sup> *Warfighting*, MCDP1, (United States Government, 1997)

mobility and lethality of the armored platform. Given these simple facts, the tank is a logical platform to integrate into infantry units on the ground to increase their lethality against a determined enemy.

During the arduous eight-year campaign in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union even saw the advantages of integrating the Main Battle Tank into its ground offensive actions. One specific success occurred in May, 1984, in the Helmand Province. The goal of the operation was to clear the mujahideen from an area located in the province. The mujahideen at the time would only fight in close proximity in order to eliminate an indirect fire option from the Russians. This subsequently allowed the mujahideen to inflict casualties on dismounted troops. Understandably, the unit commanders opted to lead with tanks in order to clear lanes for follow-on dismounted troops. Largely due to the armored protection, the mission was a success. The tanks were able to push forward of dismounted troops and engage enemy elements with direct fire weapons as well as integrate and coordinate artillery fire on located enemy positions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over The Mountain*, 24-26

## **Keeping the Armor Community Sharp**

The Marine Corps should employ tanks in Afghanistan because it is necessary to continue to grow the armor community in a proficient and professional manner. This involves the tank community to operate in an unfavorable environment that the country of Afghanistan certainly has to offer. As our nation acknowledges Iran and North Korea as formidable and inevitable enemies on the battlefield, it seems a reasonable summation to implement tanks in Afghanistan to gain the experience necessary to operate effectively in such terrain where we may find ourselves fighting in the future. By employing Marine tank units to Afghanistan, the armored community gains knowledge, experience, and insight in how to integrate tanks with the infantry in these extreme environmental conditions that cannot be duplicated in the United States. This will lead to improved and updated techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) that will inform and influence tank units who will likely operate in this environment.

The lack of tank training or employment in non-traditional environments does have an impact not only on tank units but also on supported units. Prior to OIF, tank units did not regularly train in urban environments especially with the infantry. This lack of training in a

tank-infantry team in an urban environment created a diminished understanding of specific TTP's of how a tank-infantry team should operate in a built up area. With the onset of the high intensity combat in Fallujah in 2004, tank units and supported infantry had to quickly coordinate and rehearse in the firm bases on how to operate in this new environment. The lack of preparation and integrated training was highlighted in a number of after action reports pertaining to the battles of Fallujah. This certainly highlights the Marine Corps armor and infantry communities' failure to establish and train to effective tank-infantry TTPs prior to operating in severe urban conflict.

The same analogy can be applied to the current situation in Afghanistan. The Marine Corps needs to learn from this past lesson of not training and operating in non-traditional environments. Tank units need to deploy to Afghanistan in order to better prepare for the next war that may involve restrictive terrain that can occur in Iran and North Korea.

### **Providing a Security Blanket**

The tank brings a security blanket to the citizens of Afghanistan because it conveys a commitment that the United

States will deploy the necessary troops and equipment to insure that a stable government exists. By committing an armored force, it sends a message not only to Afghans but to the rest of the world that the United States is serious and that they are committed to the long endeavor to provide Afghanistan with the necessary combat power to overwhelm its adversaries.

The tank is the perfect platform to convey this message. It is a power symbol that has portrayed power and strength for the past 80 years. Although some may see the tank as an inconvenience or a statement of occupation, many view it as an instrument of protection and deterrence from insurgents. Either way it is a message to the citizens of Afghanistan that the United States Marine Corps is willing to commit all resources available to insure mission success.

### **Counterarguments**

Originating from the post-Korean War era, senior Marine Corps officials have always taken the approach of creating a lighter and more mobile force. Significant events such as a poor performance of tanks in Vietnam led many leaders to believe that the elimination of Main Battle Tanks in the Marine Corps arsenal would not impede on its



ability to accomplish its mission.<sup>4</sup> Rather it would reinforce the purpose of the Marine Corps of providing a light, efficient, and mobile force to deploy rapidly to meet our nation's threats.

Then, in the early 1980's, the implementation of the Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) struck many leaders as the ultimate remedy to the possibility of removing heavy armor.<sup>5</sup> To many it seemed like a logical step to eliminating tanks from the Marine Corps arsenal until the onset of Desert Storm, when Marine tanks proved an integral part of the combat power unleashed onto the Iraqi Army. But even after the short war, many high-ranking leaders still insisted on eliminating the burdensome and costly tank battalions. For example, General Krulak, the former Commandant, was quoted in 1999 as stating that he "would eliminate the tank fleet found in the Marine Corps if I could."<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the 1990's, the Marine Corps planned and prepared for small-scale battles. It also reduced the Marine Corps tank battalions from three to two. But yet again the Marine Corps had been thrown into another large scale conflict, Operation Iraqi Freedom, in which a heavy

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<sup>4</sup> Kenneth W. Estes, *Marines Under Armor* (Naval Institute Press, 2000) 202

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth W. Estes, *Marines Under Armor* (Naval Institute Press, 2000) 198-202

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth W. Estes, *Marines Under Armor* (Naval Institute Press, 2000) 203

mechanized unit was needed to counter a heavily armored Iraqi army.

The current fight in Afghanistan is indicative of the Marine Corps insistence of a light force. Critics of having Main Battle Tanks in theatre would argue that the terrain and the nature of counter insurgency warfare make the tank platform obsolete. However, since May 2007, the Canadians have found success in their efforts to incorporate their Leopard tanks during current operations. The Commanding Officer of the Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry Battle Group Lieutenant Colonel Omer Lavoie was quoted as saying "If you'd asked me 5 months ago, do you need tanks to fight insurgents? I would have said 'No your nuts', But because the Taliban are acting conventionally, the conventional assets like tanks, armored engineering vehicles and armored bridge laying vehicles certainly have their place here."<sup>7</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Overall with ongoing combat operations in Afghanistan the need for armor is evident. The Marine Corps needs to recognize that a counterinsurgency does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of using its valuable tanks to

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<sup>7</sup> Paul McCleary, Canadian Tanks as Counterinsurgents, <http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/blog/defense/index>

fight the enemy. Instead, it needs to implement this platform in an innovative and practical method to bring all available arms in order to kill the enemy or deter enemy attacks. The Marine Corps must return to the true meaning of its expeditionary doctrine and not allow logistical obstacles to hamper its ability to mobilize its armored units. Finally, we need to learn from past military operations that utilized tanks and further build on this foundation in order to give ground commanders additional options in developing plans in battling this formidable enemy element.