



An Independent Tank Battalion in World War II: How It Was Used.....And Sometimes Misused

by Marvin G. Jensen

Most Americans think of World War II tank warfare in terms of long thrusts by armored divisions, probably led by Patton. To his credit, he did lead such thrusts, just as planners had envisioned when they created the 1st and 2d Armored Divisions as the principal components of the Armored Force of the United States in July, 1940. Modeled after German blitzkrieg forces, armored divisions had enormous power and mobility. Tanks set the pace for their own motorized infantry.

However, for tanks to use their maneuverability and speed, terrain and conditions had to be right. When they were not, such as in the hedgerows of Normandy, or in the forests of Germany, regular infantry with close tank support had to slug it out with the enemy at close quarters.

To provide this support, the 70th Tank Battalion was included in the original Armored Force as the first of the independent tank battalions. Called independent because they were not part of a division, these battalions were available to be attached to an infantry division when the need arose. It is believed that General Adna R. Chaffee, the first commander of the Armored Force, insisted upon the creation of independent tank battalions so infantry divisions wouldn't constantly be breaking up armored divisions by borrowing tank battalions from them every time tank support was needed.

As always in the Army command structure, a division controlled all attached units, including an independent tank battalion. This, at times, presented difficul-

ties for tankers. It was a wise infantry commander who used tankers' advice on how best to use tanks. Most of them did so, but not all.

During the course of their combat, most independent tank battalions were attached to a number of infantry divisions. In its eight campaigns (the most for an independent tank battalion), the 70th was attached to the U.S. 1st Infantry Division (twice), the 9th, the 4th, the 63rd, C Company to the 45th in Sicily, and A Company to the French in Tunisia.

Because it was not always possible to foresee needs, an infantry division and its attached tank battalion often had little or no prior joint training. This could lead to a lack of coordination. Combat is a poor

place for one unit to get to know the ways, styles, and idiosyncracies of the other.

In preparation for invasions, however, the infantry that would lead an assault and their tank support usually trained together. As the first independent tank battalion, the 70th was selected to be the first to undergo amphibious training with an infantry division, the 1st. Training was still in progress when Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7, 1941.

As the only tank battalion and infantry division with joint amphibious training, the 70th, the 1st, along with the 1st Marine Raider Battalion, were sent on a mission to Martinique on January 9, 1942. Control of this Caribbean island in our own backyard by pro-Nazi, Vichy France was intolerable. Seeing the force against him, the Vichy governor capitulated without a shot being fired.

In early March, the 70th and the 9th Infantry Division began training for "Operation Torch," the invasion of French North Africa. On November 8, 1942, B Company and the 47th Infantry Regiment landed at Safi, French Morocco, C Company and the 60th at Port Lyautey, French Morocco, and A Company and the 39th at Algiers, Algeria. Combat was over in a day except at Port Lyautey where it lasted three days.

The 70th was soon detached from the 9th, which meant A Company was alone and available in Algiers. It was sent to Tunisia in late December, 1942. The rest of the battalion set up a training school in Tlemcen, Algeria, to teach "Free French" cadres the use of M5 light tanks.

In Tunisia, A Company was attached to the "Free French" XIX Corps. Not only was there no prior training, but the company found itself providing tank support for French, Senegalese, and Ghoumier infantry, all speaking a different language and with different military traditions. Even worse, French commanders at first deployed A Company tanks as sentinels and mobile pillboxes, out ahead of infantry in exposed positions and ineffective for an assault. On another occasion, the light tanks were used as bait, parading in front of heavier German tanks to draw them within range of French big guns and the 75s of U.S. 601st T.D.s and British Churchill tanks. Such misuse of tanks ended only when the A Company commander, Atlee Wampler, insisted that he be involved in all planning when company tanks were employed. In time, the French and A Company developed a good, solid relationship which lasted until the end of hostilities on May 13th.

In Sicily, the 70th again supported the 1st Infantry Division. For the first time in

combat, the entire battalion was together. Now, Lt. Col. John Welborn, battalion commander, was involved in all planning. He was highly regarded and a good friend of Brig. Gen. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., 1st Division Assistant Commander. Relations and coordination between the 1st and the 70th were excellent throughout the campaign.

Light tanks had proved to have limited value. Sent to England to train for the invasion of France, the 70th became a "standard tank battalion" with three companies of 17 Sherman medium battle tanks, and one company of 17 lights, used primarily for screening, roadblocks or reconnaissance. Mediums had crews of five, lights of four.

Roosevelt, now in the 4th Infantry Division, was reputed to have said that for the invasion, the untried 4th would need the battle-tested 70th more than would the experienced 1st. Roosevelt prevailed, and the 70th was assigned to the 4th just prior to the invasion maneuvers, code-named "Exercise Tiger." Joint infantry-tank training was only for the landings, and only for a few days.

Yet on Utah Beach, the 4th immediately showed that tankers would be involved in planning tank-infantry operations. The 4th assigned Franklin Anderson and two radio men to land with engineers at H-Hour minus three minutes. As a 70th tank officer, Anderson designated for engineers places to blow holes in the seawall where tanks could best operate.

Four DDs (amphibious tanks) sank when their LCT hit a mine, but the other 28 DDs landed in time to support infantry across causeways over land inundated by Germans. C Company Commander John Ahearn and his regular Shermans protected both infantry flanks. D Company light tanks helped link scattered 101st Airborne troops on D+1.

Inland, the first of the hedgerows which dominated the Norman landscape were encountered. These were earthen banks perhaps six or seven feet high encrusted with bushes and trees bringing the total height to 10 or 12 feet. Each was a natural defense line protecting a farm field. Movement was from field to field, and infantry with tank support had to do it. It was a badly chosen place to conduct warfare, and high command had not told front line troops about hedgerows nor prepared anyone to fight in them.

It took individual initiative to find a way. As early as D-day, dozer tank commander Owen Gavigan and his temporarily assigned engineer tank driver learned to use the bulldozer type blade to push

through hedgerows, making an opening for assault tanks to get into a field.

Once, Gavigan recalls, his dozer tank was the only tank in a field with a platoon or more of infantry. A good deal of small arms fire was coming in, so Gavigan used the dozer blade to build mounds of earth, enabling infantry to hold their ground until more help arrived.

It was in these conditions that the 4th and the 70th learned to work together. Tanks needed infantry protection or warning of anti-tank guns, panzerfaust (German bazookas), and heavier German tanks. The German Tiger and Panther exceeded the Sherman in both the power of the main gun and in armor thickness. One on one, the Sherman didn't stand a chance, and that is what happened as German tanks simply waited behind hedgerows for American tanks to come to them. Infantrymen needed the protection tanks offered, and especially the firepower of two machine guns (or sometimes a third firing out of the turret) and a 75mm cannon. Tanker Clarence McNamee believes the 4th and the 70th "were a perfect fit. Infantry would say what they wanted, but control was really between our platoon leader or company commander and an infantry officer. It was crucial that tanks work alongside infantry, in conjunction, not out in front and not behind."

Often, as in Normandy, a single tank battalion was insufficient to meet infantry tank needs. Then all or parts of a second independent tank battalion would be attached to an infantry division. When a single tank battalion sustained losses on the line day after day for prolonged periods, it was almost always understrength. The ratio of tanks to infantry did not allow tank companies or platoons to be alternated as frequently on the line and in reserve as was the case with infantry units.

Medium tank companies seldom saw one another during a campaign. Each was assigned to an infantry regiment. Even the three platoons of a company normally fought in different actions with a battalion or company. When a platoon was split, they were likely supporting a company or less. Single tank missions were conducted at the request of an infantry officer or noncom who would direct the tank to the target.

If the enemy was behind a hedgerow in unknown strength, Ed Gossler remembers, "We would spray it like hell with machine-gun and 75mm fire to keep the Germans down. I guess they were just as scared as we were and we had a lot of firepower!"

Continued on Page 42

Independent Tank Battalion (Continued from Page 28)

The attachment of the 70th to the 4th was unusual as it lasted until the end of the war for all but three days when the 70th was with the 63rd Infantry Division. The more the 70th and the 4th worked together, the better their operations became. It should have been that way with all independent tank battalions and the infantry divisions they supported. That it wasn't led to untold consequences.

When a tank battalion became attached to an infantry division, the question of authority for use of tanks became significant. Tankers knew what tanks could and could not do. Yet in the hierarchical structure of the Army, orders from one of higher rank must be obeyed, even if an infantry officer put tankers in needless jeopardy.

The worst case occurred late in the war. Company Commander Franklin Anderson attended a meeting at infantry regimental headquarters. There was to be an attack the next morning into a shallow valley with a high ridge on the opposite end still held by the Germans. "That was a perfect place to put 88s, hidden by trees

and looking right down on us," Anderson recalls. He had examined the ground and found tank traps which would force tanks to go the way the Germans wanted. At the meeting, the regimental commander, a colonel, planned the attack. He said he could visualize tanks "barreling over the crest of a small hill into the valley." Infantry would rush in when tanks reached their objective. With his tanks in the open, in front of infantry, and with no artillery barrage against the ridge, Anderson knew they would be in serious trouble. Yet he could not question the colonel's authority. He did ask for the attack to begin at 0630, hoping for a morning mist. The colonel said no, it will begin at 0800. An infantry major gave the order for four tanks to move out. Within 50 yards 1-2-3-4-all were knocked out. Six tankers were killed, more were injured.

Such a decision would likely not have been made by infantry and tank platoon leaders or company commanders together planning an action at the point of attack. This is where infantry and tankers had developed a relationship built upon experience and trust.

When I arrived home in September, 1945, the 70th patch was on one upper arm of my "Eisenhower jacket," the Ivy Leaf of the 4th on the other. I am proud to read that the 4th is considered among the best infantry divisions in the European War. I know one of the reasons was the excellent relationship it had with the 70th.

This article is in part extracted from the author's book, *Strike Swiftly: The 70th Tank Battalion From North Africa to Normandy to Germany*, Presidio Press, 1997. It was reviewed in *ARMOR Magazine*, May-June 1998.

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