

An Infantryman's Thoughts on Armor

by Major Robert Bateman

This is not so much an article as it is an open letter from a grunt to his brothers-in-arms. It is not an attack. It is not a prescription. It is most certainly not the "word" from somewhere on high, although it agrees with some of the ideas coming from the top recently. In fact, as the all-time record holder for "authors that annoyed the readership," I may well be considered just about the antithesis of "official" for the Armor community.¹ Think of me as your token grunt. In other words, these are the thoughts of somebody that cares, a lot, about our collective future. It is supporting fire for some, such as SSG Morris (see "Letters," September-October 2000) who are among the very few wholeheartedly working to get Armor into the fight on the ground.

Surprising absolutely no one, there has been a great deal of gnashing of teeth lately over the Transformation Force concept started by General Shinseki. Sure, the Chief of Armor has officially proclaimed that you all heartily agree with the transformation. You won't find an O-6 anywhere that will publicly disagree with the concept. That is "corporate-ness" in action.

This is important because Fort Knox is the center of the world for the armored community. Because of that, and because the branch is "officially" supporting transformation, the change is rolling along. But we've all heard the whispering and complaining in other channels. This grumbling is entirely unofficial, but we all know that it is on that front that General Shinseki's gamble on transformation must be won.

Transformation is no easy feat. For half a decade I have been trying to understand how we (the U.S. Army) blew it so badly during the period between World War One and Two, an era with striking similarities to our current situation.² What emerges from this research is a realization that the toughest part of getting an army to change is convincing the grognards.³ Getting the water cooler crowd to go along with an idea is the toughest part. For lack of a better term, let's call it "institutional inertia." This is the killer. It was what kept armor under the thumb of the infantry from 1920 to 1940, and it may be what keeps General Shinseki's ideas from going the distance. Why?



Let's just say that you, as a branch, are not going along with the idea 100 percent. If you do not deal with this quickly, and quit your unofficial challenging of the idea, you are going to be responsible to future generations. You hold the power to knock the contractors into line; we all know it, so do it. Otherwise we are heading for a train-wreck at the Congressional level. You know who will pay for that if it happens? Won't be you, it'll be me and mine in the infantry. Do you know how? In blood, most likely. Because we will be there, wherever "there" is, and you won't be, just when we need you most. Let me explain why.

ON EQUIPMENT

Most members of the Armor community will not deny that the M1 (any generation) is miserable in three areas. It is tough to deploy. It is a pain to maintain (compared to, say, a HMMWV) It is a royal pain to logistically support. (Can you say "fuel consumption," lieutenant?) Fine, we all agree on that. These are three really good reasons to change. But some of you still resist. You contend that there are some important issues to be addressed, issues stemming from the

famous triad of armor, "Protection, Mobility, Firepower." OK, let me address the most common of these that I have heard from my armored brethren.

ARMOR: First, you have to realize that your "protection" means jack**** to me as an infantry soldier. Are you going to look me in the face, me with my 120-pound load as I personally carry a Javelin round and sight from point A to point B on foot, and tell me that you need more "protection" than I am entitled to in order to place your tank-killing system on the battlefield?

Here I am, wearing my MK-1 BDU system (armor level 0 for you Dungeons and Dragons fans), and I am on the battlefield, and you want me to feel sorry for you because you don't have enough armor when you have the equivalent of 10 mm, or 50 mm of rolled steel?! (Obviously, that's a lowball. The point is that I have 0.0 mm, and therefore have little sympathy.) Forget it. What I want is you there with me, not on a boat 3,000 miles away. That is my number one.

Your job is to be on the battlefield. If having armor stops you, you must discard that armor until you reach the point that you can be on that battlefield again.

Basically, although I know most of you know this at some fundamental level, your primary purpose is not to survive, it is to accomplish the mission. Just like me. Survival, at the nasty end of the spear, is a "nice to have" that slips in right behind "mission accomplishment." Until you are more vulnerable than I am with my BDU armor, you should be thinking about other things first. Let other people worry about "Force Protection." The armor community should focus on "mission accomplishment."

FIREPOWER: Specifically on design. Aim upwards. Not in technology, I mean in elevation. Forget range for a moment. Personally, I don't care if you can accurately ID and hit a target at 5 km, or 15 km for that matter. Let aviation or artillery get into that "precision munitions" bull. More often than not, I really don't care how big your gun is. I am only interested in "terminal effects." I want you to be able to hit that fourth-floor window 250 meters away in a way that the Russians quite obviously could not in Grozny.

In short, this is another good reason to think about me and mine, the infantry. Of the tank kills in the past nine years, my bet would be that 95 percent of them were infantry-on-armor, not armor-on-armor.⁴ Think about that, my brothers-in-arms. You can bitch and whine all you want that armor "shouldn't be used in cities," but you know what?...if they put **my** "fourth point of contact" in a city, you can bet I am personally going to be screaming for armored support. I need you.

Without you and your armor, more of my boys will die. Given that reality, how long do you suppose we will stick to the aspects of our doctrine that suggest that we should "bypass population centers whenever possible," huh? How long? (Hint: How long did we stay in the hinterlands of Somalia? Where are we concentrated in Kosovo? Etc.)

Your engine power allows you to carry a lot of equipment, so make something that can shoot through walls, or knock down walls, or buildings. Oh, and don't forget that sometimes your firepower is walking beside you...give us a phone, will you?

MANEUVER: This requires a bit of qualification. As we all know, there are several levels of war, and therefore we need to think of maneuver and movement at all of these levels. So stop thinking about the dash speed or cross country mobility of the M1 and think at all three levels, the tactical, operational and strategic. At the strategic level, we are talking about movement on a global scale. Ask yourself, "How quickly can I

get there?" Either the Navy or the Air Force will take us to the dance. The question then is, how much armor can we get there at the speed of the infantry? Since the infantry will fly, we need armor that can get there by that method as well. If we are going to fight and win our nation's wars together, then you have to be there to make sure that I don't become somebody's speed bump.

The operational level is the real clincher. This is your worst area, and very few of you even realize this fact. You need a lot of improvement here, though the limitation in this area is not so much the weight of your machines but the weight of what it takes to keep them moving.⁵ Operational speed means that you need to think about a scale of operations larger than movement from main post, Fort Hood, to North Fort Hood. In short, and in terms understandable to all members of the armor community with more than one PCS, think of maneuvering from Fort Hood to Dallas. That is the distance I expect my infantry to cover, tens of thousands of them, dismounted if need be, in three days. Roughly 1,000 gallons of fuel would be needed for that in the worst case scenario. (Remember that once upon a time hundreds of thousands of infantry might cover that distance with zero gasoline.) Most of that will go to haul food. Will you be there with us, if that is the fuel limit? If not, how many infantry will I need to give up to bring in a fuel carrier for your armor? If I have to give up too many, what are you going to do, dismount and start room-clearing on the interior of buildings with me? Not likely, so figure it out.

CONCLUSION

To make a weak historical point, I would note for you that despite the fact that the German Tiger and King Tiger tanks were "the greatest heavy tanks of WWII" they were also the tanks used by the losers. The Germans lost using the Panther and Tiger. What did they have when they were winning? The MK II, III and IV, tanks that were far lighter, far less capable, and far more likely to be "there" when the infantry needed them, thank you very much. We in the infantry are screwed without you. I don't care how many of my brethren thump their chests mightily and place their berets at a jaunty angle, when we hit that first barricade, or we see our first T-80, we're all screaming "ARMOR, get me some @%&#* ARMOR!" The question then is going to be, "where are you?"

I hear it in the hallways when I talk to tankers, officer and enlisted. The grumbling and reservations. Let me make this clear. If you keep pretending that the M1

is god, that it is the be-all and end-all of armor, you won't be there for us when we need you. Some politician will decide that 70 tons of steel "sends the wrong message" and you will be pulled back to the States just when I need you the most. That or your treads will seem "offensive" or cause too much damage and you will be held back. Moreover, continuance down that same old design path was going to ensure you would get your lunch eaten by some 16-year-old Third World punks with a sense of depth and a view from the sixth floor. Choose. Will you be there with me? Lord knows I need you. I pray that you'll be there with me, because there is no doubt in anyone's mind that I'll be there, is there?

Notes

¹The author has the dubious honor of generating the most letters to the editor (in response to articles) in the 113-year history of *Cavalry Journal/ARMOR Magazine*.

²The best recent works on this era are David Johnson, *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers*, (Cornell, 1998), *The Challenge of Change*, Harold Winton and David Mets, ed. (Nebraska, 2000) and William Odom, *After the Trenches* (Texas A&M Press, 1999).

³"Groggnard" (Grow-nyar) was the nickname given by Napoleon to his veterans in his elite formation, the "Old Guard." This was a select unit, a part of Napoleon's Imperial Guard, the minimum requirements for entry into the corps was that one must be a veteran of no less than seven separate campaigns. (Imagine a division-sized formation of First Sergeants) As old soldiers are wont to do, the Old Guard would "grumble" regardless of the rank of the officers nearby. Groggnard is French for grumble.

⁴"Life After Operational Maneuver" by CDT Joseph Berg and CPT Robert Bateman, *ARMOR*, Vol. CVIII, No. 2, March-April 1999, pp. 16-19.

⁵The caveat to that is obvious. You need to be able to cross all the bridges that I can cross, without any additional reinforcement, assuming the bridge is not damaged to begin with. That is a simple requirement to Operational Level maneuver.

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