Time for a Change in Tank Gunnery

by Sergeant First Class Timothy L. Gray

In the process of deploying numerous armor units to Iraq, a noticeable need for changing or adding to current tank gunnery tables has emerged. Current gunnery tables are good, but somewhat dated. The likelihood of facing multiple targets involving tanks and personnel carriers are fading. The modern battlefield appears to be headed for a more urban, less open, closer target engagement environment.

Many engagements are at extremely close ranges and it is not uncommon for tanks to engage cars, trucks, or even buildings with main guns at ranges that rarely exceed 400 meters. The current Table VIII targets are greater than 400 meters and many .50-caliber engagements are less than 200 meters, and the loader's M240 machine gun is being used much more often than current gunnery table requirements dictate.

Current Tank Table VIII main gun engagements involve defensive and offensive situations typically firing at ranges in excess of 1200 meters. Target arrays consist of tanks and personnel carriers. Longer ranges were used due to the capabilities of the M1-series tank to accurately engage at that distance when most other armies' tanks could not.

The .50-caliber engagement is fired by tank commanders at ranges typically over 500 meters. There is only one .50-caliber engagement on Table VIII; there is no loader's M240 engagement on Table VIII.

There are preliminary tables fired as a prerequisite to shooting Tank Table VIII. These tables do include a loader's engagement with the M240, as well as .50-caliber engagements; however, these engagement scenarios are lacking realism and generally just give practice to prepare for Table VIII.

While these tables do encourage and enhance teamwork while using the tank's full capabilities, they are lacking in certain aspects.

The .50-Caliber Machine Gun

The .50-cal. machine gun on the M1A1 tank series is somewhat difficult to manipulate quickly and accurately. Most tankers have there own tricks of the trade for that one engagement. Beforehand, most would line up the commander's weapon station (CWS) sight with the gunner's primary sight (GPS) and have the gunner sense as the tank commander adjusted the sight in elevation or depression. Although usually successful, it is not realistic or practical to do this in Iraq.

While patrolling narrow streets, it is nearly impossible to safely traverse the entire turret to engage enemy forces. Many of the potential or actual engagements would be at such close range that the time required to drop down, align the CWS with the target, and fire the weapon would result in a completely missed target with potentially devastating results for the crew. Many tank commanders keep the M4 carbine close by instead. When asked about how they use the .50 caliber, many tank commanders have the same response. They keep the CWS power control handle mounted up top for quick access. They also keep the .50 caliber level in elevation and if they have to engage quickly, they "John Wayne'd" the engagement. Some tank commanders admitted that it just makes a lot of noise and is difficult to hit targets. All of them had the M4 carbine ready to use while riding in the hatch.

Another drawback is that the tank commander is the only crewmember to fire the "ma-deuce" during gunnery. Many times, tanks are used for perimeter security or for guarding facilities or bases. During these times, it is not unusual to have a gunner, loader, or driver manning a weapon that most have never fired. All crewmembers should fire the .50 caliber at various ranges, and be proficient with it, not just familiar.

The Loader's M240 Machine Gun

The loaders M240 machine gun is underused at gunnery ranges. Unfortunately, many tank crews treat the loader's

M240 as a "spare coax." Many times during field training exercises the loader's M240 is never fired because it gets dirty. This is unfortunate and unacceptable. The loader's sector of responsibility could require him to engage a rocket-propelled grenade team, or any other target. To not train to standard in peacetime jeopardizes individuals, as well as entire crews, during wartime. I have also witnessed loader's M240s not fired at live-fire exercises for fear of shooting the bore evacuator or collimator off. This too is unacceptable.

Several tank commanders expressed a desire to replace the loader's M240 with an MK19 grenade launcher. One tank commander suggested that wingman tanks be equipped with MK19s. Another tank commander wanted M203 grenade launchers on both M4 carbines. They all expressed the need to "lob" rounds onto rooftops and the loader's M240 did not meet that need. Either way, the entire crew, including the tank commander, should be required to fire several engagements with the M240.

Close Targets

The M1-series fire control system is accurate out to 4,000 meters, but many engagements fired in Iraq are too close to even laze. Some say, "if you can hit it at 2,000 meters, 200 meters or less is no problem." This might be true, but the surprise of having a target so close sometimes catches gunners off guard, resulting in confusion. I recommend several engagements at a gunnery range at targets of 500 meters or less.

Engaging from a HMMWV Window

This is not directly related to Tank Table VIII, but many tankers often times are tasked to ride in various wheeled convoys in Iraq. Convoys happen daily in Iraq. Whether it is to escort supplies, deliver mail, or transport personnel, there are usually high-mobility, multipurpose, wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) in convoys. All personnel should be armed with an M4/M16. Engaging from a moving HMMWV while seated and wearing a seatbelt is awkward and difficult. There are currently no training requirements for shooting from a HMMWV window. Scouts have their own tables, but this type of engagement is not part of the table. A HMMWV table for all military occupational specialties, involving shooting not only from the passenger positions, but from the crew-served weapons up top (if so equipped) would be beneficial.

There are many new tactics, techniques, and procedures being developed here in Iraq. The current tank gunnery tables are good, in that they develop teamwork, instill confidence in the tanks' fire control system, and develop lethal tank crews. However, they are not adequate for the current battlefield in Iraq.

Master gunners, commanders, and tank commanders should be creative, imaginative and use ranges to develop different scenarios. This training will ensure success while deployed to Iraq. Oh, if ammunition for this is a concern, redirect ammunition from other tables including Tank Table XII. Find ammunition — it's out there. Not to train for the close-in urban fight, with all crewmembers using all weapons systems, is detrimental to the lives and safety of tank crews.

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SFC Timothy Gray is currently the assistant operations NCO S3, Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 1st Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment, Samarra, Iraq. His military education includes Master Gunner Course, Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course, Primary Leadership Development Course, and Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Defense Course. He has served in various command and staff positions, to include company master gunner, C Company, 1st Battalion, 66th Armor Regiment (1-66), 4th Infantry Division (4th ID), Mosul, Iraq; tank commander, C Company, 1-66 Armor, 4th ID, Fort Hood, TX; tank commander, A Company, 2d Battalion, 72d Armor, 2d ID, Camp Casey, Korea; and tank commander, C Company, 1st Battalion, 67th Armor Regiment, 4th ID, Fort Hood, TX.