

Gunner's Seat

Contributions of the Armored Force

The U.S. Army's Armored Force has been the combat arm of decision since CPT George Patton first reported to the American Expeditionary Force (AEF)'s Tank Corps commander, COL Samuel Rockenbach, in 1918. Although the tank of World War I was slow, clumsy, unwieldy, difficult to control and mechanically unreliable, its value as a combat weapon had been clearly proven in action, where it restored mobility to the battlefield and drove home the firepower and shock effect that would become the corps' hallmarks.

The performance of the Tank Corps during World War I was so valuable that the AEF commander, GEN John J. Pershing, penned a personal letter to then-BG Rockenbach praising its splendid work and gallant record. He wrote in part: "Its history in active operations, though short, is a bright and glorious one. In both the American offensives at St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne of the First American Army, it was a material assistance in the advance. In the breach of the Hindenburg Line with the British near La Catelet, it also won glory. The high percentage of casualties among the officers and men tells the tale of splendid morale and gallantry in action of your personnel and of the unselfish devotion to duty."

Clearly, the men of the Armored Force had proven their worth and established a benchmark for those who would follow.

With the formation of the Armored Force July 10, 1940, BG Adna Chaffee took control of all tank units that had been part of both the Infantry and Cavalry Branches. Pioneering the use of armor as a highly mobile force capable of penetrating and exploiting enemy weak points, the formation of an Armor Branch also allowed for the expansion of the force as the Army federalized National Guard units and began drafting eligible males.

Combat operations would soon follow. Early during American involvement in World War II, the activated National Guard tankers of 192nd Tank Battalion were ordered to defend the Philippines during the Japanese invasion and participated in the first tank-on-tank combat of the war. A tank platoon led by LT Ben R. Morin was ordered to move north from the town of Damortis, when on Dec. 22, 1941, the platoon of M3 Stuarts ran into Japanese Type 95 light tanks from the Imperial Japanese Army 4th Tank Regiment. In the ensuing tank-on-tank battle, the lead 192nd tank immediately left the road to maneuver but was hit and caught fire. The remaining four Stuarts also received hits but withdrew from the field, only to later be destroyed by enemy aircraft. Morin was wounded, and he along with his crew were captured. The 192nd continued to skirmish with 4th Tank Regiment as they retreated toward Bataan.

Tank losses during the fighting required the reorganization of some units. Consequently, tank companies were reorganized into 10 tank companies with three tank platoons, and one tank for the company commander. During the remaining struggle for Bataan, the tank battalion defended the beaches and the airfield, and provided support for the infantry until April 8, 1942, when the 192nd received orders to prepare to destroy their M3s. Upon receiving the code word "Crash," the crewman destroyed their remaining tanks and the U.S. Army and its allies on Bataan surrendered April 9, 1942.

Though not initially successful, the Armored Force would continue to grow, eventually incorporating more than 89,000 tanks into 16 divisions and 118 separate tank battalions and participating in virtually every campaign during World War II.

Just five years later, the Armored Force would be called on again, participating in the defense of our South Korean allies. Often individual tank platoons and companies, working in conjunction with the infantry, would make the difference between a successful mission and being overrun by enemy forces. An early example is the "Battle for the Bowling Alley" in August 1950, where Company C, 73rd Tank Battalion, was attached to 27th Infantry and defended a narrow valley north of Tabu-dong, Korea.

The approaching North Koreans had been first spotted near Ch'onp'yong, 800 yards forward of 27th's lead elements. The commander of the attached C/73rd Tank Battalion overheard the enemy advance and deployed two

of his M-26 tanks onto the road. Three other tanks stayed in a streambed that was more or less at a right angle to the road. Another four or five tanks were in a column farther back, each about 75 yards apart.

The lead T-34 stopped and fired. Its first round was 25 yards short. The second round set a U.S. truck on fire. The light of the burning vehicle revealed an enemy tank about 300 yards from the American tanks, accompanied by infantrymen in the ditches. Two North Korean People's Army tanks following the first opened up on the M-26s to the rear, but the leading M-26 returned fire with a 90mm high-explosive round, striking the leading T-34's front plate. This was followed by five high-velocity armor-piercing rounds, which destroyed the enemy tank. The three M-26s in the stream then joined the duel.

The combined efforts of the tankers, infantrymen and well-placed artillery carried the day and caused one infantryman to remark: "The North Koreans never stood a chance, despite their numbers and heavy armor. Our artillery, tanks, mortars and machineguns proved too much for them as they tried to come south through the gauntlet we had set up."

In perspective, though, more important than the campaigns the Armor Branch has participated in while committed to the places mentioned, or in Lebanon, Vietnam, Panama, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq, are the people who came out of the Armored Force. Household names such as Patton (both father and son) and Abrams – as well as those who would shape, train and lead the Army such as Walker, Starry, Sullivan, Franks and Shinseki – have left an indelible mark. Also, four sergeants major of the Army and the first senior-enlisted adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff have been Armor Branch Soldiers, with an impact on generations of young men and women. The combat arm of decision has always been about teams of amazing and innovative people who have truly made a difference in our Army.

In closing, this is my last **ARMOR** article as the command sergeant major of the Armor School. It has been a remarkable job and a rewarding experience, and I am proud to have been counted among Cavalry and Armor Soldiers. Thank you for your support and Scouts Out!

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Acronym Quick-Scan

AEF – American Expeditionary Force