

Saddles and Sabers: The Thunderbolt: a Reminder of What Makes Armor Unique

by CPT Lazaro Oliva Jr.

What is Armor? Many in our branch find it difficult to answer this question. Most cannot articulate the difference between Armor and infantry. Others will say that the Armor mission is obsolete and that the branch should focus on the cavalry mission.

I, however, believe that our branch is more than just a tank and more than just infantry support. Armor represents a combined-arms approach to war, and while the infantry and cavalry missions are inherent in what we do, we must not lose sight of what makes Armor unique. It's called **shock effect**, and it's represented by the thunderbolt on our insignia. It's a symbol of our ability to overwhelm our enemy.

Shock effect paralyzes our enemy with fear, both physically and psychologically, and it is a result of our tempo. The Army defines tempo as "the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy." Our ability to make critical decisions, maneuver and destroy the enemy at a time and place we choose allows us to retain the initiative; it's what makes us the "combat arm of decision," the only force on the modern battlefield capable of creating this effect.

But how is it that an Armor officer or noncommissioned officer develops this skill – how does he become the thunderbolt? It is done through training as part of a formation within an armored brigade combat team (ABCT); leaders in our branch describe the experience as "turret time." The "thunderbolt" refers to the speed at which the fight develops and only occurs in an ABCT.

In an ABCT, for example, it is common to operate in an area of operations that is 100K x 100K. What makes us different are the large maps we operate on, our rate of march and a fight that can and often will begin and end in a matter of minutes – and sometimes seconds – from distances as great as five kilometers away (long before you are capable of seeing the enemy with your own eyes). This forces our leaders to make on-the-spot decisions in rapid succession. Turret time is what produces an agile and adaptive leader, capable of processing large volumes of information very quickly and making decisions that help us retain the initiative, preserve our tempo and ultimately strike paralyzing fear into our enemies, creating our signature shock effect. So it is our ability to employ our weapons systems effectively that makes us what we are, the thunderbolt.

World War I (birth of the thunderbolt)

From its creation as the Tank Corps in World War I, the Armored Force has always understood that to achieve a decisive victory, it had to be part of a larger team – a combined-arms team. Proof of this can be found in the branch insignia first worn by crewmen in the Tank Corps. The insignia was conceptualized in the shape of a triangle and divided into three equal parts. At the top is the color yellow, which symbolizes the mobility associated with the cavalry. To the bottom left is infantry blue, which represents our ability to close with and destroy the enemy. To the bottom right is red, the color of field artillery, known for its ability to engage and destroy the enemy from extraordinary distances, providing freedom of maneuver for its brothers in arms.

This insignia represents the concept of a combined-arms team in which all parts are equally important in accomplishing a mission. Any Soldier who belonged to the Tank Corps wore the insignia.

The tank was a revolutionary weapon created to restore maneuver to the battlefield through the use of mobility, shock and firepower. The advocates of this new weapon realized they needed a way to cross no man's land with enough combat power to penetrate the enemy's elaborate trench network; the tank was a weapon that did just that.

This new weapon also had a devastating shock effect on the enemy. "Its ability to stun the soldier until his mind was dominated by fear and self-preservation was a weapon commanders used to attack the nerves of an army and spread terror through its organization," according to the Armor School's publication ***This Is Armor***.¹

The “demoralizing effect the new machine had”² helped restore mobility to the battlefields of Western Europe and ultimately resulted in an Allied victory over the Central Powers. It was at this moment that the War Department recognized the effectiveness that shock effect had on the enemy, and it became a trademark of the Armored Force.

Forging thunderbolt

Offensive characteristics such as speed and tempo – which are synonymous with the Armored Force today – were not as prevalent in first-generation tanks. The tanks that helped the Allies break the stalemate on the Western Front and win World War I were laden with problems. They were mechanically unreliable, very slow and lacked adequate firepower and protection; this made them easy targets for German artillery. Also, the logistical lines of communications that would allow them to exploit opportunities and achieve early victory had not been conceptualized or assembled. This often allowed the enemy to conduct successful counterattacks and recapture ground they had lost.

These weaknesses led to a lot of skepticism from senior leaders in the other branches such as infantry and cavalry about the future role of tanks, but in spite of those concerns, “The U.S. Tank Corps under Rockenbach continue[d] ... to endure,” wrote historian Mildred H. Gillie. “Then, on June 4, 1920, under the provisions of the National Defense Act ... the Tank Corps was abolished, and its equipment and personnel inherited by a somewhat indifferent infantry arm.”³

The situation remained unchanged until Summer 1927 when Dwight Davis, U.S. Secretary of War, witnessed a British demonstration of mechanized warfare. He knew instantly that the United States needed to develop a mechanized force, and as soon as he returned from his trip to England, he met with GEN Charles P. Summerall, the Army Chief of Staff. The results of this meeting “forever altered the development of tanks in America.”⁴

At about the same time this new mechanized force was being developed, a cavalry officer named Adna Chaffee received orders to the training section of the Army’s G-3. In 1928, just a year after arriving at his new job, Chaffee submitted a paper that “outlined for the first time for official consideration a definite program leading to the creation of the Armored Force. The new force was to be a union of all the arms: cavalry in armored cars for reconnaissance, tanks to strike the enemy, infantry in trucks to hold the ground won by the tanks ... artillery on tracks to provide supporting fire [and] engineers to build and clear.”⁵

This force would place special emphasis on speed, armor and operating radius. The goal was to restore mobility on the modern battlefield and achieve a quick and decisive victory in war. The Army approved the proposal, and the uncertainty and opposition that ensued in the following years never deterred Chaffee from pursuing his vision.

Technological advancements during this time solved a lot of the issues that plagued the World War I Tank Corps. The latest models had better protection, could travel at speeds of up to 40 miles an hour, were better armed and were more capable of negotiating very difficult terrain. The mechanical reliability increased exponentially.

Chaffee assembled 7th Cavalry Brigade (Mechanized) at Fort Eustis, VA, and later moved it to Fort Knox, KY. They trained endlessly; tested new tactics and best practices; and ultimately wrote new doctrine. The shoulder insignia for this new unit was a set of tank tracks, which represented mobility and armor protection; a superimposed cannon, representing long-range firepower; and a lightning bolt to denote the shock effect it produced.

This insignia was superimposed on the World War I Tank Corps insignia, and it became the standard insignia for the Armor School and all the armored divisions before World War II – and it still is today.



Figure 1. *The Armor School's insignia incorporates World War I's U.S. Army Tank Corps insignia and tracks, cannon and lightning bolt of the Armored Force created during World War II.*

Lightning war

On May 9, 1940, German panzer divisions swept through the Ardennes Forest and into France. Within the first 10 days, they reached the English Channel's coast and split the Allies, sending the British into retreat across the Channel. By the end of June 1940, the French government had surrendered. The Germans' use of armor was so effective that they were able to accomplish in six weeks what they failed to do in five years during World War I. The Germans referred to this new form of warfare as *blitzkrieg*, or "lightning war," denoting both the speed with which operations were conducted and the shock effect created by the concentration and tempo that characterizes it.

Our leaders couldn't ignore any longer Germany's decisive strikes, which served as the catalyst for uniting our leaders to support creation of an independent Armored Force. The Armored Force was born July 10, 1940; both tanks and mechanized cavalry fell under the responsibility of this new force.

Chaffee became chief of the Armored Force and commander of the I Armored Corps. His responsibilities also included "the development of tactical and training doctrine for all units of the Armored Force," wrote Dr. Robert S. Cameron, the Armor Branch's historian.⁶ This led to the creation of the Armor School at Fort Knox, which played a critical role during the rapid expansion of the Armored Force leading up to and lasting through World War II.

Unfortunately, Chaffee died of cancer before the United States became involved in the war, and he never got the chance to see the fruits his hard work and unwavering commitment produced. It is for his efforts that he is known as the Father of Armor.

As the war progressed, American armored forces found themselves center stage, playing a pivotal role in every major theater and in every major victory the Allies achieved. These victories weren't attained by tanks alone but through the successful use of the combined-arms team. It was the armored divisions that led the Allies over the Rhine and into victory in Europe, and history is full of examples like these.

One instance is 101st Airborne Division's defense at Bastogne. As the story goes, the brave paratroopers, operating alone, were able to secure the city and single-handedly prevent the mighty German offensive from seizing the city of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. The part that is not well known is that the 101st wasn't alone but was augmented by elements of two armored divisions: Combat Command Reserve, 9th Armored Division, and Combat Command Bravo, 10th Armored Division. It was this combined-arms team that prevented the Waffen-SS, the armed

element of the SS, from enveloping the city. This siege would not be lifted until Patton's Third Army penetrated the German line and regained the initiative for the Allies.

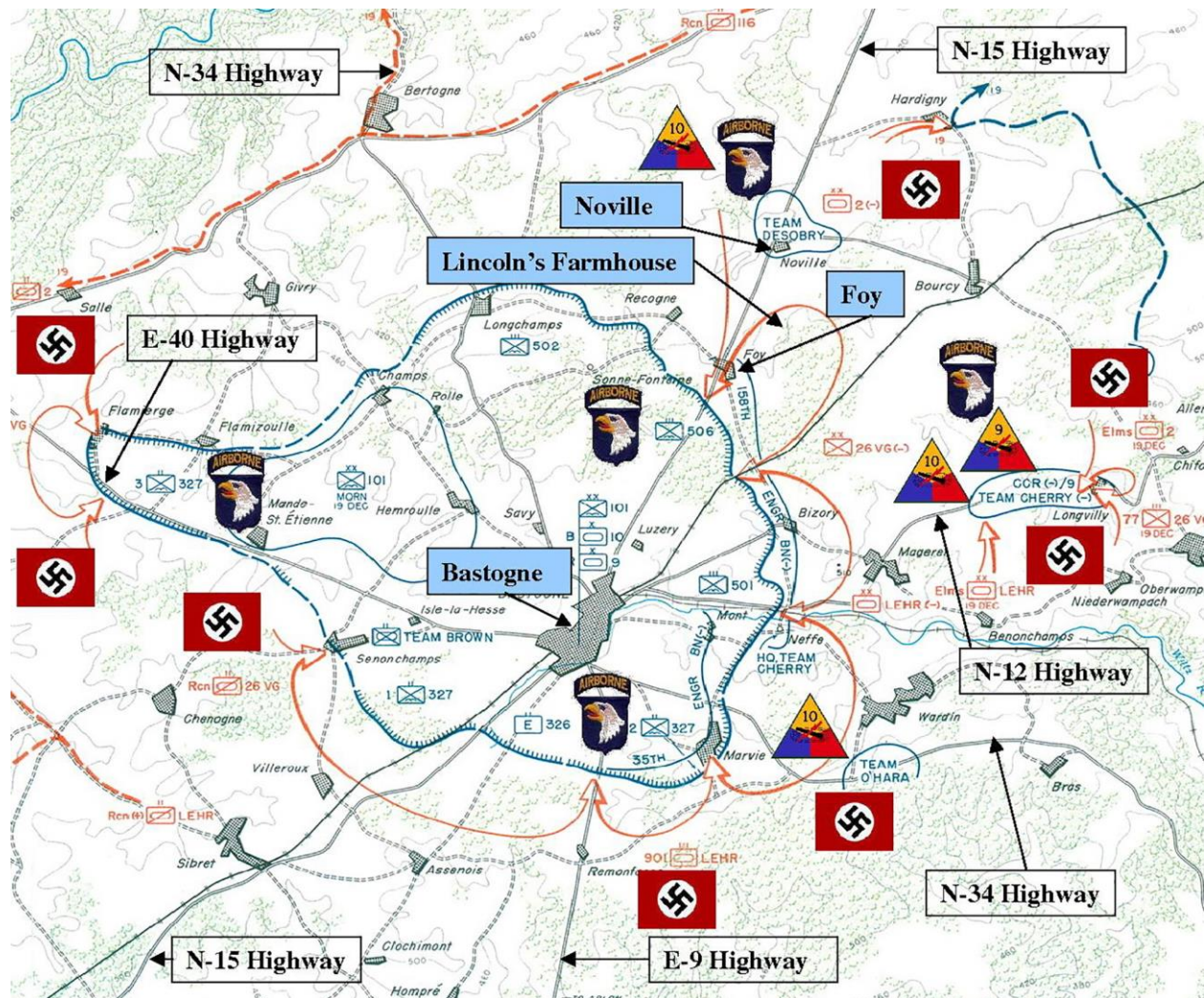


Figure 2. Elements of 9th Armored Division and 10th Armored Division assist 101st Airborne Division in its defense of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge.

Modern armor

1990s. The presence of an armored force on the battlefield is a game-changer for the side that employs the capability. Eagle Troop demonstrated the shock effect produced by an armored force during Operation Desert Storm in the Battle of 73 Easting when 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, serving as the advance guard for 1st Infantry Division, encountered a division of enemy armor. Through quick, decisive action and the effective employment of mobile, protected firepower, the troop destroyed a division of the elite Iraqi Republican Guard, suffering minimal casualties in the process. This scene repeated itself many times during the ground offensive, and the tempo set by American armor resulted in a decisive victory against Iraq, which had the fourth-largest standing army in the world at the time of the invasion.

The Battle of Mogadishu in 1993 serves as another example but one when the U.S. operation went awry. The enemy force within the city achieved fire superiority and denied the quick-reaction force access into the city by emplacing tactical obstacles, blocking key avenues of approach. This resulted in staggering losses for the Rangers and Delta Force operators who were attempting to rescue the crews of two downed helicopters. The commanding

officers of Special Operations Forces in Somalia had to request armored forces under the United Nations' control to breach the obstacles and fight their way to the crash sites to rescue the surrounded Rangers.

2000s. Twelve years later, 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) led a second armored assault into Iraq. Iraq surrendered after two swift strikes – now known as thunder runs – rolled into Baghdad's heart and forced the Iraqi government's collapse during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The same was true of the armored force that recaptured the city of Fallujah just one year after the Iraqi government surrendered. During the 2nd Battle of Fallujah in 2004, two ABCTs cleared the city, and in this instance tankers worked side-by-side with mechanized infantry to clear the city.

Whether in urban terrain against an insurgent force or the open desert against a conventional army, Armor has repeatedly proven its value. Our superior firepower allows us to engage irregular adversaries at distances that exceed the maximum effective range of the weapons employed by an irregular threat. "Heavy armor enables friendly forces to survive initial engagements and respond with precise, timely, direct fire that generates less collateral damage than do artillery or air strikes," wrote David E. Johnson.⁷ The infantry must resist the urge to think that it can do it on its own, or we will be forced to relearn a 100-year-old lesson.

Complex world

In the near future, the United States will likely face a **hybrid threat**. The concept of a hybrid threat is defined in doctrine as "the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefiting effects." Army leaders explain that the "[h]ybrid threat will use an ever-changing variety of conventional and unconventional organizations, equipment and tactics to create multiple dilemmas."

This is not a new concept; the United States faced it leading up to and during the Vietnam War. Russia's ongoing operations in Ukraine are the most recent examples of this hybrid approach. The most dangerous aspect of a hybrid adversary is that it can organize into a conventional force, or it can blend back into the population and operate as an irregular force, making it difficult to destroy.

To defeat such enemies, friendly forces must use combined-arms ground fire and maneuver to close with adversaries and force them to either fight or move, thus exposing them to attack by direct and indirect fires. Heavy forces provide the protected mobility needed for this maneuver, and the joint force provides the fires needed to suppress the enemy and enable maneuver. Dismounted infantry complements heavy forces once the close fight is joined.⁸

We are thunderbolt

As we move forward and prepare for the future, it is critical we do not forget our heritage. From the revolutionary weapon that broke through the stalemate of World War I's no man's land to the thunder run that pushed deep into Baghdad, Armor has proven that it is the combat arm of decision. The mental agility of an Armor warfighter is the hallmark of a branch that has achieved the decisive operation of countless battles and will continue to do so in the future. While the roles of the infantry and field artillery will remain, the need for Armor's swift and overwhelming power is the key to controlling the tempo and securing a decisive victory on the battlefield; Armor is the branch of decision.

So the next time someone asks you what makes Armor different, reply, "We are the thunderbolt!"

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Air-Assault School. CPT Oliva holds a bachelor's of arts degree in psychology and history from the University of Miami and a master's of science degree in international relations from Troy University.

Notes

¹ U.S. Army Armor School Pamphlet 360-2, ***This is Armor***, 2014,

<http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/OCOA/content/pdf/This%20is%20Armor.pdf>.

² Mildred H. Gillie, ***Forging the Thunderbolt***, Harrisburg, PA: The Military Publishing Company, 1947.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Dr. Robert S. Cameron, ***Mobility, Shock and Firepower: The Emergence of the U.S. Army's Armor Branch, 1917-1945***, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, U.S. Army, 2015. Dr. Cameron bases his information on memorandums from the Adjutant General (TAG), subject: "Organization of Armored Force," dated July 10, 1940, and TAG to the chiefs of all arms and services, subject: "Report of Board of Officers on Development of Equipment for Armored Divisions," July 16, 1940, both in Item 179, Reel 36, National Archives Project, George C. Marshall.

⁷ David E. Johnson, ***Heavy Armor in the Future Security Environment***, Rand Corporation (http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP334.html), 2011.

⁸ Ibid.