

# Future U.S. Marine Corps Tank Support

by U.S. Marine Corps CPT Joseph G. DiPietro

I am blessed to have spent the last five years working with and leading young U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) tankers. I was certainly disappointed to learn the Marine Corps would no longer own tanks, but I understand the reasoning. I would have preferred to see the Corps keep two tank companies either at Twentynine Palms, CA, or in the Reserve, but I also understand the most dangerous threats in the world and what is required to win in those environments.

I served three years as a platoon commander, executive officer and company commander at 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, at Twentynine Palms. I was also honored to serve as an instructor at the U.S. Army's Armor Basic Officer Leaders Course (ABOLC), the entry-level school for both Army and Marine Corps tank officers. My experience working with Army tankers provided me a new perspective on tank employment. That assignment has led me to care almost as much about Army tankers as I do Marines, and I want to use this perspective to secure a healthy future for these units to integrate.

Many of the arguments against the new force design that I have heard or read involve tanks in the second Battle of Fallujah or Operation Phantom Fury. Many of my Marines and leaders fought in that historic operation. Tanks were vital to the success of Operation Phantom Fury, and I am willing to bet that any Marine who fought in the Battle of Marjah or Operation Moshtarak would have loved heavy armor in support.

The issue now is that, similar to the aforementioned examples, there will come a moment when the Marine Corps must supplement the Army in unified land operations. Without the main battle tank, these future operations could lead to significant increases in casualties.

Assuming the force design does not change with regard to tanks, there are some questions for the Joint community to figure out as a service if land operations last longer than expected, or if we enter a fortified urban area within the littorals.

1. What becomes our primary support force unit in a combined-arms breach?
2. What does the process look like to acquire U.S. Army tank support?
3. How do we close with the enemy if aviation and indirect fire are unavailable?

The Amphibious Combat Vehicle could be the future answer to Question 1, but until the Marine Corps integrates it into the Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF), we are left with amphibious-assault vehicles and light-armor vehicles to serve as our primary direct-fire suppression. Neither are designed for that heavy task. The big-picture answer to Question 3 will come over time through practice and trial-and-error, but having worked with the Army for the past few years, I have some general guidelines and topics to consider that could answer Question 2, which simultaneously answers Questions 1 and 3.



**Figure 1. U.S. Marines with 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division, track through tank trails on Camp Lejeune, NC, July 27, 2020. For nearly 80 years, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion left the tank lot and would return after combat or training operations. This time, the tanks will not return. After serving 2<sup>nd</sup> Marine Division for more than three quarters of a century, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tank Battalion will deactivate in accordance with the future redesign of the Marine Corps. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by LCpl Patrick King)**

## Relationships

The first thing to consider is the relationship between units. One of the best parts of being a small community like the USMC tank community was the ability to work with multiple units throughout the Marine Corps. In my three years with 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion, I worked with 11 infantry battalions in various capacities. These relationships allowed multiple infantry units to understand their tank attachment's standing operating procedures (SOPs) and tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). This understanding led to more efficient training.

Without having an organic tank unit, Marine infantry units will now have less exposure to and experience with Army tank units, which could potentially lead to less efficient training when they are able to conduct Joint exercises. A useful publication to combat this unfamiliarity is Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3-12, **Tank Employment**. This publication provides a gaining infantry unit knowledge of the modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) for a Marine Corps tank unit, as well as its TTPs and SOPs. If an Army-Marine Corps team updates tank employment to reflect Army tank unit TTPs, SOPs and MTOE data, a gaining Marine Corps infantry unit could at least have a sample of the Army unit's background prior to conducting exercises or operations.

The next step to building that relationship is to determine which Army units would attach to which Marine Corps units and connect the leaders of those teams. The earlier Army tank-platoon leaders, company/troop commanders or battalion/squadron commanders can coordinate with gaining USMC commanders, the more organized the transition will be and the more efficient training will become.

Once the initial relationships form, these units could then begin training. Although no Army tank units are co-located with Marine Corps infantry units, there are some within a few hundred miles of each other which can facilitate relatively easy training. For example, Fort Stewart, GA, is only 400 miles from Camp Lejeune, NC; Fort

Irwin, CA, is only 140 miles from Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC), Twentynine Palms; Fort Polk, LA, is 220 miles from 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Division Headquarters in New Orleans, LA.

In addition to location considerations, the Marine Corps and Army both offer unique training opportunities to further enhance this joint endeavor. On the Marine Corps side, MCAGCC hosts the integrated training exercise that an Army tank unit can take part in (given logistical coordination). On the Army side, Fort Irwin is home to the National Training Center, and Fort Polk is home to the Joint Readiness Training Center. Both training centers can accommodate USMC infantry units to train alongside Army tank formations.

One of the glaring differences between USMC and Army tankers is the lack of knowledge and desire to work alongside dismounted infantry. The ability for a Marine Corps tank unit to support an infantry clearance of a contested urban environment, or to provide continuous suppression on a fortified trench system, is what our Marine Corps community prided itself on for decades. When I introduced these concepts to my ABOLC classes during situational-training exercises, most of the Soldier-instructors were puzzled at best. This is not a slight on Army tankers. I believe they are very good at what they do as a branch, but they do not train tank-infantry integration like MAGTF did.

Army tank units will also benefit from combined-arms training with the Marine Corps, as their fire-support coordination capabilities differ from those of USMC tank units. Army fire-support officers would benefit greatly by working with USMC fire-support coordination centers in training prior to any live-combat situations, and having a capable armored fire-support team is a significant asset to MAGTF.

## **Logistics of training**

The next consideration is the logistics of this training and future operations. The first logistics concern is money. Who will pay for the transportation, training, ammunition and such for exercises and operations? Having an organized and tested maintenance structure would prove extremely efficient, especially if this relationship takes place in-country.

Army and Marine Corps Global Combat Support Systems must communicate to ensure the maintenance process does not slow down between branches. For example, Army tank companies are structured with two vehicles the Marine Corps does not currently field: the Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle and the M113 Personnel Carrier.

Another logistical aspect to consider is how to best transfer ammunition and weapons, physically and administratively, because the Marine Corps will no longer carry 120mm ammunition or weapons specific to the M1A2 Abrams. Therefore, the Marine Corps will also have to plan for transportation overseas, or determine what forward bases to request Army tanks from within each combatant command.

To supplement that, Army tank units should consider training for amphibious operations, including use of the tank fording kits. Joint leaders also cannot forget the tactical logistics challenges that come with this relationship; the Marine Corps and Army must determine refuel capabilities and requirements with a tank unit attaching.

I am not the one to answer a lot of these questions, but these challenges require significant coordination and could become greatly limiting to future operations if we are not prepared.

## **Communications**

The last consideration here is communications. First, will radio cryptology match from branch to branch, unit to unit? I imagine that depends on where each unit gets its communication keys. However, if the unit applies different keys, gaining Marine Corps units need to have the proper communications tools to ensure an efficient transition.

Another difference from USMC to Army tanks is the overall radio capacity of the vehicles. Marine Corps tanks were all fitted for a radio supplement kit, which allowed more radios to function on the platform. Nearly half of Army tanks carry only one radio. I imagine they each have the capacity for more radios, but that is a question I would want answered before my infantry unit started to maneuver through a city alongside a main battle tank.

Finally with regard to communications, I want to know if the radios and frequencies each platform uses can work between units. If an Army tank unit attaches without the same communications abilities, its presence would be nearly useless.

These communication considerations are all tasks the joint community should train and practice, so these questions should have answers prior to the execution of live scenarios.

The purpose of this article is to save the lives of Marines who will one day benefit from the integration of Army tank support. The earlier the Joint community answers the questions posed here, the more prepared our young warfighters will be to combat the peer threats around the globe. Let us take the time now to plan and prepare for this Joint concept before it is too late. Let us execute this relationship before our Marines and Soldiers are caught in an unfamiliar situation when it matters most.

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## **Acronym Quick-Scan**

**ABOLC** – Armor Basic Officer Leadership Course

**MAGTF** – Marine Air-Ground Task Force

**MCAGCC** – Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center

**MTOE** – modified table of organization and equipment

**SOP** – standing operating procedures

**TTP** – tactics, techniques and procedures

**USMC** – U.S. Marine Corps