

RVN Armored Forces and Soviet Tanks

■ I have only recently caught up with your excellent August issue and particularly Bernard Halloran's article, "Soviet Armor Comes To Vietnam." I wholeheartedly applaud Mr. Halloran's thesis that the intelligence community must do a better job of providing the fighting soldier with meaningful information about the enemy he faces. There are, however, several points in his article which must be clarified, some to set the record straight and some to save lives in the future.

First, let me make it clear that I have no quarrel with Mr. Halloran. He has done an excellent job of research. Unhappily, the record of rather chaotic recent events is simply not yet sufficiently complete to lead even the best researcher to reliable conclusions. My credentials for attempting to set the record straight consist of having been senior advisor to the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) Armor Command from July, 1970, through 3 April, 1972. In this capacity, I was present at every one of the tank actions mentioned (and some not mentioned) save only the 1968 overrunning of Lang Vei by PT76s.

This having been said, let me go about straightening the record, holding for last the points concerned with saving lives. Portions quoted are from Mr. Halloran's article:

"... the fact that the NVA had an armor capability was largely ignored." This is essentially true, but with one major exception: the RVNAF Armor Command has always been keenly aware of the NVA armor threat (though not, to be sure, of its full magnitude). I can state categorically that as early as February, 1971, RVNAF armor units had been thoroughly indoctrinated on the strengths and weaknesses of the PT76, T34/85 and T54/100 and had been supplied with the appropriate ammunition and engagement instructions to defeat them. That they in fact got the word is proved by the magnificent performance of a single platoon of M41A3s (76-mm gun) from one troop of the 17th Cavalry, which found itself face to face with two battalions of mixed PT76s and T54s near Hill 31 in Laos during Operation Lam Son 719 in early 1971. When the smoke cleared from this desperate fight, no fewer than seven T54s and 16 PT76s had been destroyed by the friendly tanks (quite aside from a goodly number more killed by friendly air). Four of the five M41s also failed to return, but each had fallen victim to rocket propelled grenades (RPG) or mines: *none* to the enemy tanks.

"As U.S. planes bombed enemy tanks to save a fleeing army." This

statement, which in context is meant to apply to the northernmost units of I Corps during the 1972 NVA Easter Offensive, is simply not true. Neither is the later rhetorical question: "yet, how could it be that the characteristics of the T54/55 were so little known that . . . ARVN units equipped with comparable M48s disengaged?" In point of fact (and no derogation of the Air Force is intended) the weather was so miserable as to totally preclude any air support through the first five days of the Easter Offensive which opened on 29 March, 1972. The first extremely welcome fighter-bombers appeared on station in the late afternoon of Easter Sunday, 2 April, by which time the NVA armor had already been stopped dead in its tracks by the heroic action of the RVNAF 20th Armor (M48A3), Lt. Col. Nguyen Huu Ly commanding. An NVA tank column was moving south virtually unopposed on Highway 1 from the DMZ toward an intact class 60 bridge at Dong Ha on Easter Sunday morning. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, had they crossed that bridge we would have suffered a Remagen-in-reverse, and NVA would have had Easter supper in Quang Tri Citadel. But on Lt. Col. Ly's initiative (not in response to orders), 20th Armor moved to intercept. Reaching hull-down positions on the ridge southwest of Dong Ha, they engaged the enemy column and destroyed seven T54s at ranges of from 1,800 to 3,000 meters. (This, by the way, any tanker will recognize as superb shooting: on a par with Israel in the Sinai. It is even more impressive when one realizes that this was 20th Armor's very first fight: they had only completed their army training test on the afternoon of 29 March, *after* the NVA offensive opened.) The 20th's executive officer, who was monitoring the NVA radio at the time, reports that the enemy commander could not comprehend being engaged at such ranges. In any event, all present watched the surviving enemy tanks retire without firing a single round.

To pursue the point further, it is inaccurate to call the M48A3 "comparable" to the T54/100. It is, in fact, vastly superior; and even the hoary M41A3 (as implied above) is more than a match for the T54.

There is, of course, no denying that Quang Tri did finally fall in early May. My point is simply that the initial enemy armored thrust was met and stopped on Easter Sunday by a gallant band of tankers who need never bow their heads to any man in any army in the world. They were joined on the 2d and 3d by the ARVN 2d and 57th Infantry (3d Division), a Vietnamese marine battalion, the ARVN 11th and

17th Cavalry (M113 and M41A3), and sundry Regional Forces units, all under command of 1st Armor Brigade (Col. Nguyen Trong Luat). This makeshift force formed the so-called "Dong Ha Line" which held *four divisions* at bay for a month before yielding to overwhelming odds. This is not quite the picture of "a fleeing army."

U.S. advisor-verified statistic: from 31 March through 4 November, 1972, ARVN tanks destroyed 139 enemy tanks of all types. Not one ARVN tank has *yet* been lost to an enemy tank, though many have been lost to other weapons.

Now to the life-saving comments I promised (which will also do much to explain the foregoing lopsided statistics). Two basic points must be understood: the effects of shaped charges on armored vehicles and the gross weaknesses of the T54/100.

It is true that practically any shaped charge (LAW, RPG, bazooka, HEAT round) will penetrate the thickest known tank armor. This does *not* mean, however, that the tank will be destroyed, or even disabled. The jet of a shaped charge *burns* through armor in much the same way as an acetylene torch. It *penetrates*, but it does *not* produce significant spalling (not even the "moderate" spalling described by Mr. Halloran). I have seen M41s that had been holed between the gun tube and the telescope, less than an inch from the gunner's eye, continue to move and fire accurately. Over a decade's statistics on the M113 in Vietnam show that no more than one vehicle is destroyed for every *seven* penetrated by shaped-charge weapons (with 0.8 crew casualties per penetration). Shaped charges destroy *only* through secondary explosions of fuel or major-caliber ammunition. Failing this, they do no more than damage men and hardware so unlucky as to be *directly* in the path of the jet and scare hell out of the rest of the crew. Since secondary ammo explosions are uncertain at best, it follows that the primary aiming point for shaped-charge weapons must be the enemy vehicle's fuel supply. (This explains Mr. Halloran's observation that the LAW failed to stop PT76s at Lang Vei in 1968 even though it has subsequently caused catastrophic loss to both PT76s and T54s.)

And now the T54/100: with its low, sleek silhouette and big gun, unquestionably one of the fiercest looking tanks in the world. The Israelis first pointed out for us in the Sinai that the T54 has a glass jaw; a major fuel storage area immediately beneath the front slope plate just to the driver's right. Yes, the armor here is 100-mm

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thick, but even the smallest shaped charge will penetrate 100-mm given a reasonable angle of incidence. Mr. Halloran errs, therefore, in ridiculing the figure in FM 23-3 showing a sight-picture dead center on the front slope: this is precisely the *right* aiming point for the T54 when using a shaped-charge warhead. (And HEAT is by all odds the best round to use if a T54 offers a frontal shot.) Against the PT76, T34 and other models not suffering this gross design error, of course, one must use armor piercing-tracer or high-velocity armor-piercing (armor-piercing discarding-sabot) for frontal shots, reserving HEAT for flank and rear shots. Conversely, a T54 should be engaged in flank or rear only with HVAP(APDS). The teaching point for the infantryman with a LAW is, for the T54 and T54 only, strive to hit him right smack in the nose! (A point which ARVN infantry did not know at first but has since learned well.)

One final point of interest to tankers who have long envied Soviet armor its low silhouette and relative simplicity: the T54 is about as bad a tank as one could imagine. It took real *work* to foul up the insides of such a good looking tank so badly. As if the almost incredible stupidity of the fuel storage were not enough, the inside of the fighting compartment is even worse. Specifically:

(1) The turret has no basket. Tank commander and loader must stumble around as best they can amidst expended brass and other impediments to keep up with the rotating turret.

(2) There is no range-finder of any kind.

(3) The breech is so close to the back turret wall that there literally isn't room for a new round to be loaded unless the gun is at maximum elevation. This means that the gunner must elevate, lose his target, depress, re-acquire and re-lay for *each* round: no such thing as burst-on-target. (And Mr. Halloran's estimate of five to eight rounds a minute "effective rate of fire" is beyond all reason. The *best* crew couldn't possibly do better than two rounds a minute.)

(4) Ammo ready racks are all wrong: they are horizontal rather than vertical. This means that the loader cannot select a particular ammo type with equal alacrity. If the round he wants is not on top, he must stoop and scrabble for it. Worse, he must then rotate the round to near-vertical in order to move in the constricted turret, and then rotate it again to align with the breech which is at a back-breaking angle at the bottom of the turret.

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Sp. 4 Virginia E. Smith

AT LEAST TWO

■ The photograph on page 52 of the 1972 Green Book is described in the caption as being of the only WAC teletype repair specialist in the Army.

I wish to point out that there is at least one other WAC who has this MOS: Sp. 4 Virginia E. Smith (see photograph), a school-trained teletype repair specialist who has been assigned to the Fort Monroe Telecommunications Center since April, 1972.

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TO HELP THE DOUGHBOY

■ Being an artilleryman brought up in the doctrine that guns and gunners exist only to support the infantry in combat, Lt. Col. Albert N. Garland's "Give Me A Tank" (November) strikes me as one of the most significant commentaries on ground combat armament I have read.

Gadgets and gimmicks, as well as innovations and refinements in weapon systems, all have their places. So, too, with the helicopter—neither gadget nor gimmick—but an extremely important development which has brought a third dimension into ground combat.

But all these innovations have only one common mission: to help the infantryman gain and hold ground. To make use of them as substitute rather than adjunct, enticing though the thought may be to budget-planners, may lead to disaster. Recall, as classic examples, the mitrailleur, the battle cruiser and the tank destroyer.

Reading Lt. Col. Garland's piece jolted me right back to Rudyard Kipling:

Ubique means that warnin' grunt the perished mineman knows,
When o'er 'is strung an' sufferin' front
the shrapnel sprays 'is foes;
An' as their firing dies away the 'usky
whisper runs
From lips that 'aven't drunk all day:
"Our Guns! Thank Gawd, our
Guns!"

Elide "guns" from that couplet, substitute "tanks" and you have the picture.
Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. (The more things change, the more they are the same.)

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