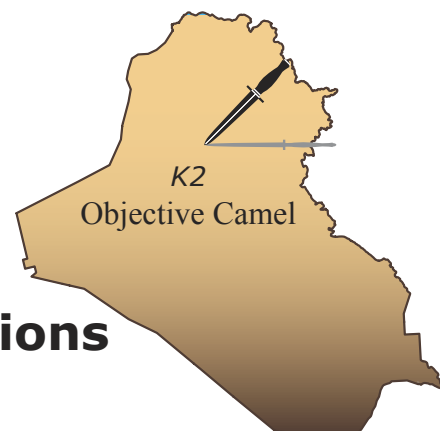


Team Tank:

Armor in Support of Special Operations



by Robert W. Jones, Jr.

Captain Celeen's M1A1 Abrams tank accidentally drove into a large hole as it traveled at high speed with no illumination during the assault on Objective Camel. Because the tank entered the deep well from the wrong end, it flipped over and landed with its turret buried in the soft sand.

ALTHOUGH Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) are not usually associated with armored units, they have been known to work together when the situation has warranted heavy support. During World War II, the legendary Colonel William O. Darby formed the provisional "Cannon Company" of four M-3 half-tracks mounted with 75mm guns to give additional firepower to the Rangers during the Italian campaign.¹ However, not until Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) did ARSOF again work with armor forces to any appreciable degree, and even then, the association was weak.

Early in operations, armored Task Force (TF) 1-63 was airlifted into Bashur Airfield in support of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North (CJSOTF-

North).² After taking three days to arrive, however, the armor force was not able to effectively leave the airfield perimeter to provide an immediate impact on the combat situation in northern Iraq. In fact, three days after TF 1-63's arrival, the major Iraqi elements in the north surrendered, and Kurdish *Peshmerga* and Task Force Viking (10th Special Forces Group) seized Kirkuk and Mosul. TF 1-63 only entered operations in the north as an occupying force in the cities controlled by TF Viking.³ With such a tenuous association in the north, it again fell to the Rangers to prove the worth of armor in special operations.

In a situation reminiscent of that faced by Darby and the Rangers in World War II, the 75th Ranger Regiment found itself in need of armor support in Iraq. The Regi-





Soldiers from C/1/75th Rangers and C/2/70th Armor established a blocking position on Highway 1 north of Tikrit. The units proved that Armor and ARSOF could work together successfully.

ment had discussed attaching an armor force during mission planning, but no formal arrangements were made. In the course of their operations in the western and northern deserts, however, the Rangers concluded that they required an armor force to confront Iraqi tanks, and to send the message that tanks were operating almost unopposed along Highway 1 north of Baghdad.⁴⁵ The request for forces worked its way to Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), down to 5th Corps headquarters, and ultimately to C Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment (C/2/70th Armor).

While it is not clear whether C/2/70th Armor was specifically selected for the mission or if it was simply luck, the Rangers were getting a very experienced armor unit. The company had previously spent six months in Kuwait under Operation DESERT SPRING (May–October 2002), returning to Fort Riley, Kansas, in November 2002. After deployment to Kuwait in February 2003, C/2/70th Armor had fought from the Kuwaiti border to Objective Rams, just south of Baghdad, attached to 3rd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division, before moving back south and being attached to Task Force 1-41 fighting near As Samawah.⁶

On 31 March 2003, C/2/70th Armor was fighting as part of TF 1-41 Infantry attached to the 82nd Airborne Division near As Samawah.⁷ The next day Captain (CPT) Shane Celeen, the commander of C Company, received what some may have considered an early April Fool's Day message after the hard fight north: move almost one hundred kilometers south to Tallil Air Base, located twenty kilometers southwest of

An Nasiriyah, and then conduct an air movement back north to support CJSOTF-West. CPT Celeen was ordered to leave one tank platoon with TF 1-41, and wait for heavy equipment transporters (HETs) to move his tanks south. After waiting several hours for the promised HETs, CPT Celeen ordered the company to move out under its own power. At 0100 hours on 2 April 2003, C/2/70th Armor headed south.

Arriving at the air base approximately five hours later, CPT Celeen met with a liaison officer from the 75th Ranger Regiment. CPT Celeen and his headquarters platoon leader then flew in and reported to the Ranger tactical operations center, where they discovered that the armor company, newly dubbed "Team Tank," would fall under the operational control of 1/75th Ranger Battalion. While the Ranger Regiment included some commanders with mechanized experience, most had not operated with armor for many years. One of CPT Celeen's first tasks, therefore, was to brief the capabilities and logistics requirements of the M1A1 Abrams tank. Planners focused on fuel consumption as a key concern, since a single M1A1 used almost as much fuel as an entire Ranger company in Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs).

While CPT Celeen worked with the Ranger staff, the rest of C/2/70th Armor prepared for air movement. The air movement of tanks by C-17 was new to both the tankers and the Air Force loadmasters. In fact, most of the armor soldiers had never even flown in a C-17 during peacetime, much less in a combat zone. The tank crews worked through the process of

draining three-fourths of the fuel and securing the tanks by chain to the aircraft. Due to weight limitations, only one tank and its crew could be transported per C-17 sortie. (The first tank to go was the company commander's, with the rest of his crew.) The gunner recalled that the burdened aircraft performed "a long slow takeoff that felt like it was doing a wheelie."⁸

The air movement of C/2/70th Armor required three days to complete. The company's ten M1A1 tanks, three M113 armored personnel carriers, one single fire support vehicle, three cargo trucks, two fuel trucks, and a single High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV, "humvee") required a total of fifteen C-17 sorties between Tallil Air Base and H-1 Airfield, located five hundred kilometers to the northwest.⁹ As each lift arrived, the tankers consolidated in a *laager* site, conducted maintenance, and prepared for their next mission. The last two tanks and crews arrived only two hours before the ground armored convoy (GAC) departed H-1 for Mission Support Site (MSS) Grizzly, a desert landing strip located between the Hadithah Dam and Tikrit.

On the surface, Team Tank's mission seemed simple enough: support the Rangers in a series of raids, and interdict main avenues of escape for regime loyalists and high value targets (HVTs) attempting to flee to Syria. Once Highway 2 and Highway 4 through the western desert were blocked by coalition forces, north-south Highway 1 became the primary avenue of escape. HVTs would follow Highway 1 north as far as they could, then cut west toward Syria on any number of lesser roads running through the desert. In order to carry out its mission, Team Tank would be participating in raids that included between fifty and one hundred kilometers of movement each way. While the tanks had no problem maneuvering once on the objectives, they were not built to travel long distances. Through hard work and perseverance, the tank crews and the company's small maintenance section made up for the lack of direct support maintenance and kept the tanks running in spite of the intrinsic stresses of the operations.

The first operation out of MSS Grizzly earned the soldiers of Team Tank the Rangers' respect as they proved that armor soldiers were as hard as their tanks. On 9 April, C/2/70th Armor and 1/75th Rangers conducted a night attack to secure Objective Camel (K2 Airfield), under conditions of zero illumination and little visibility after the initiation of mortar fire. As the tanks began the attack, CPT Celeen suddenly dropped off the command net. The



The lead tanks of C/2/70th Armor refueled after landing at Objective Serpent (H-1 Airfield). The Rangers also took the opportunity to ready their vehicles for the move to Mission Support Site Grizzly.

Ranger operations officer commanding the attack tried to raise Celeen, but his efforts proved fruitless. The armor commander seemed to be out of action.

While CPT Celeen was, indeed, out of action, it was not enemy fire that had disabled his tank; rather, the commander's tank had rolled into a forty-foot deep hole in the middle of what appeared to be a wheat field. Traveling at between five and ten miles per hour with zero percent illumination, the tank had unwittingly driven over the edge of a large hole and then rolled over until the tank rested upside down, directly on top of the turret. Luckily for CPT Celeen and his crew, Celeen had stressed rollover drills during predeployment training, so everybody in the company knew exactly what to do in this unfortunate situation. As soon as the company's executive officer, First Lieutenant (1LT) Drummond, realized what had happened, he moved his tank forward and began recovery operations while also protecting the vulnerable crew of the overturned tank from enemy fire.

Meanwhile, CPT Celeen and the rest of the crew were trapped inside a living nightmare. Over the next hour, though it seemed like an eternity, the men quickly assessed their situation and began their own recovery. In addition to the basic conditions that trapped it, the crew's self-rescue was hampered by fuel leaks, requiring the tank's power to be turned off. Using flashlights, CPT Celeen and his gunner, Sergeant (SGT) Arthur Thorness, performed first aid on the loader, Specialist (SPC) Michael Colchiski, whose left hand had been almost severed off during the rollover. While Celeen and Thorness worked on Colchiski, driver Private First Class Christopher Bake wriggled his way through

the narrow driver's hatch and began digging through the sand using his hands, eventually tunneling his way to freedom. Celeen and Thorness pushed and pulled Colchiski through the tunnel to fresh air and medical attention. The tunnel was so narrow that CPT Celeen had to strip off his chemical suit, emerging into the desert night clad only in his underwear and boots, and coated in blood, fuel, and hydraulic fluid.

After CPT Celeen verified that his crew received proper care, he transferred to 1LT Drummond's tank and continued the attack. Team Tank still needed to block Highway 1. With recovery assets over forty kilometers away, the company declared the overturned tank a total loss. Since the wreck was located in hostile territory, filled with sensitive gear, loaded with ammunition and soaked in fuel, they concluded that they had to destroy the tank. Two tank rounds brought about an inglorious end for the tank. The crew lost almost all of its personal gear with that decision, and had to make do for the rest of its tour in Iraq. As for the respect garnered by the episode, the Rangers recommended 1LT Drummond for the Bronze Star with "V" device.¹⁰

The attack on Objective Camel ensured the continued association of C/2/70th Armor with the 75th Ranger Regiment. On 11 April 2003, Team Tank and A Company of 1/75th Rangers combined their strengths and conducted an attack on Objective Badger: Al Sarha Airfield and site of the Iraqi Air Force Academy. The mission was to attack and seize key terrain, and to interdict Highway 1 in order to prevent the escape of HVTs. An on-order mission was to move to the site of a downed F-15E (designated Objective Falcon), search for survivors, and recover any remains of crewmembers. The combined 1/75th Rangers and C/2/70th Armor GAC, consisting of thirty-eight vehicles of

Through close coordination, the Rangers and Team Tank successfully conducted assaults and established blocking positions in the deserts of north-central Iraq.



nine different types, moved sixty kilometers cross-country under cover of darkness to Objective Badger.

After a short stop to refuel the tanks, the task force attack on Objective Badger began with mortar fire and rotary wing close air support. Satellite imagery had indicated a fence line at the objective, but when the tanks assaulted the line, they found it to be an easily bypassed agricultural sprinkler system. Moving quickly through the first objective, the tanks and Rangers, mounted in GMVs, assaulted through several Iraqi vehicles that had been destroyed by helicopter gunships.¹¹

The Rangers and the tankers coordinated closely as they dismounted to meet Iraqi resistance. Near one set of buildings, a few Iraqi defenders had stymied one Ranger squad by ducking behind a brick wall and spraying automatic weapon fire over the wall. Every time the squad attempted to move forward, it was met with a renewed barrage of fire. The solution was simple for the tankers; fire two HEAT (high explosive anti-tank) rounds through the wall. The Rangers then assaulted through the hole and killed the remaining Iraqi infantry.

Once Objective Badger was secure, part of the force moved to Objective Falcon, where the remains of the F-15E crew were successfully recovered. The Rangers and tankers performed both missions without casualty. The Iraqis did not fare as well: their losses included several armored vehicles, including two T-55 tanks, twelve antiaircraft guns, and approximately seventy-five Iraqi soldiers. The tankers had once again acquitted themselves with courage and skill, as exemplified by CPT Celeen, who was later awarded the Bronze Star with "V" device for his actions at Objective Badger.¹²

The assaults on Objectives Camel and Badger proved that armor and ARSOF could work together effectively, if not seamlessly. The Rangers discovered that they had overestimated the tanks' ability to travel long distances quickly, but admired their ability to "burst" past the Rangers' GMVs and gain the advantage of speed and firepower on any Iraqi opposition.¹³ The operations also revealed that future night operation coordination needed to reconcile the Rangers' use of infrared sights with the tankers' use of thermal sights. In spite of these slight differences in operational capability, C/2/70th Armor and the 75th Ranger Regiment validated Colonel Darby's World War II Cannon Company experiment. In mid-April 2003, C/2/70th Armor returned to TF 1-41 and the Rangers went about their usual operations, but their success working together opened a door for possible future cooperation. 📌

Endnotes

- 1 Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Random House, 1992), 113.
- 2 Gregory Fontenot, et al., *On Point* (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 225.
- 3 Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Warren and Major Keith Barclay, "Operation Airborne Dragon, Northern Iraq," *Military Review*, November–December 2003, 11–14.
- 4 Colonel Joseph Votel, Commander, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by Steven Cage, 25 April 2003, Baghdad International Airport, Iraq, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 Captain Shane Celeen, Company Commander, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, interview by Steven Cage, 13 April 2003, Mission Support Site Grizzly, Iraq, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Captain Shane Celeen, Company Commander, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones, Jr., 5 October 2004, Seattle, WA, digital recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 C Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment is normally assigned to 3rd Brigade, 1st Armored Division at Fort Riley, KS; however, prior to the start of OIF the 2/70th Armor deployed to Kuwait and was attached to the 3rd Infantry Division until it was attached to the 75th Ranger Regiment.
- 8 Sergeant Arthur Thorness, Tank Gunner, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 70th Armor Regiment, interview by Steven Cage, 13 April 2003, Mission Support Site Grizzly, Iraq, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 9 *On Point*, 253.
- 10 Mike Heronemus, "Valor earns medals," *Fort Riley Post*, Vol. 47, No. 15, 16 April 2004, 1–2.
- 11 Celeen interview, 13 April 2003.
- 12 75th Ranger Regiment Briefing, "Attack on OBJ Badger," 26 August 2003, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Heronemus, 1–2.
- 13 Votel interview.

