The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

- Purchase this document
- Browse Books & Publications
- Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org
Explore the RAND Arroyo Center
View document details

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Unauthorized posting of RAND PDFs to a non-RAND Web site is prohibited. RAND PDFs are protected under copyright law. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use. For information on reprint and linking permissions, please see RAND Permissions.
This product is part of the RAND Corporation monograph series. RAND monographs present major research findings that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors. All RAND monographs undergo rigorous peer review to ensure high standards for research quality and objectivity.
In the Middle of the Fight

An Assessment of Medium-Armored Forces in Past Military Operations

David E. Johnson • Adam Grissom • Olga Oliker

Prepared for the United States Army
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited
The research described in this report was sponsored by the United States Army under Contract No. W74V8H-06-C-0001.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, David E., 1950 Oct. 16—
   In the middle of the fight : an assessment of medium-armored forces in past military operations / David E. Johnson, Adam Grissom, Olga Oliker.
   p. cm.
   Includes bibliographical references.

358'.18—dc22
2008029010

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

RAND® is a registered trademark.

Cover photos courtesy of the U.S. Army Center of Military History

© Copyright 2008 RAND Corporation

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from RAND.

Published 2008 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
RAND URL: http://www.rand.org
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: order@rand.org
Summary

The purpose of this study is to draw insights about medium-armored forces from past operations to help inform decisions about U.S. Army transformation and the design of the Future Force. The study is a qualitative assessment of the employment of medium-armored forces in the 20th century and it relies on a multicase, comparative historical approach. We assess U.S. and foreign experiences to analyze how medium forces performed across the range of military operations in complex terrain and against different types of opponents, as shown in Table S.1.

Tasks
The project’s sponsor specified three central questions for the study:

- What unique capabilities have medium-armored forces brought to past conflicts, and where along the spectrum of operations have they been most valuable?
- How have medium-armored forces performed in complex terrain in the past?
- What advantages has the rapid deployment capability of medium-armored forces provided to operational commanders in the past?

Methodology
We used historical research, mainly as supplied in secondary sources, to select and develop the cases studied in this report. At the sponsor’s request, we assessed each case from several perspectives:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Complex Terrain</th>
<th>Point in the Range of Military Operations</th>
<th>Type of Operation</th>
<th>Types of Armored Vehicles and Other Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armored warfare during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)</td>
<td>Broken and mountainous; urban</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Major operations</td>
<td>German and Italian medium-armored vs. Soviet Union heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. armored divisions in France and Germany during World War II</td>
<td>Urban; hedgerows; forests</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Major operations</td>
<td>U.S. medium-armored vs. German heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armored cavalry and mechanized infantry in Vietnam (1965–1972)</td>
<td>Jungle</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Major operations; counterinsurgency operations</td>
<td>U.S. medium-armored and heavy vs. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet airborne operations in Prague, Czechoslovakia (1968)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Strike (regime change)</td>
<td>Soviet Union medium-armored and heavy vs. Czechoslovakian light (mainly civilian forces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa in Angola (1975–1988)</td>
<td>Close; undeveloped infrastructure</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Major operations; raids</td>
<td>South African medium-armored vs. Angolan heavy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1979–1989)</td>
<td>Urban; mountains; undeveloped infrastructure</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Strike (regime change); counterinsurgency operations</td>
<td>Soviet Union medium-armored and heavy vs. Afghan light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation Just Cause, Panama (1989)</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Strike (regime change)</td>
<td>U.S. medium-armored vs. Panamanian medium and light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case</td>
<td>Complex Terrain</td>
<td>Point in the Range of Military Operations</td>
<td>Type of Operation</td>
<td>Types of Armored Vehicles and Other Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Marine Division light armored vehicles (LAVs) in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Southwest Asia (1990–1991)</td>
<td>Desert; limited visibility</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Major operations</td>
<td>U.S. (Marine Corps) medium-armed vs. Iraqi heavy and medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia and New Zealand in East Timor (1999–2000)</td>
<td>Urban; jungle; undeveloped infrastructure</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Peace operations</td>
<td>Australian and New Zealand medium-armed vs. rebel light</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• How were medium-armored forces employed, and why does this monograph define them as “medium-armored”?
• What doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities (DOTMLPF) insights emerge?¹
• What are the battlefield operating system (maneuver, fire support, air defense, command and control, intelligence, mobility/counter-mobility/survivability, and combat service support) implications?
• Which operational characteristics that the U.S. Army expects of a transformed force (i.e., responsiveness, deployability, agility, versatility, lethality, survivability, and sustainability) surfaced, or did not?
• How did the medium-armored force under examination perform in the case environments (i.e., complex terrain)?
• What key insights emerge?

Finally, the sponsor asked us to describe any overarching insights that are common among cases.

Key Findings

Several cases examined in this study show the critical difference that even small numbers of medium-armored forces can make, particularly in augmenting light forces or when operating independently in raids or strikes. In Somalia, Malaysian and Pakistani armor provided the protected mobility and firepower required to extricate cutoff elements of Task Force Ranger. Similarly, U.S. medium-armored forces in Panama during Operation Just Cause provided a needed edge to light forces, and even the modest number of deployed M551 Sheridans provided an important capability at crucial moments in the early stages of the campaign. U.S. Marine Corps LAV units were an important economy-of-force and reconnaissance element during Operation Desert Storm. Medium-armored forces gave Australia and New Zealand the capability

¹ The facilities aspects of DOTMLPF are not addressed in this monograph, however.
to range widely and rapidly across East Timor with protected mobility sufficient to meet the threat. Furthermore, SBCTs were able to provide rapid response across a large operational area in Iraq, with greater survivability than light forces. Finally, medium-armored forces are more able to operate in areas with less-developed infrastructure. This was the case in Panama, where M551 Sheridans could cross bridges that could not support U.S. main battle tanks.

Having the capacity to rapidly deploy medium-armored forces (by air or sea) may be an important national capability. This was apparent in operations by the South African Army (SAA) in Angola and in the Australian response to East Timor. Rapidly deployable medium-armored forces were also an important capability in the coup de main operations conducted by the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan. Currently, the U.S. Army does not have a forced-entry, medium-armor capability. Although the air-droppable M551 Sheridan armored reconnaissance vehicle provided this capability in Panama, the vehicle has since been retired from the inventory. Stryker medium-armored vehicles are not air-droppable and, with their add-on armor, can only be deployed by C-17 or C-5 transport aircraft. This likely limits their movement by air to any but secure locations.

Medium-armored forces highlight the fundamental defense-planning challenge of balancing predictability and adaptability. Peace-time choices about future capabilities, rooted in judgments about likely adversaries and environments, matter greatly because most wars are “come as you are” in many respects. Medium-armored forces have experienced the majority of their difficulties when conditions on the ground differed significantly from the predictions used to prepare those forces. This phenomenon is most apparent in the case of the U.S. Army in World War II, when U.S. medium-armored forces were obliged by strategic and operational circumstances to directly engage German heavy-armored forces that possessed significant survivability and lethality advantages. U.S. Army doctrine had explicitly rejected this contingency, and this conceptual error resulted in unnecessary losses for many U.S. armor units. Similarly, while SAA medium-armored forces enjoyed great success against Angola’s Soviet-supplied heavy forces in the late 1980s, the unexpected arrival of heavy armor on South Africa’s
doorstep led Pretoria to hedge against a future recurrence by fielding its own heavy forces.

The primary implication of this study is that the development of the U.S. Army’s Future Force should be framed by a broad conceptual paradigm that embraces the complexity and diversity of the types of military operations that the nation may call upon that force to execute. In future conflict environments, the U.S. Army may face—as it has in the past—adversaries who operate in complex terrain and are equipped with heavy armor and highly lethal weaponry. In some circumstances, therefore, the materiel employed by U.S. medium-armored forces will be inherently less survivable and less lethal than the materiel fielded by their adversaries. Even if digitally enhanced situational awareness lives up to expectations, such circumstances will be very challenging, and medium-armored forces will need to compensate with sophisticated combined-arms tactics that exploit enduring U.S. advantages in artillery and air support (as did U.S. Marine Corps LAV units during Desert Storm and U.S. Army forces during World War II).

Given the breadth of cases examined in this study, we can draw an even more pointed conclusion: Medium-weight forces are useful only when deployed under one or more of the following conditions:

- by air in a way that preempts an effective enemy response (as in Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan)
- against an enemy who lacks the capability to deal with any mobile armor (as in Panama, Somalia, and East Timor)
- in circumstances where other friendly assets—e.g., close air support, artillery, a significant training differential—offset enemy capabilities (as in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, Angola, and OIF).

In short, this monograph suggests that medium-weight armor enjoys only four clear advantages over heavy armor: rapid deployability (particularly with air-droppable vehicles), speed over roads, trafficability in infrastructure not suited to heavy armor, and lower logistical demands. It furthermore suggests that these advantages are exploitable only in conditions where the resulting diminution of combat power can be
accepted or compensated for by other means. Because the U.S. Army cannot expect all future operations to occur in such circumstances, it would be prudent to maintain a mix of heavy, medium-armored, and light forces that can be task-organized and employed in conditions that best match their attributes. Medium-armored forces have much to offer in such a mix.