

# TAC NEWS

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## What Makes a World War II Veteran Unit?

For the wargamer, the term "veteran" refers more to combat proficiency than it does to combat experience. Green, Regular, Veteran, and Elite are conventionalized ratings measuring a gaming unit's ability to inflict and absorb punishment. Important considerations; yet, how does one accurately rate a unit? Rating a weapon system simply requires a comparison of proving ground statistics. A German 88mm gun shoots farther and hits harder than a American 75mm. Therefore, in this aspect at least, a Tiger tank is superior to a Sherman. Accurately rating a *kampfgruppe* or a regimental combat team is not that straightforward.

On the surface, combat experience seems an obvious rating yardstick. An experienced soldier is superior to a raw recruit. But the experience level of the average infantryman, even in veteran units, varied widely. The three rifle regiments of the American 30th Infantry Division, a veteran unit in every sense of the word, suffered a casualty rate of 200% during eleven months of line duty. Ghastly as this overall percentage was, the situation was far worse for the fighting elements which did the lion share of the bleeding. The 30th's rifle companies actually suffered casualty rates exceeding 300%. Nor did this casualty rate lessen as the war wound down. The rifle elements of the 94th Infantry Division, which entered the line late in November 1944, suffered a 100% casualty rate within thirty days. The junior officers suffered losses commiserate with the private soldier. In pitched battle the life expectancy of a platoon leader was measured in minutes. Of the supporting arms, the tank, tank destroyer, and forward artillery personnel were the hardest hit.

To replace battle losses, US Army personnel officers requested men in a manner similar to mail-ordering. Soldiers were cataloged according to their Military Occupational Speciality (MOS). For example, a rifleman was an MOS 745, a machine gunner an MOS 605. Quite often, the replacement depot was out of MOS 745s. Rather than putting the item on "back-order," the slot was filled with whatever MOS available, even if that MOS was not rifle-trained such as a cook, typist, or mechanic. In the German army, the situation was even worse. Redundant naval and air force personnel were pressed into infantry service. Physical standards were relaxed. Foreigners were given the choice of forced labor or service in the Wehrmacht. Despite the quality of the recruit, however, a good battalion, regiment, or division could absorb a stream of replacements and retain its

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### US24 M36 Jackson Tank Destroyer

superior fighting character. This is not to say recruits joining a particular unit underwent a spiritual transformation that suddenly made them skilled warriors resolved to "go to their god like a soldier." It did mean that, excluding the occasional lapse on the squad or platoon-level, the battle experience of battalion, regiment, or division was cumulative and did not have to be constantly relearned.

How was the collective combat experience of a battalion or regiment passed to the common soldier? Quite often, it wasn't. Recruits joining units during a quiet time enjoyed a period of assimilation. But, during major battles replacements entered the line without the opportunity to learn their duties or get acquainted with comrades. In the heat of battle, a squad leader couldn't be expected to remember the names of all the men under his command twenty four hours previously, let alone pass the regimental tradition to a newcomer. Nor was it necessary to do so, because experienced warriors, although nice to have, do not necessarily insure success on the modern battlefield.

During World War II all nationalities tried to team their combat elements into combined arms groups. American armored divisions had separate headquarters designated CCA and CCB. These headquarters commanded divisional assets grouped into teams called "combat commands." American regiments became "regimental combat teams" (e.g. 169th RCT) when they operated outside of close divisional control. A "task force" was organized for a specific mission and could range in strength from a brigade to a battalion. For their combat teams the Germans used the catch-all term "*kampfgruppe*."



### **US M3A1 Halftrack w/ crew**

Battle groups were not haphazard collections of soldiers. Ideally the team's core elements had a long working relationship. For German armor, this meant panzers worked with their own panzer grenadiers. Panzers grouped with unfamiliar regular infantry did not fare as well. The Americans, with tanks to burn, had the luxury of permanently attaching independent tank battalions to each infantry division. Therefore, American armored formations always worked with their own armored infantry, while American regular infantry always went into battle with their own tanks.

This was a tremendous advantage for the Americans. A successful combat group smoothly meshed the actions of its organic components and that of attached elements. This could only happen after a prolonged shared field experience. Training taught fundamentals, but as a unit developed a combat history, it also developed a unit identity. So, not only was there a right way to do a job, there was the 169th Infantry's way of doing that job. Furthermore, as a unit developed specific talents, commanders tended to assign it tasks tailored to those talents. For example, in the American Civil War, Gen. R. E. Lee used Jackson's Corps to set-up the blow and counted on Longstreet's Corps to deliver it.

American RCT organization was set by divisional preference. The 90th Infantry Division attached a five-tank platoon from the 712th Tank Battalion to each infantry battalion. The tanks in turn were supported by a platoon from the 607th TD Battalion, plus a section of quad .50s from the 537th AAA Battalion. Whenever possible, the 712th attached its Company A to the 357th Infantry, Company B with the 358th Infantry, and Company C with the 359th Infantry. Of all the supporting arms, however, tanks kept the least regular affiliations. Often, tanks were assigned per the situation and terrain within the divisional zone, rather than to a "parent" regiment.

Whereas the the 90th Division attached a section of AAA to each infantry battalion, the 30th Division, except on rare occasions, kept its 531st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion split up amongst the four divisional artillery battalions. Battery D of the 531st, for example, moved with the 230th Field Artillery Battalion and considered itself as much a part of that unit as it did of the 531st.

Another critical RCT element was combat engineers. The 90th Division's 315th Engineer Battalion attached its companies like the 712th Tank Battalion. Company A of the 315th supported the 357th Infantry, Company B the 358th Infantry, and Company C the 359th Infantry. In the 30th Division, the 105th Engineer Combat Battalion's three companies also worked in the zones of specific regiments unless an unusual situation called for a concentration of engineer resources elsewhere.

The strongest affiliation was the traditional infantry-artillery relationship. The 30th Division's 118th Field Artillery Battalion, for example, always supported the 117th Infantry. The 197th Field Artillery Battalion always supported the 119th Infantry and when a 230th Field Artillery Battalion man referred to "his" infantry, he meant the 120th Infantry Regiment. Whenever the Infantry Cannon Company was temporarily attached to an RCT, it was subordinated to the Field Artillery Battalion.

The close infantry-artillery bond was necessitated by the elaborate system required to make it work. To support its regiment, a field artillery battalion attached a liaison group to each of the regiment's three rifle battalion command posts. The primary mission of these officers was not to adjust fire, but to understand the battleplan's intent and to insure the artillery had the material and information necessary to accurately land its concentrations. To directly adjust fire, each field artillery battalion deployed about six forward observers. These FOs usually operated with the assault companies and were thus directly available to a company or platoon commander who needed fire. Augmenting the FOs were the weapons company mortar observers. These men were also tied into the artillery communication network and frequently directed artillery fire. Artillery support was also provided to the tank and tank destroyer battalions via their liaisons at the RCT command post.

So, how should you rate a particular unit? On the squad and platoon level, it is a random factor. A divisional patch doesn't count much to a soldier who isn't inclined to give the "full measure." Starting at the battalion level and above, one can discern patterns of conduct and draw historical analogies. For example, the American 90th Infantry Division was a "green" division early in the Normandy campaign; it was incompetently led and poorly staffed. After a command shake-up in July of 1944, the 90th battled the 5th Fallschirmjäger Division and whipped it. So, after July 1944, rate the 90th "veteran." Conversely, the Herman Göring Panzer Division, cadred by elite fallschirmjägers and always fully equipped with Germany's best weapons, had a checkered history. The Luftwaffe simply wasn't the service arm for staff officers with a penchant toward coordinating mechanized forces on the divisional level. From the battalion level down, HG troopers were good, and sometimes, as with the defense of Catania in Sicily, brilliant. Above the battalion level, however, HG was mediocre to simply awful. As a general rule, the same could be said of all Wehrmacht formations after July 1944. During this decisive month, catastrophes in the East and West completely annihilated many divisions. Heavy material and personnel losses could be replaced, but a unit completely destroyed must rebuild its cohesion from scratch. Rate any completely reconstituted formation accordingly.



**M15A1 MCMG Halftrack**

# Order of Battle: Task Force Weaver

The 90th Infantry Division formed Task Force Weaver on August 5, 1944 for the capture of Mayenne. The order of battle described below was for the column of march onto Mayenne. For the actual assault, the Task Force was further reorganized into two separate commands, Task Force Weaver and Task Force Barth.

## Forward Reconnaissance Element

**Lt. Colonel George Randolph**  
90th Reconnaissance Troop  
Light Tank Company, 712th Tank Battalion

## Advance Guard

**Major Edward Hamilton**  
First Battalion, 357th Infantry Regiment  
Detachment of engineers from Company A, 315th Engineer Battalion  
(This group's forward screen consisted of one infantry company mounted on Shermans from the 712th Tank Battalion.)

## Task Force Headquarters

**Brigadier General William Weaver**

## Maneuver Force

**Colonel George Barth**  
Remainder, 357th Infantry Regiment  
Remainder, 712th Tank Battalion  
Remainder, Company A, 315th Engineer Battalion  
Company A, 315th Medical Battalion  
345th Forward Artillery Battalion (155s "Long Toms")  
Company A, 607th Tank Destroyer Battalion

## Artillery Support

**Lt. Colonel Kenneth Reimers**  
343rd Forward Artillery Battalion (105s)  
Battery A, 537th AntiAircraft Artillery Battalion

## Supporting Elements

### Communications

A detachment from the 90th Signal Company

### Supply

All vehicles were inspected before the march. Extra rations and ammunition were carried on all vehicles. Refueling was accomplished en route by divisional motor maintenance and service units.

### Air Support

One squadron of P-47 Thunderbolts continuously on call  
One attached Piper Cub artillery spotter aircraft

## Scenario

On July 9th, 1944, the American 90th Infantry Division was ordered to take Mont Castre. The objective's significance was obvious even to an amateur strategist. Mont Castre loomed high over the broken, but relatively flat bocage. Of course the Germans also realized this. Mont Castre anchored their main line of resistance and was defended by a crack unit, the 15th Regiment of the 5th Fallschirmjäger Division.

Spearheading the 90th's assault was the 1st Battalion of the 359th Infantry, Col. Leroy "Fireball" Pond commanding. As usual, 1st Battalion was supported by the Shermans of Company C, 712th Tank Battalion. With a month of hedgerow fighting now behind them, the foot-sloggers of 1st Battalion and the tankers of Company C were a formidable team. Their first push captured the hill crest and carried

them down the reverse slope, where they aggressively pursued the retreating fallschirmjäger. The Germans, no amateurs themselves, rolled with the punch. They rallied on a secondary hill to the south and used it as base to launch a counterattack. The counterattack staggered the 3rd Battalion of the 358th Infantry, which was positioned on 1st Battalion's immediate flank. Third Battalion was rolled back to Mont Castre, where its commander, Lt. Col. Jake Bealke, prevented a complete rout by rallying his men on the hill crest. As the Americans stiffened, the Germans switched tactics: They fanned out around the hilltop and enveloped it. This maneuver not only separated the two American battalions, it also isolated them from divisional supply. Before the noose completely closed, however, a two-truck convoy, led by a Lt. Sheppard, managed to reach 1st Battalion. Sheppard was the 721st's motor officer and his load of rations, ammo, and gas was



destined for the Shermans of Company C. Now fully restocked, Company C was 1st Battalion's strongest element and therefore its best bet to crack the German encirclement. The tankers realized this and it was not long before Lt. Jim Flowers, the 1st Platoon commander, appeared at headquarters volunteering to lead a breakout.

While Col. Pond approved Flowers' battle plan, he was not pleased at the prospect of losing a third of his armor support for any period of time. He ordered Flowers to immediately return once a corridor had been punched through to Bealke. As Flowers departed the HQ he commandeered Sheppard's jeep and scouted an attack route. Although his five-tank platoon had suffered no battle losses, it had been reduced by one due to mechanical failure.

Flowers' careful reconnaissance paid off. His Shermans hit a seam in the German perimeter and Mont Castele was reached without loss at dawn on July 10th. To consolidate the corridor established by Flowers, Bealke ordered Company K, with Flowers' platoon in direct support, to retrace the track cut by the Shermans. Companies I and L remained on the hill lending indirect support.

Company K jumped off at 1400 hours and immediately ran into a determined group of expertly deployed fallschirmjäger. Despite impossible terrain and fierce resistance, the GIs made progress. Some German machine gun nests were overrun and their crews killed. Eventually, the Shermans emerged from the hedgerows just short of the blacktopped Lastelle road skirting the base of Mont Castele. As Flowers popped into the open, he spotted a marshy area directly across the road. As his platoon crossed the asphalt, Flowers barked directions on how to avoid the bog. With his attention focused forward, Flowers failed to notice that just a handful of infantry now accompanied his tanks. The bulk of Company K was some 400 hundred yards back, pinned by German artillery. Perhaps it was tunnel vision due to the bog, maybe a more aggressive effort from his support was expected, for what ever reason, Lt. Flowers now made an elementary blunder. He led his tanks, unsupported, into a prepared defense masked by thick vegetation

After skirting the bog, Flowers advanced 150 yards into a cultivated field. There an antitank round scored a direct hit on the left side of his turret. Fortunately, the round ricocheted and Flowers remained upright in the hatch searching for its source. Almost immediately his tank was hit again, this time by a second antitank gun dug-in to the right. This round penetrated. It punched open an ammunition bin and entered the turret cage, clipping off Jim Flowers' right foot.

The Ronson was a cigarette lighter advertised to light "first time, every time." To the GI tanker, the Sherman was known as the "Ronson." True to its moniker, the wounded Sherman began to burn. Prompted by fire, the tanker's worst nightmare, the crew immediately bailed. The driver, loader, and radioman tumbled out through the bottom hatch, while Flowers hauled his wounded gunner out through the turret. With both the bottom and top hatches open, an updraft whistled through the hulk fanning the flames into an inferno. As Flowers started to clamber out, he slipped on his bloody stump and collapsed into the bottom of the tank. Flames seared the flesh on his hands and face as he hauled himself to safety.

Once on the ground, the crew sought cover in a hedgerow. Luckily, a couple of them had Thompsons, for the hedgerow was occupied. The close quarter firepower of the tommy guns proved too much for the Germans and they lit out. Still, the area remained thick with fallschirmjäger and Flowers kept his men moving. They crept on to the south where they discovered a wounded GI from Company K.

Flowers' crew wasn't the only one dismounted in the hedgerow. All four Shermans of 1st Platoon were now ablaze. Flowers' main concern, however, was more immediate. Jets of blood spurted from his severed ankle and the initial shock of his wounds was giving way to agony. A tourniquet fashioned from a belt stanchied the bleeding; morphine taken

from a salvaged medical kit deadened the pain. At dusk Flowers ordered his unhurt driver and loader back to the battalion. As they left, Flowers heard movement on the other side of the hedgerow. He called out, but received no reply. Convinced he faced a enemy patrol, Flowers propped himself on his elbows and emptied two magazines from a Thompson. The Germans, if indeed they were Germans, scattered.

As the night wore on, Flowers and his wounded comrades lapsed into semiconsciousness. When a enemy patrol stumbled on them, they did not resist. A German medic bandaged their burned hands and faces. He also checked Flowers' tourniquet, but ignored pleas for water. As quickly as they appeared, the Germans disappeared into the night.

The next morning, an enemy rifle platoon investigated the burnt out Sherman. Ignoring the wounded GIs, they dug-in around the hulk. As the day passed, American artillery started to systematically bombard the area. Even though they were entrenched, several Germans were hit. It was worse for the exposed Americans. Flowers' left leg was blown off below the knee and the rifleman's chest was ripped open by shrapnel. Despite their bandaged hands, Flowers and his gunner managed to transfer the tourniquet from his right ankle to his left knee. The Americans then huddled together until the barrage finally let-up at dusk.

The rifleman's chest wound proved mortal; by noon the next day he was gone. Flowers, who had nursed the boy for almost two days, watched helplessly as he drifted off. Soon thereafter, small arms began to crackle in the distance. The Germans vanished as an American skirmish line entered the field. A steel-helmeted GI poked the foliage aside with a carbine and shouted "Hey, here's one that's alive!" Flowers' rescuer was Lt. Claude Lovett, Company G, 357th Infantry.

### Scenario Order of Battle

#### Americans

Four M4 Shermans fitted with Cullin Hedgerow Cutters  
One Infantry Command Stand, Three Infantry Stands

#### Germans

Two 50mm Antitank Guns  
Three Infantry Command Stands, Nine Infantry Stands  
Three Light Machine Gun Stands

The top of the map is north. Game duration: Ten turns. The Americans set-up on the north side of the Lastelle road. The Germans set-up hidden in any hedgerow hex. To win the Americans must exit three stands off the south edge of the map. Any other result is a German victory.

