

TAC NEWS

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German Principles of Tank versus Tank Combat 1939-1941

The civilized world was thunder-struck by the success of the German Army's initial *blitzkrieg* victories. But few forward thinking tankers of the day were surprised by the armor tactics employed by the *Wehrmacht*. Men like Zhukov, DeGaulle, Liddell-Hart, Patton and Chaffee were well aware of the potential these new machines offered, when properly crewed, trained and led. The tank had emerged from the mud of Flanders's fields, and every nation had leaders who were thinking of similar doctrines.



The German Army trained their *panzertruppen* with a manual developed following wargames in the later 1930s. By 1940, Hitler believed these units were ready to take on the world.

General Principles

The manual listed three decisive factors in tank versus tank combat. They were:

1. Panzer crews must rapidly identify the type of the enemy tank engaged. Tactical decision making was largely based on the opposing

tank's armor thickness, automotive capabilities and weapon system.

2. As quickly as possible, the strength and direction of the enemy tank attack had to be ascertained.

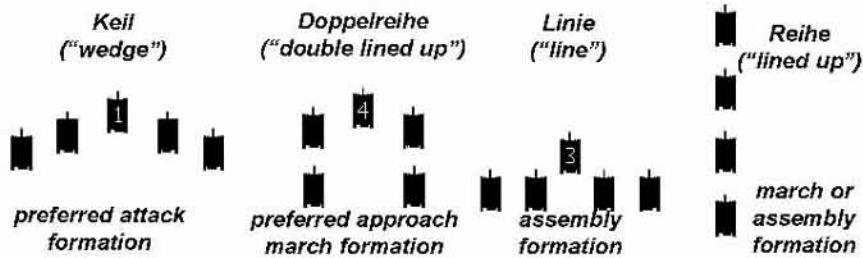
3. Local commanders, from the platoon level up, had to obtain a thorough knowledge of the battlefield terrain and maintain a grasp of the tactical "big picture." Equally important, however, was the will to act decisively in the absence of orders.

Armored combat has always been a

fine mix of fire and movement.

Movement was necessary to achieve surprise or take the enemy by the flank or rear. Because of the fluid nature of armored combat, the panzer commander had to truly lead his troops. His tank was always in the front rank; sometimes he rode point. Ideally, command decisions were made from direct observations at the point of attack. This exposed the commander to enemy fire, but the tactical benefits were considered well worth the risks. The inherent delays of running reconnaissance reports and orders up and down the command chain could give the

Panzer Zug Formations



The drill manual prescribed intervals of 25 meters to the front, and 50 meters side to side. These distances would be altered by terrain and circumstances.

enemy time to counterattack or rally a superior force. Time above all was the critical factor. When issuing orders, the commander had to act quickly and decisively. Indecision was considered worse than a wrong decision.

The initial task of front rank panzer forces was to break the enemy's momentum and cohesion by concentrated fire and conduct combat reconnaissance to determine the strength and position of the enemy flanks. Even though the first wave may have been outnumbered and outgunned, it was expected to overcome the odds through prompt target recognition and good training.

Even if outnumbered, the commander at the point of attack was to gain fire superiority in at least one location. No matter the odds, it was felt the side building superior firepower and scoring first hits would win.

The most effective method of achieving fire superiority was to concentrate fire on the enemy command and signals tanks. To spot these tanks in the confusion of battle required tank crews trained to recognize enemy unit organization and battle tactics. Once the objective was recognized, smaller panzers with light guns would close to effective range while under the cover of

the longer ranged and heavier armed panzers.

Unit cohesion was critical to success. A commander had to maintain tight control to utilize his panzers' full effectiveness. Platoons and individual tanks were not allowed to separate from their units. Tight coordination with supporting units, such as anti-tank units, artillery and heavy infantry weapons would defeat a disorganized foe, even if he had superior numbers or better tanks, as was often the case.

In the event of an enemy surprise or flank attack, the necessary defense was carried out automatically, and without orders. This was an essential part of platoon and company training. In such instances, smoke screens immediately fired in front of the enemy provided protection and time to establish a fire front.

The role of machine gun only armed tanks was flank security and combat reconnaissance. For firepower, machine gun tanks relied on cannon-armed panzers for support. For protection, they relied on terrain.

On one point the doctrine was quite specific: firing was done from a stationary position. Firing on the move was considered a waste of ammunition. If a panzer was not firing, it

was expected to be moving to, or looking for, an improved firing position. All available cover was to be utilized when firing. Once the enemy gained fire superiority, the panzers left their firing position and drove at high speed to a new location. Fields of fire and terrain determined ideal tank positions. Also, if possible, the tank commander was to keep the sun to his back and his panzer pointing into the wind.

The German Panzer manual divided combat into three main types:

- The Meeting engagement
- Our Panzers Are Surprised by Enemy Tanks
- Surprise Attack against the Enemy

The Meeting engagement

The front rank panzers were to promptly identify the enemy tank types and bring all available armor-defeating weapons into action. If the range was too great, the front rank was to charge at high speed to gain favorable firing positions and let the enemy advance onto them.

Covering fire and smoke was provided by the medium panzers of the second rank. Initial maneuvers were kept simple to hasten the start of effective fire.

If the enemy advanced against a flank, the threatened unit assembled into the "Reihe" formation (a platoon line in column). The commander would then determine the most advantageous terrain to deploy to meet the threat. The standard response would be to turn toward the threatened side. If better terrain was obtainable by advancing toward the exposed flank, the platoon



Our Panzers Are Surprised by Enemy Tanks

If the leading panzers stumbled into an ambush, the hidden enemy tanks were especially difficult to identify. In a prepared ambush, the enemy would usually be

advanced toward that flank. If this was not possible, the best available positions were chosen and a brisk fire placed on the advancing enemy.

If the enemy established effective fire first, exposed tanks pulled back, zigzagging into better firing positions. Elements not under direct enemy fire provided covering fire.

Panzer units in the rear remained in the hands of the company or battalion commander. Rear units attempted to envelope the enemy, extend the front, or counterattack enemy breakthroughs. Units closely following the front line, however, were expected to move to the sound of cannon, immediately, without waiting for orders. It was the company commander who first decided whether to reinforce the front rank, extend the line, or counterattack. Whatever his decision, it was immediately relayed by radio to the battalion commander.

In a meeting engagement, the decision where to strike cannot wait for lengthy terrain scouting. Swift action has always been considered more decisive than an attack delayed by lengthy scouting or detours to gain an especially favorable position.

hull-down with only their turrets exposed. In this instance it was better for the lead panzers to immediately pull back under the cover of smoke and supporting fire from panzers of the second rank.

When the front rank was surprised, the commander of the rear wave decided the strength and direction of the counterattack. As the lead elements were extracted, and the second rank counterattacked, it was vital for the MG-armed panzers to immediately secure the flanks and rear against follow-up attacks.

Surprise Attack against the Enemy

Surprise was achieved chiefly through good camouflage, good combat reconnaissance by the panzers themselves, and close coordination with other reconnaissance assets such as aircraft and *aufklarungs* (reconnaissance) troops.

To fully exploit a surprise opportunity, the tank crews had to be trained to rapidly deploy into commanding positions. The correct choice of hidden or hull-down positions was carefully practiced during training exercises, with every panzer commander and driver instructed on how to properly read the terrain.

Once the ambush was initiated, the firing tanks were to tie down the enemy from hidden or hull-down positions. If the enemy managed to mount effective return fire, the panzers would switch to pre-selected alternate positions. Once the enemy cohesion started to crumble, a reserve force of tanks would hit his flanks. In case of a complete rout, the enemy was pursued until he was completely destroyed. While the initial targets were the defeated combat elements immediately to their front, the real goal was always the command and control echelon behind the front line. If this could be disturbed and destroyed, victory would be complete.

Gaming Applications

This article has focused on the battle training and tactics of early war German panzer troops. But the sound military principles shown are timeless. All German doctrine in WWII as based on the combined experiences, carefully studied, of modern military history. Though

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most certainly the primary core had evolved from the *stasstruppen* tactics of the later stages of the Great War, even these experiences were grounded in the finest of military traditions. Whatever troops you command on the table top, these instructions can be put into effect with great success.

German doctrine matured during World War II, but did not greatly change. Applications of these tactics in any Wehrmacht era game will enhance the authenticity. Minor modifications will be necessary to depict the standardization from mixed light-medium panzer companies to those made up of one type only. But the more powerful mid- and late-war vehicles incorporated most of the features of the earlier light tanks, plus a number of substantial improvements. Application of these tactics will heighten the authenticity of any game.

Allied tank doctrines were remarkably similar to their enemy's. It has been argued that the first nation to develop the fundamentals of *blitzkrieg* was the USSR. The purges of the officer corps in the late 1930s diminished the Red Army's potential to implement their doctrine to its full effectiveness. It is true that Soviet commanders were less moti-

vated to self initiative, but the principles of shock and the goal of achieving a swift breakthrough were universal. Soviet attacks tended to have very thorough preparation, which frequently cost them the tactical initiative so essential in German doctrine. But the small unit commanders who lived through fighting the Wehrmacht were quick on their feet, and the fundamental elements of these German practices were employed throughout the war.

British and French tanks were divided into categories to a much greater extent than most other nations. These first opponents of the new German doctrine were expecting a much more stationary, trench-style war similar to that of 1914-1918. Their heaviest tanks, like the Matilda, Churchill and Char B1 bis were primarily designed for an infantry support role. They were very heavily armored and vulnerably slow. They were generally deployed in small units attached to infantry brigades.

Both England and France also designed tanks for the traditional cavalry role. These tended to be quite lightly gunned and very fast. Their employment more closely mimicked the practices of the Germans, through their grand tacti-

cal mission was quite different from that of the Nazi *blitzkrieg*.

American military doctrine has been heavily influenced by the "frontier" experience. US Army armor practice has always had a flavor of the hard riding indian fighter. Mobility was the predominant design consideration following the initial use of French Renault tanks in World War I. The Sherman was specifically planned to be big enough with enough muscle, without being too slow or cumbersome. The fire and movement doctrines described above were perfect for the US armored forces. Americans have always pushed small unit commanders to seize the initiative, and lead from the front. Platoon tactics closely paralleled the enemies. Though independent tank battalions were attached to most infantry divisions for the closer support, the bulk of US armor served in fast moving, hard hitting divisions designed to function in a very similar fashion to the German Panzer divisions. A comparison of the two nation's armor division orders of battle are remarkably similar. It is not therefore surprising that the tactical employment was similar.

More modern gamers will find these early World War II German practices good exercises. Certainly gyro-stabilized guns, developed late in the Second World War, has added the ability of fire on the move in a way that 1941 tankers could only dream about. Advanced technology has altered the modern battlefield, but the fundamentals of successful small armor unit combat are, in many ways, timeless.

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