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What is Tank Country?

William Murphy

There are certain principles that evolved during the past war that should be applicable to future operations, and one of these principles, it is suggested, is the answer to the question of what is and what is not tank country. Many serving and former members of the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps will recollect how eagerly they perused reports from the western desert during the years they sat in England awaiting their turn. They realized that in all probability when they saw action it would be with a better vehicle and in totally different country. But the only reports available, so far as tanks were concerned dealt with their use in the desert. Such country permitted commanders to exploit the mobility of this particular weapon to the full, and it played a great, if not predominant, part in every victory won, no matter by which side. In very rocky country, or where the going was too soft, tanks could not operate, but there was always plenty of other portions of the front where the going was good. Thus the question of what was, or what was not, tank country did not receive the early consideration that it otherwise might have.

When Canadian tanks landed in Sicily it was soon realized that this mountainous country called for far different tactics, so far as tanks were concerned, than did a wide open country such as the desert. In almost every case the infantry were the predominant arm and the tank's job was to support them to the best of its ability. Both arms had much to learn in actual warfare in difficult country, and it was hardly surprising that infantry thought tanks should do more than they were prepared to do, and the tanks thought infantry were hopelessly ignorant of the tank's capabilities. To begin with, neither really appreciated what a tank could or could not do to give the infantry a helping hand in the varied

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country that was fought over. Nor did either realize the tremendous help that infantry could afford tanks in close going. Italy, with its mountains, valleys, olive groves, vineyards, crops, walled cemeteries, and other detestable features (that is, from a tank point of view) further complicated relations between the two arms. After all, the infantry wore cloth jackets, and the tankmen had several inches of steel to protect them, so why should not the tanks fight where the infantry had to go? But at first the tank men were reluctant. Their steel was not much good against the well-concealed antitank gun or the boldly handled infantry anti-tank weapon. In close country they could not see them and therefore could not protect themselves. The gunner's telescope was masked by olive groves and vines, and he was unable to give effective support to the infantry in any event. So the inter-service battle raged, and at times there was considerable feeling between the two arms. But experience was bearing fruit. The tank men, who had been taught that tank country was that country which afforded the best going, and contained successive features permitting good fields of fire from hull-down positions, and support, tank by tank or troop by troop, began to learn that it was just such country that was the best protected by anti-tank weapons.

Few forces can have sufficient tank stoppers to be strong in them at all points. The anti-tank weapons were usually concentrated to cover the best tank approaches. The tank men started to experiment. They found they could climb slopes they thought were impossible. It was just a matter of skillful driving. They found that much rocky ground could be traversed with care and attention. They found that even terraced hills could be topped by driving the terraces until a low point was found and then charging a path to the next terrace, and so on. Sunken roads and other obstacles could be overcome by the use of explosives, so they took along tank sappers, trained in demolition and mine clearance, and



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Canadian infantry advancing through the hills of Italy with armoured support.

carried them in cut-down Honeys moving with squadrons. They used the tank dozer well forward to help clear the way where necessary.

Time and again they found these tactics won them that pearl beyond price – surprise – and soon they were looking not for good going, but the going where only skill and experience could get them through.

The policy was laid down, at least in the writer's formation, that every request of the infantry must be met if it was humanly possible to get the tanks over the ground. The response of the infantry was immediate. As soon as they found the tanks were ready to take on almost anything, their confidence in the tank men firmed, and the two started to work together in a most satisfactory manner. In not one single instance did the writer find that infantry, once assured of the tank mens' real desire to help, took unfair advantage of that cooperation. It was soon realized by all concerned that each arm had its own particular tactics. If tanks stopped to bring fire to bear on a position, the infantry quickly learned that they were not quitters, but that this was the very moment for them to press on under cover of that fire. They soon got to know that regardless of how close the country, the tanks were right behind them, depending on them to winkle the concealed antitank weapons, and ready to forge ahead when more open country was reached. The infantry normally preferred country which gave them the maximum in covered lines of approach, although often this was not the direction of attack the tank men would

have chosen. But when the tanks had learned that they could depend on the infantry, and so long as they could get their vehicles forward, they cheerfully accepted the infantry's choice of ground. Infantry and tank cooperation reached a high peak of efficiency, and the results were very gratifying – at least to our side. Even in the Apennines, where the tanks were wholly road-bound, they were found more than useful. They formed a firm base from which the infantry could fan out into the hills. They brought accurate direct and indirect fire to bear when it was most needed. And it gave the infantry a comfortable feeling to have them around. Infantry like to have tanks near them. Possibly the tank is blind in close country and therefore helpless, or road-bound, or blacked out on a dark night, or otherwise not much of an asset. Nevertheless, the infantry like to have them around. There is a psychological factor here which is most important and should never be overlooked. The old practice of "rear rally" for reorganization, petrol, rations, etc., was discontinued in Italy by the Writer's formation. The tanks stayed with the infantry and supplies were taken forward to them. Even if they couldn't see to fire they could lay their guns on fixed lines, and the starting up of tank engines, and the sound of their guns at night, were found to have a most satisfactory effect both on our own and the enemy troops. The close and intimate training of tanks and infantry is essential if the best results are to be obtained. Where the tanks are to fight with well-trained infantry who know and trust them, then we have no difficulty in answering the question which forms the title of this article. Under such circumstances there is only one type of country that is non-tank country, namely, that terrain over which it is physically impossible to move the tanks even with the use of explosives, tank dozers or any other artificial aids that are available or can be improvised.

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