

THE TANK CORPS REORGANIZED

TIMOTHY K. NENNINGER

Rapid demobilization followed the Armistice. As soon as possible the War Department returned troops to the United States and discharged them. On 11 November 1918 the Tank Corps consisted of 483 officers and 7700 enlisted men within the continental United States and 752 officers and 11,277 men overseas. By May 1919 most of these troops had been discharged.

During late 1918 and early 1919 tank troops from Camp Colt and Tobyhanna in Pennsylvania, from Fort Benning, Georgia, and from Camp Polk, North Carolina transferred to Camp Meade, Maryland, the Tank Corps demobilization and storage center. Beginning in March 1919 tank troops from overseas began to arrive with their equipment. The French and British wanted to produce new tanks and therefore did not want the models they had loaned to the Americans during the war. At Camp Meade the Army collected 218 French Renaults, 450 American built Renaults, 28 British Mark Vs, and 100 Mark VIIIs built at Rock Island Arsenal. The collective worth of these machines was 32 million dollars. These demobilization activities represented the concluding acts of the past war. What about the future of the Tank Corps?

In August 1919 Secretary of War Newton D. Baker ordered General Rockenbach to return to Camp Meade as Commandant of the Tank Corps. Subsequently, on December 31, Congress fixed the Corps' strength at 154 officers and 2508 men. Rockenbach protested that this allotment was insufficient to operate in time of war. He maintained that the United States needed at least two tank brigades. But Congress was in no mood to appropriate funds for a large military establishment. Tankers had to be

satisfied with a small organization and confine their efforts to improving their service with the means at hand. Congress charged the Tank Corps with formulating sound tactical doctrine, developing improved tanks, and disseminating information on the value of tanks. No one needed to prod tankers into lobbying for their service. Tank Corps officers, particularly George Patton, Sereno Brett, and General Rockenbach, began to impress upon military and civilian officials the need for tanks in modern warfare.

As commandant, Rockenbach was in a particularly advantageous position to express his views. In testimony before Congressional committees, in articles for military journals, and in speeches for military gatherings, Rockenbach defended the tank's performance during the war and stressed the need for developing improved tanks in the future. In a lecture at the General Staff College, Rockenbach said the Tank Corps had resisted entangling alliances with any of the traditional branches but that its support in combat would be of value to all of them. According to Rockenbach, the use of tanks reduced infantry casualties. He thought that function and design should govern Tank Corps needs in the future. To carry out their mission tanks should be designed to cross any defensive position, to go anywhere the infantry could, and to possess sufficient armament to cope with protected hostile machine guns.

Despite the necessity of close association between tanks and infantry, Rockenbach opposed permanent attachment of tank units to infantry divisions. He maintained that tanks could not be used in every situation and should not be wasted on a division operating in unfavorable terrain. Before a Senate

subcommittee Rockenbach defended the wartime tank organization. He said that the Tank Corps should remain a separate entity assigned to General Headquarters for use as the tactical situation dictated. Because of their special nature, tanks needed their own organization to coordinate the procurement of proper equipment with the Ordnance Department, to conduct the necessary specialist training, and to plan tank-infantry operations with GHQ.

In response to a lecture by General Rockenbach, Major General Charles P. Summerall, an outstanding wartime corps commander, wrote, "Far from disagreeing with any part of the lecture, the only comment that I heard . . . was that you had presented the subject in a very conservative manner, and that all were in hearty sympathy with the development and use of the Tank Corps." Some of the Tank Corps' own officers agreed with Summerall that Rockenbach was too conservative. Rather than experimenting with and developing new tanks, Rockenbach sought to maintain the status quo.

Patton's biographer wrote that upon return to the United States after the Armistice, Patton vigorously promoted research, development, and training: three activities essential to the improvement of tanks. Soon after arriving at Camp Meade, Patton realized that several forces, including General Rockenbach, combined to thwart his efforts. A close friend of Patton's during this period, then Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower, expresses similar sentiments in his book *At Ease!*

During the war Eisenhower commanded the tank training center at Camp Colt. After the end of the war he went with the tank units to Camp Meade. On the controversy surrounding tanks, Eisenhower writes that he, Patton, and several other young officers disagreed with accepted doctrine. They thought tanks should be fast and should attack in mass formations. This group of officers conducted experiments with World War I tanks and held demonstrations for War Department officials. Several of the group, including both Patton and Eisenhower, wrote articles for military journals expressing their "revolutionary" ideas. But the War Department disapproved of their divergence from established doctrine. Eisenhower writes, "I was told that my ideas were not only wrong but were dangerous, and that henceforth I was not to publish anything incompatible with solid infantry doctrine." Confronted with such pressures, both Patton and Eisenhower soon left the tank service.

Official War Department doctrine called for tanks



Brigadier General S. D. Rockenbach, Commandant of Tank Corps, who defended the tanks' performance and stressed the need for improving them.

to be used as close support weapons for the infantry, thus the wartime practices for the employment of tanks would continue. A board of officers convened by the War Department in 1919 to study tank tactics recognized the value of tanks as an adjunct to the infantry but declared them incapable of independent action. To emphasize further the association of tanks and infantry the board maintained that the "Tank Service should be under the general supervision of the Chief of Infantry and should not constitute an independent service." Their recommendation that tanks be under Infantry control broke with the wartime arrangement by which the Tank Corps retained autonomy from branch authority. Peacetime exigencies gradually pushed the War Department into placing tanks under the control of the Chief of Infantry.

Ultimately the question of a separate Tank Corps came before Congressional committees holding hearings on the reorganization of the Army. The question raised in these committees was not over the value of tanks but over the necessity for a separate service. General Peyton C. March, the Chief of Staff, said that American military authorities were fully convinced of the offensive value of tanks. March himself believed the Tank Corps was "technical enough and important enough to keep it as a separate arm." Disagreeing with March, General Pershing expressed the belief that tanks should be under the control of the Chief of Infantry; they were an adjunct to that arm. For Congress the question of a separate tank service became one of economics.

Could the government afford an independent tank organization in view of the reduced postwar military budgets?

Congressman Harry E. Hull of Iowa presented the problem as follows: "I can see how perhaps in the case of war there might be some need of a separate organization for tanks, but I am unable absolutely to see any reason during peacetime for the creation of the overhead that would have to be established to give you a separate organization." Evidently the majority of Congress agreed with Mr. Hull. Section 17 of the National Defense Act, as amended by Congress on June 4, 1920 assigned all tank units to the Infantry.

In tactics as well as organization, the reorganization of 1920 had a tremendous impact on tank development. Under Infantry control, tanks naturally had to conform to infantry tactics which meant continuing the close support mission of World War I. Independent tank attacks had no place in infantry doctrine.

A conference held by the General Service Schools at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in October and November 1921 discussed the organization and tactics of infantry tanks. The conference report together with comments elicited from other officers and included in the report indicate post-1920 thought on the use of tanks. To secure close cooperation between tanks and infantry the report proposed assigning light tank companies as organic components of infantry divisions. Additional tank units would compose a GHQ reserve. This would insure the maximum use of a limited number of tanks. GHQ tanks, distributed in depth, would be allotted to the corps delivering the main assault. Terrain and the mission of the assault divisions dictated the distribution of available tanks. Departing from established doctrine, the conference suggested the allotment of additional machineguns to each tank company. In a defensive situation these units could serve as machinegun companies. Again departing from normal doctrine, the conference maintained that in certain situations tanks might successfully assist horse cavalry in performing its missions.

Criticism of this report came from several War Department sources. On 9 December 1921 the Tank Board met at Fort Meade to consider the report of the General Service Schools conference. This board criticized the proposal for using tank companies as machinegun units. Tankers required additional training, equipment, and manpower in order to carry out any dual missions. The board

maintained that tanks were offensive weapons only. According to the Infantry Board the number of tanks available during wartime would not be sufficient to maintain division tank companies as well as GHQ tank units. Furthermore, divisions might not operate in terrain suitable for employment of tanks. Tank companies organic to infantry divisions might prove more of a burden than an asset. Writing to the Commandant of the General Service Schools, the Adjutant General charged that instructors at the conference failed to deal with existing organization, units and arms. Instead, they made unauthorized assumptions regarding the tank service. The Adjutant General said that uniformity of tactical doctrine cannot exist unless all schools based their teachings on existing organization. Tactically, tanks served as an auxiliary of the infantry. According to the Adjutant General, any discussion of tank tactics had to begin with that premise.

Even before the reorganization the Army took steps to insure closer cooperation between tanks and infantry. Early in 1920 the Secretary of War, in response to a request by the 1st Division commander, General Summerall, assigned one tank company to each infantry division and assigned one battalion of tanks to the Infantry School at Fort Benning. After the reorganization the units retained at Camp Meade included the 16th Tank Battalion (Light), the 17th Tank Battalion (Heavy), and a maintenance company. Meade was also the location of the Tank School and the hub of postwar tank activities. In the event of war Meade would have become a mobilization, training, and replacement center for tank units. Four light tank companies and six separate light tank platoons were the remaining tank units assigned to Regular Army posts. In addition, the National Guard had fifteen light tank companies located throughout the United States. All tank organizations, National Guard and Regular Army, were organic to infantry divisions.

Lack of funds restricted but did not halt the postwar activities of American tank units. For fiscal year 1921 Congress appropriated only \$79,000 for use by tank units. During the war, tank crews operated their machines for the entire day but peacetime budgets dictated that tanks be driven for a few hours at most because of a lack of funds to buy gasoline. Despite the inconvenience caused by tight budgets, tank units conducted important training and attempted to stimulate interest in tanks. A letter from First Lieutenant Eugene F. Smith, platoon leader of the 1st Platoon, 9th Tank Company at Fort Devens,



ROBERT J. JACKS COLLECTION

At the end of World War I 100 Mark VIII tanks were collected at Fort Meade. At that time the United States had almost 3000 Mark VIIIs that had cost \$85,000 each to build.

Massachusetts, to now Colonel Rockenbach aptly reflected the difficulties and nature of tank training during the twenties.

Smith's platoon moved from winter quarters to Fort Devens between 12 and 17 May 1924. Upon arriving at their training area they constructed a tank park to house and protect their vehicles. Beginning on 9 June and continuing for three weeks the tanks helped in felling trees and clearing land for a drill field. *This was valuable experience because it gave all hands an opportunity to drive the tanks under difficult conditions.* After completing the preparation of their training area, the platoon held a test mobilization on 3 July. Despite only 24 hours notice the test went well.

From 7 to 9 July two tanks of the platoon assisted the 5th Infantry in conducting demonstrations for an Elks convention in Boston. During the second and third weeks of July the platoon assisted in the summer training of the 26th Tank Company of the Massachusetts National Guard. Several reserve tank officers trained with the platoon from 21 July until 2 August.

Tactical exercises with infantry regiments constituted the unit's primary activity in the latter part of July. On 15 and 16 July the unit participated in field problems with the 13th and 5th Infantry Regiments; these were part of the regiments' annual tac-

tical inspections. During both of the exercises the tanks moved about eight miles under their own power and impressed the infantry officers present with their ability to keep up with the march column.

On 24, 28, and 31 July, Smith's platoon participated in the tactical inspection of the 18th Infantry Brigade which was observed by the I Corps commander and some War Department officials. To advertise the mobility and strength of tanks the platoon conducted a demonstration for the visiting dignitaries. One tank crossed a trench system, drove across a bridge, knocked down a tree, and then returned to the starting point. Smith noted, "We received some very good publicity in the Boston papers because of it."

The platoon held a demonstration of tank-infantry coordination in an attack for ROTC and Organized Reserve Corps personnel on 1 August. Following this exercise several officers expressed their surprise that tanks could move so rapidly and assist the attacking infantry so well. More than just training his own men, Smith attempted to publicize the tank and impress other officers with its possibilities. The performance of the tanks in these summer maneuvers convinced many officers that they could rely upon tanks in any combat situation. Smith concluded his letter to Rockenbach, "They don't have to know that on one problem we had to stop and put a new

fan belt on one tank, a new water pipe from the pump to the radiator on another and stop every half mile and fill the radiator on another because it sprang a bad leak."

The most important tank activity of the twenties was the Tank School at Fort Meade. Among its more important functions the school trained personnel for tank units such as Lieutenant Smith's platoon. Although the enlisted men received instruction only in their specialties, the officers took a more comprehensive course. Included in the officers' program was instruction on motors, ignition systems, battery maintenance, vehicle chassis, light tanks, heavy tanks, weapons, tank marksmanship, tank combat practice, tank history, tank organization, tank tactics, reconnaissance, intelligence, and chemical warfare. The courses were a balance between theory and practice. The National Guard and Reserve officers course began in March of each year and continued for three months. The Regular officers course was of ten months' duration. Specialty schools for enlisted men lasted for about three months. After graduation the officers served a tour of several years with a tank unit. Most of the enlisted students came from one of the units at Meade and they returned to their former units upon graduation. But the type of training received by the men created some problems. The skills developed at the school were valuable in a society becoming rapidly motorized and many Tank School graduates left the service to take higher paying civilian jobs. In order to retain trained personnel, the Army began to assign students to the school who had at least two years remaining on their enlistments.

Another activity located at Meade and closely associated with the school was the Tank Board. Originally organized in 1919 as the Tank Corps Technical Board, this body conducted tests, undertook studies, and made recommendations about tanks, tank equipment, tank unit transportation, and similar technical matters. Following the reorganization in 1920 the board disbanded until 1924. In October of that year the Commandant of the Tank School, with the approval of the Chief of Infantry, appointed four permanent members of the Tank Board. This board cooperated with the Tank School, the Ordnance Department, and other agencies concerned with improving tank development. Army Regulations 75-60 of 30 April 1926 reorganized the board. Rather than four permanently assigned officers, the board now consisted of the Commandant of the Tank School, three officers designated by the Chief of Infantry, and one officer representing the



ROBERT J. ICKS COLLECTION

A Six-Ton Tank crashes through old barracks at Fort Meade. Demonstrations such as these were organized by tank enthusiasts to impress upon the public the usefulness of the tank. Despite favorable newspaper reports, funds provided were scanty.

Chief of Ordnance. In 1929 the Chief of Infantry, upon recommendation of the president of the board, named a recorder and two other members. Similar to the Infantry Board, the Tank Board became a part of the Office of the Chief of Infantry.

For initial equipment requirements the Tank Board prepared performance specifications. Upon request of the Chief of Infantry, the proper supply facility procured the item and sent it to the board for tests. The board exercised a coordinating role between the tank troops and the supply agencies. Following the conclusion of tests, the board issued a report on the acceptability of the particular piece of equipment. Among the items considered by the Tank Board were communications systems, maintenance equipment, accompanying guns for tanks, a trench digging tank, tank machineguns, and development of new tank models. Members of the board and the test officers worked on projects individually. At frequent meetings the board as a whole reviewed and reported on the individual projects.

The postwar years were both a time of transition and a period of stagnation for American tank development. Although the 1920 reorganization changed the organizational structure of the Tank Corps, small postwar military budgets limited activities. Among other things, this hindered production of new, improved tanks. But a number of officers retained an interest in tanks. They wrote for military periodicals, tried to impress their fellow officers with the capabilities of tanks, and like Lieutenant Smith, attempted to "advertise" tanks. By the end of the decade the Army was contemplating more positive steps for improving the American tank service.