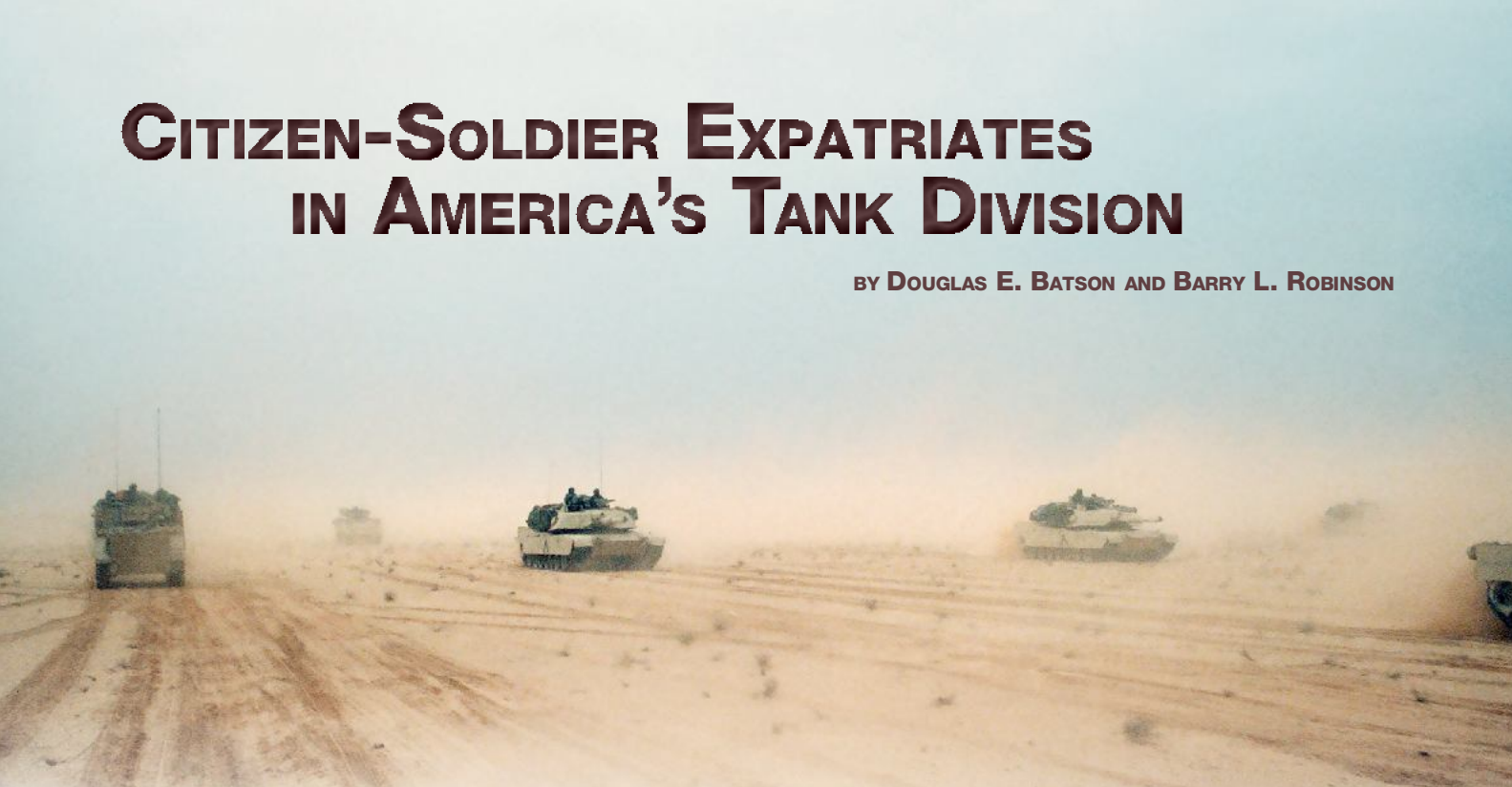


CITIZEN-SOLDIER EXPATRIATES IN AMERICA'S TANK DIVISION

BY DOUGLAS E. BATSON AND BARRY L. ROBINSON



More than 20 years ago, a Saturday morning dawned in Ansbach, Germany, a small rococo-styled city situated 25 miles southwest of Nuremberg. Farmers were up early harvesting beets and turnips as members of the 312th Support Center, a new 7th Army Reserve Command (ARCOM) unit, drove by en route to the 1st Armor Division (1AD) Headquarters in Ansbach. Traffic was light compared to a *Langer Samstag*, the first Saturday of each month when shoppers from outlying areas flock to enjoy the extended hours of retail shops. For these citizen-soldier expatriates, 10 November 1990 would be a very “long Saturday” as they prepared to go to war!

If ever a U.S. Army unit was unlikely to see combat, it was the 312th. Established in early 1989 to conduct 1AD rear area operations, the 312th would not see its third birthday. The unit's members had witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, and planning for 1AD's deactivation had earnestly begun. A historic era had ended; the U.S. Army in Europe had achieved victory in its 43-year deterrence mission against Soviet expansionism. Yet, ironically, members of 1AD — and the 312th — were about to face Soviet T-72 main battle tanks, not in the heavily forested Czech-German border region, but in the stark naked desert of Iraq's Al Muthanna province.

“All Ready, Already Here”

In 1987, 7th ARCOM became the only forward-stationed reserve command in the U.S. Army with the apropos motto “All Ready, Already Here.” The activation of units, such as the 312th, supported the new rear area battlespace concept within the theater general defensive plan. This was a unique relationship — a reserve unit integrated with an active Army division on foreign soil. Reflecting this close affiliation, 312th members wore their Active Component (AC) parent unit shoulder sleeve patch.¹

The significant role of the 312th's first commander cannot be understated. Indeed, his credibility with AC officers at division was undoubtedly enhanced by the fact that he was an armor officer. However, he was deemed uniquely qualified for establishing the first USAR unit outside the United States because he was the only 312th member who had been a reservist!

In the year prior to mobilization, the 312th participated in command field exercises (CFX) and, most notably, in what

proved to be the last return of forces to Germany (REFORGER) exercise. REFORGER 1990, Centurion Shield, was quite different from the previous 21 exercises, which had been held annually for the previous two decades. Centurion Shield involved fewer troops, fewer tracked vehicles, *no tanks*, and lots of computers.² Reflecting on this change, a participant opined, “If I see an enemy HMMWV roll past my position at 50 miles per hour, I can't tell if it's taking out chow or if it's [representing] a platoon of tanks that just broke through our perimeter.”³

REFORGER 1990 was a test bed for the 312th's ability to coordinate 1AD rear battle movements. However, this scaled-down, computer-driven simulation, in the snowy Bavarian forests, would in no way resemble what would take place the following winter: a division (+) supply trains, with 3,000 wheeled vehicles and 8,000 troops constantly in motion across open desert.

Mobilization

On 2 August 1990, Saddam Hussein's republican guard forces invaded Kuwait. Within days, Operation Desert Shield had deterred an expected Iraqi incursion into Saudi Arabia. What followed were 3 months of negotiations and United Nations resolutions that failed to persuade the Iraqi strongman to withdraw from Kuwait. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney held a press conference on Thursday, 8 November 1990. Most Americans in Europe were glued to televisions as Cheney announced the decision to send more troops from Europe to the Persian Gulf. The U.S. Army's VII Corps was the major command on the list and everyone in Germany knew that 1AD, “America's tank division,” with its heavy-hulled M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks, was the corps' lead unit.⁴

On Friday, 9 November, the 312th commander ordered the unit drill moved up to the very next day! It was, indeed, a very long Saturday. The 1AD's deployment from Europe to Southwest Asia (SWA) was unique because forward-deployed troops had never been further deployed to another theater of operations. Thus, during the ensuing weeks, the division faced an enormous task: it had to prepare war plans; train and move to SWA 17,000 soldiers, who, with auxiliaries, add-ons, and support elements, would grow to 24,000; pack and convoy more than 1,000 military vans to distant ports; rail load 2,000 tracked vehicles; and drive 7,000



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Deployment

Another delay in the unit’s departure date resulted in an unexpected, but much appreciated, Christmas with families. Then, on 27 December 1990, the 312th manifested 27 personnel on a C-141 flight from the Nuremberg civilian airport to near Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. At the initial staging area, a hovel of soldiers overcrowded into a sand pit disparagingly referred to as “tent city” or “Andersonville.” The 312th crammed into one general purpose (GP) medium tent with wooden flooring and cots.

wheeled vehicles to the same distant ports, which was much like a REFORGER in reverse.⁵

Not knowing exactly when or if certain units, including the 312th, would deploy made planning exceedingly difficult for a division simultaneously turning in equipment and fielding new combat vehicles. For example, one the brigades had not completed its transition from M113 armored personnel carriers to M2A2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles (IFV), thus it was replaced with 3d (Phantom) Brigade, 3d Infantry Division, which had transitioned. Because many AC units in Europe had already started drawing down, the 312th, which had no vehicles, was given an unexpected windfall. An artillery unit had readied its wheeled fleet for turn-in, and the battery’s NCOs were elated to transfer at least a dozen HMMWVs to 312th.

In an armored division, drivers are combat multipliers. The unit’s sergeants and specialists ensured unit members obtained military drivers licenses and conducted preventive maintenance training. The NCOs also acquired radios, weapons, gas masks, tents, and a myriad of supplies from dozens of locations throughout Germany. Not having one, they created a basic unit load plan for equipment and supplies. The unit adapted to overcome every obstacle, including qualifying with M16s on a 25 meter range, accomplishing personal and family preparations, and transporting equipment and vehicles to Rotterdam. Most of the officers performed nighttime duty shifts in the division operations center as the division’s staff and advance party began departing for SWA.

When the 312th’s departure date was delayed several times in December, rumors swelled that the division, given its reluctance to allow the 312th to march in 1AD’s 50th anniversary parade the past July, was not about to take untested reservists to “the sandbox” for what Saddam Hussein billed as the “mother of all battles.” Many soldiers resigned themselves to pulling months of guard duty around family housing areas and post exchanges in their adopted hometowns of Nuremberg and Ansbach. Indeed, with thousands of Iraqi nationals in Germany, there was a very real fear of terrorism, and rumors of war abounded. “Television and newspapers were filled with stories of Iraqi flaming pits of oil awaiting American soldiers, long-range artillery fire nailing them, and unforeseeable poison gas killing them in their sleep... and that their own generals expected 20,000 friendly casualties on the first day of fighting.”⁶

The 312th’s staff attended staff calls and performed shifts in the division tactical operations center (TOC). Soldiers drove vehicles from other units from the port at Al Jubail to paint sheds where forest green gave way to desert tan hues. This pause also enabled the 312th to prepare for rear area missions of base defense clusters. In Europe, strategy was defensively focused, and rear area operations centers were a new innovation to counter rear area threats by coordinating security and boundaries for combat support units spread throughout the rear battle area. In SWA, however, strategy became offensively focused and commanders were concerned that rapid advances would outdistance their supplies and support. For this reason, large logistics support areas, or log bases, were created close to the Iraqi border to facilitate resupply. The 312th was asked to convert some of its base defense liaison teams into “pony express” riders and escort resupply elements as rapidly as possible to and from the front.

Finally, the 312th’s equipment arrived and word was given to move 400 kilometers to Tactical Assembly Area (TAA) Thompson. The division did not have enough heavy expanded mobility tactical trucks (HEMTTs) to move its vehicles in one movement, thus the transport had to be staged. Rear area support units, to include the 312th, were the last to move and just in time for a freak climatic event. A 100-year rainstorm turned the desert into a shallow lake. Once off the paved Tapline Road, the 312th, using its Loran geographical locators, waded to its sector of TAA Thompson in total darkness. In the morning, the sun was up and the water had strangely disappeared. “The biggest surprise that awaited the troops was that there was no ‘there.’ Nothing! As far as the eye could see in all directions!”⁷

Once at TAA Thompson, 1AD began a month of war preparation, which included boresighting and gunnery practice, and rehearsing movements in the featureless desert. The 312th base defense liaison teams, consisting of one officer and one NCO, introduced themselves and their ‘iron gothic’ call sign to organic and attached IAD units and advised how to “deploy skirmishers” (conduct base defense on the move). In other words, during pauses in movement, each convoy and unit was to set up its own base defenses. Furthermore, the division G3, in the form of the 312th Support Center, would conduct checks on each unit, which was a very new concept for support units meandering throughout the division rear, a vast area with very fluid boundaries.

From Shield to Storm

On 17 January 1991, the air war and Operation Desert Storm began. The 312th executive officer (and Vietnam War veteran) encouraged soldiers to be as proficient as possible, thus allowing no opportunity for the AC to blame any foul-ups on “those reservists.” The operational tempo increased markedly and soldiers not organizing base defense clusters or riding pony express missions found themselves in the TOC, pulling 12-hour shifts, writing operations orders and annexes, and creating associated battle graphics.

On 14 February, movement to attack position TAA Garcia commenced. This daylong event featured two tank divisions, 1AD and 3AD, crossing each other in tactical formation over the Al-Batin wadi, a (normally) dry riverbed, but in some places, a craggy valley. The division rear began its movement via the Tapline Road, but could not cross the valley until the maneuver elements of both divisions traversed the wadi. While waiting near the town of Hafir Al Batin, multiple warheads from two Iraqi scud missiles, having been intercepted by Patriot anti-aircraft batteries, landed within 500 feet of the 312th’s idling vehicles. Ever fearful of chemical attack, pandemonium ensued as drivers sped away from the impact area while simultaneously donning their mission oriented protective posture (MOPP) gear. After seeing no adverse effects on pedestrian Saudis (or on their camels) a few brave souls removed their protective masks and gave the “all clear” signal.

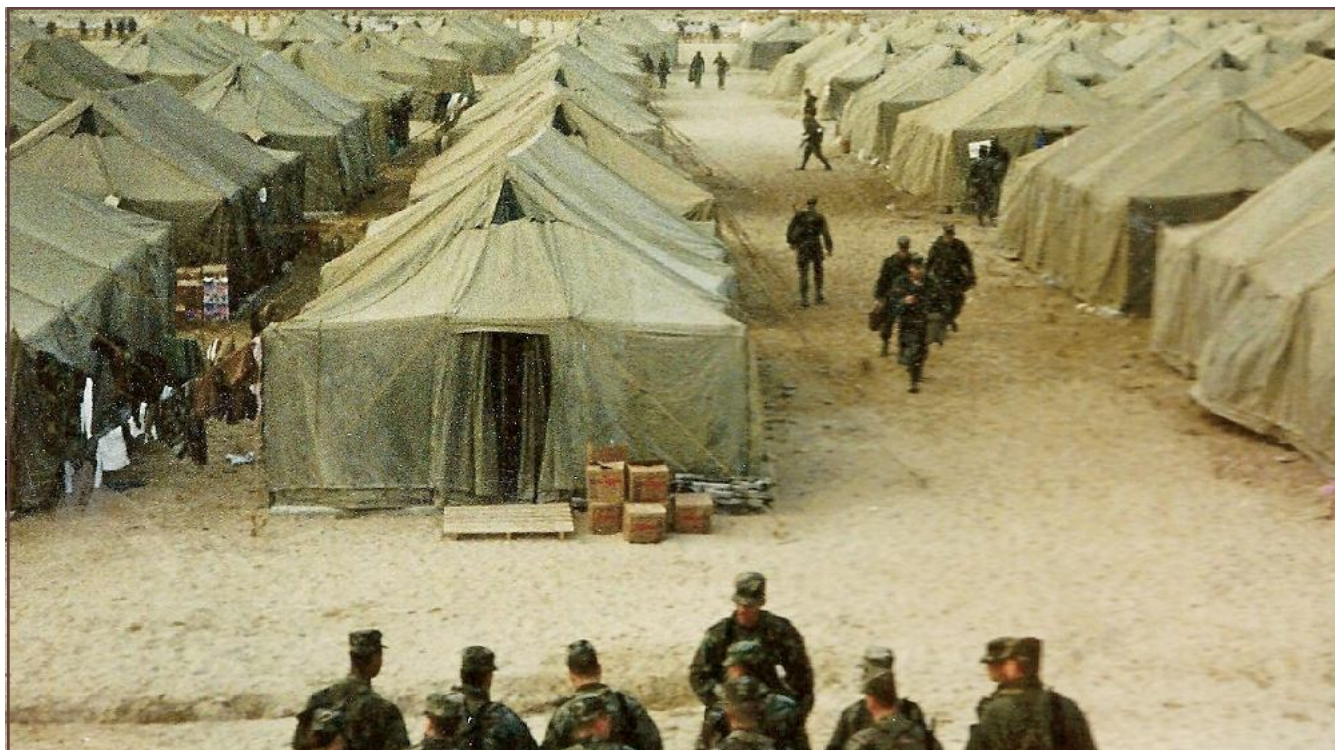
Arriving at TAA Garcia at night, the 312th guided the division rear’s 3,000 wheeled vehicles into positions staked out like slices of a giant pie chart. Vehicle crews navigated in the dark using latitude and longitude coordinates determined by the Lorans and odometer readings measured in tenths of a mile. America’s tank

division now faced its adversaries across a foreboding berm, separating Saudi Arabia from Iraq roughly along the 29th Parallel North. The opposing forces were most notably the T-72-equipped armored divisions of Saddam’s elite republican guard forces. Named Tawakalna, Nebuchadnezzar, and Hamurabbi, these and other Iraqi units in the VII Corps’ “left hook” axis of approach were pounded for 5 weeks, day and night, by B-52 bombing sorties, thus greatly attriting their effectiveness.

89 Hours to Victory

The 1AD’s role during the ground war has been well chronicled. In summation, the 350-tank task force battled four Iraqi divisions, destroyed 341 tanks, 924 armored personnel carriers, and 92 artillery pieces during 89 hours of combat. The division also captured nearly 2,000 prisoners. At one point, on the night of 26 February, 1AD fought three republican guard divisions simultaneously. The division’s tanks, IFVs, and artillery fought a close-in battle with part of the Tawalkana Division, while Apache helicopters and long-range artillery attacked part of the Adnan Infantry Division farther to the north. At the same time, the division staff directed a deep attack by Air Force jets against the Medina Infantry Division. “That is air-land battle at its best,” Griffith said of U.S. forces attacking enemy reserves before they had the chance to enter the battle.⁸ But during the Battle of Medina Ridge on 27 February, the largest tank battle since World War II and the largest tank battle in America’s history, is where America’s tank division made her mark. In just over 2 hours, 1AD destroyed 186 Iraqi tanks and 127 other armored vehicles while suffering one fatality and had four of its M1A1 tanks disabled by direct fire.⁹

In the final hour before the announced cease fire at 0800 hours, 28 February, 312th and the supply trains of division rear caught



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up with the division artillery (DIVARTY) just as it unleashed a hellacious, ground-quaking "DIVARTY four" on 26 targets. That meant that each target was hit more than 90 times by 155mm and 8-inch guns, plus multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS), a total of more than 12,000 rounds in just 45 minutes!¹⁰ The cease fire afforded the 312th's weary pony express riders some much needed sleep. Without pause for 89 hours, they escorted supply convoys to and from the division rear to the log bases in Saudi Arabia along ever-lengthening lines of communications. This was a vital mission because 1AD maneuver units fell short on fuel by the second day of the ground war. The base defense clusters regained significance following the cease fire and units became static for about 45 days.

A full generation of AC soldiers had never worked, much less fought, alongside Army reservists. Soldiers of 312th wore the 1AD shoulder patch; therefore, it was only after the cease fire that 1AD leaders realized that 312th was a USAR unit. They exclaimed, "We had no idea that you are reservists! You did a damn fine job out here!" Verbal accolades and personal decorations pinned on in Iraq were to be the 312th's only recognition. While victory parades and heroes' welcomes awaited troops returning to CONUS, the 1AD left its equipment in the desert and promptly deactivated. Its 17,000 regulars were reassigned from Germany to posts Armywide, while 312th members faced career uncertainties unique to citizen-soldier expatriates. Many were, or would soon be, unemployed and without a USAR unit assignment. All would search for and find new USAR assignments and civilian careers with the same fortitude they demonstrated in combat.

The 1AD's experience in Operation Desert Storm was groundbreaking — a forward-deployed armored division, further deployed to another theater with its organic forward-stationed reservists, marked a seminal change in the relationship between the USAR and the AC. At the outset, neither the 312th nor the 1AD staff knew what rear area operations center augmentees could or should do. The 312th's performance in earlier command field and REFORGER exercises persuaded senior leaders that reservists are force multipliers. The 1AD soldiers who witnessed the 312th Support Center successfully conduct its wartime mission caught a glimpse of the future. Change did not occur overnight or even on a long Saturday in November 1990, but more

than 20 years later, a much more integrated and effective total Army continues to excel at conducting full-spectrum operations in the Balkans, Iraq, and Afghanistan.



Notes

¹The 7th U.S. Army Reserve Command, available online at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/7arcom.htm>, accessed 18 January 2010.

²K.M. Shimko, "The Last 'REFORGER' Exercise – 1990," *Spearhead Magazine*, January 1990, available online at <http://www.3ad.com/history/cold.war/feature.pages/reforger.1990.htm>, accessed 18 January 2010.

³Ibid.

⁴Tom Carhart, *Iron Soldiers: How America's 1st Armored Division Crushed Iraq's Elite Republican Guard*, Pocket Books, New York, 1994, p. 51.

⁵Ibid., p. 52.

⁶Ibid., p. 99.

⁷Ibid., p. 106.

⁸*The Stars and Stripes*, "Future Tank Battles Not Ruled Out: 1st Armored Division Griffith Points to Combat Success," 15 May 1991, p. 3.

⁹Battle of Medina Ridge, online at www.answers.com/topic/battle-of-medina-ridge, accessed 18 January 2010.

¹⁰*Iron Soldiers*, p. 317.

Douglas E. Batson served as a cavalry scout with 1st Battalion, 37th Armor, 1st Armored Division (1AD), Ansbach, Germany. He began his civilian career as an education counselor for 1AD Division Support Command. He joined the 7th Army Reserve Command (ARCOM) and served in the U.S. Army Reserve until his retirement in 2004. Following assignments with the U.S. Geological Survey and Department of Justice, he is currently a human geographer with the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). He received a B.S. from Excelsior College, an M.E. from Boston University, and authored *Registering the Human Terrain: a Valuation of Cadastre*, National Defense Intelligence College Press.

Barry L. Robinson is currently a business process analyst, Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Installation Management, the Pentagon, Washington, DC. He received a B.S. from the University of Texas at Arlington and an M.B.A. from Tarleton State University. He served in various positions, to include staff officer, 1st Armored Division, Ansbach, Germany; and installation coordinator, Herzo artillery base, Herzogenaurach, Germany. He also served in morale, welfare, and recreation positions at Fort Hood, Texas, and U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan, Korea. In 1988, he joined 7th ARCOM and served in the U.S. Army Reserve until he retired as a lieutenant colonel in 2003.



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