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REMOTE-CONTROLLED TANK SEEMS LIKE WORLD'S LARGEST TOY, BUT ITS MINE-CLEARING JOB IS DEADLY SERIOUS

By Capt. Will Thompson and Christopher Ix
9th Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division

TIKRIT, Iraq — On an airfield south of here, in the blistering, dusty heat, 13 warriors from Task Force Gila of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division took turns operating the remote-controlled toy of their dreams -- an M1A1 Abrams tank.



PHOTO COURTESY 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

Frank J. Mitchell, an Army contractor from Redstone Arsenal, Ala., explains the attributes of the Operator Control Unit of the Panther mine-clearing system to engineer Soldiers from V Corps' 9th Engineer Battalion.

"It's a simple system to understand and operate, as long as you take care of the equipment," explained Frank J. Mitchell, an Army contractor from Redstone Arsenal, Ala.

"It's easy."

Actually, the system -- the M1A1 Abrams Panther -- is a tank of sorts. It's a modified, turret-free tank that uses robotics to allow users to safely conduct mine-proofing and -clearing operations by remote control. Equipped with a plow or mine roller, a Panther can effectively clear an area of anti-personnel and tank mines or unexploded ordnance in a relatively short time, while the Soldier controlling it keeps a safe distance.

Mitchell spent five days repairing the task force's Mini-flails and Panthers and training Soldiers from the division's 9th Engineer Battalion to maintain and operate them.

Using an Operator Control Unit, joystick controls and digital heads-up display, Soldiers took turns maneuvering the Panther across Forward Operating Base Remagen. At the OCU, the effect of on-board controls, two digital video cameras and integrated audio system provided trainees with the same view and experience they would get sitting in the Panther's driver's seat.

Spc. David Klingaman of Headquarters and Headquarters Company learned to manipulate the system power, braking, steering, throttle, gear shifting and turn the engine on and off -- all at the touch of a button from up to a mile away.

One at a time, Soldiers took turns riding inside the tank in the event of a training emergency. "We wouldn't want the Panther cruising off into the [Logistics Support Area]," quipped Master Sgt. Steven Murphy, the Task Force 9th Engineer motor sergeant. "That would be bad."

Spc. Steven Lewis of the task force's Bravo Company concentrated with a smile as he directed his team leader, Spc. Michael Lamb, across the dusty sands. "This is too much fun!"

Throughout the day engineers learned to operate the Panther as they would during actual operations. Many of the armor Soldiers on site were surprised to see an Abrams without a turret and expected the vehicle to move much faster without it. "Three to five miles per hour and long straight lines are the norm," explained

Mitchell. "It's not as exciting as driving 30 miles per hour, (but you) train as you fight."

And fighting was exactly what the Panthers were called upon to do during Operation Outlaw Destroyer, a mission to prevent enemy forces from extracting harmful ordnance from an Ammunition Storage Point near Tikrit. Intelligence suggested that ordnance from improvised explosive devices was being stolen from the ASP.



PHOTO COURTESY 1ST INFANTRY DIVISION

An M1A1 Panther belonging to the 9th Engineer Battalion of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division drives through an Ammunition Supply Point near Tikrit, Iraq. The Panther, which can be operated by remote control, uses 16-ton rollers to clear a safe path for follow-on forces.

To keep insurgents out, the engineers of the task force's Bravo Company built a seven-meter-high earth berm, integrated with a triple-standard concertina wire fence that encloses the ASP. But the ASP had to be properly cleared of dangerous unexploded ordnance first. The Panther, with its 16-ton rollers and electromagnetic "dog bone," was called forward to beat the minefields and pave the way for follow-on "dig and demolition" teams.

In preparation for the operation, the task force set up a two-week training program. During the training Soldiers learned proper mounting of the Panther's rollers; "roller overlap" precision driving; how to keep the roller and track aligned when turning, and how to efficiently check the three-meter "un-proofed area" between the system's two rollers. With two one-meter-wide rollers it takes a Panther four turns to completely proof the dead space in between the rollers.

“Overlapping each roller with previously covered paths can be extremely difficult while buttoned up inside the Panther,” explained one operator. With the assistance of a marking team, he and his tank commander spent countless hours driving, all the time ensuring that rollers lined up with previous proofed area.

In clearing the ASP, the Panther’s first task was to open lanes for security forces to maneuver in and to set up a 360-degree perimeter around the ASP. Over the following 10 days, the Panther drove more than 250 kilometers and cleared 400,000 square meters for the dig teams. By the time mission was complete, the operators said they had full confidence in the machine's abilities.

“We took a few hits from unidentified ordnance” one said, “but the Panther kept trucking along ready for more.”

