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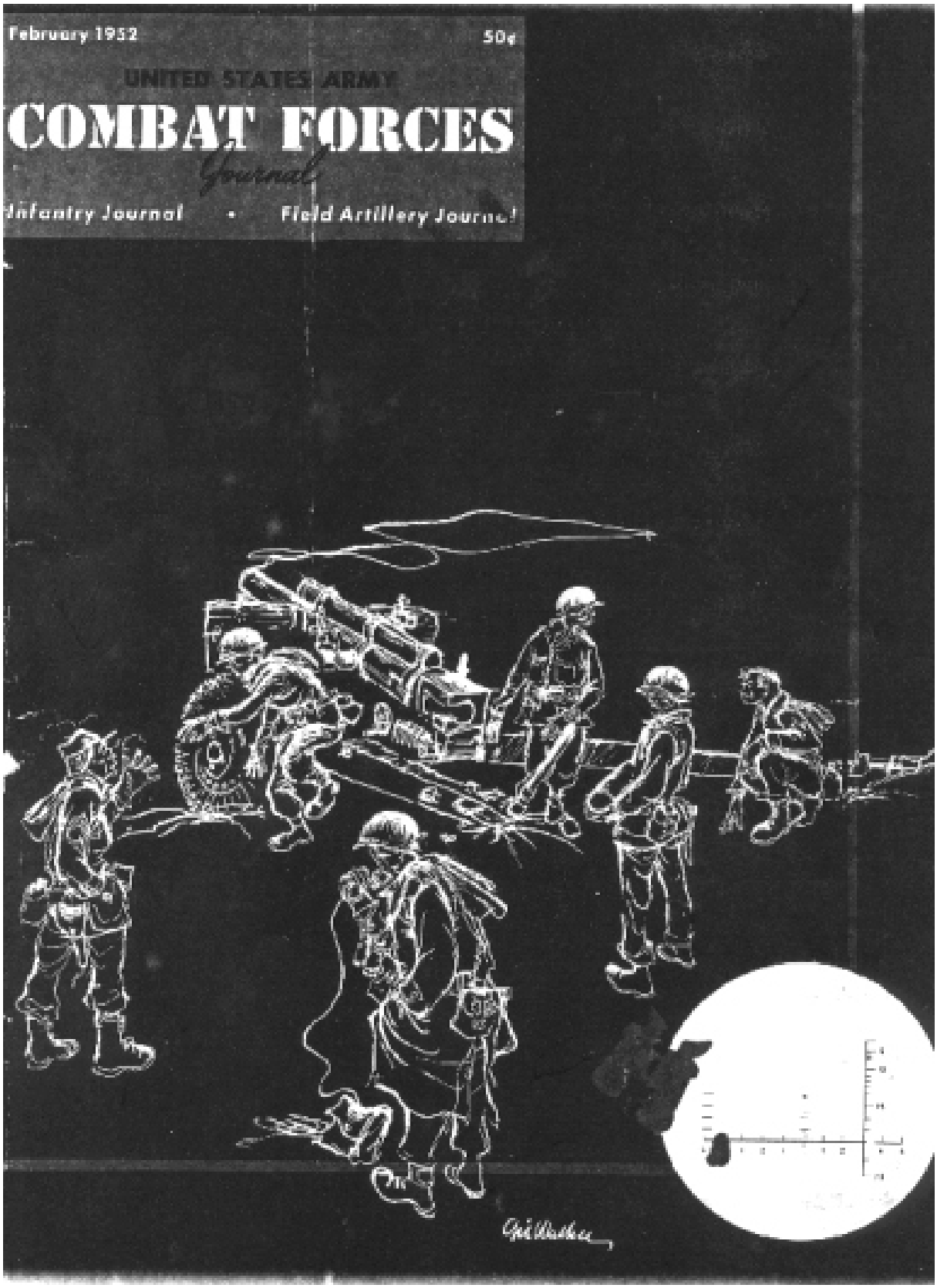

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"MAKE MINE SP"

The mobility and devastating punch of the Self Propelled 155mm Howitzer, M41, paid off in Korea

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The long standing argument among artillerymen about the relative merits of self-propelled artillery is disappearing. Those who say SP artillery is a special type are slowly giving up their resistance. Mostly they are "towed" artilleryman with little or no experience with the self-propelled weapons.

Certainly the proof ought to be in Korea. But many will say that Korea is not a true pattern of war. Possibly it is not the type of war that we like to fight, nor that to which our mechanization is best suited. But pattern or not, it is a real shooting war in which many of our Regular Army have been killed; where positions are overrun, and where much loss of face is suffered. We invariably visualize war in the continental style of Europe. But it may be that destiny holds for us many smaller conflicts - like Korea - before the full fury of another all-out war engulfs us.

In World War I and II our allies fought these smaller conflicts while the United States mobilized, equipped, and trained. In future wars we are certain to have to meet the first shock with troops and equipment on hand. In such wars towed artillery has proved itself frightfully inadequate.

After World War II, with its diversified operations encompassing the desert, the jungle, and mountains, one wonders why the experience tables do not produce the rational answer. Possibly because, Korea illustrates, the three basic considerations of terrain, enemy and force available are always blended; and no blend can be counted on always to contain the same proportion of these ingredients.

From the very outset of the Korean Campaign, we heard it said that Korea was not the place for self-propelled artillery. Naturally when the 92nd Armored Field Artillery (155 howitzer self-propelled) was alerted, detached from the 2nd Armored Division and dispatched to Korea, as a separate battalion, we knew that "Korea would either make or break us". Aboard the Japan bound transport we frequently encountered comments reflecting skepticism of the merits of self-propelled artillery in rice-paddied Korea. In fact I remember one battalion commander who was delighted that he had been able to trade his SPs for towed combinations. Similarly in Japan, we were frequently asked if we did not think it best to turn in our M-41's for the M5-M1 combinations. An atmosphere of doubt as to the merits of self-propelled artillery was visible among most artillerymen. But we were not dismayed- skepticism bolstered our convictions, whether through ignorance or plain stubbornness - we stuck to our guns. Today, however, we know that it was faith in our equipment, training, and respect for the capabilities and limitations of our SP artillery. Those officers who had favored towed artillery and saw it helplessly overrun, are now unanimous in saying that self-propelled artillery would not have been overrun and enemy tanks and infantry would have been defeated.

In Korea our modern Army found itself inevitably road bound; hugging valleys and defiles. Our enemy, essentially a foot soldier, stuck to the high ground and mountaintops. His infiltration tactics into our rear areas cost a heavy toll in equipment and supplies. During the first year of the Korean War the enemy was almost devoid of artillery and he sought to neutralize and harass this dreaded supporting weapon of the United Nations' forces. Unmercifully, he stalked artillery positions, overran and ambushed them. He inflicted severe losses in personnel and staggering losses in towed weapons, and at a time when artillery was scarce and indeed precious.

Blessed by air superiority and an absence of effective counterbattery fire, the ideal battalion perimeter becomes a tightly knitted and mutually supporting area some six hundred by six hundred yards. Under those circumstances, visualize, if you can, the self-propelled battalion in a position where its eighteen guns could maneuver and fight as tanks in final defense of the perimeter. With its thirty-five armored personnel carriers, fifty-eight caliber .50 and thirty-eight caliber .30 machine guns, forty-three 3.5 rockets and hundreds of submachine guns and carbines, the SP artillery battalion perimeter becomes an impenetrable ring of steel protecting our cannoneers against enemy small arms, grenades, mortar, artillery and bomb fragments.

The offensive is the keynote of all our training. Since our concept of the defensive is that of a purely temporary exchange of space for time, we must evaluate all our materiel in the light of its offensive power. In an uncovered movement to contact, as in an advance guard action or in the pressing of a break through in exploitation or pursuit, where most fire requests are "will adjust" missions on instant targets, self-propelled artillery is "tailor made" to the occasion. It is compact self-contained "rolling stock" of unlimited potential. One cannot fully appreciate self-propelled artillery until he sees it on the road---one fire unit behind the other-rumbling along-exemplifying American ingenuity. One must hear the clanking of the tracks and the engines throbbing inside, and one must see the crew, red-eyed and dusty, grimly determined. One must feel the earth tremor as they thunder into position like fingers jutting from the hand-adeptly aligning on the base piece. It is a picture of power and might.

The spade is down; the tube electrically elevated and the gunner is on the sight! With a snap of his fingers, number five cuts the fuze and the gunner shouts "Ready." You hear the rumble and the crashing of the volley through the sky and get the smell of smoke and powder. Now you realize the might, the speed and the simplicity of self-propelled artillery.

As the pitch of battle thickens you ponder through memories of days with the towed. You recall the slow procedures of backing the piece into the precise spot and the laborious and back breaking process of uncoupling and unloading. You recall the details of unloading the projectiles, the powder bags, fuzes, section equipment. Painfully you remember the massive tails and their splitting and spreading. Like a chain of nightmares you clearly remember the digging-in and the tail-logging; the shifting and that irksome inquiry, "What is the delay?" As you ponder you recall the grunting and straining to shift to the flank to meet a tank attack. But now you see an M41 moving down the road and getting an aimed round out in 20 seconds -a target hit on that tank 800 yards away! No tricks! No round in the chamber. This is mechanization, the "modern trend" in artillery.

Of the old artillery dictum, roll-shoot-communicate and how it pertains to self-propelled artillery-enough has been said of the first two. As to communications, the self-propelled battalion is blessed by quantity, variety, and flexibility. On the premise that "nothing ventured-nothing gained," I shall suffer myself to the raised eyebrow and pointed finger of communications instructors by stating that radio is the primary means of communications and was so proven in combat of World War II. Particularly in the attack, an SP artillery battalion cannot get bogged down by "clove-hitching" itself to the ground. It is patterned for rapid action, and prompt continuous support - a unit that can sustain itself under moderate small arms and automatic weapons fire. Wire is used freely to supplement the communications system of the battalion - but radio is the punch that contributes most to its characteristic flexibility by literally placing every element of the command at the commander's finger tips!

While proud of our present self-propelled weapons, we recognize them as mere blacksmith compromisers. The latest thinking of American ingenuity will be reflected in the new self-propelled artillery that is coming.

In the armored division our basic training principle was that armored artillery must first be able to do that which is required of infantry division artillery. Rich in mechanics and drivers who knew the capabilities and limitations of the carriage, we have invariably enjoyed one hundred percent fire power. As to the old argument about losing a weapon when a motor fails--many weapons are lost in Korea because the prime mover never gets to the weapon, or while helplessly towing the gun on the road.

The adoption of the M5 tractor as a standard prime mover for the medium artillery battalion is but a halfhearted admission of the superiority of the track over the wheel. So why not go all the way? The M5 tractor weighs 15 tons and exerts a ground pressure of 11.1 pounds per square inch, while its towed load, the M1, weighs 7 1/2 tons. The M41 combat loaded weighs 23 tons and exerts a ground pressure of 10.2 pounds per square inch. As to cost, the M5 and its towed weapon cost more than the self-propelled. While wheeled vehicles have better strategic mobility; self-propelled artillery has superior tactical mobility - the pay-off in battle.

The proof of the superiority of self-propelled artillery comes from those officers who have served with both. They developed this "self-propelled' state of mind. They have answers for those who are stubbornly resisting this trend by anchoring their arguments on the self-propelled weapons' inability to support with high-angle fire; that maintenance is too complicated or that you cannot haul infantry on self-propelled artillery. Most of the present self-propelled weapons can and do fire high-angle fire and the new SPs will do it with greater ease. The artillery's vehicles (ammunition, kitchen, supply) which are used to haul infantry are present in self-propelled battalions in the same numbers as in towed battalions. As to maintenance, none is too complicated.

All of these desirable attributes favor self-propelled artillery in Korea, as they did in Europe. If used more extensively in Korea, the enemy would have soon learned that artillery can defend itself against arms and automatic weapons fire while accomplishing its primary mission.