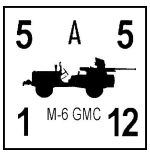
New American Vehicles for North Africa



When the US went to war in WWII, US tank destroyer battalions were organized as two companies of 3" tank destroyers and one company of light tank destroyers, even though purpose built vehicles did not exist for either of these two weapon types. After evaluating dozens of proposals for a light tank destroyer, a design was finally accepted consisting of a 37mm AT gun mounted on a Fargo 1 1/2 ton light truck chassis. This was placed into production and designated M-6 Gun Motor Carriage. This vehicle went to war as part of the 701st, 801st 805th, and 843rd Tank Destroyer Battalions when the Americans landed in North Africa. The M-6 did not have a very useful service career as the gun was too small to be very effective as a tank killer by then and the total lack of armor made this vehicle too vulnerable to small arms fire and artillery. By the end of the Tunisia campaign, the M-6 had been pulled from front line service and replaced by M-3 tank destroyers or M-10's. Many of the guns ended up mounted on halftracks to give the armored infantry some extra firepower. Some M-6's soldiered on to the end of the war in the Pacific Theater where their firepower was still effective against Japanese tanks.

In 1942, US Armored Divisions were organized with light and medium tank battalions. The M-3 Light Tank (called Stuart by the British) was designed to fill the light tank need. The M-3 was mechanically sound and very reliable in the field but too light to compete effectively against the Panzer IV's and Tigers it sometimes found itself facing. The tank still had a useful life scouting and probing flanks and an improved version (M-5) served the US armored forces and recon units until the end of the war.

The M-3 Medium Tank was an interim design rushed into production with the goal of getting a 75mm gun armed tank into the field as soon as possible. To do this, a 75mm gun was mounted in the hull while a 37mm gun was placed in a turret on top. This tank was quite effective in British service (in Lee and Grant versions) against Rommel's severely depleted tank forces and equipped the initial US medium tank battalions which landed in North Africa. When the Sherman was finally available to the Americans in early 1943 (the first batch had gone to the British in late 1942), the M-3 was pulled from front line service and replaced. Many of the hulls were converted to other purposes such as the M-7 Priest and M-12 self-propelled artillery and also a large number of tank-recovery vehicles were produced from these cast-offs.

Since 1941, the US had been experimenting with a number of designs for placing an anti-aircraft gun mounting on a halftrack chassis. The M-13 Multiple Gun Motor Carriage was the first model to actually enter production and consisted of a Maxson power-operated turret with two .50 cal machine guns mounted on an M-3 halftrack. 535 were produced and the vehicle was ready for service when the North Africa landings occurred. Within a year an improved quad machine gun vehicle (the M-16) was being produced and the M-13 was phased out of service.

New British Vehicles for North Africa

When the understrength British 2nd Armored Division was moved to the front in April of 1941, it had a severe shortage of tanks and a number of captured Italian M-13/40 tanks were pressed into service. These were all destroyed or captured when the 2nd Armored was overrun in Rommel's first North African operation.

The Valentine was the result of a proposal to produce an infantry tank based on the proven chassis of the A-10 cruiser. A more heavily armored vehicle was designed, which possessed most of the same characteristics as the Matilda tank but at much less cost and many fewer man-hours to produce. Though slow, the Valentine proved to be a very reliable machine in the field and over 8000 of all marks were produced during the war.

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As the Allied forces under Montgomery prepared to attack the Axis defenses at El Alamein, it was clear that clearing paths through the dense minefields would need to be a priority in any assault. As a field expedient, engineers attached rotating flails onto the front of obsolete Matilda tanks. The modification required the guns to be removed. A British officer dubbed this vehicle "Scorpion" due to its appearance. 25 of these vehicles were ready for use in the battle and continued to be used until replaced by the superior Sherman Flail tank. Note: a secret Matilda flail project called the Baron was also being developed in England at the same time but it was not completed in time to be deployed in the field and the few Barons produced were used only for training. The Baron did retain the main gun.

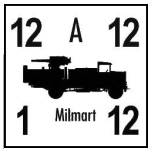
Impressed by the effectiveness of German self-propelled artillery, the British developed their own version consisting of a 25pdr mounted in an armored box on a Valentine tank chassis. The vehicle had many limitations and, just as it was being deployed, it was replaced by the American produced M-7 Priest. This vehicle mounted a 105mm howitzer on either a M-3 or M-4 medium tank chassis. The Priest served as the primary British self-propelled howitzer until just after D-Day, when it was replaced by the Canadian built Sexton.

New Axis Vehicles for North Africa

The Germans were looking for a way to have quicker artillery support for their lightening armored assaults. The solution was to mount artillery on its own self-propelled platform so that no time was wasted deploying. Also, an armored cover would protect the crew against artillery and small arms, allowing the artillery to deploy closer to danger. One of the first attempts at this was to mount a 150mm howitzer on a French Lorraine armored tractor chassis. Several dozen of these were produced and 23 of them were sent to North Africa where they served in Rommel's panzer divisions.

The GW-I, consisting of a heavy infantry gun mounted on a Pz I chassis had been a useful support weapon for the Germans in the assault on France. They decided to improve on the concept by building a vehicle with a much lower profile, more armor, and better speed. To accomplish this, a 150mm infantry gun was mounted low into a Pz II chassis. The vehicle showed much promise but only 12 were produced. All of them were sent to North Africa where they served in the 707th and 708th Self-Propelled Infantry Gun companies which served as assault guns attached to the Panzer divisions. Each counter represents two such vehicles.

In late 1941, as self-propelled tank destroyer battalions were being added to the DAK, there was an immediate need for more than had been provided so far. An ad-hoc solution that helped fill the gap until more could be provided was achieved by mounting a captured Russian 76.2mm gun in a thinly armored box on top of an unarmored 5 ton halftrack tractor. The end result was the 76.2mm FK 36(r) auf Panzerjager Selbsfahrlafette Zugkraftwagen 5t, commonly called the "Diana". Only 9 of these were ever produced and they arrived in North Africa in January and February of 1942. They equipped part of the 605th Pzjgr Battalion (along with PzJgr I's) until the fall of 1942, when the few surviving vehicles were replaced with Marder III's.



In an attempt to improve their mobile firepower in North Africa, the Italians experimented with mounting naval guns on large truck beds. These were operated by Milizia Marittima Artiglieria (MILMART) naval personnel. One such vehicle mounted a 102/35 mm naval gun onto a truck. Several batteries of this type were attached to Ariete for this battle and proved to be effective tank killers.