



Written by [Mary McHugh](#) on November 22, 2010

First Time: U.S. Tanks in Afghanistan

M1A1 Abrams tanks will be put to use in Afghanistan's Helmand province by early spring. It is the first time in the nine-year Afghan war that the United States has made use of what CNN describes as "the fastest and most deadly ground combat weapons system available."

Tanks have already been employed by Canadian and other coalition forces working in Afghanistan; the United States is currently making successful use of the heavily-armored Abrams vehicles in Iraq's Anbar province.



According to the *Washington Post*,

The deployment of a company of M1 Abrams tanks, which will be fielded by the Marines in the country's southwest, will allow ground forces to target insurgents from a greater distance — and with more of a lethal punch — than is possible from any other U.S. military vehicle. The 68-ton tanks are propelled by a jet engine and equipped with a 120mm main gun that can destroy a house more than a mile away.

Marine spokesperson Maj. Gabrielle Chapin explained:

They bring superior optics, maneuverability and precision firepower that will enable us to isolate insurgent forces from key population centers and provide the ability to project power into insurgent safe havens.

The *Washington Post* continued:

A U.S. officer familiar with the decision said the tanks will be used initially in parts of northern Helmand province, where the Marines have been engaged in intense combat against resilient Taliban cells that typically are armed with assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and homemade bombs. The initial deployment calls for about 16 tanks, but the overall number and area of operations could expand depending on needs, the officer said.

"The tanks bring awe, shock and firepower," the officer said. "It's pretty significant."

Although the officer acknowledged that the use of tanks this many years into the war could be seen as a sign of desperation by some Afghans and Americans, he said they will provide the Marines with an important new tool in missions to flush out pockets of insurgent fighters. A tank round is far more accurate than firing artillery, and it can be launched much faster than having to wait for a fighter jet or a helicopter to shoot a missile or drop a satellite-guided bomb.

"Tanks give you immediate, protected firepower and mobility to address a threat that's beyond the range of machine guns that are mounted on the mine-resistant trucks that most U.S. troops use in Afghanistan," said David Johnson, a senior researcher at the Rand Corp. who co-wrote a recent paper on the use of tanks in counterinsurgency operations.



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[Fox News](#) reported the M1 Abrams will give American ground forces “the power to target insurgents with a longer range and more lethal punch than from any other U.S. military vehicle.”

The [Huffington Post](#) questioned why officials have felt the need for ratcheting up such firepower after all these years, and further observed:

Taliban often engage the soldiers while deeply ensconced in mud huts, often using the civilian population as a shield. Even the most intense of fire exchanges cause less civilian casualties than a single blow of a tank that demolishes an entire hutment.

It is true that Americans are desperate to flush out the Taliban and their patience is running thin. It is also a fact that NATO casualties have quadrupled this year. It is, however, not a good idea to wipe out an entire village and further escalate the public backlash.

Marjah, Laskhar Gah and other areas of southern Afghanistan have an entirely different topography from the eastern provinces. They don't share an immediate border with Pakistan or Iran where the Taliban could find an easy refuge. They are devoid of any tough mountain ranges and passes where it is extremely difficult to flush out the troublemakers. Southern Afghanistan is mostly a big desert with nary a tree nor a bush growing on its barren soil. Most of the action is in the villages and the surrounding fields and barns.

This begs for a different approach, which should essentially involve the locals. There have been some efforts to engage the locals but they have mostly fallen through the cracks. Locals are too afraid to cooperate as the Taliban live amongst them. They cannot help NATO troops unless the latter increases its presence in the area and offers them a complete protection. One has yet to see any efforts in this direction as the villagers are left on their own devices — and at the mercy of the Taliban — after the raids.

Some NATO commanders have told the *Washington Post* that the added use of tanks comes amid the fiercest coalition operation against the Taliban since fighting began in 2001, and that in October alone U.S. and NATO aircraft unleashed in excess of 1,000 bombs and missiles on insurgents. This is more than any other single month since the war began.

Said one senior official, “We’ve taken the gloves off, and it has had huge impact.”

The decision now to employ tanks comes at the same time that NATO heads of state are meeting in Lisbon, with the war in Afghanistan expected to be among the top subjects of discussion. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been particularly angered by Special Operations night raids, and feels support for the U.S.-led war effort has diminished as a result.

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