

Opinion – US Artillery: Crusader is Out, What is Next?

Written by Robert Palmer

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ROBERT PALMER, SEP 23 2021

The XM2001 Crusader was a dead-end from the start, it just took a few years for the US army to face the facts. Obscenely pricey, so bulky it was unmovable, chock-full with technology ill-adapted to modern-day battlefields, the Crusader fell victim to what often happens in US Army procurement: billions of dollars poured into a stillborn project. So, has America learned its lesson?

America's military hegemony was conceived during World War Two, and consecrated during the Cold War. The frantic stockpiling of weapons at this time made it, de facto, the most lethal country in the world – neck and neck with the Soviet Union. Consequently, the only conventional wars which the US has known, in its relatively short history, are struggles against large forces, be they German, Japanese, or Russian. In this type of strategic and tactical setting, immense howitzers, such as the Crusader, would have been suitable, despite its lack of mobility and accuracy: when facing large bulky forces, blunt firepower will often do.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said in 2002, after having made his decision to cancel the program, “we need joint integrated approaches to battlefield challenges. We need weapon systems capable of producing the precise and timely destruction of enemy targets.” He said the effectiveness of the Crusader, which had no prototype, is a topic that has been under study for five or six years. “It’s not something that is a new debate.” So, what was wrong with the Crusader?

In the post-Cold War era, the US has been facing a new type of enemy, and is slowly realizing that the game has indeed changed. Be it in Somalia, Afghanistan or post-war Iraq, US forces have been finding themselves increasingly helpless, despite systematically superior firepower, in tactical situations. Small, nimble, insurgent enemy units have reverted the guerilla strategy which the US used during the war of independence, against US troops. Against this invisible, constantly moving enemy, articulated in ultra-small formations, a howitzer such as the Crusader is nearly useless. War reporter Scott Shuger writes:

Rumsfeld's official justification for the move was that the 40-ton Crusader wouldn't be able to keep up with the tanks and fighting vehicles it was designed to protect. While it might have been a terrific weapon for the set-piece battles it was designed for—against massed Soviet forces in the flats of Central Europe—the Crusader figured to be of dubious use in short-lead-time maneuver warfare in faraway mountainous places like Afghanistan.

Its size and weight bars it from quick air deployment, its tracked configuration means that insurgents will find a safe haven in mountains, where tank-type vehicles cannot go, and its slow speed means that it would systematically be one step behind its targets. Since the turn of the century, warfare has changed. The goal is now to reach a balance between mobility and firepower, so as to adapt the US forces to their new enemy – and the US knows it.

Now that it has become clear in which strategic direction US Army procurement needs to drift, it has started looking at alternative equipment, within the armed forces of its neighbors. Israel, France and China all have opted from artillery systems mounted onto truck chassis, which provide increased tactical mobility and deployability.

The Israeli Atmos howitzer is used by Tzahal, with good results. It is not to be excluded that the US Army would purchase some Atmos guns, if only given the strong diplomatic relations between the US and Israel. However, the

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equipment is not all that is at stake in this matter. Behind a vehicle lies a doctrine, and the US needs to find inspiration from nations with expeditionary armies – which rules out both China and Israel. The Atmos is a good gun, but it has only been used in homeland defense, so there is no way of knowing how well it fares in overseas deployments.

Although it is highly unlikely the US will ever purchase its weapons from China, the US will probably observe the results of the PLC 181 with a keen eye, as it does seem to fit the American bill, on paper at least. Also mounted on a truck chassis, it is easily transportable by air, and may eventually be used in the Himalayas, in the simmering confrontation with India.

But the model which seems the most suitable source of inspiration for the US may be the French Caesar howitzer, which comes both in 6×6 and 8×8 configurations. The vehicle has been deployed in operations in Mali and Afghanistan, with excellent results. Because the Caesar has the proper configuration for modern-day warfare, is battle-proven, and can fire all of the advanced ammunition which the Americans use, the US army has included it in its latest market review. Janes reporter Victor Barreira writes:

Nexter's CAESAR 6×6 will participate in an upcoming US Army shoot off against other 155 mm self-propelled howitzers [...] The air-transportable CAESAR 6×6 has a combat weight of 17,700 kg, length of 10 m, a width of 2.55 m, can travel up to 50 km/h off-road speed, and is manned by five soldiers.

To American dismay, war is not simply about having the biggest gun, it's about having the right gun. The Crusader was larger in every way, on the modern armament market, but would have been utterly useless in today's theaters of operations. Donald Rumsfeld took flak for having dropped the curtain on the program, after 11 billion dollars had been spent. But, had he not, the US would have lost far more, and all of the strategic edge which artillery provides. It is becoming increasingly likely that the US army will resort to howitzers more similar to the French artillery, in the very near future.

About the author:

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