

# NATO caught napping

**A**s East and West near a deal to scrap tactical nuclear weapons, attention is now focusing on conventional arms. And, by curious coincidence, NATO is now facing one of its gravest challenges since World War II, an event barely noticed by either the media or the public.

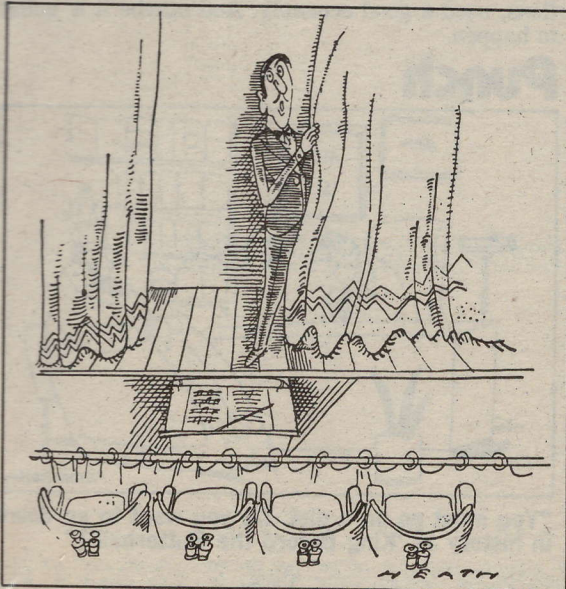
In simplest terms, 95% of NATO's vast array of anti-tank weapons has been rendered ineffective by recent Soviet technology. The significance of this development cannot be overstated.

Soviet military strategy is based on swift-moving tank and mechanized formations that are designed to fight a short, violent war against NATO. With little advance warning, Soviet mechanized formations would attack NATO's long, thin, brittle front, punch holes in it, and drive into NATO's rear. In 10 to 12 days of non-stop fighting and movement, Soviet armor would reach the Rhine and Channel ports before NATO could mobilize its large reserves.

This Soviet blitzkrieg strategy is based on a 3-1 edge over NATO in tanks, armored vehicles and guns. The NATO allies have failed to match the Soviet armored might because tanks are extremely expensive. The U.S. M-1 or German Leopard II now cost nearly \$3 million each. NATO, always short of defence funds because its politicians prefer to fund vote-getting social programs, sought a cheap way to counteract Soviet armored might. The solution was to buy large numbers of low-cost anti-tank missiles whose shaped-charge warheads could knock out even the most heavily armored Soviet main battle tanks.

So NATO built few tanks and opted, instead, for systems like the U.S. TOW and Dragon or the European HOT and MILAN. They were based on the German-invented shaped-charge warhead. Instead of using kinetic energy to punch a hole through armor, a shaped warhead uses chemical energy to focus a thin jet of molten plasma

## Punch



"Is there anyone in the house?"

## ERIC MARGOLIS



against a tank's armor. The jet burns a pencil-sized hole through the armor and erupts inside the tank, subjecting the crew and stored ammo to overpressure, fire, flying debris and toxic gas.

During the seminal 1973 Arab-Israeli War, hundreds of Israeli tanks were knocked out by Egyptian infantry armed with Soviet anti-tank missiles. Even a hand-held RPG anti-tank rocket, costing around \$1,400, could knock out a \$2.5 million tank. NATO absorbed this lesson and accelerated deployment of shaped-charge missiles. Some writers went so far as to claim that the day of the tank was over.

Not so. Another German produced a solution to the shaped-charge problem, offered it to NATO but found no interest. The invention was then acquired by Israel which quickly fielded it, under the trade name "Blazer," on its tanks and armored personnel carriers. It's called "reactive armor." Brick-shaped boxes containing plastic explosives are simply hung onto a tank's most exposed areas, its frontal quadrant, turret and top.

When these boxes are struck by the jet of a shaped charge, their explosive detonates outward, deforming and deflecting the molten jet. Rather like hitting a bullet with a grenade. This system proved remarkably effective during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, saving many tanks and the lives of their crews.

The Soviets have now adopted the reactive system. Over the last 18 months 6,000 T-64B and T-80 tanks deployed with crack units in East Germany have been fitted with the new armor. Some 11,000 T-72s are next in line and even the old T-55/62 series may be retrofitted. What this means is that these refitted tanks are now largely immune to 95% of NATO's anti-tank weapons.

If the Soviets attacked tomorrow, NATO's troops would not be able to stop the Soviet armored juggernaut. This realization has produced something close to restrained panic among NATO planners, as well it should. Frantic efforts are now underway to develop top attack and multiple warhead anti-tank weapons, but these too may be defeated by simple, cheap countermeasures. The advantage has now swung back to the tankers. Infantry, once again, cannot stand up to armored knights.

For Canada, still giddy over the chimera of nuclear subs, the message is clear. The army's TOW and Carl Gustav anti-tank missiles are no longer effective and must be replaced. Our pitiful handful of tanks would not last more than a few minutes on a modern battlefield. The Soviets, using German-Israeli technology, common sense and low budgets, have managed to steal a march on the napping West. Something must now be done — fast.