

Posted on May 29, 2020

# British Anti-tank guns in the Desert

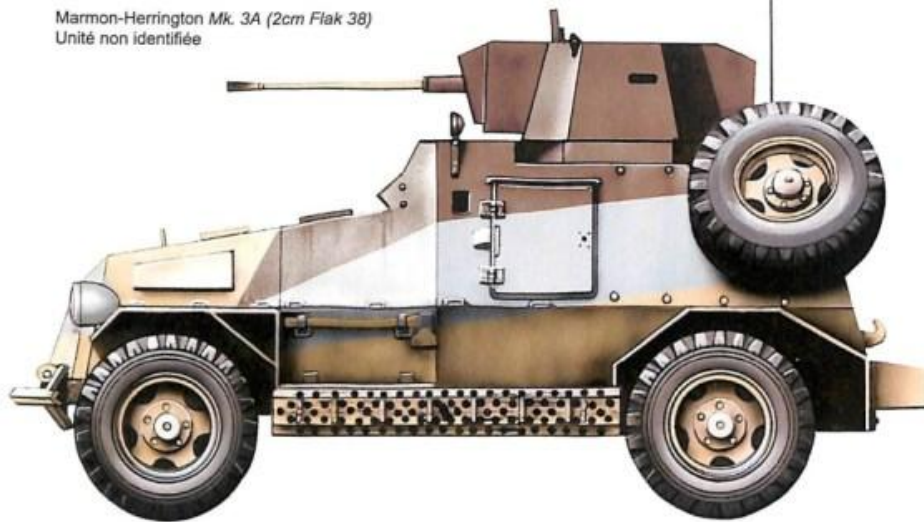
The portee of guns is a pretty basic and, generally, an ad hoc technique. While it was often used in North Africa owing to the need for longer ranged mobility and lack of concealed gun positions, the British did use it in Europe.

The first British portee weapons in WWII occurred in France in 1940. They were augmenting their 2-pdr AT guns with French 25mm guns. They were so flimsy that high-speed cross-country towing was impossible so they were carried by lorries.

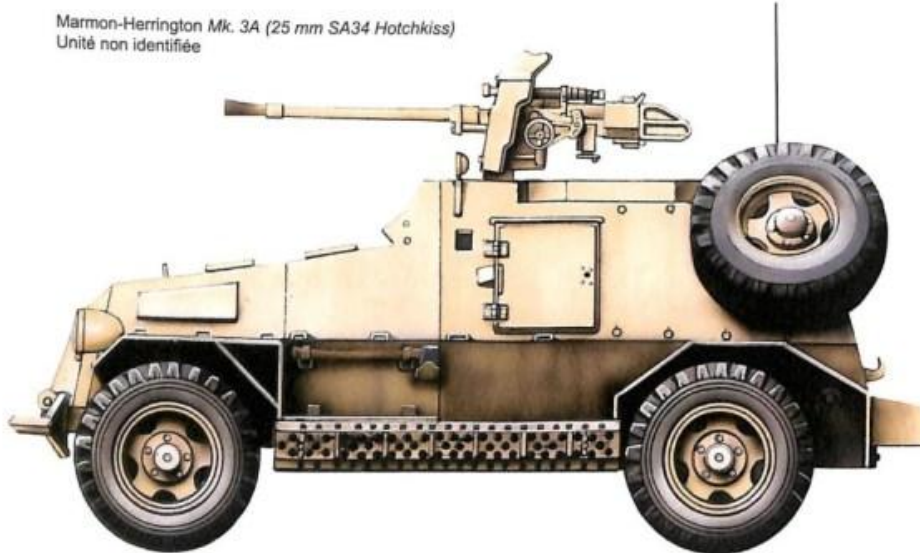
Starting in 1941, the British developed the “en portee” method of mounting an anti-tank gun (initially a 2 pounder) on a truck. This was to prevent the weapon from being damaged by long-distance towing across rough, stony deserts, and it was intended only to be a carrying method, with the gun unloaded for firing. However, crews tended to fire their weapons from their vehicles for the mobility this method provided, with consequent casualties. This undoubtedly inspired their Morris C9/B (officially the “Carrier, SP, 4x4, 40 mm AA”), a Bofors 40 mm AA gun mounted on a chassis derived from the Morris “Quad” Field Artillery Tractor truck. Similar types, based on 3-ton lorries, were produced in Britain, Canada and Australia, and together formed the most numerous self-propelled AA guns in British service.

The 2-pdr antitank gun equipped RA anti-tank regiments and later infantry battalions for much of the Desert War. This 40mm-calibre weapon was mounted on an ingenious three-legged carriage, giving it a low profile and which allowed the travelling wheels to be lifted clear of the ground so that the gun could easily traverse through 360 degrees. An armored shield lined with an ammunition box protected its 5-man detachment and it weighed 1,760 lb. in action. Many were carried portee on the back of lorries during the Desert War. but when used this way often proved vulnerable to both small arms and shrapnel. Firing a solid AP round and with a penetration of 40mm at 1,000m, the 2-pdr was highly effective against lightly armored cars and tanks, but as the Desert War progressed it was quickly outclassed and could only engage with a hope of success from the flank at close range.

Marmon-Herrington Mk. 3A (2cm Flak 38)  
Unité non identifiée

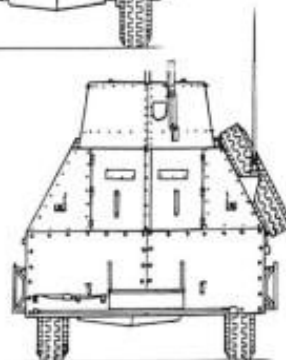
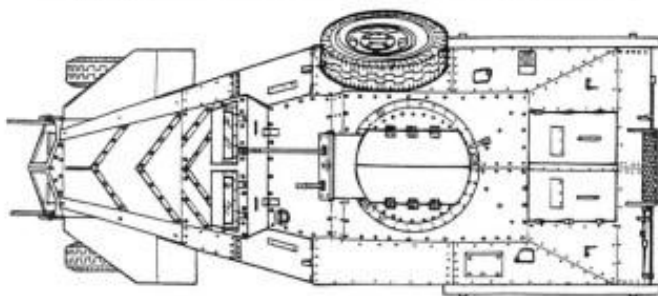
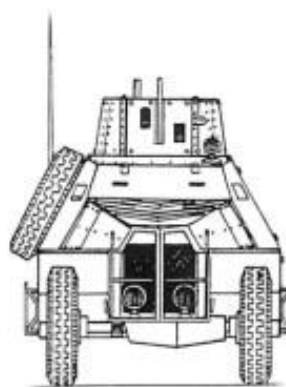
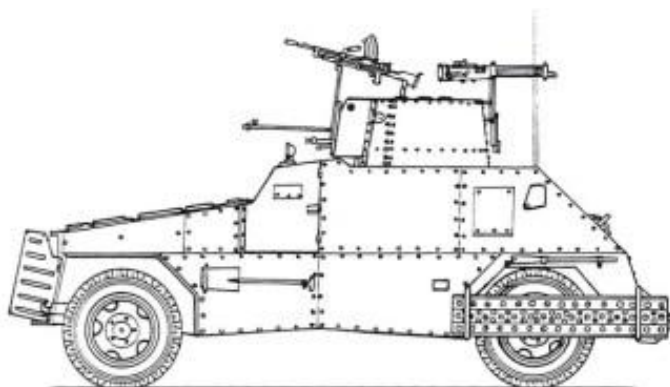


Marmon-Herrington Mk. 3A (25 mm SA34 Hotchkiss)  
Unité non identifiée



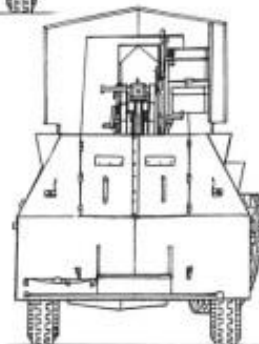
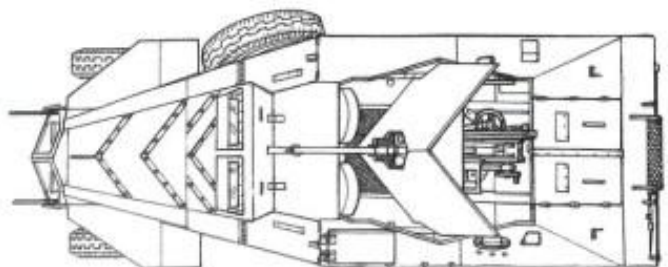
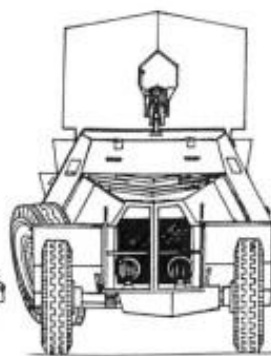
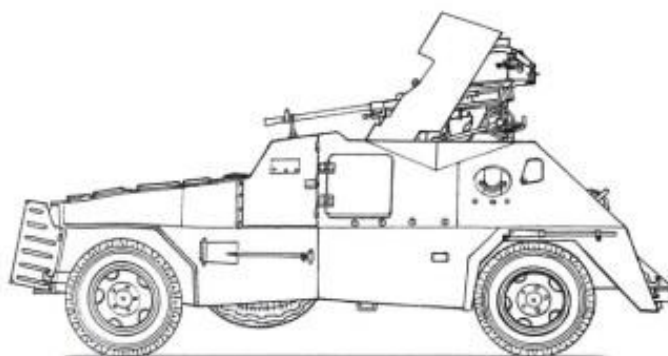
Marmon-Herrington Mk. 2 ME (20 mm Breda)  
1st King's Dragoon Guards  
7th Armoured Division  
Western Desert Force  
Libye, février 1941

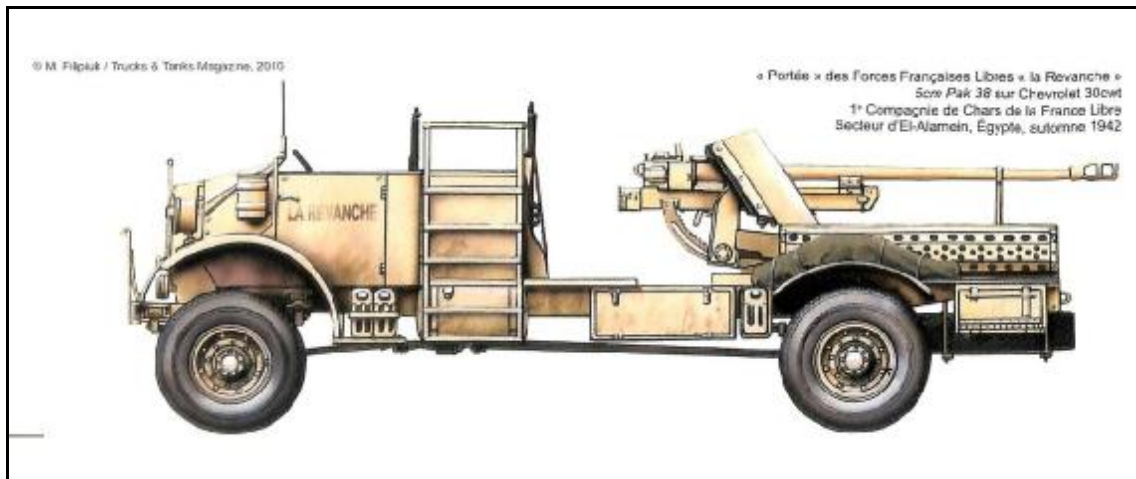




▲ MARMON-HERRINGTON *Mk. 2 ME* (VÉHICULE DE SÉRIE)

▼ MARMON-HERRINGTON *Mk. 2 ME* (20 mm BREDÁ)





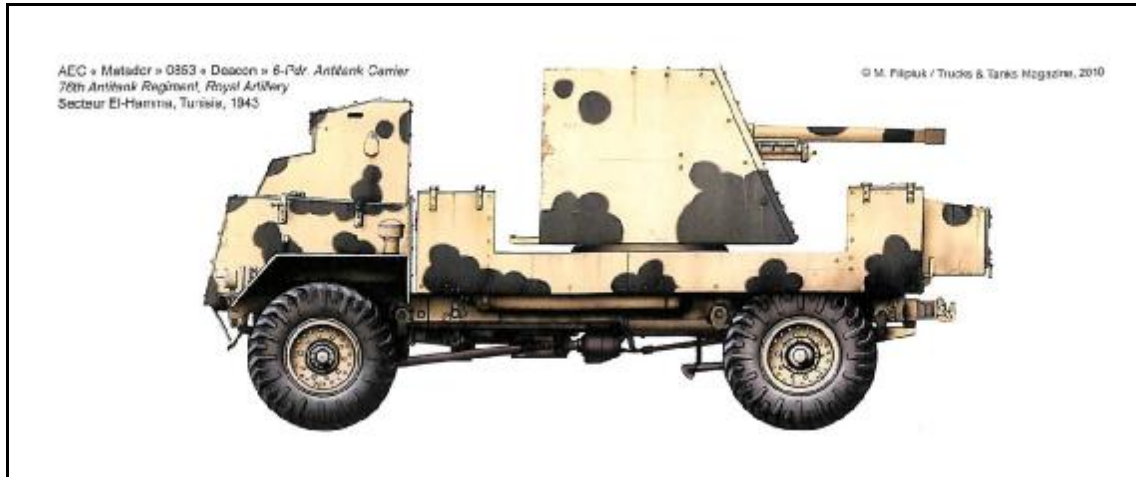
The 2-pounder was given a new lease of life by putting it on a lorry-the Portee mounting. This mounting used a 15cwt truck with the sides taken off the back so that it had a flat bed. Using two long ramps a 2-pounder was hauled up and set down on its platform. The wheels were removed and bolted on the sides of the truck. The gun could be fired from the flat bed or it could be unloaded and emplaced. By reversing the truck up to the emplacement and throwing down the ramps, it could be evacuated quite quickly, although it could not be done with safety by daylight. The idea gave the little 2-pounders some much-needed mobility and the Portee gunners soon evolved a technique in which they lay up behind a low mound with only the top of the shield and the barrel emerging round the side of the cover. This was safe enough until the tank moved to a flank whereupon the unfortunate truck began to catch the shot and the gun had to move. One anti-tank regiment lost almost a complete battery in one day early in 1942. When the first of the 6-pounders arrived, they too were mounted as Portees, though they were getting a little heavy for continuously pulling up and down the ramps.





## 15 CWT truck with Breda 20/65

During WW II Canada produced well over 850.000 military motor vehicles which includes one of the most widely used types: the 4 x 2 type Chevrolet 15 CWT. This vehicle was the backbone of the Australian, British and Canadian Forces but was also supplied to many of the other Allies including the Soviet Union, China and India. The truck was used for transporting troops, ammunition and other war material. The design was based on a British Army design and the vehicle was built by General Motors of Canada as well as in Australia. The engines were also supplied through American manufacturers.

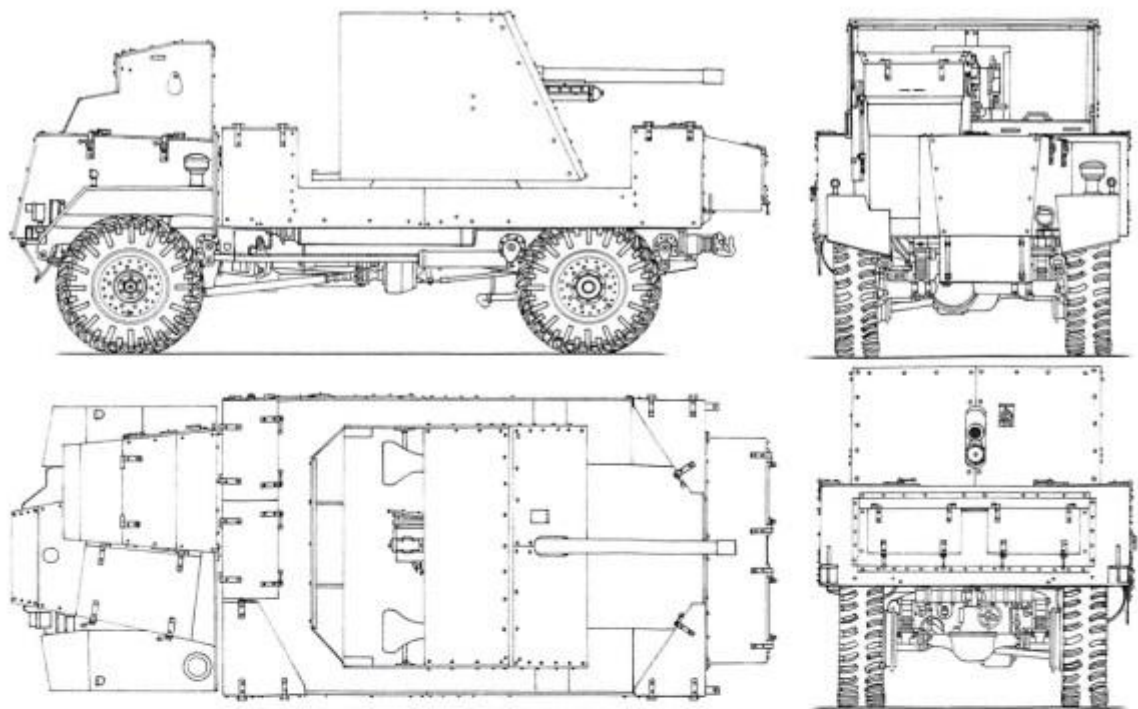


## BEDFORD QL with 6 PDR.AT GUN

In 1939 the British War Office placed an order with VAUXHALL MOTORS Ltd of Luton, a British subsidiary of General Motors to design a 3-ton 4x4 truck chassis which would form the basis for various vehicles. Originally this vehicle was built for the transport of 6-pound-guns type M-1 and therefore it was also called Gun-Portee. The gun was placed on the platform of the truck and thus it could not be identified. Thus the Bedford QL truck was created and from 1941 until 1945 a total of 52,245 chassis were produced. The QL was an excellent vehicle and soon became the most numerous tactical 3-tonner of the British armed forces. These models were used on almost all fronts during the Second World War and later served in Korea and the Middle East. In the British forces it was gradually replaced by the model RL.

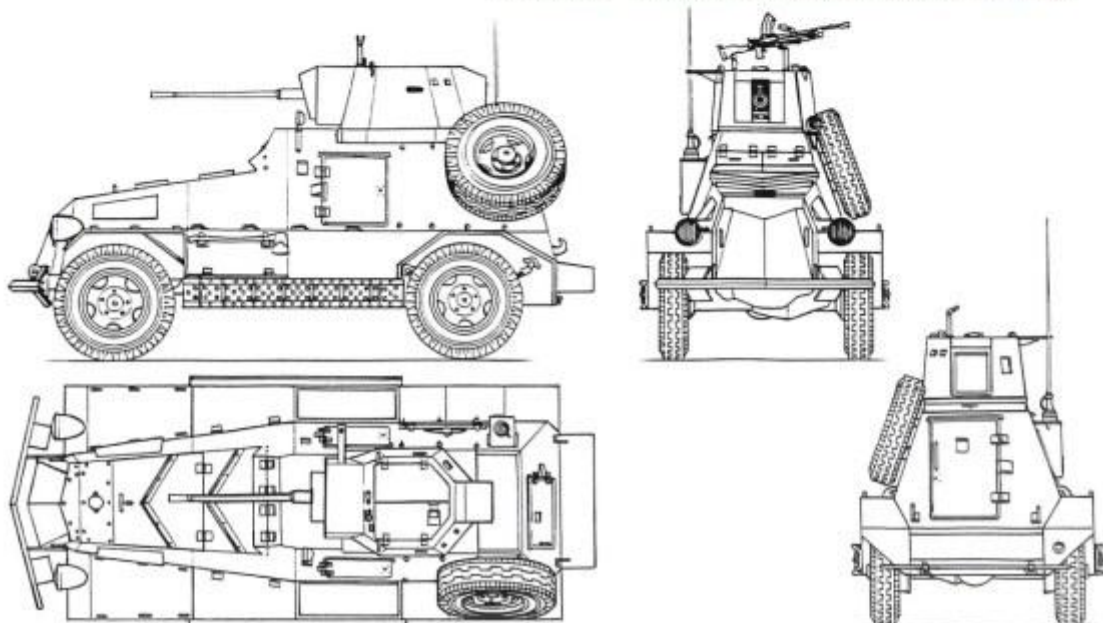
It is important to note that in any battle a significant proportion of the AT fire suffered by British tanks did not come from other tanks at all, as perhaps British tacticians liked to assume, but from towed (ground-mounted) AT guns. The German 5cm gun was particularly potent, and their famous 8.8cm Flak gun even more so, although it was available in far smaller numbers. British tank crews often imagined that they were being hit by tank fire when in fact they were being hit by something much more serious; the literature is crammed with examples of this misconception. This led them to make a false comparison between the supposed power of the Axis tank guns and the perceived weakness of their own – which in turn reinforced the British belief that they did not particularly need to fire HE shells at the enemy. High explosive was not a

good weapon against tanks, but was ideal against AT guns. Since the British doctrinal mindset was pre-occupied with tanks fighting other tanks, it simply did not take account of the need to shell AT guns with HE – in diametrical opposition to the German perception of what was needed.



▲ AEC « MATADOR » 0853 « DEACON » 6-PDR. ANTITANK CARRIER

▼ MARMON-HERRINGTON Mk. 3A (2CM FLAK 38)

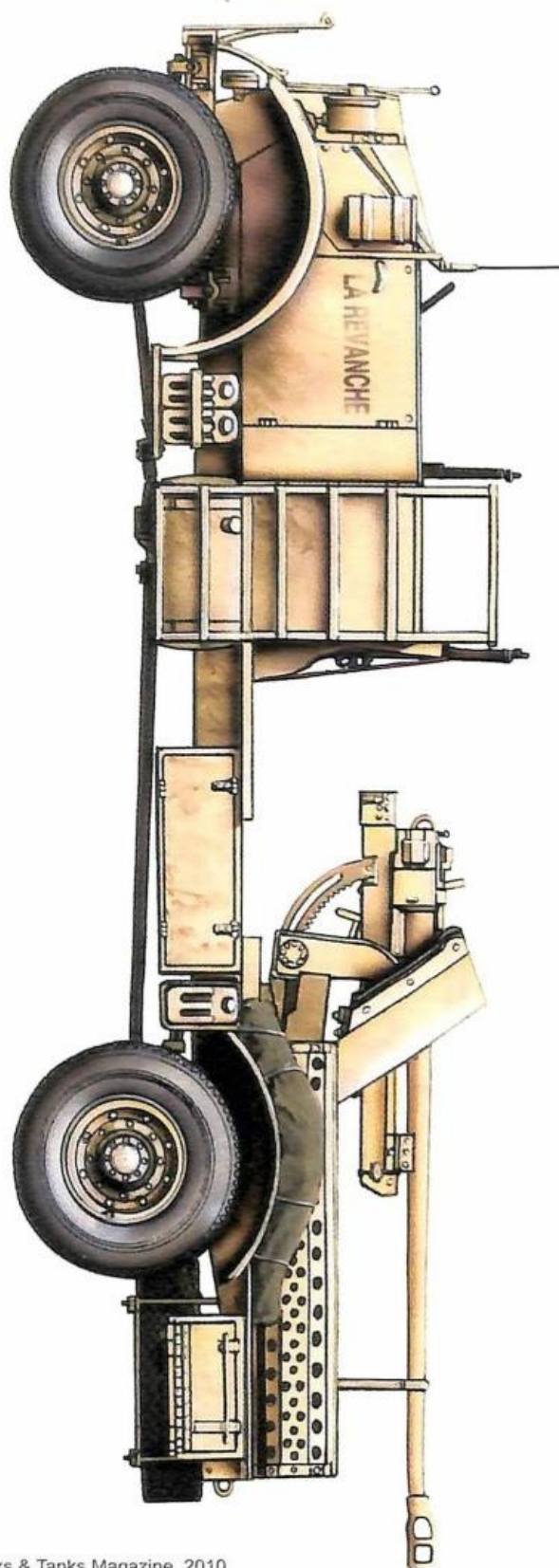


The British believed that they themselves possessed an adequate antitank defence, although it was split into five distinct and different elements. The first was the infantry platoon's 0.55in Boys AT rifle, which could be useful against very light armour, or sometimes against the flank or rear of heavier tanks, but for nothing much else. The next were the 2-pdr guns fitted on tanks, and the ballistically identical 2-pdr towed guns on ground mountings or portee vehicle mounts. While these guns were recognized as being the best in their category, by 1942 that whole category had become practically obsolete. The fourth prop of British AT defences was provided by the Bofors 40mm quick-firing AA gun, which in practice did some good service with AP shells, but was not often available at the key time or place. Finally and most importantly, there was the incomparable 25-pdr gun-howitzer. This was in fact almost precisely an 8.8cm weapon, although its muzzle velocity was considerably lower than that of the 8.8cm Flak. There were many occasions on which 25-pdrs in the AT role did succeed in beating off the Panzers. A major disadvantage, of course, was that as long as they were firing AP ammunition they could not be firing HE; their dual role thus served to reduce the availability of HE to the British in a 'tank battle' still further.

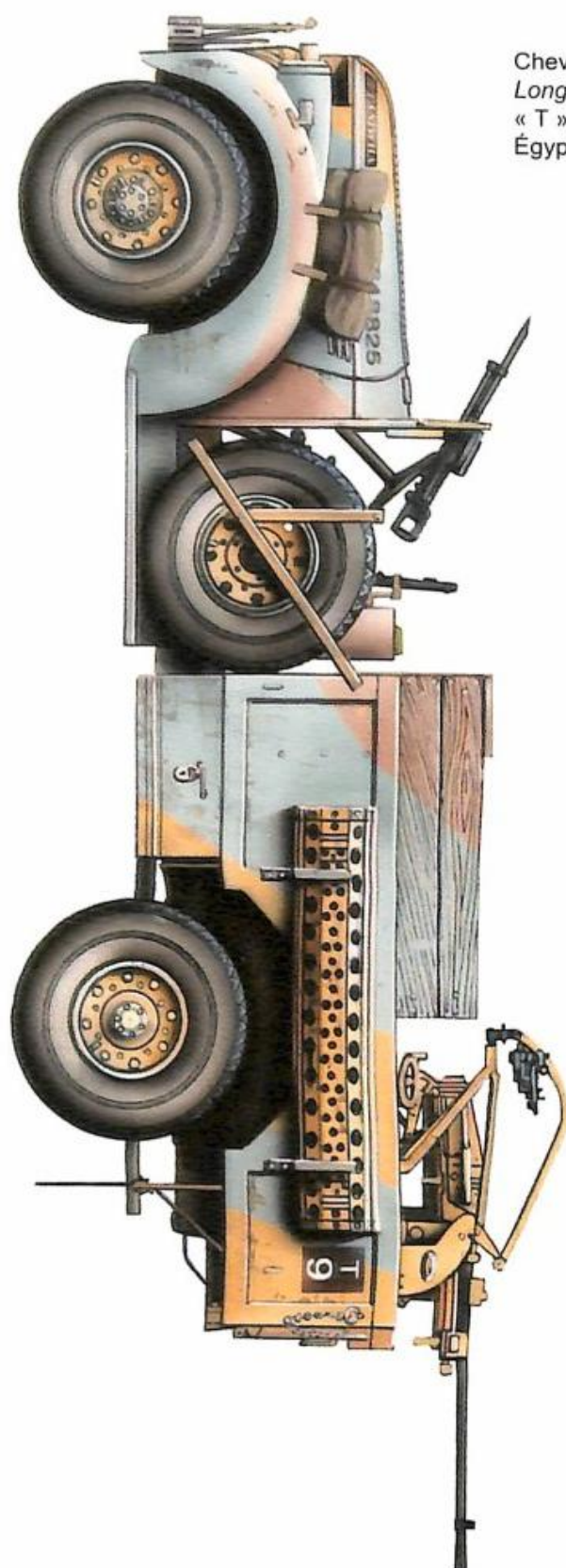
A sixth potential British AT weapon was the 3.7in (92mm) AA gun, which was ballistically better than the German 8.8cm Flak. The question has often been asked why it was not widely used in the same way, to which the answers are many and complicated. There were problems with sights – of which three different types were tried before an effective AT sight was developed – and with the production of AP ammunition. It took about ten minutes to remove the wheels and unfold the static firing platform; and the sheer height of the beast, which did not have a gun shield, made it a more vulnerable target than its German equivalent (although firing both guns kicked up a 100-foot dust cloud). There were also 'political' pressures for it to be kept nearer to the Army, Navy and RAF rear base areas than to the front line where it might encounter Panzers. All of these difficulties had been solved in theory by the summer of 1942 (notably by the energetic efforts of Brig Percy Calvert, commander of the 4th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Bde), but with very few exceptions the 3.7in was still not used against tanks.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was ultimately because British doctrine saw all AT guns as defensive and static weapons, and therefore not really appropriate to take part in a mobile tank battle. If friendly tanks were defeated and forced to fall back upon their AT guns, then all well and good; but pushing the guns forward to accompany an armored thrust somehow went against the grain. The Germans, by contrast, regarded the deployment of AT guns – including even the heaviest – as an integral part of all tank movements, in the advance no less than the retreat.

« Portée » des Forces Françaises Libres « la Revanche »  
5cm Pak 38 sur Chevrolet 30cwt  
1<sup>re</sup> Compagnie de Chars de la France Libre  
Secteur d'El-Alamein, Égypte, automne 1942







Chevrolet 1533X2 (avec Breda 20mm)  
*Long Range Desert Group*  
« T » Patrol  
Égypte, janvier 1941

AEC « Matador » 0853 « Deacon » 6-Pdr. Antitank Carrier  
76th Antitank Regiment, Royal Artillery  
Secteur El-Hamma, Tunisie, 1943

