

US Army Vehicle Markings

The US Army fielded approximately 3 million trucks, tanks, halftracks and other vehicles during WWII. Ideally each vehicle was painted; had national markings applied and was identified by a unique registration or 'hood' number. At times each vehicle was also marked with a simple 'bumper' code system that allowed anyone to identify a vehicle and know its parent unit.

National Insignia

There are six different types of national insignia seen in photographs in WW2. Five of these are variants of the ubiquitous white star. Some units (particularly in Africa) used yellow instead of white for the star and associated markings.

Three Color Star

The first marking used before the war was a white star, with a circular center in red on a circular background of blue. Based on the colors of the US flag it was identical to markings carried on US aircraft until about June of 1942. Occasionally the colors were reversed with a blue center on a red background.



Two Color Star

A descendant of the three color star the two color star appeared in North Africa at the end of 1942. It consisted of a white star on a circular background, usually blue but sometimes of red. Most commonly seen on half-tracks and soft-skinned vehicles, it has been photographed on armored artillery and tanks as well. It is most often seen on Sand colored vehicles.



National Flag

The Stars and Stripes were used predominately on vehicles and uniforms (in the form of armbands) for the landings in North Africa in November 1942. This was mainly for political purposes (this being the first American participation in the European war). Later in the war, US paratroopers wore armbands with the Stars and Stripes during the Normandy and Market-Garden drops.



Star and Stripe

Possibly adapted from the Army Air Corps symbol, this variant of the white star was used on tank turrets during 1942 and into 1943. On most tanks the star was applied to the turret sides, of at least 22" in diameter, with a 4" band running around the turret. It appeared on tanks used to train the US armored formations in England & Ireland during 1942. It also saw service in North Africa, Sicily and to a lesser extent, the SW Pacific.



White Star

A plain white star was seen on US vehicles as early as 1942 in the UK as well as the SW Pacific



US WWII Vehicle Markings

(Guadalcanal). By 1943 the star was seen on all types of vehicles in all theaters. From 1944 onwards the plain white star (with or without the circle described below) became the most common form of national identification symbol for the United States.

Yellow Variants

In January, 1942 HQ Armored Force issued orders that all armored vehicle markings were to be painted in Air Corps Yellow, No. 4 lusterless. A yellow star was adopted for armored vehicles. On most tanks the star was applied to the turret sides, of at least 22" in diameter, with a 4" stripe running around the turret. The adoption of the yellow star and markings for the Armored Force is odd as the rest of the Army was in the process of adopting the white star. In August 1942, AR-850-5 formalized the use of a white star as a form of national insignia.

Painted Out Stars

In the dust and confusion of battle the US star could be mistaken for a German Cross at long range (greater than 1000 yards). Tankers and armored units began painting out the stars to avoid becoming a casualty of 'friendly fire'. The addition of the circle around the star helped to resolve this problem, though some of the more experienced units (like the 2nd Armored) stayed with the painted out stars until the Normandy landings. There they painted the vehicle number on the sides of the turret in yellow. This was painted out by D-Day + 14. After Normandy several armored divisions were sent into Europe but kept their stateside markings, except the bar, and that is why one sees so many variations in pictures.

Star and Circle

A plain white star surrounded by a continuous or broken white circle came into common usage towards the end of 1943 (July) primarily an aerial identification marking. Numerous complaints from air crew that the white star on a dark background could be mistaken for a cross. It was during this period that the term "American Luftwaffe" was coined. The star and circle continued in service throughout the remainder of the war. This symbol was used by all Allied forces from the time of Normandy on.



Star and Circle - Variants

In July of 1943, all vehicles slated for participation in the invasion of Sicily were ordered to increase the width of the circle and paint it in yellow. Sometimes this resulted in the white circle being repainted in yellow; sometimes this resulted in a "bloated" white star with a white or yellow circle.



In looking at photographs from the period, it is clear that stars were not always applied with care, resulting in so called "crooked" or "upside-down" stars.



US WWII Vehicle Markings

Registration Numbers

In 1929 the Army Quartermaster Corps introduced a vehicle numbering system which would identify each Army vehicle. The number originally preceded by a 'W' for War Department. From mid 1944 on, the 'W' was dropped. Vehicles with a 'K' prefix were used by the US Signal Corps to designate special vehicles.

Registration number were painted in 3" numbers (space permitting) and painted on each side of the vehicle hood or somewhere on the back of the vehicle. If the vehicle was "suppressed" in order to carry a radio the letter 'S' (preceded by a dash) was applied as a suffix after the registration number. Sometimes 'USA' was painted before or above the registration number (again, space permitting).



Prior to 1942 white or yellow was used to paint registration markings. From mid 1942 to mid 1943 registration markings applied at the manufacturer were painted in blue drab lusterless enamel by means of a stencil. From mid 1943 on, registration markings were painted in white or even yellow or black.

The first one or two numbers in the sequence determined the vehicle type.

Registration Number Prefixes	
Light Trucks	2
Reconnaissance Trucks & Jeeps	20
Medium Trucks	3
Trucks 2.5 - 5 ton	4
Trucks 5+ ton	5
Tanks	30
Tracked & Half-Tracked Vehicles (not Tanks)	40
Armored Cars & Special Command Vehicles	60

Jeeps always had the prefix 20, which stood for 'reconnaissance' followed by the vehicle's registration number. For the first 99,999 jeeps this was a 5 digit number; later jeeps had 6 digits.

US WWII Vehicle Markings

Some examples:			
USA			USA
W-20#####	USA 30#####	40#####	20#####-S
Jeep – very early	Tank - standard	TD - standard	Jeep - suppressed, late

Unit Bumper Codes

AR-850-5 established a comprehensive set of unit bumper codes to quickly identify a vehicle and the unit it belonged to. They were painted with flat white paint and generally found on the front and rear bumpers on soft-skinned vehicles and on the front glacis plate and rear ‘wings’ of tanks. Often these codes were ordered removed in combat areas. As an expedient troops would usually simply obscure the markings with grease or mud.

The code consisted of three groups of letters and numbers which were:

1. Army, Corps and Division Codes
2. Regimental or Battalion Codes
3. Company & Vehicle Numbering Codes

Army, Corps and Division Codes (Group One)

- Army – The number of the Army followed by an **A**.
- Corps – The number of the Corps (Roman numerals), followed by the letters **AB** for an airborne corps or Δ for an armored corps.
- Division – The number of the Division followed by the letters **AB** for an airborne corps or Δ for an armored corps.

Regimental or Battalion Codes (Group Two)

- Regimental or Battalion – Follow a similar pattern; the number of the regiment, battalion or detached company followed by the appropriate branch or service code.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Branch / Service</i>
AB	Airborne
AA (AAA)	Anti-Aircraft Artillery
APH	Amphibious
Δ	Armored Division
C	Chemical
E	Engineers
F	Field Artillery
I	Infantry
M	Medical
P	Military Police
PI	Parachute Infantry
O	Ordinance
Q	Quartermaster
S	Signals
T	Transportation
TD	Tank Destroyer

US WWII Vehicle Markings

- The 'I' and 'O' symbols were always preceded by a dash to prevent confusion with numbers.
- Battle groups, tank battalions, field artillery battalions and reconnaissance squadrons operating under the regimental system were identified by 'B', 'A', 'F' and 'R' respectively, preceded by their number and followed by the basic identification of their unit.
- 'X' was used when a vehicle had no intermediate organization (when it was assigned directly to division instead of a regiment).

4. Company & Vehicle Codes (Group Three)

- Company codes once more a follow a familiar pattern

<i>Code</i>	<i>Branch / Service</i>
A - I	Company, troop, battery letter
HQ	Headquarters & HQ unit
SV	Service company

- Independent companies also included a code which identified their role:

<i>Code</i>	<i>Branch / Service</i>
AW	Automatic Weapons
CON	Construction
DP	Depot
DS	Direct Support
GAM	General Auto
GS	General support
HW	Heavy Weapons
MR	Mortar
MT	Maintenance
PM	Parachute Maintenance
R	Reconnaissance
RP	Repair
TMP	Transportation motor pool

- Units not covered by the above codes were allowed to invent their own as long as they weren't confused with others and didn't exceed three letters in length.
- Vehicle Numbering - Each vehicle was given a number which indicated its order of march. Towed vehicles were considered separate vehicles and given numbers directly after the towing vehicle. Generally, vehicles 1 to 10 were allocated to company HQ; 11 to 20 to the 1st Platoon; 21 to 30 to the 2nd Platoon and so on. For example E3 would be the third vehicle of the company HQ of E Company.

US WWII Vehicle Markings

Some examples:				
2-I	12E	HQ	6	2nd Infantry., 12th Engineer battalion, 6 th vehicle of Headquarters Company
3A/8-I	34-I	A	11	3rd Army, 8th Infantry, 34th Infantry battalion, 111th vehicle of A Company
101 AB	506PI	E	3	101 st Airborne, 506 Parachute Infantry Regt., 3 rd vehicle of E Company
101 AB	81AAA	HQ	13	101 st Airborne, 81 AA Artillery Regt., 13 th vehicle of Headquarters Company
1A 2Δ	67Δ	D	5	1 st Army, 2 nd Armored Division, 67 Armored Regt., 5 th vehicle of D Company
VIII	705TD	B	9	8 th Corps, 705 Tank Destroyer Battalion, B Company, 9 th vehicle
17AB	320F	B	6	17 th Airborne Division, 320 th Field Artillery Battalion, B Battery, 6 th vehicle
2Δ	702 TD	B	14	2 nd Armored Division, 702 Tank Destroyer Battalion, B Company, 14 th vehicle

The codes were not to exceed 4" tall and were sometimes separated with an inch long dash or a proportional forward slash.

Examples



US WWII Vehicle Markings

AR 850-5
14

MISCELLANEOUS

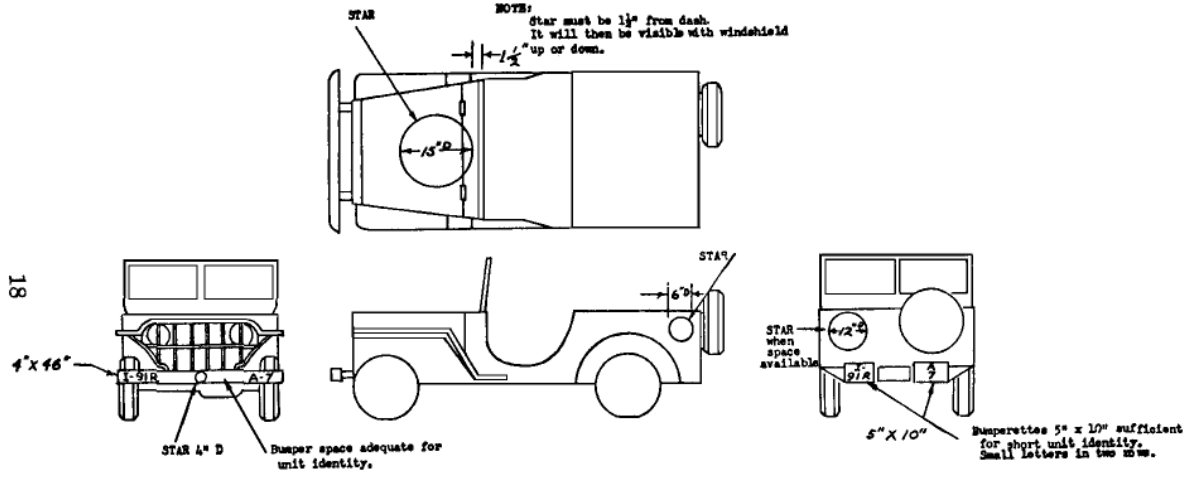


FIGURE 3.—Reconnaissance car, 1/4-ton.

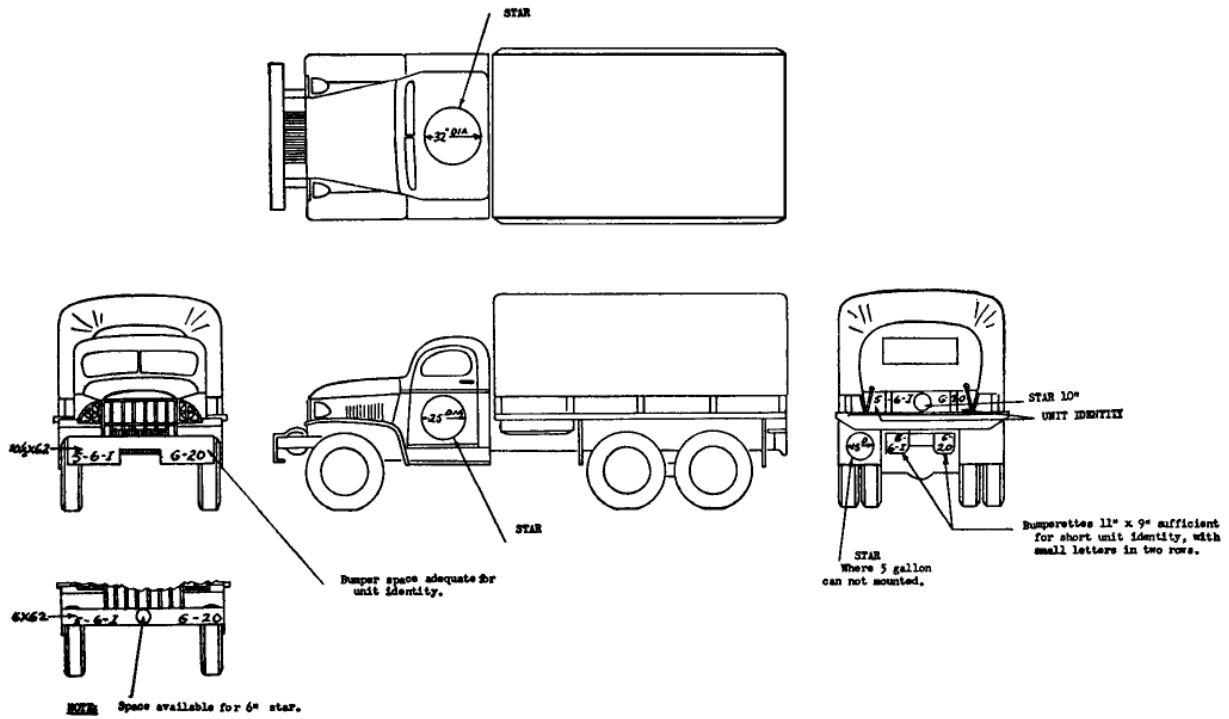


FIGURE 18.—Cargo truck, 2 1/2-ton, 6 by 6.

US WWII Vehicle Markings

Miscellaneous:

Shipping markings:

These were applied prior to shipping and indicate the vehicle's weight and dimensions. They also existed as metal tags fitted to the dashboard of vehicles.

Personal markings:

Although not as frequent as on aircraft many vehicles were decorated with small "nose-art" during WWII. These were usually names, mascots, painted Division symbols and pin-ups. The variety was limited only by the GI's imagination.

Bridge plates:

Army regulations specified a yellow square showing the vehicles weight in tons be painted or affixed to the front of the vehicle. In practice, the British method of a yellow metal disc fitted to the grill (or painted on) was used to prevent confusion. Typically, these discs were 6 to 9 inches in diameter, painted yellow, bearing black numbers which indicated the weight class of the vehicles. The discs could either be a metal plate attached to the vehicle or if the weight class was unlikely to change (tanks), painted directly onto the vehicle. They were usually located on the right front fender, though on many vehicles the disc replaced the right front headlight. Vehicles capable of pulling trailers would have two numbers; one indicated the weight class of the vehicle only, the other the weight class of both vehicle and trailer.



It was meant to be used on all vehicles, but if a bridge can't hold a jeep it is pretty useless. For this reason it was seldom applied to US Army jeeps in the ETO, although they seem to have been used by them in the PTO and by the Commonwealth forces in Europe quite extensively.

Some Common Bridge Plate Numbers	
Light Trucks	4
Reconnaissance Trucks & Jeeps	2
Trucks 2.5 - 5 ton	10
Trucks 5+ ton	21
Stuart Tank	19
Sherman Tank	30
Hellcat TD	18
M3 Half-Track	10

Stars & Stripes:

All US Army unarmored vehicles in the ETO had a little "stars & stripes", made of paper, glued in the lower left corner of the windshield. On the back fording instructions were printed in red ink.

US WWII Vehicle Markings

Trucks:

Rear Tail Gate:

From left to right; "MAX. SPEED 45 MPH" / (star) / "Caution Left Hand Drive". Note the small star on the left mud flap



Others:

- "Prestone 44" - Painted on the front of the hood above the grill in approx. 1/2"-1" letters it indicated anti-freeze was put into the cooling system of the vehicle, together with the year (in this example 1944).
- "T.P.35" – (Tire pressure)
WWII-era US Army jeeps had it sometimes painted on the dashboard or on the inside of the window, or on the INNER sides of the wheel well, below the fenders and above the wheels. Post war jeeps had the tire pressure painted on the rim of the fenders ABOVE the wheels (all 4). This was only applied post-war! It is an incorrect marking for a WWII-era jeep.



- Many more informal markings exist, like "No Smoking" etc.

Exterior Paint

Olive-Drab (FS-34087): there is no fixed shade of OD. Every batch of paint delivered to the factories was a little different from the other. As long as it is OD and not green you can pretty much pick the shade you like, but it must be lusterless/flat! No glossy enamel was used.

US WWII Vehicle Markings



The Stuart Light Tank in the above picture has a lot of information in it. Note the following items of interest:

- White interior visible through the open front vision ports.
- Color and weathering on the tracks and running gear (grease and oil stains)!
- Blue drab registration numbers on the rear of the side hull.
- Black tactical number surrounded by a white square (3rd platoon)?

Sources:

Bradford, George:

Armor Camouflage & Markings North Africa 1940-1943 (Bradford 1971)

Wise, Terence:

American Military Camouflage and Markings 1939-1945 (Almark 1973)

Zaloga, Steven:

US Armour Camouflage and Markings 1917-45 (Osprey 1984)

Army Regulations

AR-850-5 (1942, 1943, 1944)