

Vietnam: Tanker's War?



by Lieutenant Colonel Jim Walker (Retired)

More than 21 years since the end of the Vietnam War, an old veteran has finally taken up its new home in the Patton Museum collection, bringing a promise of closure and even achievement to a veterans group of tankers who fought there. This old veteran happens to be an M48A3 main battle tank, the tank employed by most Armor and Armored Cavalry units in Vietnam.

The 69th Armor Association had spent several years searching for an 'A3,' an appropriate memorial of their Vietnam experience, for exhibit at the museum. The problem was that most of these tanks had long since been either upgraded to M48A5s, passed on to allies, or dumped in the ocean to form artificial reefs. The search turned up a virtual empty bag on more than one occasion. Anniston Army Depot had only one left, and needed to keep it. The Tank-Automotive Command offered a variety of substitutes: "We can give you an M48A5 or an M60. But an 48A3? Nope." "An M forty what?" was the response from Aberdeen.

Finally, the search bore fruit, strongly augmented by the personal investigations of the late LTG Paul S. Williams, Jr. (former battalion CO of 1/69 Armor in Vietnam) and COL Don Williams (Ret.), former Chief of Staff of the Armor Center and A-1/69 Armor CO, MG Stan Sheridan (former 1/69 CO), John Purdy of the Patton Museum, MG Lon E. Maggart (Ret.), former Armor Center CG, and the Center for Military History. Shortly before the June 1996 Armor Conference, the tank we wanted

arrived at a rail siding on Ft. Knox. I snagged MG Jim Fairfield, Honorary Colonel of the 69th Armored Regiment, and moved out smartly for the Boatwright repair facility. There we found row after row of retired M60A1 tanks and other vintage vehicles. Then we came upon the oddball. Nestled snugly next to an M103 heavy was our vision from the past... an M48A3 in near mint condition, complete with cupola and coax-mounted machine guns.

So, why is this tank so important to the veterans of America's longest war? What makes it so different? What should it mean to others?

Millions of Americans today were born after the end of the Vietnam conflict. Their limited understanding — shaped by the popular media, movie, and book cultures — has painted Vietnam as a war fought in swampy jungles by foot soldiers. Most are surprised to hear veterans talk about their service on tanks in that war, but U.S. Army tanks first went into Southeast Asia nearly 31 years ago with the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor. More disturbing is that many current serving members of the Army are ignorant of the contributions tanks made in Vietnam. This institutional memory lapse may have been a factor in the tragedy at Mogadishu, where foreign armor had to answer a call for help to rescue our pinned-down Rangers. We must ensure that U.S. armor soldiers aren't forgotten again in the planning and execution of similar 'meals on wheels' or other such diverse missions in the 21st century.

The crew of "Apostle," an M48 operating with the 67th Armor in Binh Dinh Province, survived their encounter with a 500-pound bomb, rigged as a booby trap, in 1967.

Almost immediately upon landing his first tank in 1966, the CO of the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, LTC (MG, Retired) R.J. Fairfield, Jr., found widespread misunderstanding of the role of armor. Assigned to support the 2d Brigade, 25th Infantry Division, operating near Cu Chi, the 69th Armor commander found himself at loggerheads with the brigade commander over employment of his tanks. Despite nearly a half century of bitter experience from two world wars and numerous other conflicts, traditional Infantry-educated/instructed commanders had yet to grasp the principles of mass, maneuver, and objective as they applied to Armor employment. This was the situation facing LTC Fairfield as his immediate superior sought to parcel his tanks piecemeal to infantry units without defined mission or measurable objectives.

When summarizing his arguments to the division commander, MG Fred Weyand, Fairfield stood his ground and stated simply. "Sir, the **only** time I will ever deploy **one** of my tanks will be to ordnance."¹

Following a well-supported rationale for maintaining his unit's integrity and employing his mass, firepower, and maneuver capabilities, LTC Fairfield won the day and the approval to retain operational control over his tanks. The successful rout of an enemy force by his A Company, only an hour and a



Above, LTC R.J. Fairfield, commander of 1/69 Armor, who fought attempts to parcel out his unit's tanks.

Above right, one of the unit's M48s busts jungle near the Chu Pong Massif, November 1967.



half after landing in country, significantly reinforced the battalion commander's arguments. This proved critical in the ensuing weeks as the application of the battalion's massed firepower and shock action broke the back of an enemy offensive against the brigade in the Ho Bo woods.

This would also prove to be the seminal argument for virtually all succeeding 1/69 Armor commanders in the application of their unit's assets. The consideration of unit integrity and Vietnam lessons learned would similarly guide planners for the development and application of doctrine for Desert Storm and hopefully, will also hold true for 21st century application of armored forces.

Equipment: Blessing and Nightmare

Immediately prior to its Vietnam deployment, 1/69 Armor had traded in its gas-guzzling M48A2 tanks for the somewhat upgraded M48A3 vehicles. The A3s were a distinct improvement over the A2C version, with the addition of an economical and much safer V12 diesel power plant that gave the A3 increased horsepower, over 310 miles range on the roads, and some 230 miles range cross-country. Most important to the crews was that the A3's diesel fuel

tanks did not explode violently when penetrated by enemy fire, a long-standing problem with gasoline-powered U.S. vehicles. Similarly, the elliptical hull of the M48 Patton provided outstanding protection from mine explosions, artillery, and small arms fire. With few exceptions, Vietnam tank crews would survive even large mine incidents thanks to the robust M48. Additional upgrades included the new AN-VRC 12-series radios and a Xenon searchlight (2 or 3 per platoon issued in 1967).

The A3s 90mm cannon, and its broad range of available ammunition types, was the major reason the M48s were sent to Vietnam, rather than the later M60 series. The 90mm came with a variety of ammunition choices that proved critical in Vietnam combat. Tankers could draw on the devastating canister round for use in thick jungle and wooded areas, high explosive plastic (HEP) for taking out bunkers and structures of all types; HE and HE Delay for use against personnel and fortifications; white phosphorus (WP) for marking targets and for use against personnel; and HEAT for use against other tanks and fortifications. The normal basic load for 1966-68 tankers might include equal numbers of canister, HE, and a WP-HEP mix. Later loads would include HEAT, due to the introduction of armored vehicles by NVA forces in the tri-border areas of operation.

Precluding the use of the M60 tanks in Vietnam was the lack of HE and canister rounds for their 105mm tank guns. Today, our R&D efforts should be directed toward increasing the types of ammunition available for the 120mm cannon on the M1 series because, given the volatile nature of world politics, our armored forces may encounter a combat environment where they will again need canister and vari-

ous HE rounds. Efforts to ensure that our Armor soldiers enter these types of situations with the tools right for the job must be on top of everyone's procurement priority lists. While a 120mm SABOT or HEAT round are devastating against T-80 tanks, they will be virtually useless against troops hidden deep in the forest of Bosnia or hunkered down in sun-baked mud trenches somewhere in Africa.

Field Expedients: The Tanker's Lot

Field expedient replacements for weapons or equipment were difficult, but generally, they might be found as close as a sister unit. Vietnam terrain often restricted the cross country travel of our tanks to narrow ravines or treacherous, switchback roads with steep hills between open stretches of road. As ambush was the main enemy tactic, early triggering or detection of ambushes became a primary goal. To reduce the mystery of what lay around the bend or over the hill the battalion CO, LTC Scott Riggs, and later LTC (MG, Retired) Stan Sheridan, made it SOP to carry an M79 grenade launcher on each tank.

As XO of A Company, I was able to enhance this capability by extending the range and lethality of our indirect fire through the addition of 60mm mortars, scrounged from 173rd Airborne supply types, to each of our platoons. Expedient weaponry augmentation was the rule. These added capabilities saved lives and cost the enemy dearly.²

After talking with tankers and Infantry soldiers who have or are currently serving in Bosnia, it is evident that M1 crews might very well want to add a few M203 grenade launchers to their inventories, or perhaps begin the requi-

sitioning procedures for 60mm mortars.³

There were many unforeseen needs which arose in Vietnam, especially with units operating in the dense highlands' jungles. Enemy contact in these close confines was generally 50 meters or less. Survival required violent, overpowering fire and maneuver to meeting engagements and ambush. Many of our tanks were festooned with claymore anti-personnel mines attached to the hull or on the blades of dozer tanks. Basic loads were augmented with additional quantities of ammunition for the coax, .50s, and individual weapons, along with M72 LAWs, huge quantities of hand grenades, C4 plastic explosives, and flares. A typical A Company tank might carry over 20,000 rounds of 7.62mm ammo for the coax, 1,000 rounds for the .50, and another 5,000 rounds of .45 cal. ball for the M3 sub-machine guns and pistols. This did not include any additional ammunition for other 'personal' weapons. Interestingly, the major percentage of enemy killed by 69th Armor units resulted from coax, .50 cal., and small arms fire.

Jungle operations also required numerous 'on the spot' modifications to the tanks. The fenders, front and rear, for instance, would invariably become bent or torn as the result of tree branches rolling up under them, often resulting in a thrown track or actual stoppage of the tank. Fenders were summarily detached from new arrivals and otherwise cut away as required. As a defensive tactic, track blocks were hung from turret hand rails; turrets were sandbagged like high riding bunkers against RPGs; airport runway PSP strips were hung over the running gear as protective skirts; and rolls of chain link fence were carried for use as protective screens. I daresay that operations in areas such as Bosnia might require similar considerations. The challenge is exploring these needs, based on terrain peculiarities and enemy weaponry/capabilities, *before* the tanks are deployed, if possible.

Parts, Parts... Never Enough Parts!

The most critical long-term problem encountered at all levels by 1/69 Armor tankers (and all Vietnam Armor/Cav commands) was the scarcity of replacement parts, from roadwheel arms to machine gun backplates and electrical firing solenoids. The basic Army tank

inventory was in transition during the mid-1960s, from the M48-series of tanks to the newer M60s, and accordingly, parts inventories were also 'in transition.' From the outset, battalion and company maintenance PLL resources were stretched to the limits. Despite urgent requests from the battalion commander through the division commander to MACV/USARV, replacement parts were slow in coming throughout the Vietnam deployment. Parts supplies were always somewhere between this unit in Europe and that unit back in CONUS.

Company XO's and motor sergeants became masters of midnight requisitioning and bartering. All too often, parts would be in country, in a port depot somewhere, but their actual whereabouts or release authority were not to be found. Because of the disparate nature of 1/69 Armor's missions and the wide dispersion of its organic assets, personnel were forced to extremes of resourcefulness and expediency.

Two critical problems encountered with the M48A3 tank were with its secondary weaponry, the M73 7.62mm coaxial machine gun and the mounting of the M2HB, .50 cal. machine gun in the M1 cupola. The M73 simply didn't work well. The solenoid needed constant replacement; the barrels burned out too quickly; and it was mechanically unreliable. All parts were in short supply. The superb M2 Browning, mounted as it was on its side in the cupola, was virtually useless. Vietnam combat necessitated quick, easy access to the weapon and the capability for fast ammunition resupply, neither of which was possible with this configuration. Most crews and units subsequently mounted one, or even two, M2s externally on pedestals, welded to the turret in front of the TC and loader's hatches. The M73 problems were never fully solved except for carrying an average of three spare barrels per tank and firing the thing manually.

Despite these shortcomings and difficulties, and thanks to the resourcefulness and creativity of our tankers, the M48A3 proved well suited to its role as a protector, forced entry tool, jungle buster, and absolute terror to the enemy.

From the Mountains to the Sea

The typical mind's eye view of Vietnam is of trackless, swampy jungle and

an endless patchwork of rice paddies. Indeed, both visions hold true to varying degrees... it's not your expansive 'European tank country,' to say the least. But could tanks operate in that stuff?

They did... and with devastating effect. From its initial assignment in III Corps, 1/69 Armor ran its tanks from the coastal plains on the South China Sea to the mountains bordering Cambodia and Laos and from Cu Chi to Quang Ngai province in the north. To the enemy's chagrin, tanks too often appeared in the most totally unexpected locations.

Missions Impossible...?

I dare say that none of us, trained and prudent Armor Officers/NCOs that we may have been, would have conceived utilizing a tank platoon to climb a heavily jungled mountain, provide *artillery* support, cut roads where none existed, search for submarines, or provide ambulance service (all of this, of course, on top of finding, fixing, and fighting the bad guys). These were but a few of the actual mission requirements given to 1/69 Armor. Versatility, diversity, endurance, and expediency became the tankers' creed. With the battalion's move to the II Corps Area in the Central Highlands, mission demands increased and changed daily, sometimes even hourly.

The 4th Infantry Division, the battalion's new parent (as of 8/67), was responsible for the largest divisional AO in Vietnam, and the 69th Armor prowled all of it and more. Despite loud and protracted arguments against piecemealing, the unit was fragmented almost immediately, with A Company joining the 1st Cavalry Division (Air-mobile) in operations on the coastal plain around Bong Son with one platoon assigned to each of the Cav's three brigades.

B Company, already in the II Corps AO, fought one of the war's first major engagements where tanks decisively turned the tide of battle. Detailed to support a company of the 1st Korean Cavalry Regiment at a small LZ (27 Victor) in western Pleiku Province, the 1st Platoon, B Company, beat back and effectively destroyed a reinforced NVA battalion during a night-long attack on the position in August, 1966. This would become the norm for most en-

agements of 69th Armor tanks... encircled, outnumbered, but not outfought. The 1st Platoon, B Company was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for this action.

Command of 1/69 Armor had passed from LTC Fairfield to LTC Clyde O. Clark and then to LTC Paul S. Williams, Jr. It was during the latter's tour that some of the more 'unusual' missions occurred.

BG Jack Mountcastle, Chief of Military History and former platoon leader with B Company, 1/69 Armor recalls two mission of note.⁴ Artillery assets of the 4th Division were hard pressed at all times. In April, 1967, B Company was ordered to augment these resources by providing indirect fire support with the tank guns, as had the unit's predecessors in WWII and Korea. For several weeks, they fired missions westward along the Cambodian border with good effect according to aerial target assessments. Here's where the availability of a variety of HE ammunition and fuze types carried the day.

Reconnaissance in force was another favorite mission of 69th Armor tankers. This usually meant that a platoon-size unit, sometimes accompanied by infantry, would smash its way into some heavily jungled grid square and look for a fight. More often than not, they found one. Then-1LT Mountcastle was tasked on a similar mission along the border, searching for signs of NVA activity, in particular a regimental-size unit reported in the area. A short time into the mission, LTC Williams received an unusual radio SITREP from his recon element and LT Mountcastle... "Sir, we spotted NVA... and they are on elephants...!" Responding with some incredulity, LTC Williams asked for more details and, as a good commander should, reported the find to the division G2. Needless to say, eyebrows were raised at this quarter as well and incontrovertible proof was requested. How do you prove the existence of an elephant, short of snatching one? Finally, after continued requests and snickers from the intelligence types, a bag of incontrovertible 'proof' was duly deposited on the doubting G2's desk.

A Company tankers, commanded by CPT Don Williams, found themselves

in similar unique situations during their support of the 1st Cav in 1967. LZ English, the division's forward headquarters at Bong Son, gained public attention in April, when Viet Cong sappers fired up the unit's ammunition distribution facility, setting off massive explosions from the ordnance, including aerial rockets, artillery rounds, and aerial bombs up to 500 lbs. The dump was a blazing, exploding hell for nearly a week with 69th Armor tankers heroically driving their tanks into the inferno and rescuing dozens of trapped troops.



During the Tet Offensive, 1/69 tankers call in an airstrike on nearby NVA near Highway 19E.

Binh Dinh Province was VC territory... an enclave characterized by rugged coastal mountains, virtual seas of rice paddies and villages heavily fortified, first by the Viet Minh in the 1950s, then by the VC in the '60s. Some of the most vicious fighting of the war took place here, where tanks regularly proved decisive in defeating numerically superior, well dug-in enemy forces.

Company A tanks were committed to action almost daily in reaction to Air Cav contacts in heavily fortified villages. Here, another serious problem was encountered in operations with infantry elements. With very few exceptions, ground commanders from platoon to battalion level had little if any knowledge or experience in operating cheek to jowl with tanks. All too often, our tanks first had to proceed into with-

ering small arms, RPG, and recoilless rifle fire as armored ambulances, to extract dead and wounded, before launching our own attack. Working with the brigade commander's authority (COL Fred Karhos), we reduced this problem by establishing a rotational training program with Cav companies as they returned to their forward base camp. Similarly, as the tank platoon leader, I was included as a staff advisor to all brigade operational planning which might include tanks or require their response to enemy action. A helicopter flew daily low level reconnaissance of access routes to the coastal villages. These steps proved extremely effective in reducing both tank and infantry casualties and significantly increasing the efficacy and impact of future ops against prepared fortifications. The grunts had a superb forced entry tool, and we had operational knowledge and the flank and rear security necessary for us to effectively clear these VC strongholds.

Another major concern of the tankers was mines... some as large as 500 lbs.; these were aerial bombs rigged as mines. We had the misfortune of running over one of these in mid-67 during a village sweep operation. The crew of A32, (TC, SSG Roger Urban) though severely injured, survived this awesome blast as did many other men who encountered enemy mines, thanks to the protective qualities of the M48A3.⁵

While the primary mission of Company A was as a heavy reaction/assault force, there were other very 'unusual' missions performed by the tankers, not the least of which included a submarine watch... yes, that's correct... a watch for submarine/boat activity in the Dam Trao Lake area on the South China Sea coast.

Several reports came into the division G2 shop indicating that the VC were moving men and supplies to area VC forces via seagoing vessels, particularly submarines of unknown origin. While we knew of the boat traffic, the submarine factor generated surprise and not a few smiles. We didn't spot any submarines, but did sink a junk loaded with ammo, rifle stocks, and medical supplies which washed up on the beach.

A similar offbeat mission found us attempting to dig an unknown number of VC out of a series of caves formed in coral outcroppings along the coast. We fired every type of available ammunition directly into the cave openings for nearly a week, yet continued to receive heavy return fire. An 8-inch SP howitzer was similarly employed with little discernible effect. The solution came with the pumping of raw napalm from 55-gallon drums, via hand pumps, directly into natural vents in the coral above the caves. A WP round ended the standoff with an earth shaking blast and accompanying fire. Ammunition hidden in the caves cooked off for more than a day and upon inspection, nearly 30 VC/NVA dead were found inside.

For its seven month attachment to the 1st Cav and bitter fighting throughout Binh Dinh Province, A Company, 1/69 Armor was awarded the Valorous Unit Citation.

Dak To, Tet '68, Keeping the Road Open and Ben Het

The primary mission of 1/69 Armor, from late 1967 through its departure in June 1970, was keeping open the critical overland routes of communication into the Central Highlands. These AOs included QL19, from Qui Nhon on the South China Sea to Duc Co and the Cambodian border; QL14, from Ban Me Thout in the south, to Dak To in the north and even parts of QL1 between Phu Cat and Duc Pho on the coastal plain. Over 55 convoys per day traveled the treacherous Highway 19, east and west, supplying the 1st Cav and later, 173rd Airborne in An Khe; the 4th ID in Pleiku, and CIDG/Special Forces camps in western Pleiku Province. At least one of these would be attacked in some manner daily. Similar numbers of vehicles followed the equally nasty Hwy 14S, following its reopening by 1/69 Armor in late 1967. The massive NVA incursion into Kontum province in November and the ensuing battles around Dak To pressed even heavier responsibilities onto the thinly stretched resources of the battalion. Most enemy contacts during this period were either ambushes or meeting engagements, and always on their immediate terms. Despite being outnumbered and at times, short in men and equipment, the 69th Armor tankers had extremely high operational ratios,

never lost a fight and, in many instances, reduced enemy force strength to a point of their being incapable of further action.

One such action occurred just before Tet in January, 1968, as the 1st Platoon of B Company was escorting a convoy of ammunition resupply vehicles north to Dak To. Several miles south of the town, the convoy was attacked by a battalion-size force of NVA. Most of LT Bob Wright's tanks were temporarily put out of action by intense RPG fire, wounding many of the tankers. Despite the battering, the crews fought

engaged in heavy combat in the cities of Dak To and Kontum. While nearly a dozen tankers were lost, and dozens suffered wounds, the Viet Cong infrastructure and hardcore units in the Highlands were virtually destroyed, along with hundreds of NVA killed during the protracted two-week fight. Here again, 69th Armor tankers found themselves improvising tactics and the application of their firepower to fit the situation. Little had been taught in the schools on the employment of tanks in built-up areas. Because of a shortage of infantry, Engineer troops and MPs were pressed into service with the tanks to



B-1/69 tankers inspect an NVA PT-76B tank after destroying it near Ben Het.

valiantly until a relief column arrived. During the action, SP5 Dwight H. Johnson, driver on LT Wright's tank, became legend, killing over two dozen of the enemy in close and hand-to-hand combat and saving his fellow crewmen, as well as several others of the platoon. Specialist Johnson was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism.⁶

The 1968 Tet Offensive found the battalion heavily engaged in the cities and along the roads of the Central Highlands. A Company and other battalion elements helped defend the city of Pleiku, Pleiku Air Force Base, the Camp Holloway SF complex, and Highway 19 against heavy VC and NVA attacks. B and C companies were

reduce enemy strongholds in schoolhouses, factories, homes, and even the ARVN military compound in the center of the city of Pleiku. Problems of ammunition shortage, evacuation of wounded, refueling, command and control, and even identification of friendly forces plagued the unit commanders. The VC had forced civilians to dig trenches literally across black-topped roads in the center of the city and had dug themselves into hasty bunkers along the roadsides. The lack of accompanying ground support cost us two tank commanders killed and several other crewmen wounded when the enemy suddenly popped up behind or to the exposed flank of a vehicle to take it under RPG fire.

The 69th Armor tanks reacted to road ambushes almost daily, especially along Highway 19's infamous 'ambush alley,' a five-mile stretch of road immediately east of Mang Giang pass. The armor was initially positioned to protect key bridge sites and provide route security for the heavy convoy traffic. The bridge site/checkpoints were typically manned by two or three tanks and perhaps a squad of infantry. Each would normally cover an additional bridge site due to lack of vehicles and troops. These strong points would alternate opening and closing their road segments each day, usually accompanied by Engineer mine sweepers or MPs. Company A initially occupied the strong points in December, 1967, relieving elements of the 1st Cavalry Division. Most required total rebuilding to incorporate revetments for the tanks and bunkers for the troops. This effort alone could occupy a separate volume.

Battalion forward headquarters ultimately displaced to Camp Radcliff in An Khe from a location on Hwy 14S below Pleiku. A Company occupied a run-down fire support base between the pass and An Khe called LZ Schueller, home of a towed battery of 105mm howitzers and an airborne infantry company from the 173rd Airborne. Ultimately, an additional FSB called LZ Action was established at the base of Mang Giang Pass, in response to the constant enemy contact. While the enemy action, for the most part, consisted of limited ambushes, mortar attacks, and mining, several major attacks occurred in the post-Tet period.

By far the largest incident cost the NVA an entire battalion of fresh troops on 10 April 1968 when the 'B' battalion of the 95th NVA Regiment attempted an ambush of the first convoy of the day. Prematurely initiated by a command-detonated mine, the event turned bad for the enemy immediately. Twelve A Company tanks and nine ACAVs from the battalion scout platoon were in movement to their assigned strongpoint positions. C Company was moving back to Pleiku from An Khe, and B Company was enroute to Bong Son from Pleiku. In essence, the entire battalion was available for any major contingency.

The A Company tanks and the ACAVs reached the point of contact and simply charged on line against the enemy units hastily dug into roadside

berms and trenches. The fight continued for half the day, ending with a massive mortar attack on LZ Schueller. C Company secured the north side of the road while A Company engaged the enemy force. As it turned out, no additional force was required. Nearly 300 of the enemy were killed and scores of individual and crew-served weapons captured. The tankers incurred but a few wounded. A captured NVA officer, though in total shock, related to G2 personnel that his unit had only infiltrated into Vietnam from Cambodia two weeks prior and its mission was to destroy a major convoy and attack LZ Schueller. They were told that only U.S. MP and Engineer units patrolled the road. The sheer terror of the charging armor had had true shock action effect on the green NVA troops. Many of their weapons, especially the machine guns, were found to be unfired, with grease still in the barrels.

Tank vs. Tank

Most veterans of the 1/69 Armor missions in the tri-border area of Vietnam can relate their own experiences and responses to the vehicular sounds emanating from the bad guys' side of the border. At night, we heard engines revving and tracks squeaking. We all knew the sound of heavy armored vehicles and trucks, and they were tantalizingly near... but untouchable... until the night of 3-4 March 1969. Battalion units had reacted regularly to reports of enemy vehicular movement near border CIDG camps and U.S. fire support bases, from Khe Sanh to the Parrot's Beak. Nothing had ever come of it, save for a few random shots in the dark. But as a precaution, 69th Armor units were issued HEAT ammunition, beginning in 1968, because of the potential threat. The Special Forces team at Ben Het, a small CIDG camp west of Dak To, had reported heavy movement of enemy troops and equipment in their area throughout the month of February. While several enemy vehicles had been sighted and identified by CIDG/SF recon elements, none had come closer than a few kilometers to the border. Then in late February, NVA tanks were seen approaching the border by both CIDG and air reconnaissance. B Company's 2d platoon was ordered to Ben Het to provide security in case of an attack. A skirmish the first week of March had resulted in the medical

evacuation of the platoon leader, LT Jerry Sullenberger. With all of his officers deployed with other company elements, CPT John Stovall, B Company commander, decided to stand in for the injured lieutenant himself.

The camp had been receiving regular, though light, mortar and sniper fire from enemy troops across the border for over a week. A heavy fog had settled into the area around the camp the night of 3 March, moving CPT Stovall to keep his troop on 50% alert. Shortly after midnight, a trip flare was ignited in the outer perimeter, exposing a Soviet PT76B light amphibious tank. The NVA immediately opened fire on the camp, one of their shots wounding CPT Stovall and killing two tankers. The M48s responded with their 90mm guns, destroying two PT76s and two BTR 50 personnel carriers. Several other enemy vehicles were damaged, but managed to limp back across the border. Though considered to be a minor skirmish in the greater scheme of things, this was to be the only tank-to-tank battle between North Vietnamese and U.S. tanks of the war.⁷

Back to Bong Son... More of the Road

LTC Stan Sheridan was able to get the bulk of the 1st Battalion back together for several battalion operations with the 173rd Airborne Brigade in late 1968. Major engagements with NVA/VC troops were again fought in the fortified villages of the Bong Son plain, while QL19 continued to provide action for the tankers. The complexion of the war had begun to change with 'Vietnamization' accelerating, along with the gradual drawdown of the U.S. troop commitment. The battalion continued its combat role until standing down in June of 1970 with the 4th Infantry Division.

Lessons... The M48A3 Veteran... Into the Future

A number of Armor veterans of Vietnam attended the change of command/retirement ceremony on 29 October 1996 for the Chief of Armor, MG Maggart, himself a former commander of 2/69 Armor and an armored cavalry commander in Vietnam. One veteran stood out above all the rest, however. The old vet looked fit and ready to

fight in his 'new clothes,' a new coat of paint and markings now identifying the recently acquired M48A3 tank as B11, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, 4th Infantry Division, honoring Dwight Johnson's individual valor, and the combined heroism of all 1/69 Armor tankers whose selfless sacrifices made the battalion the most highly decorated tank battalion in the Army.⁸

The M48A3 will soon take its place as a permanent exhibit and tribute to 69th Armor tankers, (and for that matter, all Vietnam tankers), alongside 'veterans' of other wars, in the Patton Museum. It is an outstanding affirmation of Armor's contributions and accomplishments in Southeast Asia. But more important, it should stand as a signpost, a call to action if you will, for the education and development of Armor soldiers and leaders with doctrine addressing the fluid and diverse mission outlook for Force XXI, but soundly anchored in the valuable experience, resourcefulness, and intrepidity of the Vietnam tankers and their predecessors.

Acknowledgments/Sources

¹MG (USA, Ret.) R.J. Fairfield, Jr. Honorary Colonel of the 69th Armored Regiment; First Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor in Vietnam, 1966; dear friend and advisor; Daddy of the regiment.

²MG (USA, Ret.) Stan R. Sheridan. Commander, 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, Vietnam, 1968-69; Chief Advisor, 69th Armor Association; friend and counsel; the regiment's charger.

³ILT Stephen Kavanaugh. Bradley platoon leader, 1st Infantry Division, U.S. Army, Tuzla, Bosnia/Herzegovina; the Army's future.

⁴BG John W. Mountcastle. U.S. Army; Chief of Military History, U.S. Army Center of Military History; former platoon leader, B Company, 1/69 Armor, Vietnam, 1966-67; no truer gentleman, fellow platoon leader, and great Virginian.

⁵SFC Roger Urban. U.S. Army, Ret.; former tank commander, A32, A Company, 1/69 Armor, Vietnam, 1967. Our "Mine Magnet." Needed more Rogers.

⁶Mr. Dale Ritch, historian, author, Detroit, Mich.; Mr. Tim Pratt writer/historian, NASA; National Medal of Honor Museum, Chattanooga.

⁷MAJ (Ret.) John Stovall. Former commander, B Company, 1/69 Armor, Ben Het, Vi-

etnam, 1969; good friend; a true place in history.

⁸MG (Ret.) Lon E. Maggart. Former commander, U.S. Army Armor Center and 2/69 Armor; AOBC classmate. Thank you, Sir.

Mr. John Purdy. Curator, Patton Museum of Cavalry and Armor, Ft. Knox, Ky.; the tanker's friend.

LTG Paul S. Williams, Jr. Former commander, 1/69 Armor, Vietnam, 1967; my first Vietnam CO; champion of Armor; we miss him.

COL (Ret.) Donald Williams. Former commander, A Company, 1/69 Armor, Vietnam, 1967; former Chief of Staff, U.S. Army Armor Center; tireless supporter of the 69th Armor and the Armor soldier.

Lieutenant Colonel James F. Walker (USAR, Ret.) was commissioned in 1965 as a Distinguished Military Graduate of Western Michigan University. A graduate of AOBC, AOAC, CGSC, SF Officers Q Course, Ranger, and Airborne Schools, his active duty service includes platoon leader, company XO, and battalion S3 Air with A Company, 1/69 Armor, Vietnam, 1967-68, and MACVSOG, 1970, SEA. His Reserve service includes S3 and company commander with 327th MP Battalion, 300th POW Command and numerous special operations, staff, and liaison positions with USAR. He is the President and co-founder of the 69th Armor Association; President, New River Valley Chapter (Virginia) Association of the U. S. Army; and a member of the ROTC Hall of Fame, Western Michigan University. He has attended Detroit College of Law and Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University. LTC Walker is a co-author of several Vietnam novels with Ralph Zumbro (A-1/69 Armor, 1967-68; author of *Tank Sergeant* and *Tank Aces*) for Simon & Schuster — *Jungle Tracks*, *Puma Force*, and *Easter Tide*.



MG Stan R. Sheridan, who served as CO of 1/69 Armor in Vietnam during 1968-69, and now Honorary Colonel of the Regiment, meets up with an old friend at retirement ceremony for MG Lon E. Maggart, outgoing Chief of Armor, in October, 1996. The M48 was used at the ceremony and will be preserved as an exhibit in the Patton Museum.