

## PARK 'EM

# The Last M60s Hit The Bullpen

by Captain Roger T. Aeschliman

Very few people are aware that on a windy prairie day in May 1997, at Fort Riley, 1st Battalion, 635th Armor, Kansas Army National Guard, retired the last M60-series tanks in the United States' military force structure.

The 58 M60A3 main battle tanks of the Kansas Guard's only armor battalion were unceremoniously parked in a holding pen at the Camp Funston Mobilization and Training Equipment Site (MATES), in the Kansas River Valley, down the hill from Fort Riley's main post. A few snapshots were taken and a couple of jokers "kissed them goodbye." Otherwise the tired Kansas tankers simply boarded buses for home stations after an aggressive weekend of training.

There was little sense of history at the time, and none of the attention that was bestowed on the last Sheridans which disappeared nearly simultaneously. Few battalion members even realized that these particular tanks were the very last of the hardy and valiant Patton Series serving in the U.S. armed forces.

LTC Bob Bloomquist, commander of 1-635th AR, said it was — in fact — the publication of the Sheridan articles in *ARMOR* that led staff officers to look into the equipment question.

"When we learned our A3s were indeed the last tanks of the type — Active Army, Army Guard, or Marines — we knew we needed to spread the word. The M60 was a damn fine tank and a mainstay of our national defense for 20 years. Even now the A3 version is one of the top five or six main battle tanks in the world, and the A3's thermal sights still put the M1 sights to shame. It was a wonderful tank, and it is significant to see it go," Bloomquist said.

Production on the M60 began in 1960, but only after a decade of effort to tweak and contort World War II-vintage Pershings into something more than they were designed for. The Pershing got a new power train and was dubbed the

Patton in 1950, an obvious naming choice with GEN George S. Patton Jr., a Blackjack Pershing protégé, transformed by death into an icon. The M46 then got a new turret, 90mm gun, and fire control system to become the second Patton tank, the M47. A whole new tank was contracted to Chrysler. The crew was reduced to four; enhancements were made to the fire control system; the hull was recast, but the same M47 powerpack was used, resulting in the M48. It wasn't until 1959 that a variant of the M48 — with a diesel engine, new front hull, higher profile, and a 105mm cannon — proved to be different enough to warrant a new number; and the M60 was born.<sup>1</sup>

Four variants of the original M60 were created:

- The "Slick 60;" then the A1, which featured a new cannon with a thermal shroud and bore evacuator, and for the first time carried 63 main gun rounds, as well as thicker armor.
- The A2 model featured the short-lived 152mm missile/cannon system carrying 13 missiles and 33 rounds.
- The A3 was a cross-breed with many improvements created in the course of M1 development and research, including the Tank Thermal Sight (TTS), solid-state ballistic computer, laser rangefinder, turret stabilization system, smoke grenade launchers, and Halon fire extinguisher system.<sup>2</sup>

The M60-series turret, which has the 105mm M68 E1 cannon, was able to traverse 360° in 16 seconds and could depress to -10 degrees. A cant unit permitted firing on the move over inclines while a sensor measured and corrected for crosswinds. Other armament included the much maligned (and deservedly so) M85 .50 caliber machine gun as the tank commander's weapon. Even more despised was the M219 coaxially-mounted 7.62mm machine gun. Though the M-85 was never replaced, tankers' coax complaints were answered with the excep-



Company B waves goodbye to their 60A3s at Fort Riley MATES site.

tional and reliable 7.62mm MG M240 for accurate long range and rapid fire on troops. The M60 weighed 60 tons and could go 30 miles an hour (downhill, with a tailwind) and a nice 10-20 cross-country. Firing on the move required a "stab" speed which was usually between 5-10 mph, but occasionally a system would not stab out until 20-22. In these instances tanks were known to outrun the firing boxes on tank gunnery ranges.

The M60 in all of its variations was truly a world-class tank and saw continuous duty in Europe and Korea from 1961 into the late 1980s. While the Soviets built sleek and fast attack vehicles, the large and powerful A3 was more of a "hunker down and wait for them to come to you" machine. While highly visible outside of a berm or dug-in firing point and ponderous on the move, the M60 can claim some of the credit for preventing the Warsaw Pact attack that never came. It was a well-designed defensive tank.

Whether GEN Patton would have liked this tank bearing his name is open to debate. Certainly these beasts were not his idea of fast, dynamic, and aggressive vehicles primarily to be used in the attack. Patton repeatedly spoke against tank versus tank warfare and in favor of the tank as an exploitation weapon to rapidly cross ground, and terrorize artillery guns, troops, and rear areas. Today's M1 tanks would have been more to his liking, totally suited to the attack.

Despite its long service, the M60 tanks saw little combat by United States' forces. They were of limited use to the Marines in Beirut, and until the mass attack of some 200 Marine M60A1 tanks in Kuwait during the Gulf War, were virtually untested by U.S. forces. Israel used its M60s to great battlefield effect in the Sinai and on the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War; and in the Gulf War, Egypt fielded M60A3s in Kuwait.



## Park 'em...

Above, an M60 tank platoon maneuvers across the Kansas prairie enroute to the turn-in facility.

At right, tankers pull their gear off the tanks as they get ready to turn them in. These tanks will be transferred to the Jordanian Army.

Tanks roll into storage, below left, and a "second career" in the Mideast. SGT Clark Bingham, lower right, administers one last farewell kiss.

All photos by the author



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After the active forces began fielding M1s in the 1980s, more M60A3s became available to the National Guard, replacing early M60s or even older M48-series vehicles. Many units received depot rebuilds as a part of the Reagan military build-up, providing the Army Guard with the best armor it had ever had. But through the '90s, most Guard units were converted to M1s, and by January 1997, 1-635th Armor was the last in the system, and scheduled to be deactivated.

As a part of the once-proud 69th Brigade, 35th Infantry Division (Mech), First Tanks were set to follow 2nd of the 635th into the world of the deactivated. The currently used Red, Amber, Green status of the states' end strength indicated that Kansas — in a downward Amber trend — was due to lose force structure. The brigade lost an infantry battalion as well as the armor, and lost the brigade flag, leaving First Grunts and First Tanks to follow soon after.

Into this dismal picture stepped the 69th Brigade's chain of command and Kansas' State Adjutant General. In 1995, they reviewed the status of 1-635th Armor and found something worth fighting for — a highly efficient and hard-charging bunch of DATs. Over the next two years, the battalion produced a string of successes which lead to an eventual decision to retain the unit and upgrade to M1s. During this period the tankers:

- Produced a national winner in the Army Chief of Staff's Supply Excellence program.
- Qualified 48 tank crews on Tank Table VIII (including a score of 996) at the Fort Riley MPRC, one of the toughest ranges in the world, and in the same two-week annual training fired all platoons in a Platoon Kills Battalion exercise. This coming from a training cycle with no funding for gunnery ramp-up and only one 1970s MCOFT trainer of dubious reliability for the whole battalion.
- Supplied the Kansas National Guard Officer of the Year.
- Twice supplied the Kansas Best Individual Soldier of the Year.
- Supplied the best NCO in brigade-level competition.

- Increased strength from 85% to the current 100% before retiring the M60A3 MTOE.
- Placed second in the National Guard heavy-rucksack division of the Bataan Death March in New Mexico.
- Placed first in the Adjutant General's APFT team competition, including a junior officer scoring 374 on the extended scale, winning the overall individual competition.
- Had eight M1 Tank Commander school honor graduates of 20 classes conducted.

Through these efforts and others, the battalion made believers out of the National Guard Bureau and the 40th Division, from California. Effective September 1998, 1-635th Armor becomes a battalion of the 40th Infantry Division (Mech), (headquartered in California) armed with M1-IP tanks. At this writing the unit is preparing to fire screening rounds in April and May 1998, to proof the new fleet of M1s in expectation of entering a full-year of gunnery training in FY99. The gunnery cycle in 1999 is expected to be of similar intensity at the Ft. Riley MPRC. Again, with limited resources and funding, the battalion will have to rely on talented NCOs and officers, drive and enthusiasm — items not carried in PLL, but nonetheless abundant.

LTC Bloomquist speaks for everyone in the unit when he says of the M1s, “they are a dream come true.”

“This is the finest weapon system in the world and we're proud to have them. We're going to perform with them. But we had nothing to be ashamed of with the M60s. We were able to do more with less than any unit I can think of. The Jordanians are getting a fine tank with our Kansas A3s,” he said.

The Kingdom of Jordan has purchased the entire M60A3 unit, and the tanks have been entirely rebuilt, some for the third, fourth, or even fifth time since they were cast in the 1960s. The purchase enhances the Jordanian Army, adding to the vehicles purchased when 2635th Armor rolled away, and from other states.

The 1998 class of the International Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, were guests at a recent luncheon meeting of the Topeka Chapter

of the Association of the United States Army. An AUSA member who is also a company commander in 1-635th Armor found himself seated next to a Jordanian battalion commander who was very eager to get home in order to get right to work on his new Kansas-provided M60A3 tanks.

“These are the best tanks in our Army,” he said. “It is exciting to have world-class equipment.”

M60s will continue to generate that kind of enthusiasm for many years to come, all around the globe. We will remember them fondly here in the USA. In Kansas, we're proud to be members of the “Last of the M60 Tankers” Club, and say goodbye to a sturdy warrior of the Cold War.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Hunnicut, R.P., *PATTON: A History of the American Main Battle Tank*, Presidio Press, 1984, pp. 421-459, vehicle data sheets.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Military Academy Home Page, World Wide Web Address: [www.dmi.usma.edu/Milresources/weapons/m60tank.htm](http://www.dmi.usma.edu/Milresources/weapons/m60tank.htm).

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