

A Centurion Returns to Puckapunyal

Introduction

In early 2010, a Centurion tank returned to Puckapunyal, some 34 years after participating in the 1st Armoured Regiment's Farewell to the Centurion parade. The tank had been purchased by the 1st Armoured Regiment Association and is now being displayed at the Australian Army Tank Museum, courtesy of its new owners. It was purchased with donations from the Association's members from Lieutenant Colonel Peter Jarratt (Retired), who had owned the tank for many years.

The Tank

The Centurion, carrying Australian Army Registration Number (ARN) 169005, was one of the first batch of tanks to be purchased by the Australian Army. Australian Army Order 2813 was issued to the UK Government for the purchase of 60 Centurion Mark 3 Main Battle Tanks, the first batch of which arrived in Australia in late 1951. This tank originally carried the UK WD number 01BA24 and was brought onto Australian Army charge by 3 Base Ordnance Depot in March 1952.

The Mark 3 Centurion mounted a wartime 7.92mm Besa Machine Gun as its coaxial armament. In this configuration it served with both the Armoured School and the 1st Armoured Regiment at Puckapunyal during the 1950s. During a base overhaul in 1958 it was converted to Mark 5 standard. This involved changing the coaxial machine gun to a Browning .30 inch, requiring a larger diameter hole in the mantlet.

Following the base overhaul the tank was returned to Puckapunyal and served again with the 1st Armoured Regiment until 1965 when it was again sent for a base overhaul. It is believed at this time it received modifications to Mark 5/1 standard, including the fitting of a .50 inch Ranging Machine Gun and an uparmoured glacis plate.

Operational Service

In November 1967, after the 1st Armoured Regiment had been warned for active service in South Vietnam, the tank was issued to the Independent Armoured Squadron then conducting work up training for the first deployment of Australian tanks overseas since the end of the Second World War.

Following its deployment to South Vietnam in 1968, the tank was initially held by the 1st Forward Delivery Troop. In December 1968 the tank was issued to C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, and moved to Fire Support Base Julia, where it participated in Operation Goodwood. It remained with C Squadron until its relief by B Squadron in early 1969.

The tank was on issue to 3 Troop B Squadron when Corporal Whitney Clark took over as the crew commander in March/April 1969. The tank then carried the Callsign 23C and was named "Chuckles". The tank was involved in land clearing operations during this period, whereby armoured protection was given to the engineers involved in clearing jungle around villages, thus denying the VC covered approaches.

On 13 May 1969, the tank was part of a sweep designed to clear a road to allow resupply vehicles to use it. The tank was about 500metres along the track when it detonated a large mine, which exploded directly under the driver's compartment. The driver, Trooper Jim Kerr, was killed instantly, and the gunner Trooper Chris Lehy severely wounded. This was the second Centurion tank to suffer serious mine damage which resulted in the death of the driver.

In a later technical report on the damage to the vehicle was described as:

Attack on tank: Mine 60 to 80 Pounds of TNT

Point of Strike: Under driver's compartment at forward end

Damage: Extensive damage to hull floor, driver's compartment and 20 round bin. Hull floor lifted, split and pieces broken out. Driver's seat and controls wrecked.

The tank was returned to the Australian Task Force base and a replacement tank was issued to Corporal Clark, and two new members joined the crew. 169005 was subsequently declared Beyond Local Repair (BLR) and returned to Australia.

The Tank is Reborn

During a tank's rebuild, the turret and hull are separated and all components are usually stripped from them. As the hull was damaged beyond repair, a replacement hull was sourced and given the ARN 169005. At the time of committing tanks to service in South Vietnam, the Army looked at obtaining some replacement tanks to allow training in Australia to continue, to serve as a pool of spare tanks and to take up shortfalls caused during the transport of tanks to and from the war zone.

Thus a number of tanks were purchased from New Zealand and the British Army in Hong Kong. With the exception of a Centurion Armoured Recovery Vehicle Mark 1, none of the New Zealand tanks were put into service, instead remaining as a source of spares. Thus a New Zealand hull was used to become the tank 169005. It is interesting to note that the identification plate inside the driver's compartment of the replacement tank is actually the plate from the original 169005 hull.

The tank was thus rebuilt and issued to 1st Armoured Regiment in 1970, where it served out the remainder of its career.

The Tank is Retired

Along with the remaining Centurion tanks in service, 169005 was returned to Bandiana Ordnance Depot in 1977 and placed in long-term storage. It took some time for the Army to decide the fate of the Centurion tanks and it wasn't until 1989 that the Centurion tank fleet was sold to Combat Vehicles Australia, a private company. The tank was sold to a private collector shortly afterwards, and it was then purchased by the former Commanding Officer of the 1st Armoured Regiment, Peter Jarratt.

Peter restored the tank and fully equipped it with its Complete Equipment Schedule (CES), including radios and optics. The tank was stored under cover and run up at regular intervals.

The uniqueness of the tank, and its completeness, were major factors in the decision of the 1st Armoured Regiment Association to acquire the tank when Peter decided that he could no longer give it the same care he had done for his long period of ownership. A major fund-raising drive was undertaken by the Association and thus the tank was purchased and moved to Puckapunyal.

In an agreement between the Association and the Australian Army History Unit, the tank will be stored at the Australian Army Tank Museum, located at Hopkins Barracks, adjacent to the School of Armour. A major factor leading to this agreement is that the tank will be available to assist with technical training and preservation of RAAC heritage, the reasons for which the Museum exists. During these activities the tank will be operated by Association members who have been trained in its operation and servicing requirements. The Association also provides the tank to participate in a number of Corps activities, including the annual Corps Conference and Dinner, and its own Annual Dinner.

Dedication

This article is dedicated to the members of the 1st Armoured Regiment who served in South Vietnam between 1968 and 1971, using the Centurion tank, a vehicle considered by many to be unsuitable for operations in South East Asia. They proved that the tanks could be operated in very difficult terrain, and that their mere presence often caused the enemy to break off an engagement. Their ability to provide immediate and devastating firepower saved many lives in the infantry battalions they supported.

The fact that only two crewmen were killed during the tanks' period of deployment is a testament to its design and construction.

Acknowledgements

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