

# A Sheridan Memoir: The Early Days

by Lieutenant Colonel Burton S. Boudinot (Retired)

"Good-Bye, Sheridan"

These were the headlines on the 23 September 1996, *Army Times*. The Sheridan may be gone from combat units, but its chassis will be around at the National Training Center for many more years.

Considering that the M551 was a vehicle and weapons system nobody wanted, it has spent more than 27 years in the Army inventory. For a combat vehicle, that places it among the immortals. Like General Sheridan himself, who was reported killed at least five times during the Civil War, the M551 was dropped from the inventory at least as many times, yet survived each cut. It served a three-year combat tour in Vietnam, and was employed by U.S. Cavalry units in Germany and Korea for nine years.

When I showed an old Army buddy a local paper, which included a photo of Sheridans being pushed off a barge into a bay off the Virginia coast to become marine life habitats, he said, "They belong with the fish." There seemed to be a love/hate relationship between the soldier and the M551 from Day One.

In 1960, while I was attending the Armor Advanced Course at Fort Knox, Kentucky, my class was shown a concept called the Armored Reconnaissance Airborne Assault Vehicle. We were told it was not a light tank, but something the airborne wanted to protect their troops from enemy tanks. It was to have a powerful missile/gun weapons systems that could meet numerous threats. It would float and could be parachuted or LAPESed. We were told Armor Branch was in doubt about this *thing* for the cavalry, so we forgot about it.

Well, time passes. In 1967, as a young LTC with the Combat Developments Command - Armor Agency, I found I was getting very involved with development of the Shillelagh missile and the 152mm M409 multipurpose round. Both of these were fired down the same tube on the XM551 which, by the way, looked very much like an Armored Reconnaissance Airborne Assault Vehicle. I wondered what Armor was going to do with this system... why were we testing it? That is a long story.

Earlier, we had taken the best light tank in the world, the M41, out of the inventory.

We all knew light tanks had not been a favorite in the U.S. Army since the M41 was pulled out of cavalry units in Germany in 1959. A friend in a high position on the Army staff told me that Armor was never going to buy the M551. It was too controversial and complicated. Then, at a "Combat Vehicle Review" held in Cleveland, Ohio in about 1965 or 1966, we learned the M551 was to be type-classified and enter the inventory as the "Sheridan." One general asked why we were putting light tanks back into armored cavalry units. Another general said it was not a light tank, but a long-range weapons system to counter the Soviet tank threat in Europe. Another general said the Army only names its tanks after famous generals. This started the frequently repeated question: "The 551 Sheridan, what is it?" The Armor and Engineer Board at Fort Knox was not satisfied with the progress of the Sheridan, and reported the M551 was not ready for issue to the troops.

By July 1968, times changed again. I found myself assigned to MACV J3 in Saigon. I had not even signed in when a colonel came to my hotel room to ask if I knew anything about the M551. When I told him "yes," the colonel was ecstatic. He said the theater commander, General Creighton Abrams, was familiar with the Sheridan, but nobody else was. The general wanted to know why the M551 should not come to Vietnam. He knew there were 1,500 of them parked on a ramp in Cleveland, Ohio. He also thought the M409 round would make a great bunker buster. The next morning, I explained to the J3 that the Armor and Engineer Board did not think the M551 was ready for issue. He ordered me to do a study and have recommendations in one month. In a few days, I asked the Armor School Sheridan project officer, the A&E Board M551 test officer, and the commanding officer of the 73rd Tank Battalion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where the M551 was in operational field test, to be brought to Vietnam. The three LTCs arrived in about a week. After a few days of studying the proposal, we told the J3 we thought the M551 was not well-suited for Vietnam.

Well, said the J3, think again. General Abrams wanted to know if the M551 would



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be of any use at all in Vietnam. My colleagues thanked me for their free trip to Vietnam and returned home. I then briefed Abrams, with these recommendations: The Shillelagh missile and its guidance control system should stay at home, and only 27 vehicles should be brought into country, all with added armor enhancement, especially belly armor.

General Abrams said, "Let's do it."

In early January 1969, the first Sheridans and their new equipment training teams arrived in Vietnam. The reception by the 11th Armored Cavalry was cool. Then, on January 29, two Sheridans were on picket duty along the Long Binh highway. At about 0230, the crewmen were alerted of movement to their front. The Sheridan searchlights were turned on, and enemy troops were sighted crossing a dirt road. Two 152mm rounds were fired, each sending hundreds of small, arrow-like flechettes down range. At daylight, 125 bodies were found, along with dozens of blood trails.

In short order, the M409 round was soon blowing dirt, pieces of bamboo, and the enemy thirty to forty feet into the air. The M409 was a very effective bunker buster. With all of its shortcomings, the M551 had gone to war.

During the next three years, over five hundred Sheridans were issued in Vietnam. During that period, over three hundred were damaged or destroyed by mines and RPGs, mostly by mines. Personnel casualties were high. A wounded crewman once told me that the Sheridan was the "devil's chariot." Under Vietnam conditions, it is hard to measure the effectiveness of a system that was designed to fire a missile at long range. Close-in combat was not the Sheridan's strong point. But even its greatest critics had to admire its reliable suspension and power train. Its longevity is probably a result of the Sheridan's chassis.

In 1978, the M551 was retired from active duty TO&E units, except for the 73rd Tank Battalion of the 82nd Airborne Division. What was to be done with the rest? That did not take long to figure out. The National Training Center needed realistic-looking Soviet vehicles, and these were adopted on the M551's chassis. T-72 and BMP VIS-



MODs were created with fiberglass molded overlays.

The Research & Development people also tried putting different gun and missile systems on the Sheridans over the years, and the M551 chassis was also used in many experimental field tests of other developmental items. Everyone seems to have had ideas on what to do with the M551's great chassis.

Most of us probably have no idea of all the places the Sheridan has traveled with the 73rd Tank Battalion. We do know it went to Panama, Haiti, Desert Shield, and Desert Storm.

Eventually the Sheridan will go away. Many more may become homes for marine life, but that is not all bad either. Then we can really say, "Good-bye, Sheridan."

Author's Note: For those who are interested in much greater detail on the development of the Sheridan, R.J. Hunnicutt includes a very thorough and comprehensive account in his book, *Sheridan, A History of the American Light Tank, Vol. 2*.

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Above, a very early prototype Sheridan launches a Shillelagh missile in tests during the 1960s. The Sheridan shared the Shillelagh missile system with the M60A3 MBT, but when it was sent to Vietnam, no need was seen for the missile.



At right, a C-130 delivers a Sheridan using low-altitude parachute extraction. The vehicle's airmobility, and the need for a rapidly-deployable fire support vehicle for airborne troops, kept the Sheridan in Army service for a remarkably long time.



One experimental attempt to extend the Sheridan's life was this 105-mm low-recoil turret developed by Cadillac Gage.