

The Grim Reaper

This M48 may have been the most heavily gunned tank in Vietnam

by Dave Decker

The year was 1969. I was a crew member on B35, a tank called "The Grim Reaper," serving with the 3rd Platoon, B Co., 2/34 Armor, OPCON to the 1st Infantry Division. This M48A3 was probably the most heavily gunned tank in Vietnam.

By various nefarious means, my crew had been able to acquire more machine guns and personal weapons than any other tank in the theater. Besides the 90mm cannon, the M73 coax, and the issue M2 HB .50 cal. machine gun, we mounted other crew-served guns to improve our firepower. During 1969, in III Corps, it was common practice to mount the TC's 50 cal. on an infantry tripod base, welded to the top of the cupola. This facilitated reloading and improved flexibility of fire. Another .50 cal. was mounted on



a tripod that had been welded in front of the loader's hatch. (Some crews did not mount any guns in that position; others mounted M60s.) Yet another 50 cal. was mounted on a modified infantry tripod welded in place near the tank's travel lock on the rear deck.

The accompanying photos show another arrangement, where the 7.62mm Minigun from a Cobra helicopter was adapted to mount in front of the loader's hatch. To my knowledge, this was the first and only time a Minigun was employed in this manner. Ammo fed from a former coax ammo box strapped to the side of the turret. However, after a night attack on the perimeter of the Rome Plow operation base we were assigned to guard, this Minigun was confiscated by an irate high-ranking officer.

An M60 with a ready pack was kept in the bustle rack, along with an M14E1 rifle, an M79 grenade launcher, a couple of M-16s, a few captured AK-47s, issued M3 .45 cal. submachine guns, hand flares, and radios. Most of the crew also carried .45 cal. pistols.



Above, at left, a 7.62mm Minigun salvaged from a helicopter was mounted in front of the loader's hatch... until the crew was ordered to remove it.

Visible at right are the .50 cal. machine gun mounted on the rear deck, near the travel lock, and another on a tripod in front of the TC's hatch.

All photos by the author

Dave Decker enlisted in 1968, and after basic and advanced training at Fort Knox, and jump school at Fort Benning, served in cavalry and armor units at Fort Lewis, Wash., and the Republic of Vietnam. In Vietnam, he earned the Bronze Star, Air Medal with "V" device, Distinguished Flying Cross, and the Army Commendation Medal. In 1991, he was awarded full disability for the effects of exposure to Agent Orange.