

# Armor in the 1960s-70s

Text and [photos](#) by retired LTC James Olmstead

The 1960s and 70s saw many transitions in Armor. The near-term World War II aftermath in Europe morphed into a deeper Cold War, followed by a shift of focus to Vietnam. U.S. Army Armor equipment changed markedly.

The M41 light tank was phased out; the M48- and M60-series tanks and the M551 Armored Reconnaissance Airborne Assault Vehicle (ARAAV) evolved, matured and waned. The MBT-70 development program with Germany started, sputtered and died. It was followed in the United States by the XM-803 program, which met a similar fate. As an interim replacement, 500-plus missile-launching M60A2s were fielded but withdrawn shortly thereafter, principally due to reliability and maintenance issues. Following these cancellations, the M1 Abrams was designed and developed.

Evidence of this equipment turbulence was seen at the Armor School. The school trained turret mechanics for multiple models of tanks (and one combat engineer vehicle) with various combinations of optical and laser rangefinders, mechanical and solid-state ballistic computers, active and passive night illumination and sights, stabilized and unstabilized turrets, and 76, 90, 105 and 165mm conventional cannons/guns and 152mm missile/gun launchers. Much of this training occurred simultaneously because all turret components were fielded at the same time. Of course, crews moving among units with different tank models faced similar challenges. While the continental United States and U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) received the full range of tank developments, U.S. Army units in Korea and Vietnam were focused on the M48-series tank and the M551 ARAAV.

In Europe, the stand-off between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Soviet Union/Warsaw Pact forces intensified with the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961. USAREUR armored vehicles were fully uploaded with ammunition, fuel and rations, even while in garrison and adjacent to family housing areas. Periodic alerts, generally at night, could be “muster only” or “move-out” – the latter sometimes resulting in downed gates and fences as units moved to nearby dispersal areas within the two hours allowed. Extended field exercises would routinely find armored columns on the autobahns and tanks in small German villages. In winter, maneuvers across farmers’ frozen fields were common, as were claims for maneuver damage from tanks sliding on icy village cobblestones. Rail travel of armored vehicles to major training areas was routine but strictly managed by the Deutsche Bundesbahn.

Enlisted soldiers were identified in their service numbers as either “RA” (Regular Army, voluntary enlistment) or “US” (draftees, like Elvis Presley). Family housing and barracks were generally available and comfortable, many of them holdovers from German forces in World War II. Travel to and from Europe was either by charter air (frequently making necessary fueling stops in Newfoundland, Greenland and Ireland reroute) or via ship (*USNS Patch* and *Rose*.)

For families in Europe, the Non-combatant Emergency Order included mandatory briefings of evacuation procedures to embarkation ports (and, for a time, “leave your pets behind” was an unpopular instruction). Family cars were required to carry a three-day survival kit of water and blankets. Travel to and from West Germany to West Berlin was generally only by air or the duty train (with closed curtains over the windows.)

In the early 1960s, West Germany was a pleasant duty assignment. Most war damage had been repaired. Tiny cars (and massive Mercedes) shared the autobahns with tank columns, German polizei in convertible Porsches and an occasional, but authorized, Soviet “military liaison” officer taking notes and pictures. Chain restaurants had not yet populated the country, so a norm for a dinner out was the local gasthaus for schnitzel, pomfrits, salad and the local wine or beer. Seasonal fests were always fun, and the military recreation areas in Bavaria were available for relaxation or skiing in the Alps.

By 1966, the buildup in Vietnam began to impact forces in Germany as individual tours were curtailed and unit strengths were greatly reduced. However, USAREUR missions remained the same. RA officers had active service extended via “stop loss” actions necessary to meet requirements for Vietnam – many of them going to infantry assignments when they arrived there.

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## **Acronym Quick-Scan**

**ARAAV** – Armored Reconnaissance Airborne Assault Vehicle

**RA** – Regular Army

**USAREUR** – U.S. Army Europe