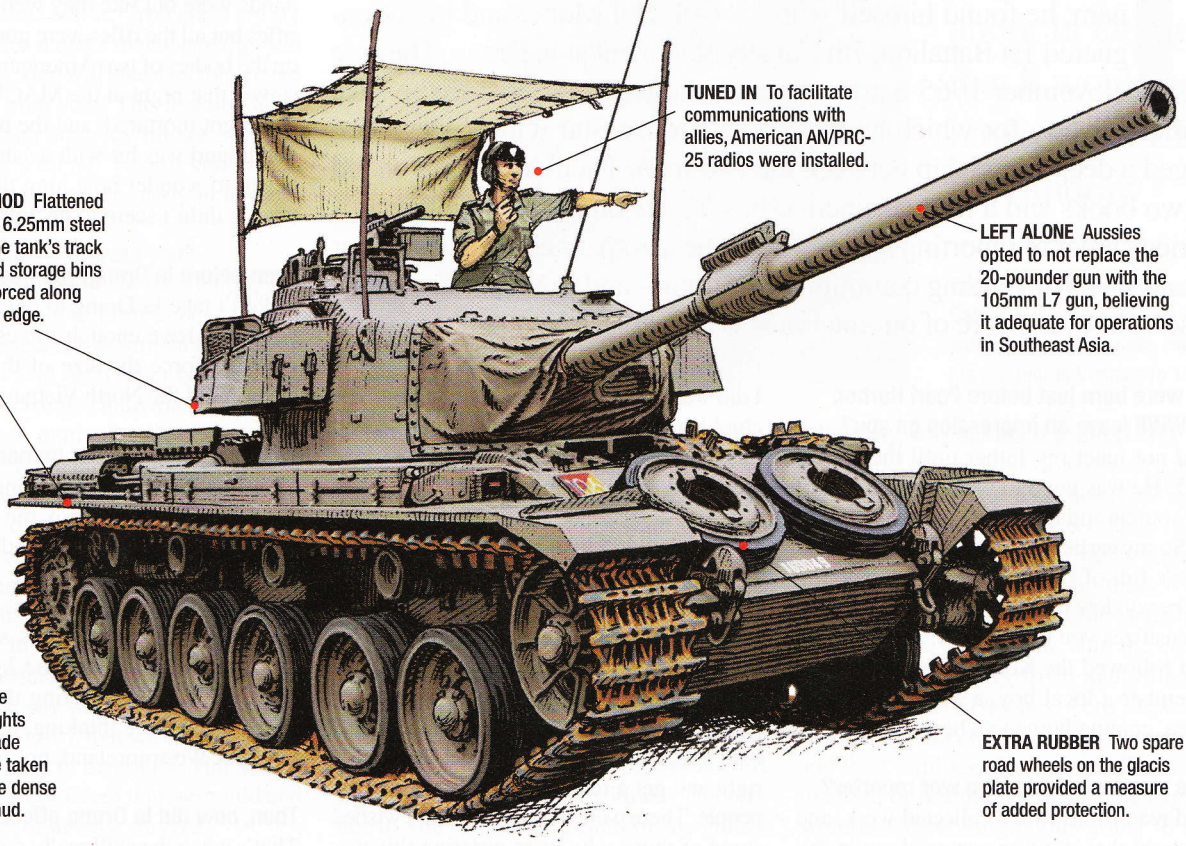
BY CARL O. SCHUSTER

Australia's Centurion Mark 5 tank



TUNED IN To facilitate communications with allies, American AN/PRC-25 radios were installed.

CUSTOM MOD Flattened sections of 6.25mm steel replaced the tank's track guards, and storage bins were reinforced along the turret's edge.

LEFT ALONE Aussies opted to not replace the 20-pounder gun with the 105mm L7 gun, believing it adequate for operations in Southeast Asia.

STRIPPED DOWN Track guards, side skirts, infrared lights and smoke grenade dischargers were taken off because of the dense vegetation and mud.

EXTRA RUBBER Two spare road wheels on the glacis plate provided a measure of added protection.

ON FEBRUARY 24, 1968, the first Centurion tanks of Australia's C Squadron, 1st Armoured Regiment, came ashore at South Vietnam's Phuc Tuy Province to join Canberra's Vietnam Task Force, which was based at Nui Dat. The tanks' arrival followed that of a third infantry battalion, bringing the task force up to brigade strength. Well armored, mobile and easy to maintain, the Centurions would demonstrate their value in numerous small unit actions over the next three years.

Built in Britain, the A41 Centurion's original design was based on the lessons learned fighting German Panther tanks in World War II. Too late to see combat in that war, it more than held its own against the Soviet-built T-34/85s it faced in Korea.

Australia acquired its first Centurion, the Mk 3 variant, in 1955. The Mk 3 incorporated the 20-pounder (84mm) gun with stabilizing mechanism, a more powerful engine and a 100-gallon external fuel tank to extend the range. Its coaxial L6A1 .50-cal machine gun served as a "ranging gun" for the main battery and was tied into the main gun's fire control system, which limited it to three-round bursts.

Australia upgraded most of its Centurions to the Mark 5/1 before deploying them to Vietnam. The upgrade consisted of installing infrared sighting systems and replacing the two original 7.62mm Besa secondary machine guns with .30-caliber Brownings: an L3A3 coaxial fired by the tank gunner; and an L3A4 mounted on a flex mount attached to the commander's cupola.

The absence of enemy tanks in Vietnam drove the Centurion into a primarily infantry-support role, with several field modifications. Its gun fired four types of rounds: high explosive, armor-piercing, smoke and canister. The last proved very effective against close-in infantry but most often was used to clear away brush and foliage to expose enemy bunkers and defensive positions.

The Centurion had good cross-country mobility but was too heavy for many of South Vietnam's bridges. In spite of having a gasoline engine, it proved robust in combat and easy to maintain and repair. The Centurion's presence and firepower proved critical to the battles over firebases Coral and Balmoral in 1968. Of the 58 Centurions that served in Vietnam, 42 suffered battle damage (six beyond repair), but only two crewmen were killed. The last Centurion was withdrawn from Vietnam in August 1971 and from frontline service two months later as the Australian Army began its transition to German-built Leopard tanks. ☆

Centurion Mark 5 Tank

Main gun	20 pounder/84mm
Secondary guns	one .50-cal/two .30-cal
Height	9 ft. 7.75 in.
Weight	50 tons
Crew	4
Engine	650 bhp V-12
Maximum road speed	21.5 mph
Range, road/off road	133 miles/66 miles

GREGORY PROCH