

In Memoriam: MG(R) Robert J. Sunell



MG(R) Robert J. Sunell, the leader who was instrumental in developing and fielding the Abrams tank, died Aug. 8, 2020. He was 91.

He is preceded in death by his wife, Joann, and his son, Robert P. Sunell.

MG Sunell entered military service in 1953 and retired 33 years later in 1987.

Contributions

MG Sunell was an excellent leader, an innovative thinker and a visionary. His peers referred to him as “the father of the modern tank.” For example, he was a forward thinker regarding the Army’s training needs, and he instituted programs that greatly improved Army capabilities. As deputy program manager for the XM1 Tank Systems in Warren, MI, he conceived and incorporated into the design of the M-1 tank innovative ideas that resulted in the Army’s fielding the premier tank in the world.

As a major general and project manager of the M1 Abrams tank, he conceived the idea of a family of armored vehicles to replace the armored force as it became obsolete.

MG Sunell was a leader in the development of conceptual use of artificial intelligence in warfare. He served on the steering committee of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, for the Defense Industrial Base Study and the future of armor/anti-armor warfare. He was also an adviser to the Army Science Board on “Close Combat (Heavy) Training Strategies for the 1990s.”

MG Sunell was also a consultant for armor/anti-armor and virtual simulation programs with the Institute for Defense Analyses, and was appointed as a consultant to the Army Science Board’s Tank Modernization Study.



Figure 1. M1A1 System Enhancement Program V2 Abrams tank. MG Sunell’s work not only influenced the tank the United States fields as its main battle tank, but other countries use variants of the Abrams. (U.S. Army photo)

Summation of service

MG Sunell commanded both infantry and armor units in peace and war, and held multiple positions that significantly impacted the development of the current armored force. His assignments included executive officer,

1st Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, Vietnam; commander, 2nd Battalion, 8th Infantry, 4th Infantry Division, Vietnam; chief, Battalion and Brigade Tactical Operations Division, Armor School, Fort Knox, KY; deputy director, Armored Reconnaissance Scout Vehicle Task Force, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, stationed at Fort Knox; deputy project manager, XM1 Tank Systems, Warren, MI; commander, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Germany; commander, Army Training Support Center (during the development of the National Training Center), Fort Eustis, VA; project manager, M1 Tank System, U.S. Army Materiel Command, Warren, MI; and director, Armored Family of Vehicles Task Force, Office of the Deputy Chief for Operations and Plans, Fort Eustis, VA.

Notably, when MG Sunell assumed command of 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (Blackhorse Regiment), based in Fulda Germany, in 1978, his responsibilities included implementing and testing the new cavalry organization as well as integrating new vehicles into the regiment. He was promoted to brigadier general while in command of the 11th Cavalry, the only general to command the regiment. Colleagues commented that the 11th Cav assignment was the one he was the proudest of and meant the most to him.

In the international arena, MG Sunell was an exchange officer with the British Army and program-manager adviser for "Tank 88," a Korean indigenous tank. He also chaired the U.S.-German and U.S.-British Tank Standardization and Harmonization Program, and he worked closely with the Israeli and Swedish research and development community.

After retirement, he was a member of the Swedish Science Council. He also founded Suonperra Inc., which worked closely with U.S. and Allied militaries to improve international cooperation through common equipment and methods. MG Sunell was a contract professional for several companies involved in training simulation, robotics, artificial intelligence and armaments for future combat vehicles.

His military schooling included the basic infantry-officer course, the advanced course for Armor officers, U.S. Marine Corps Command and General Staff College and the U.S. Army War College. His civilian education included a bachelor's of degree in education from the University of Nebraska and a master's of science degree in communications from Shippensburg State College.

MG Sunell held a number of awards for valor and service. These awards included the Silver Star, Legion of Merit (two awards), Bronze Star, Air Medal with V device, Meritorious Service Award (two oak-leaf clusters) and Distinguished Service Medal.

MG Sunell will be interred in Arlington National Cemetery.