

Saddles and Sabers: U.S. Army Tank Gunnery Qualification Patches

by Thomas D. Dinackus

Soldiers assigned to U.S. Army Armor and Cavalry units began wearing specialized patches in the early 1960s commemorating that the wearer had achieved a “qualified” or “distinguished” score on his assigned combat vehicle or weapons system during annual gunnery qualification. These patches, variously known as “qualification,” “gunnery” or “Tank Crew Qualification Course” (TCQC) patches, were not authorized by the Department of the Army, but they were approved by local commanders as a way to build esprit de corps. Unfortunately this practice fell out of favor in the 1980s and qualification patches faded into history.

Gunnery qualification patches differ from better-known awards, such as the Expert Infantryman Badge and airborne wings, in several key ways. First, qualification patches were issued to vehicle or weapons system crews, not to individual Soldiers. Second, gunnery patches were awarded for successfully completing training that was directly related to the Soldier’s specific warfighting role. Finally, the patches, like the warfighting proficiency for which they were awarded, had a limited shelf life and had to be renewed each year.

Furthermore, gunnery patches were “unofficial” in every sense of the word. While shoulder patches are authorized by the Department of the Army and designed by the Army’s Institute of Heraldry, gunnery patches were designed and adopted by the using units. Some involved complex designs that depicted the unit’s heritage, while others didn’t even identify the unit or the purpose of the insignia. Also, the quality of manufacture varied significantly. And, although a Soldier’s gunnery patch may have been one of his most prized possessions, he was almost always required to remove it from his uniform when he arrived at a new unit.

Units based in Europe first to use

The use of tank-gunnery patches began in U.S. Army Europe in the early 1960s. The first unit to adopt them was 3rd Armored Division, which began issuing TCQC patches in 1962. These qualification patches exhibited the distinctive shape that was to become unique to tank gunnery patches: a wide patch, with a straight horizontal bottom and vertical sides that were pinched inward half way up the patch, culminating with either a pointed or curved top.

Ironically, these early qualification patches did not identify which unit issued them or what purpose they served. All they included was the Armor Branch insignia and the year issued (Figure 1).



Figure 1. 3rd Armored Division 1963 “qualified” TCQC patch. This patch was also issued in a “distinguished” version, with a scroll on the body of the patch that stated “distinguished tank crew,” similar to the 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized) 1969 “distinguished” TCQC patch (Figure 4). The 3rd Armored Division was stationed in Germany.

The 3rd Armored Division went on to become the most significant user of qualification patches, issuing them for more than 20 years until the early 1980s. In addition, 3rd Armored Division had the most extensive array of patches, issuing them for scout vehicle crews, M551 Sheridan crews,¹ tank crews, mechanized-infantry squads,

antitank weapon crews, mortar crews, howitzer crews, air-defense-artillery weapon crews, M728 Combat-Engineer Vehicle (CEV) crews and ground-surveillance radar (GSR) crews.

Gunnery patches were most widespread in units stationed in Germany (Figures 1-5, 8, 10-11). They took a while to catch on with units stationed in Korea, but once they came into use there in the early 1970s, they saw widespread service until being phased out in the early 1980s (Figure 6).

Gunnery patches spread to continental United States-based units slowly. They did not achieve anything approaching widespread acceptance until well into the 1970s (Figures 7, 9). Their use varied substantially, depending on the installation.



Figure 2. 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry, 1968 TCQC patch. The 3-7 Cav was assigned to 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) and was stationed in Germany in 1968.



Figure 3. 4th Armored Division 1969 “qualified” TCQC patch with “distinguished crew” tab. The 4th Armored Division was stationed in Germany.



Figure 4. 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized) 1969 “distinguished” TCQC patch. This patch was also issued in a “qualified” version, which lacked the scroll and the “distinguished tank crew” label. The 8th Infantry Division (Mechanized) was stationed in Germany.



Figure 5. 3rd Armored Division 1970 “distinguished scout crew” patch. This patch was also issued in a “qualified” version, which had “SCQC” in place of the “distinguished scout crew” scroll.



Figure 6. 1st Battalion, 73rd Armor, 1974 “combat ready” (i.e., “qualified”) TCQC patch. This patch was also issued in a “distinguished” version. The 1-73 Armor was assigned to 2nd Infantry Division and was stationed in Korea.



Figure 7. 5th Battalion, 33rd Armor, 1976 “qualified” TCQC patch. This patch was also issued in a “distinguished” version. The 5-33 Armor was assigned to 194th Armored Brigade and was stationed at Fort Knox, KY. This patch is almost 5¾ inches wide, making it quite possibly the largest TCQC patch.



Figure 8. 3rd Armored Division 1977 M551 “qualified” TCQC patch with “distinguished” tab and “1977 qualified cav platoon” scroll. This patch was removed from a uniform, and the twill cloth, which was originally olive drab, is very faded. The tab and scroll were issued separately but have been sewn onto this patch.



Figure 9. Troop G, 2nd Squadron, 6th Cavalry, 1977 “qualified” patch. It is unknown if this patch was issued with a “distinguished” tab or if it came in a “distinguished” version. This unit was stationed at Fort Knox, KY, and supported the Armor School.



Figure 10. 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) annual qualification patch with “1977 scout squad” and “1978 super scout” tabs. The 11th ACR was stationed in Germany in the late 1970s.



Figure 11. 1st Armored Division 1979 “qualified” TCQC patch sewn over a 1978 “amber” TCQC patch. In 1978, 1st Armored Division used “amber” and “green” to signify, respectively, “qualified” and “distinguished.” “Level 1 tank gunnery” refers to qualification gunnery; Level 2 was sustainment gunnery, for which no patch was issued. The 1st Armored Division was stationed in Germany then.

Sadly, the number of units that issued gunnery patches dropped drastically in the mid-1980s as the new camouflaged Battle Dress Uniform replaced fatigues. For many units, 1983 was the last year they issued qualification patches.

Reserve Component use

Gunnery patches were fairly rare in Reserve Component (RC) units, and those RC units that did adopt them typically did so in the 1980s, years after they became common in active-duty units (Figure 12). However, a high percentage of RC units continued to wear their gunnery patches into the mid- and late-1980s, well after most Active Army units had stopped wearing them.



Figure 12. 1st Battalion, 127th Armor, TCQC patch with “Tk Tbl VII distinguished 1981” tab. This patch shows the crosshairs of a tank gunner’s sights centered on a Soviet-made tank. Gunnery qualification for RC tank crews typically culminated with Tank Table VII, rather than Table VIII, due to training constraints. There was probably a “qualified 1981” tab that was issued with this patch. The 1-127 Armor was a New York Army National Guard unit assigned to 42nd Infantry Division.

Gunnery patches were always most popular in armor and armored cavalry units, although some mechanized divisions used them fairly extensively. All three ACRs that served in the Active-Component Army during the mid-1970s through early 1980s (the 2nd and 11th in Germany, and the 3rd at Fort Bliss, TX) issued an array of gunnery patches. The 11th ACR issued the same “annual qualification” patch from 1974 through 1983, along with an array of tabs showing the year and weapon system (Figure 10). The apex was 1977, when 11th Cavalry issued no less than 12 tabs (scout squad,² “super scout,” M551 TCQC, M60A1 TCQC, Dragon, 4.2-inch mortar, Redeye, 155 Artillery, aerial gunnery, CEV TCQC, GSR and TCQC support). The 11th ACR also issued a “distinguished” tab and, in some years, a platoon qualification tab.

Most tank-gunnery patches came in two versions: “qualified” and “distinguished.” Some units awarded a third patch at an intermediate level, either “superior” or “expert.”

Qualification patches were almost always awarded once each year for qualification gunnery. They typically stated the year they were earned, either on the patch itself or on a tab that was issued with the patch. This allowed a Soldier to wear one patch and multiple tabs showing continuing proficiency as a Soldier (Figure 10). In units where the year was on the patch, Soldiers sometimes overlapped the patches to accomplish the same result (Figure 11).

Gunnery patches were typically issued at the division, ACR or battalion/squadron level. Some units issued tabs or scrolls for qualified or distinguished sections or platoons, which were worn above or below the standard qualification patch (Figure 8). A handful of units awarded special patches to the top crew in the unit.

Surprisingly few gunnery patches indicated the type of tank used by the unit. The exception was the patches worn by M551 “Sheridan” crews, which almost always indicated they were for Sheridan gunnery (Figure 8).

Gunnery patches were only worn on the field uniform and were typically sewn on the right pocket of the Soldier’s shirt, field jacket, tanker’s jacket or coveralls. Some units only issued a single patch to each qualifying Soldier, while in other units each recipient received several patches. In the 1960s all gunnery patches were in full color, while subdued patches replaced color patches in the early 1970s.

Gunnery patches are unique to the U.S. Army. As far as the author is aware, they have never been worn by the Marine Corps or any of the foreign armies that have served with or been trained by the U.S. Army.

Lost heritage

Gunnery patches are specifically part of Armor’s heritage. They were never used by light-infantry units. Few mechanized infantry, field artillery, air-defense-artillery or engineer units used qualification patches. When these

units did wear them, it was almost always because they were part of a division or ACR that adopted the patch pursuant to a comprehensive gunnery-patch program.

Few air-cavalry units used gunnery patches, which is surprising in light of their popularity in armored-cavalry units. Some units issued gunnery-support patches to the other Soldiers such as mechanics, truck drivers and cooks, who supported the tankers and other qualifying Soldiers during gunnery.

Unfortunately the Army has done essentially nothing to preserve gunnery qualification patches or document their role in the Army's experience. Few Army museums include any qualification patches in their collections, and those that do typically only have a handful of patches.

The only fairly comprehensive reference on gunnery patches was published by the American Society of Military Insignia Collectors (ASMIC)³ in its periodical, *The Trading Post*, in the 1990s. Surprisingly, there do not appear to be any decent sources on the Internet that discuss gunnery patches in any detail.

The author has heard that some Army units have begun using gunnery-qualification patches again. If so, the Army as a whole should allow Armor and Cavalry units to wear such patches to foster pride, esprit de corps and professionalism.

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Notes

¹ The Sheridan was a light tank used by armored-cavalry units and the Army's sole airborne light-armor battalion. It entered service in the late 1960s and was largely phased out of service a decade later.

² Scout patches could be issued by vehicle crew, scout squad or scout section. When done by squad or section, the course was typically known as Scout Section Proficiency Course.

³ ASMIC is a non-profit organization founded in 1937. It publishes a full-color journal, *The Trading Post*, four times a year and a variety of insignia catalogs that illustrate U.S. Army unit insignia.

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored-cavalry regiment

ASMIC – American Society of Military Insignia Collectors

CEV – combat-engineer vehicle

GSR – ground-surveillance radar

RC – Reserve Component

TCQC – Tank Crew Qualification Course