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Probers Assail Army on Tank

By George Lardner Jr.
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The chairman of a House investigating subcommittee accused the Army yesterday of hustling its problem-riddled Sheridan tanks to South Vietnam out of a determination to field them "come hell or high water."

Rep. Samuel S. Stratton (D-N.Y.) called the program a "billion-dollar boo-boo" and suggested the Pentagon brass were still trying to gloss over its "manifest defects and deficiencies."

Army witnesses insisted that the new weapon "is working very, very well" in Southeast Asia, but Stratton disclosed that some 20 pages of restrictions—raising questions about its safety as well as its effectiveness—have been slapped on its use in combat.

List Declassified

"The 'confidential' list was declassified at Stratton's insistence yesterday during what he called the concluding round of his Armed Services subcommittee's investigation into the program.

The New York Democrat pointedly noted that no official document directed at troops expected to use the Sheridan seems to have been issued until March 17, four days after the subcommittee opened its hearings.

The restrictions were laid down last Nov. 17 by the head of the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command at the Aberdeen, Md., Proving Grounds.

Among the necessary precautions, TECOM listed:

- "Due to a problem with fuel tank leaks, frequent checks for spilled fuel should be made to prevent fires."

- "When operating in jungle or heavy underbrush, vegetation will clog air intake grilles and the radiator, re-

Besson said tests in Panama indicated the Sheridan's turbo-charger could be heard as far as three miles away, but only, he stressed, "under quiet tropic conditions."

"Such as those in Vietnam?" Stratton asked drily. "This is supposed to be a reconnaissance vehicle. If it can be heard three miles away, that's not too reassuring."

Only a "small number" of Sheridans have been deployed overseas, Stratton noted, while hundreds of others are sitting unused in storage depots. He said troops in Vietnam were being asked to give the weapon—a lightweight forerunner of the Army's so-called

"dream tank," the MBT-70—what amounts to an expensive field test with the results still very much in doubt.

The General Accounting Office has estimated that by 1972, the Army will have spent \$1.3 billion on the Sheridan, which was first conceived in 1959. According to earlier testimony, its developers ran into their biggest snags over the vehicle's combination Shillelagh missile and 152 mm gun system. The conventional ammunition wouldn't fire properly.

Praises Performances

The Sheridan's stoutest defender at yesterday's hearing, Lt. Gen. A. W. Betts, chief of

Army research and development, declared that it was "urgent" to get the Sheridan to Vietnam and thus worth the "calculated technical risks" that were taken. He said it was working "very, very well in South Vietnam" although without its Shillelagh missiles—apparently because there are no opposing tanks to fire them at.

At one point, Betts maintained that both the Sheridan vehicle and the Shillelagh missile had passed all their tests "with flying colors" long ago.

"All the returns aren't in," Betts acknowledged at length. "We won't know for another two years whether it was a mistake or whether it wasn't."

quiring frequent cleaning to avoid overheating."

- "Frequent failures of the gunner's periscope . . . can be expected. Therefore a high stockage level of spares is recommended."

- "The cartridge case of all 152 mm. ammunition is highly flammable . . . Very small pieces of smoldering residue left from firing conventional ammunition can ignite the case of a subsequently loaded round."

Tests in Panama

The report, signed by TECOM's commander, Maj. Gen. Frank M. Izenour, also set down a long list of improvements it said should be made. It noted, for example, that the Sheridan, which the Army styles an armored reconnaissance vehicle, "makes too much noise and leaves a 'rooster tail' exhaust that could be spotted.

Stratton asked Gen. F. S. Besson, former commander of the Army Materiel Command, how far away it could be heard.