

The Self Propelled Gun in BAOR - A Potted History to 1970

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Geoff Fletcher moves on from missile systems, special weapons and towed artillery to the topic of self-propelled artillery. This article covers the period from 1951 to the mid-sixties when BAOR was converted to all armoured brigades as Abbott, M109, M107 and MHO (not to mention FV432 and Chieftain) entered service. The consequences of this change and descriptions of these later artillery equipments may form the content of a sub-sequent article. FIELD ARTILLERY SEXTON It was designated "Gun, Self-Propelled, 25-pounder, Sexton" and had its origins in early 1942. Around that time there were requests from armoured divisions with self-propelled artillery support that could keep up with the tanks. The idea was that armoured divisions could operate independently of Corps or Army artillery support in any future advance. The design was to mimic the American Priest self-propelled gun, but mounting the 25-pounder field gun in place of the 105mm howitzer. It is said that it was impossible to create this combination using the M4 chassis used on the Priest, as Congress would not sanction the production of weapons of a type not intended for use by US forces. The decision was therefore made to use the chassis of the Canadian Ram tank instead which had its origins in the earlier US M3 medium tank. The Ram tank was obsolescent as the largest gun it could mount (a 6 pounder) was no longer considered adequate. Production of Sexton commenced in early 1943 at the Montreal Locomotive Works and by the end of that year 424 had been built. By the end of the war a total of 2,150 Sextons had been built. Soon after 1943 each British armoured division had one Sexton field regiment in support, replacing a M7 Priest regiment and by the time of the Normandy Landings, Sexton had virtually replaced the M7 Priest in British service. Sexton was powered by a Continental R-975 air-cooled radial engine which produced a healthy 400 BHP. This meant that a 25 ton Sexton could achieve 25 mph on roads, although cross country it was considerably slower. It carried a crew of six and in addition to its main armament carried two Bren guns for anti-aircraft defence or against ground troops. There were large stowage lockers on either side of the engine compartment at the rear, crammed with ammunition, personal gear and camouflage nets and poles. At some point in its life a Gun Position Officer's (GPO) version of Sexton was produced and this had no 25-pounder gun fitter and the embrasure at the front was plated over. The crew compartment would have been fitted with a map board and wireless operator's position. This vehicle would have been sited at the gun position and taken orders for fire missions from divisional artillery and requested re-supply as necessary too. After the war all other Self-Propelled (SP) Field Guns bar Sexton seem to have been declared obsolete (certainly by the time of the 1949 Census) so Bishop and any other self-propelled equipments had been scrapped or sold by 1949. The only other tracked guns in service were the Archer, A30 Avenger, M10 Achilles and Challenger Self-Propelled anti-tank guns. Sexton-equipped Field Regiments were intended to support armoured brigades, whilst infantry brigades and lorried infantry brigades in Germany had mixed Sexton/Towed 25-pounder regiments (presumably one battery Sexton/two batteries towed). There was no shortage of Sextons so the decision to use towed artillery for other formations in Germany was probably designed to keep costs down. Undoubtedly there were many Sextons in store by the mid-fifties as War Maintenance Reserve (WMR) and they were relatively new (at most 12 years old, the same as the VSEL AS90's currently in service with the Royal Artillery). The armoured brigades in Germany at the start of 1951 were 7 and 33 Armoured Brigades. However, 6 Armoured Division began moving to Germany from the Salisbury Plain area at the end of 1951 bringing an additional armoured brigade - 20 Armoured Brigade. 7 Brigade was supported by 2 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) at Tofrek Barracks, Hildesheim until April 1951 when the role was taken over by 4 Regiment RHA (4 RHA) at Campbell Barracks, Hohn. 4 RHA continued in the role and the Sextons were replaced by M44 in October 1955 (see over). This unit wore "74" on the Royal Artillery arm-of-service square and the 7 Armoured Division formation sign. Although the Sextons were to be deployed with the armoured brigade, the artillery was a divisional asset at this time and 7 Armoured Brigade was part of 7 Armoured Division. 33 Armoured Brigade was part of 11 Armoured Division and was supported by 2 Regiment Royal Horse Artillery (2 RHA) at Tofrek Barracks, Hildesheim from April 1951 until April 1956. 2 RHA wore "74" on the Royal Artillery arm-of-service square and the 11 Armoured Division formation sign. In April 1956, 2 RHA was moved to 12 Infantry Division as part of "Operation Chameleon" but in a different role. "Operation Chameleon" involved a significant re-structuring of BAOR to meet the growing threat from the Warsaw Pact. 20 Armoured Brigade were supported by 1 Regiment RHA who arrived at Waterloo Barracks, Munster from Westdown Camp, Tilshead in February 1952 (although I'm not clear if they brought their Sextons or were re-equipped in Munster). This unit wore "74" on the Royal Artillery arm-of-service square and the 6 Armoured Division formation sign. 1 RHA continued in this role until late 1955 when they re-equipped with M44 (see below). Notice how at this time the RHA dominated these self-propelled roles. Although there were only two TA regiments with Sexton after 1951 - 269 (West Riding) Field Regiment based in Leeds and 270 (West Riding) Field Regiment based in Bradford. These units were almost certainly part of 49 (West Riding and North Midland) Armoured Division and intended to support 8 (Yorkshire) Armoured Brigade which included 45/51 RTR. It seems they converted to towed 25-pounder guns in 1956 bringing to an end the Territorial Army's use of Sexton. There are, however, suggestions that after 1956 Sexton continued to serve

with the TA and there was a further purchase in FY56/57 which could not have been for the regulars. However, it was not to equip the West Riding Artillery Regiments either as they had already re-equipped with towed 25-pounder guns. The most likely explanation is that certain TA units were equipped with towed 25-pounder guns for training but were to be equipped with Sexton on mobilization. There was a preserved Sexton held at the Gunnery Wing, Larkhill which is presumably in the Firepower Museum now. It has appeared at a number of Larkhill Artillery Days. M44 CARDINAL The US M44 Self-Propelled Howitzer was based on the M41 "Walker Bulldog" tank chassis and mounted a much more capable 155mm howitzer than the 25-pounder.

It was acquired in Fiscal Year 1955/56 under the Mutual Defense Agreement Programme (MDAP) and these were in a number of batches. In all sixty-two were allocated serials, fifty-eight were delivered and four were cancelled. Of these fifty-eight, fifty-two went to BAOR and six to the UK [02 BB 34 to 02 BB 39]. These six went to 13 Army Vehicle Depot at Ludgershall but were intended for trials use at Larkhill and Bovington. In British service it was known as Cardinal following in a fine clerical tradition of Bishop, Priest and Sexton. The earliest vehicles arrived at Ludgershall in mid 1955 and were intended to equip the Field Regiments supporting armoured brigades, i.e. initially 1 RHA supporting 20 Brigade and 4 RHA supporting 7 Armoured Brigade. At that time regiments consisted of three batteries of eight guns, so eighteen were delivered to BAOR for the regiments and four for War Maintenance Reserve presumably. After Op "Chameleon" only two armoured brigades remained, 33 Brigade having been disbanded. 4 RHA handed over their M44's to 25 Field Regiment in June 1961 who used them until December 1965 when twenty six Medium Regiment took over until the M109's arrived. 1 RHA handed over their M44's to 3 Medium Regiment RHA in June 1965 who also stayed until the M109's arrived. The regiments had been re-designated "Medium" in March 1962. 105mm and 155mm became standard NATO calibers in early 1958 and this inevitably led to the obsolescence of the 25-pounder and the 5.5 inch gun. There had been attempts to provide a British Self-Propelled chassis for these British guns, initially based on FV300 and later the FV3800 series based on Centurion. NATO standardization sounded their death knell though! To read the story of FV3800, try to obtain a copy of Tim Royall's excellent article in *Wheels & Tracks* No 57. M44 offered significant advantages over Sexton, principally in terms of its forward engine position, allowing a rear crew compartment. This compartment with its ground level doors, permitted much easier ammunition handling and this had increased in importance with the heavier rounds of 155mm calibre. M44s continued in service until the mid-sixties when a major reorganization took place in BAOR which was connected to the conversion of all the brigades to armoured, and the introduction of FV432, Abbot, M109, M107 and MHO and Chieftain. However, by 1966 Abbott was entering service and by spring 1967 M109 was beginning to come into service with 45 Regiment and 27 Regiment. The M44s were returned to US stocks in June 1968. Today there is an M44 (02 BB 39) in preservation at the Royal Artillery's Firepower Museum. Note that initially, only fifty M109's were ordered, compared with fifty-eight M44's although the initial intention was to equip three regiments with M109 rather than two with M44. This seems to be a reflection that regiments now consisted of only six guns per battery, but even so, fifty-four guns as a minimum would have been needed to equip three regiments.

HEAVY ARTILLERY M40 Two batches of M40 were delivered under MDAP to Britain. It was based on the late production Sherman chassis - the M4A3E8 otherwise known as the "Easy Eight". The vehicle had a forward engine compartment leaving a large open rear compartment to house the crew and 155mm gun. At that time 155mm guns equipped heavy regiments although they would in time equip medium regiments and eventually field regiments. The first batch (see panel below) were designated "Carriage, Motor, SP, 155mm (M41) Howitzer" (later coded 0630-0963 in British service). This is odd as the M41 code conflicts with another US Howitzer based on the Walker Bulldog Light Tank and in any case they are clearly M40s. A photo of 70 BA 10 shows one significant difference from the other batch, that is, the large hinges on the propellant bins and these also show up on a similar vehicle • the 8" M43. Could the coding M41 relate to a vehicle capable of being re-barrelled to 8"? If so it may be that Britain had plans for a self-propelled 8" gun much earlier than the MHO! According to the contract card, the vehicles in the second batch (see panel below) were initially allocated as follows: • 4 RAWing[93BA39,42] • 1 6 Training Battalion REME (i.e. the REME School Battalion, later SEME) [93 BA 43] • 6 39 Heavy Regiment RA [93 BA 40, 41, 44, 45, 47, 51] • 8 639 Heavy Regiment RA (TA) • 1 War Reserve BA 42 served at RAC Centre by the number of photos which Bovington Tank Museum have of it! The serials allocated can be dated to two Fiscal Years, 1953/54 and 1954/55. They were issued to 39 Regiment in 1955 and withdrawn when it moved to BAOR with Honest John (see Windscreen issue 111 Page 10) and towed 8" howitzers in early 1960. During the period 39 Regiment was equipped with M40s it was based at Cachy Barracks, Perham Down. Frederick says in his Lineage Book of British Land Forces "8 Battalion Worcestershire Regiment (TA) merged with 10 Battalion Worcestershire Regiment (TA) to form 639 Heavy Regiment Royal Artillery (TA) on 1 January 1947. Subsequently on 31 August 1950, 351 Medium Regiment were also amalgamated (less part which became 887 Locating Battery RA). The regiment in 1961, less its Warwickshire elements, amalgamated with 267 (Worcestershire and Warwickshire) Medium Regiment RA to form 267 (Worcestershire) Regt. On 18 March 1964 this was re-designated 267 (Worcestershire) Field Regt RA." It looks as though they lost their M40s in 1961 as it was merged to become a conventional towed field regiment equipped with 25-pounders. The M40s were finally struck off between 1962 and 1965, so must have been held as War Reserve from 1960 when 39 Regiment re-equipped. Once M107 was on order they were presumably seen as surplus to requirements. 93 BA 48 is now preserved at Imperial War Museum (IWM) Duxford. It was in IWM, London for many years.