

# LAST LEOPARD

**E**motions ran high among some of the Armoured Corps' most hardened senior members at Robertson Barracks in July, when a reliable workhorse and old friend was retired after 30 years service in the Army.

In the biggest parade for Australian Armour since the Centurion Tank was farewellled in 1967, former serving members from across the country descended on Darwin to join old mates from the 1st Armoured Regiment in saying goodbye to the Leopard tank, a major piece of the unit's heart.

As the last Leopard rolled off the 1st Brigade parade ground, through a steadfast guard of M1A1 Abrams, the odd hint of tears were bashfully wiped away by old-school Armoured Corps sergeants, right through to some old Defence chiefs.

While a sense of sadness seemed to wash over those who had served almost all of their Army lifetimes on the Leopards, an eruption of delight and a resounding cheer broke the sombre mood, as a single Leopard made one final charge across an empty parade ground on its way to a new home as guard and monument overlooking the front gate to Robertson Barracks.

Taking the Leopard to its final resting place was an honour bestowed to the only serving member of 1st Armoured Regiment

## OLD WORKHORSE RETIRED

to witness the original transition parade between the Centurion and Leopard, Sergeant John Hensler.

With a warm demeanour and a proud 24-year-history as an armoured senior NCO to back him up, Sergeant Hensler holds a 30-year Pandora's Box of stories on the Leopard close to his chest – to be opened only between mates and beers for years to come.

"It was a great honour as a young fella to drive that Centurion tank into its retirement spot down at Puckapunyal 30 years ago, so you can imagine how I'm feeling today," he said.

"We've come a long way in 30 years, and I'm very proud to have been a part of that."

While the Leopard's change in status from war machine to war relic marked the end of an era, a sense of excitement was surfacing from some of the Regiment's younger faces – a feeling that had been brewing since the first announcement of the Chief of Army's vision for a Hardened and Networked Army.

As a waiting media scrum jostled to grill the Chief of Army and 1st Brigade armoured commanders on what the new tanks mean

to Australian operations in the Middle East, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy stood his ground.

"For those in the armoured regiment who want to ask me the question, 'when are we going?' I answer – 'when we need to you,'" Lieutenant General Leahy announced.

"What I see today is that 1st Armoured is ready – and that's the important first step." Commander 1st Brigade Brigadier Craig Orme described current sentiment across the corps.

"I'm a tank soldier myself – I grew up on the Leopard, like a lot of the men you see here today," he said.

"A lot of old diggers have come back for this farewell, to share again in that sense of mateship that is born through Army training and experience on the battlefield.

"They have come from right across Australia to say goodbye to the Leopard, but also to welcome the Abrams.

"Today is our re-birthing, and the excitement across the unit is unmistakable."

Commanding Officer 1st Armoured Regiment Lieutenant Colonel Duncan



*Right: The last Leopard tank crew to serve the Australian Army pose with their tank after firing its last rounds (above) at the Mount Bundy Training Area – (from left) Trooper James Moore (operator), Trooper Michael Colley (gunner), Corporal Nicholas Zerafa (crew commander), Trooper Craig Hancock (driver). Photos by Gunner Shannon Joyce*



Hayward summed up what the arrival of the Abrams means to his unit.

"The Abrams are faster, more lethal. They fight at night and, most importantly for our soldiers, they are incredibly survivable.

"We're in the business of giving the government options – and what we give them now is the ability to deploy Abrams from today."

Regimental Sergeant Major 1st Armoured Regiment Warrant Officer Class One Ian Cummings who served all his 25 years on the German-designed Leopard, pointed out a funnier side of the capability upgrade.

"At least we're not translating the manuals from German anymore," he said with a grin.



*The last Leopard tanks in service with the Australian Army are farewellled by a guard of 1st Armoured Regiment's new M1A1 Abrams at Robertson Barracks on 7 July.*



*The old and the new Leopard (centre) and Abrams.*



*New kid on the block – M1A1 Abrams.*