

MASTERS OF WAR: THE AIF IN FRANCE 1918



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14 APRIL 2018

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Tanks!

The Application of Armour in 1918



David Brown

References

- J.F.C Fuller – *Tanks in the Great War 1914-1918* (1920)
- D.G.Browne – *The Tank in Action during the First World War* (1920)



Contemporary context

- The role of the Tank has not changed in a century
- The Australian Army doctrinal role of Armour is
'In co-ordination with other arms, to close with and destroy the enemy using fire, manoeuvre and shock action'
- Fire and manoeuvre are quite straightforward to understand
- 'Shock action' is the psychological effect on the enemy of tanks being used against them. That effect will probably be shared with autonomous armed ground vehicles when they are fielded later this century
- It remains for the foreseeable future an essential element in the Combined arms team in ground combat
- Over the next 25 years it will more than likely become unmanned but it will still have the same affect

Pre-war developments – a question of what might have been...

- The story of the tank does not begin in 1915. It's genesis is in the first decade of the twentieth century
- Like many historical stories it is a question of 'What might have been...' if several different Governments had been interested in the taking that technology further. If this sort of technology was available before the war the outcome of the opening phase and subsequent years of WW1 may have been completely different

Hornsby UK 'Chain Track' Tractor trials for the British Army 1905-1910



Despite numerous demonstrations of this tractor during 1906-08 and 1910 and interest from the Mechanical Transport Committee, the War Office was uninterested

- The decade immediately before the beginning of WW1 is important as there are technological innovations that directly lead to the tank
- The Hornsby engineering company in Grantham patent the chain track in 1904 and produce the 'Chain Track Tractor' which is trialled for the British Army on four occasions over 1906, 1907, 1908 and 1910
- The trials involve such things as comparing the capability of a Chain Track Tractor towing an artillery piece to a horse drawn gun limber from the Royal Horse Artillery over a range of different terrain types. The Chain Track Tractor obviously has more utility over difficult boggy ground
- Whilst there is interest from the British Army's Mechanical Transport Committee, the War Office show little interest in taking this forward

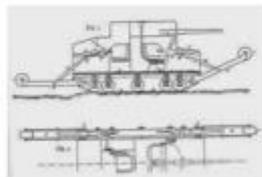
Holt 'track type tractors' used in agriculture and on the Los Angeles Aqueduct Project 1904-1909



Holt buy the patent for the chain track type tractor from Hornsby & Sons in 1914 for £4,000. Holt also register 'Caterpillar' as a trademark in 1911 after hearing Hornsby using the term (it came of British Army soldiers involved in the trials)

- Across in the United States another successful engineering firm, the Holt Manufacturing Company, who have been producing steam tractors for 25 years, are watching with interest
- Their petrol driven, partially tracked 'Track Type Tractors' are being used in agriculture and on large infrastructure projects like the new aqueduct in Los Angeles in 1909
- After hearing that British Army soldiers involved in the trials of the Hornsby 'Chain Track' Tractor use the nickname '*caterpillar*' to describe the tracks, Holt trademark the name in 1911
- Due to lack of interest from the War Office in the technology, in 1914 Hornsby agree to sell the patent for the chain track to Holt for £4,000

Austro-Hungarian Gunther Burstyn, inspired by Holt, designs a tracked armoured vehicle carrying a light gun in a rotating turret he calls the 'Motor Gun' 1911



- This story is also no solely an Anglo-American one
- A young Austrian engineer called Gunther Burstyn, inspired by the Holt 'Track Type Tractor' designs what he calls the '*Motor Gun*' in 1911 and takes it to the Austro-Hungarian government
- They are interested in the idea but tell Gunther to get commercial backing first. He fails to do so and quietly drops the idea, without even applying for a patent for his design
- His design includes some technical features that are ahead of some of the tanks developed in WW1

Australian engineer Lancelot de Mole's 'Chain Rail Vehicle' design rejected by the War Office - 1913



- Australia also plays a small part in this story with engineer and inventory Lancelot de Mole sending his design for a 'Chain Rail Vehicle' to the War Office
- He later serves as an infantryman in France in 1918
- A 1/8 scale replica he built of his design is held by the Australian War Memorial

British Tank Development 1914-1917

- It is not possible to talk solely about the application of Armour in 1918 as there are important developments in the previous years that are critical in understanding the context of its use in 1918
- Also, it is not just a British story as the French develop and operate tanks in their own right and their story also needs to be told

- What follows is an overview of both British and French tank development and usage in the years leading up to 1918
- It is also important to stress that shortly after the outbreak of war both Britain and France started looking at the idea that eventually became the Tank
- They did not go through 1914-1915 with all the casualties that ensued and then thought about developing what became the tank in 1916. They started straight away

Ernest Swinton suggests the idea of a bullet proof tracked vehicle to Sir Maurice Hankey, Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence – November 1914



- In Britain the man credited with first coming up with the idea of the tank is Major Ernest Swinton RE, who is the Official British War Correspondent in France at the outbreak of war
- A friend of his suggests that he look at the Holt 75 tractor and in November 1914 he suggests the idea of creating a bullet proof tracked vehicle to Sir Maurice Hankey, a senior public servant and Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence (a bit like the National Security Committee today)
- Hankey took the idea to Lord Kitchener, the Secretary of State for War and also the Prime Minister, who ordered Kitchener to establish a Committee to look at the Holt 75 in January 1915. They tested the vehicle in February 1915 and were not convinced of its merits so did not progress the idea further

Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty forms the 'Landship's Committee' under the Director of Naval Construction Tennyson D'Eyncourt – February 1915



- Winston Churchill is in charge of the Royal Navy and he is also a member of the Committee for Imperial Defence
- He decides to take the idea forward and establishes the 'Landships Committee' the same month under the direction of the Director for Naval Construction, Sir Eustace Tennyson D'Eyncourt

British Technology Demonstrators – March-May 1915



William Tritton, MD and Chief Engineer
of Foster & Co



A Pedrail tracked truck, loaded with half-a-ton of bricks, of the type examined and tested by Winston Churchill on Horse Guards Parade.



American up-armoured Killen-Strait Tractor

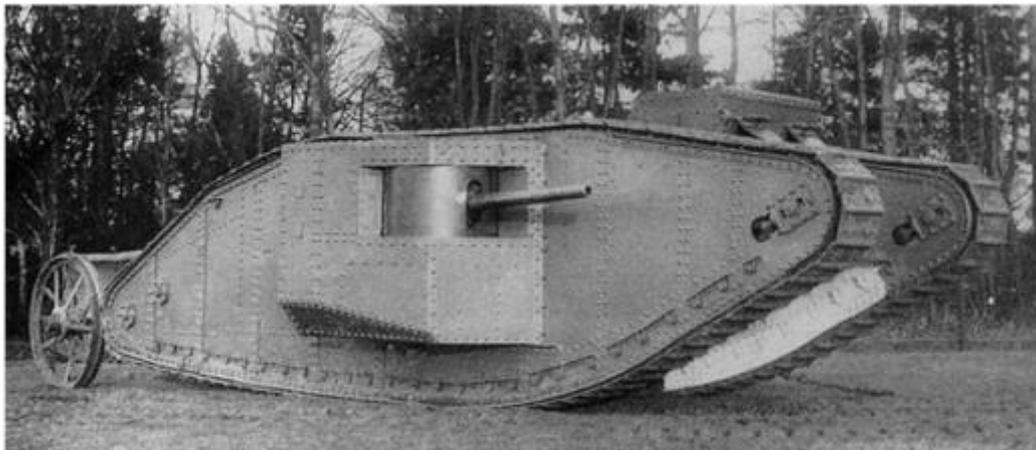
- Over the next three (3) months Churchill spends almost £700,000 of taxpayer's money on 12 prototypes, some of which are designed and built by Foster & Co of Lincoln under their Chief Engineer, William Tritton.
- In May 1915, the Landships Committee becomes a joint initiative between the Navy and Army

Foster & Co design and build the 'No 1 Lincoln Machine' or 'Little Willie' – July-September 1915



- In July 1915 Foster and Co are given the job of designing and building the first proof of concept which eventually is called 'Little Willie'
- He is demonstrated to the Landships Committee in September 1915. What is not shown in the above photo is the turret on top of the vehicle
- 'Little Willie' is on display at the Tank Museum at Bovington in Dorset
- At the same event Fosters' have produced a wooden mock-up of what will become the Mark 1 Tank

Foster & Co produce and demonstrate the Production prototype Mark 1 - 'Mother' – January 1916



- In January 1916 the first Production prototype Mark 1 Tank, 'Mother' is unveiled to the Landships Committee
- She has a rhomboid shape with the tracks now around the whole extremity of the vehicle

- The steering mechanism at the back remains as does the central cab
- 6 pounder guns have been added in 'sponsons' on each side of the vehicle, which is not surprising given that many warships (e.g. the Battlecruiser HMAS Australia) have similar mounted on each side of their hull
- The turret on top has been removed to ensure the vehicle has a lower centre of gravity

Following trials the Government place an order for first 100* – February 1916



* Increased to 150 in April. Fosters built 37 'male' and the Metropolitan Carriage, Wagon, & Finance Co of Birmingham built 113 (38 'male' and 75 'female')

- Following trials of 'Mother' in February 1916 the British Government place an order for 100 to be built. The order is increased to 150 in April
- Production is split between Fosters – 37 'Male' tanks with 6 pounder guns, and Metropolitan of Birmingham with 38 'Male' tanks and 75 'Female' tanks equipped with machine guns

Colonel Swinton releases 'Notes on the Employment of Tanks' – February 1916

*'The use made by the Germans of machine guns and wire...has in reply brought about the evolution of the **'caterpillar bullet proof climbing motor'** or **'tank'**, a machine designed for...assisting attacking infantry by crossing defences, breaking through obstacles, and of disposing of machine guns. It is **primarily a machine-gun destroyer**, which can be employed as an auxiliary to an infantry assault'*

Comment is also made on not using the Tank in 'dribbles' and ensuring that the route the tank takes is properly recce'd beforehand

- Now Colonel Swinton also releases the first attempt at any doctrine for their use called 'Notes on the Employment of Tanks'
- He describes them as 'caterpillar bullet proof climbing motors' or 'tanks' whose primary role is as a 'machine gun destroyer'
- He also makes mention of ensuring that the routes for the tanks are properly reconnoitered and marked and also that they should not be used in 'driblets'

To maintain secrecy the 'Heavy Section' (later Branch) of the 'Machine Gun Corps' is formed – March 1916



- To maintain secrecy in March the Heavy Section of the Machine Gun Corps is formed. This allows recruitment to begin of men to man the tanks as crewmen

An inauspicious start – the first operational use of British Mark I Tanks at Fleurs-Courcellette – September 1916

British Mark I Tank

49 tanks at the Somme	32 make it to front line	9 make it into enemy lines	3 return to British lines
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Tank debut battle at Fleurs-Courcellette on the Somme - 15 Sept 1916

WW1 tank Vs Modern tank

Mark I, 1916	
Crew: 8	Length: 9.91m
Speed: 3.7mph	with tail
Weight: 29 tonnes	Engine: 105hp

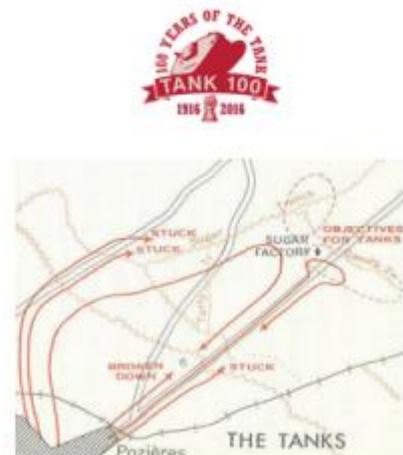
Challenger 2, 1990	
Crew: 4	Combat weight: 62.5 tonnes
Speed: 37mph	Length: 11.55m
	Engine: 1200hp

Armour plating only effective in stopping bullets

Tank prone to mechanical failure

Engine generates heat and fumes

Two six-pounder guns and three machine guns



- The Mark 1 is manufactured and rushed into service over the next 5 months to ensure that it is available to take part at some stage in the Battle of the Somme, the huge British Summer Offensive of 1916
- They are first used at Flers on 15 September 1916. The site is to the north-east of Pozieres near the 2nd Australian Division Memorial at the Windmill. The memorial to this action is across the road
- Of the 49 available, only 32 make it to the Line of Departure, 9 make it to the German lines and 3 return
- Reliability is a key issue as is employing tanks on suitable ground
- Conditions working inside the Mark 1 are worth mentioning
 - It had a crew of eight (8) including two men to operate the gears and two men to steer the vehicle
 - There was little suspension, you were exposed to extreme noise levels from the engine and main armament firing making talking very difficult
 - Whilst it was bulletproof you were still exposed to ‘splash’ with small bits of metal flying off the inside wall of the vehicle and ricocheting inside the cabin
 - The inside temperature could reach 50 degrees Celsius and it was not uncommon for the entire crew to pass out, or an exposure to fresh air, for a crew member to faint

JFC Fuller authors *Training Note 16 – Tank Tactics* – February 1917

- Covers tank organisation, operations, tactics and co-operation with other arms (role in defensive operations not yet developed)
 - **The Section of four (4) tanks was deemed to be the basic ‘unit of attack’**
 - The Training Note was distributed within the Heavy Branch but GHQ ordered all other copies to be withdrawn as the Artillery did not agree with Fuller’s comments about the use of Artillery
 - It was the only attempt within the first year of the tanks existence to impose some form of uniform doctrine on the Heavy Branch
-
- J.F.C ‘Boney’ Fuller, a staff officer in the now Heavy Branch, releases the first attempt at what we would call high level *developing* Doctrine as well as some basic Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)
 - The Section of four (4) tanks is deemed to be the ‘*unit of attack*’ and is not too dissimilar to the Tank Troop today (3 tanks are in a Troop in the Australian Army today with four (4) in the British Army)

- Boney makes some reference to the use of Artillery that is not accepted so GHQ withdraw all copies of the note outside the Heavy Branch

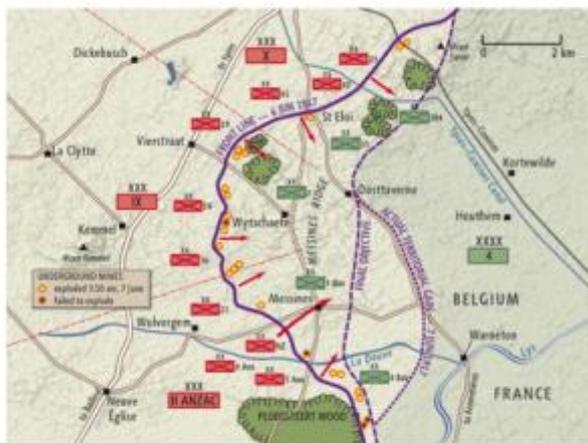
Tanks fail in support of Australians at First Battle of Bullecourt – April 1917



Come on boys, buggar the tanks! - Major Percy Black (KIA)

- Australian soldiers first experience with Tanks in France is a Bullecourt in April 1917
- The tanks fail to support the attack and it leaves many bitter feelings amongst the AIF. Many officers and soldiers refuse to operate with tanks again or include them in their plans

76 new British Mark IV Tanks and 12 Supply Tanks used for the first time at Messines – June 1917



Main improvements were better armour, re-siting the fuel tank and better ease of transport. Over 1,200 were built during the war.

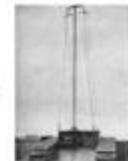
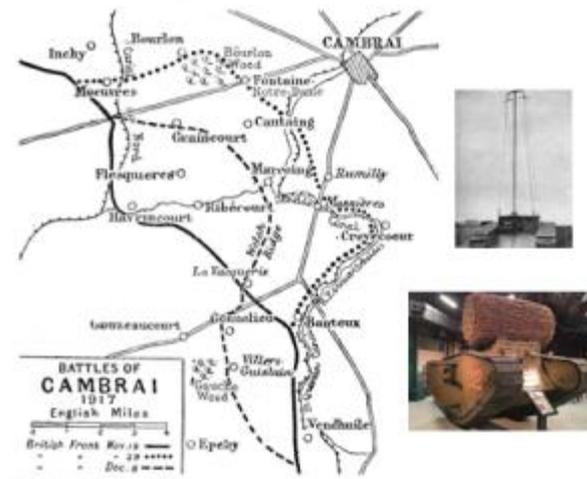
- At the battle of Messines on 7 June 1917 (the pre-cursor to the Battle of Passchendaele) the new Mark IV tank as well as Supply Tanks are used for the first time with limited effect
- The Mark IV has some improvements over the Mark I – namely the re-siting of the petrol tank (from on top of the vehicle to behind it), better armour and ease of transport
- Supply Tanks are older Mark Is used to carry forward trench stores, ammunition, grenades, rations and water to the Infantry who have captured the German line to avoid using a significant number of men as carrying parties

The Tank Corps is formed by Royal Warrant – July 1917



- On 28 July 1917 the Tank Corps becomes a separate Arm of the British Army and is no longer part of the Machine Gun Corps

History is made - the first massed use of 470 Tanks on good ground at Cambrai – November 1917



- The major historical event of 1917 is the first use of massed tanks at Cambrai on 20 November 1917
- Cambrai is chosen as the area offers good going for massed numbers of Tanks
- Wireless tanks are trialled for the first time behind the frontline to allow messages to be sent back to Brigade or Divisional HQ and orders received to then be sent forward to the front line Tanks by runner
- Other aids like fascines are also used to be dropped into German trenches to allow the tanks to drive over and across them
- Whilst it initially is successful by early December most of the ground won has been lost. The Germans do not appreciate the real threat tanks will pose partly because of this fact
- For Britain the period from 1915-1917 can be summed up like this
 - The Mark 1 has been rushed into service to take part in the Battle of the Somme with little doctrine to support its use. It is up to the Officers and Men of the Heavy Section/Branch to essentially learn by doing
 - The essential elements of suitable terrain and use of massed numbers are yet to be consistently applied (Cambrai is the first time this happens)
 - There are many in the Army and War Office who are not yet sold on this new technology.
 - The Tank to date has been too unreliable and has yet to prove itself to eventually be accepted and become an essential part of all operations
 - Germany, whilst acknowledging this new technology, does not fully recognise the significant tactical threat that the Tank will shortly become

French Tank Development 1915-1917

- French tank development essentially mirrors the British in 1915
- Where they differ is in 1916 and beyond as production challenges slow them down

Schneider's Chief Designer Eugene Brillie goes to England to study the Holt tractor. He convinces them to create a 'Armoured and Armed Tractor' – January 1915



- In January 1915 Schneider's (NB: now Schneider Electric) chief designer Eugene Brillie goes to England to study the American Holt 75 tractor which is then in the UK
- He convinces Schneider that they need to build an 'Armoured and Armed Tractor'

French experiments at the Schneider Plant with the Holt 75 and 'Baby Holt 45' – May 1915



- In May 1915 at Schneider's plant they experiment with the Holt 75 and the smaller Baby Holt [NB: This is pretty much in parallel with the British]

The 'Souain Experiment' with the first prototype based on a Holt tractor – December 1915



- The key event in the French story of the Tank is the *Souain Experiment* on 9 December 1915 with a modified Baby Holt tractor
- The experiment was watched by Phillipe Petain and the prototype produced excellent results initiating the design and development of the Schneider CA1

French Government place order for 400 Schneider CA 1 Tanks – February 1916



The contract stipulated all 400 in 1916. The first 100 by 25 August and the last 25 by November 1916. Schneider had limited experience in tracked vehicle production and assumed it could use FAMH as a sub-contractor. It takes until August to produce the first Production prototype CA 1

- In February 1916 the French Government place an order for 400 Schneider CA1 tanks
- The contract stipulates that all 400 must be delivered by the end of the year
- Schneider has limited experience producing complex vehicles and assumed that is could use FAMH – a major French prime Defence contractor with relevant expertise – to help on the project

- Design challenges (including changing requirements) result in the Production prototype CA1 not being ready until August 1916

French Government place order for 400 Tanks of a different design (St Chamond) from FAMH – April 1916



This was a political decision. Eugene Brillie of Schneider also refused to share his patents with FAMH for free and they refused to pay for them. FAMH was a major arms manufacturer

- Schneider refuse to share their designs and technology with FAMH unless FAMH pay for them. FAMH refuse to do so
- The French Government then make a political decision to order another 400 tanks from FAMH of a slightly different design
- This new design ends up as the Saint Chamond tank

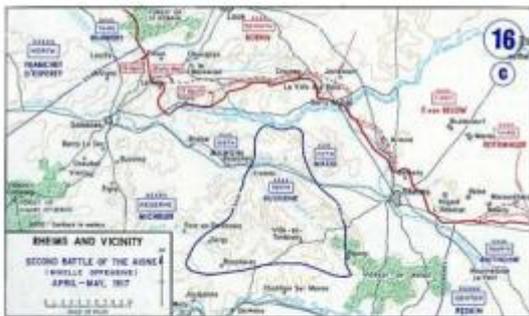
Artilleris Speciale (the Tank Arm) formed under Jean Estienne – September 1916



By November 1916 only 8 training tanks had been delivered. By March 1917 only 150 had been manufactured

- In September 1916 the French equivalent of the Heavy Branch, called the Special Artillery, is formed under the command of Colonel Jean Estienne. Today he is considered in France to be the 'Father of the Tank'
- Whilst he can now recruit soldiers to crew the new vehicles Production challenges result in only eight (8) training tanks being delivered to the Special Artillery by November 1916
- By March 1917 only 150 Schneider CA1s have been manufactured (rather than 400 that were ordered for delivery by the end of 1916)

First use of the Schneider CA during the 'Nivelle Offensive' – April 1917 (@350,000 Allied Casualties)



- French tanks (mainly Schneider CA1s) are first used during the disastrous 'Nivelle Offensive' in April 1917
- The result is similar to the British at Flers in September 1916

1918

- 1915-1917 for France can be summed up as this
 - Whilst they commenced investigating the potential of some form of armoured vehicle at almost the same time as the British, production problems have set them back by more than 6 months (when compared to the UK)
 - Like the British at Flers, they have rushed their tanks into service during the Nivelle Offensive with limited results. Overall the offensive is a costly failure
- 1918 will be an important year for the Tank to finally prove that it is reliable enough to answer its critics
- The Tank must to be successful to be accepted by soldiers, officers and senior Commanders in both the British and French Armies to survive. This is particularly so of the AIF

Germans use their A7V for the first time during Operation Michael – March 1918



100 were ordered in early 1917 but only 20 were ever used as tanks. Most of the 50 tanks they used were captured British ones.

During this critical period some British Tank Companies and Battalions perform Defensive Operations for the first time with no infantry support.



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- The first major event relating to Armour in 1918 is the use by the Germans of the A7V tank during the Spring Offensive in March
- 100 A7Vs were ordered in early 1917 but only 20 were ever used as tanks. Over 50 captured British tanks had been used up until that time
- During the Spring Offensive, British tanks also found themselves performing defensive operations, without infantry support to plug gaps in the Allied line. Doctrinally, armour cannot 'hold ground' without Infantry support

The first 'Tank versus Tank' action at Villers Bretonneux – April 1918



- As the Spring Offensive develops, in April we see the first 'Tank versus Tank action' as a small encounter battle
- Four (4) Mark IV tanks (1 male, three female) meet a similar number of A7Vs at Villers Bretonneux. The Mark IV male tank destroys one of the A7Vs in the process

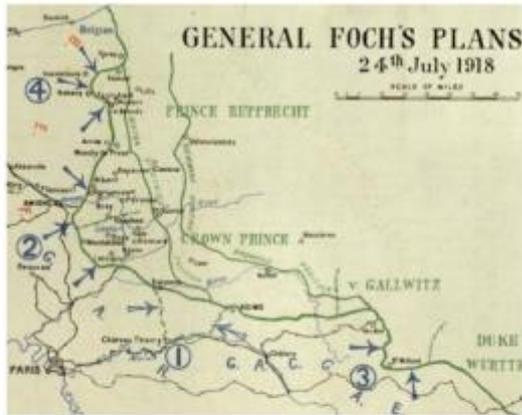
Operational debut of British Mark V at Hamel. 4 Supply Tanks carry forward stores – July 1918



- The Australian Corps' battle of Hamel is also the debut of a new British tank – the Mark V
- It is much more reliable than the Mark IV, having a purpose built engine and only one driver

- Monash also uses four (4) Supply Tanks as part of his tactical plan. They carry forward stores that would have required over 1,200 men to carry

French Tanks triumph at Soissons – July 1918



The Renault FT17 is the first modern tank with a rotating turret. It was brought into service during the Second Battle of the Marne in May

- The major action involving French tanks in 1918 is the offensive at Soissons in late July
- It is a triumph and tanks play a key part in the overall plan. You could say it is their equivalent of Cambrai
- The battle sees the use of the Renault FT17, a new tank viewed as the first with a modern design as it had a rotating turret. The FT17 had been introduced in May

Over 500 British Tanks play a vital role at Amiens and beyond – August-October 1918



'Musical Box' – The Medium Mark A 'Whippet' Tank introduced into service in March. It was lighter and faster than a Mark V and equipped 'Light Battalions'

- British (and French) tanks play a key role at Amiens and during the last 100 days of the war
- They are now accepted and an essential part of all tactical plans

- The Medium Mark A Whippet tank was introduced into service in March 1918 and is a revelation as it is twice as fast as a Mark IV or V (8 miles per hour)
- The Whippets equip 'Light Battalions', whose role is to follow up the Infantry and Heavy Tanks (Mark IVs and Vs) and exploit any gaps they create in the front line to pursue the enemy
- The Whippet 'Musical Box' demonstrates the ability of a single tank to penetrate deep into enemy lines and cause chaos. Over almost nine (9) hours 'Musical Box' destroys an artillery battery, German infantry, trucks and accommodation blocks, before it is disabled

'Grit' – Australia's first tank

- The story of Grit is told in 'Pioneers of Armour', which also tells the story of the 1st Australian Light Car Patrol in Palestine, which was presented at previous MHHV seminar in 2017

'Tanks' used to promote War Loans – April 1918



- The Australian Government identified the need for a tank to support efforts in selling War Bonds
- In early 1918 a veteran tank of France had been selected and shipped to Australia, but was sunk by a U-Boat off the British coast
- A replacement 'Female' is ordered direct from the factory

Australia's first tank 'Grit', a Female Mark IV, arrives in Australia – June 1918



- The tank was shipped to Australia and arrived in Melbourne in June 1918
- A selected group of 10 AIF soldiers was chosen in the UK to receive training on tank maintenance and operations before returning to Australia to crew the tank
- It subsequently went to Adelaide, where it was given the name 'Grit' in a public competition
- It then went back to Melbourne, then to Sydney and on to Brisbane
- The highlight of each rally was an obstacle crossing demonstration by 'Grit' including knocking down a brick wall
- At some events buying War Bonds allowed you to have a look inside 'Grit'. At others you could buy a badge, or a ticket to go on a ride or look inside
- Returning to Melbourne from Adelaide 'Grit' was broken in to and equipment stolen. No one was found responsible
- Despite written agreement beforehand, the rally organisers in Sydney and Brisbane failed to pay 100% of the costs involved in transporting 'Grit' to their events. The Defence department had to wear the costs
- The British Government also issued an invoice to the Australian Government for the tank and its equipment. The Australian Government claimed that it was a gift from the UK and the British Government could find no evidence to the contrary, so the Australian Government did not have to pay for it

Postscripts

Lancelot de Mole gets no reward (although the War Office did pay his expenses of £965) - 1919

AWARDS TO TANK INVENTORS.

The Royal Commission on Awards to Inventors have made the following recommendations in respect of claims for Tank inventions:—

Major-General E. D. Swinton	£1,000
Lieut.-Colonel F. L. M. Boothby	Nil
Commodore F. M. Sueter	Nil
Lieut. R. F. Macfie	£500
Mr. A. C. Nesfield	£500
Major T. G. Hetherington	Nil
Sir Eustace H. Tennyson d'Eyncourt	£1,000
Colonel Crompton and Mr. Le Gros	Nil
Sir William Tritton and Major Wilson	£15,000
Mr. L. E. de Mole	Nil

. Full particulars of the awards will be found on page 14.

- In 1919 the British Government established a committee to look at awarding prize money to those it deemed worthy of involvement in the development of the Tank during the war
- Australian Lancelot de Mole did not receive any prize money, but the War Office did pay all of his expenses (almost £1,000)

In 1921 'Grit' is given to the AWM where it remains on display today



- 'Grit' was given to the Australian War Memorial in 1921 after all of the crew were demobilised. It remains there today

1925 – The Holt Manufacturing Company merge with their rival the C.L Best Gas Traction Company to form...

CATERPILLAR®



- The Holt Manufacturing Company merge with their rival, C.L Best in 1925 to form what becomes a global brand that exists today...Caterpillar

1928-1930 – Australian Tank Corps gazetted (1928) and 1st Tank Section formed (1930) at Randwick in Sydney equipped with Vickers Medium Mk IIs



- In 1928 the 'Australian Tank Corps' is gazetted, becoming a new Arm in the Australian Army
- The first tank unit in the Australian Army's history, the 1st Tank Section, is formed in 1930 at Randwick in Sydney as part of the militia. It is equipped with the British Vickers Medium Mark II
- The Australian Tank Corps badge includes the Rising Sun, Mark IV Tank, and scroll with the motto 'Paratus', which means 'Ready'
- Today's 1st Armoured Regiment has the same motto