

TANKS

In the summer of 1915, development began of a fighting vehicle that could attack the trenches. Tanks were used for the first time by the allies during the Battle of the Somme on 15 September 1916. The following account is from Bert Chaney, a nineteen-year-old British signal officer.

We heard strange throbbing noises, and lumbering slowly towards us came three huge mechanical monsters such as we had never seen before. My first impression was that they looked ready to topple on their noses, but their tails and the two little wheels at the back held them down and kept them level. Big metal things they were, with two sets of caterpillar wheels that went right round the body. There was a huge bulge on each side with a door in the bulging part, and machine guns on swivels poked out from either side. The engine, a petrol engine of massive proportions, occupied practically all the inside space. Mounted behind each door was a motor-cycle type of saddle, seat and there was just about enough room left for the belts of ammunition and the drivers.

I was attached to battalion headquarters and the colonel, adjutant, sergeant-major and myself with four signallers had come up to the front line. From this position the colonel could see his men leave the assembly trench, move forward with the tanks, jump over us and advance to the enemy trenches. As a new style of attack he thought it would be one of the highlights of the war.

While it was still dark we heard the steady drone of heavy engines and by the time the sun had risen the tanks were approaching our front line, dead on time. The Germans must have heard them too and, although they had no idea what to expect, they promptly laid down a heavy curtain of fire on our front line. This had the effect of making us keep our heads down, but every now and again we felt compelled to pop up and look back to see how the tanks were progressing. It was most heartening to watch their advance, we were almost ready to cheer. But there was a surprise in store for us. Instead of going on to the German lines the three tanks assigned to us straddled our front line, stopped and then opened up a murderous machine gun fire, enfilading us left and right. There they sat, squat monstrous things, noses stuck up in the air, crushing the sides of our trench out of shape with their machine guns swiveling around and firing like mad. Everyone dived for cover, except the colonel. He jumped on top of the parapet, shouting at the top of his voice, "Runner, runner, go tell those tanks to stop firing at once. At once, I say." By now the enemy fire had risen to a crescendo but, giving no thought to his personal safety as he saw the tanks firing on his own men, he ran forward and furiously rained blows with his cane on the side of one of the tanks in an endeavour to attract their attention.

Although, what with the sounds of the engines and the firing in such an enclosed space, no one in the tank could hear him, they finally realised they were on the wrong trench and moved on, frightening the Jerries out of their wits and making them scuttle like frightened rabbits. One of the tanks got caught up on a tree stump and never reached their front line and a second had its rear steering wheels shot off and could not guide itself. The crew thought it more prudent to stop, so they told us afterwards, rather than to keep going as they felt they might go out of control and run on until they reached Berlin.

The third tank went on and ran through Flers, flattening everything they thought should be flattened, pushing down walls and thoroughly enjoying themselves, our lads coming up behind them, taking over the village, or what was left of it, and digging in on the line prescribed for them before the attack. This was one of the rare occasions when they had passed through the enemy fire and they were enjoying themselves chasing and rounding up the Jerries, collecting thousands of prisoners and sending them back to our lines escorted only by Pioneers armed with shovels. The four men in the tank that had got itself hung up dismounted, all in the heat of the battle, stretching themselves, scratching their heads, then slowly and deliberately walked round their vehicle inspecting it from every angle and appeared to hold a conference among themselves. After standing around for a few minutes, looking somewhat lost, they calmly took out from the inside of the tank a primus stove and, using the side of the tank as a cover from enemy fire, sat down on the ground and made themselves some tea. The battle was over as far as they were concerned.