Memories of the First Tanks

By O. A. Gillespie

THE armoured tank was one of Britain's real secrets of the last war—almost the only one. It was first used on the Somme in 1916, but in limited numbers. Military historians, looking back on the 1914-18 campaign and sifting the mountains of official reports and tell-tale correspondence, are now of opinion that the Great War would have ended sooner had tanks been used in large numbers during the break-through on September 15, 1916. As it was, we got far enough forward to see the enemy marching in column of route.

The years have not dulled my memory of that day. I was then a private in the 1st Battalion, New Zealand Rifle Brigade, with the company whose final objective was a line beyond the village of Flers. Our objectives were known by coloured lines—first the Green Line, second the Brown Line, third the Blue Line. and Fourth (ours) the Red Line. We had arrived at the Somme battlefield via the pavé roads and verdant fields of France (a week's march), after some weeks of training in the lovely pastoral country round Abbeville, where we had practised the attack in detail over imaginary objectives, made to resemble as nearly as possible the real territory we were to attack.

Smells and Sights of War

Since July 1 the Somme battle had been in progress and for miles the rolling countryside, beautifully wooded in peace time, had been torn and tortured out of all recognition by bursting shells from both sides. Woods had been reduced to a few tree stumps. Villages were merely heaps of rubble. Huge craters showed where mines had exploded. Trenches zig-zagged through the chalky soil, the earthworks running like tangled, grey threads for endless miles. Barbed wire, wrecked waggons and limbers, broken timber, sand-bags, twisted iron, guns, encampments, and war materials of every kind littered the countryside as far as one could see. All the smells and sights of war on a grand scale were there. Even the earth itself, flung about by explosion for over two months, seemed to smell of carnage. Constantly moving men, horses and mules and guns looked ant-like and unreal when viewed from the crest of a small hill.

The slow, rolling thunder of artillery never ceased over that wide front. Guns of every calibre barked wickedly in their thousands; the still more wicked stutter of machine guns maintained a constant belt of sound. Any rare silence was itself like a violent noise and seemed like an eternity. Lines of star shells, spurting into flame as they were fired at night, made unreal fireworks in the dark and, far behind them, the flashes from artillery were like twinkling stars.

We arrived in the Somme area, near Albert, on September 9, and camped beside some huge naval guns which had been run up on railway lines to send their deadly cargoes screaming into the air with deafening regularity. It was autumn, warm and dry, but later the rains came to turn our trenches into drains of mud, churned to the consistency of thin gruel by the constant movement of troops. But that was after our first advance.

The morning of September 15 broke fine and mild, with a thin veil of mist lifting from the torn soil. On our journeys to and from the trenches from which we were to attack, we had passed the tanks, covered with camouflage, in a valley sheltering behind a tiny hill. Although we had heard vague reference to their use we none of us knew what they looked like. That was a secret known only to the senior officers until the last moment. It was well kept.

Over the Top

Zero hour on the morning of September 15 was 6.20 a.m. As the artillery and machine gun barrage broke into a fury of heartening thunder behind us we went over the top. Exploding shells threw up spouting showers of earth for miles on every side. Bullets and bits of shell zipped past like angry wasps. Tiny groups of New Zealanders, heads bent, made their way forward through the inferno, and the acrid smoke. No soldier can forget the smell of cordite.

An Amazing Sight

But the most amazing sight of that emotional day was the approach of the tanks. Four had been assigned to the New Zealand front. One was out of action and the other three were late—but not too late. They appeared through the mist and the smoke like clumsy pre-historic monsters, crawling along on caterpillars and spitting a deadly stream of bullets and small shells at any of the enemy who crossed their lumbering paths. Fortunately the tanks travelled more quickly than the men. They overtook our company halfway towards Flers village, churning their way in and out of shell holes, over trenches and through the barbed wire as though nothing would ever stop them. When some of our men were temporarily held up, one of them straddled itself across a trench and poured its wicked stream of bullets right and left, clearing all opposition.

This is not the place for a full description of that day and all that I still remember of the dreary days which followed when the rains came. I was with several groups of our men who eventually got through the village of Flers. A tank which had been nosing its destructive way among the ruins, trampling down the remains of houses and sheds, made for the open country just in front of us, on the road to Factory Corner. And there it stopped—halted by a direct hit from a German shell. We dug in close beside it, but not too close, as its presence was attracting heavy gunfire. For some strange reason the derelict tank gave me courage; it seemed like a tiny fortress in an incredibly insecure world; a world which for me consisted of a hole hastily dug in the ground and which later shook like a jelly when our artillery barrage came down in front of us and destroyed a German counter attack.

". . . To-day the tank has become a deadly rolling fortress"

Those were the tanks I saw in action. Since then I have read in official war histories the story of their invention and the struggle by several soldiers against the High Command for their use on the battle field.

Colonel Swinton's Battle

Colonel Ernest Swinton was one of the men who literally fought for the adoption of the tank as a weapon of war. After great argument and diplomacy, 40 tanks were ordered, but the order was later increased to 150. Tank crews were trained in great secrecy behind armed guards in part of Norfolk. That secrecy was maintained until their use on the Somme, but Liddell Hart, one of the soundest historians of the last war, considers that the tank was used before it was ready and before sufficient numbers had been made. The British High Command in France was not at all enthusiastic. Tanks could be used only over dry country, such as at Cambrai, in 1917, when they were a great success, but the Somme country was also perfect for their use in 1916. At Passchendaele, later, they simply sank in the mud and their enormous strength was lost to the advancing soldiers. By the time the final break-through came tanks were used in increasing numbers and aided the bitter task of breaking the Hindenburg Line, but they could have been exploited sooner in the war. Liddell Hart says that the original decision was to build 4,000 of them but, because of opposition from the High Command, the number was reduced to one-third.

Since those days the tank has been greatly improved, and to-day has become a deadly, rolling fortress. Its use completely demoralised the Germans for a time on the Somme and at Cambrai, but they themselves have now developed it, as we saw by the use of it in Poland. To-day the tank is one of the army's greatest weapons, but only in hard, open country.

Meanwhile New Zealand is training her men for the Tank Corps. At Ngaruawahia officers and men of the Divisional Cavalry mechanised force are being instructed in the use of modern tanks, and tank warfare, to be ready for the time they may be used—if and when we send a force overseas.