

## THE FIRST TANK

From the beginning of World War I, it was obvious that a grave problem had to be solved: how to protect men from gunfire, yet be in a position of good strategy themselves. The solution was so simple that it was overlooked by those in authority—a plating of steel between the gunner and the target. The modern Tank is the result of years of research that began when, in 1914, Admiral Bacon designed a fifteen-inch howitzer that could be moved about on the field by eight huge caterpillar tractors. Mr. Winston Churchill saw illustrations of these tractors and visualised the possibility of a similar machine to carry men and guns into battle. So the idea of the Tank was born. The War Office constructed a number of models that were called trench-crossing vehicles. At the test these machines were rejected because they failed to descend a four-foot bank and go through three feet of water. Thus the first type of Tank was unsuccessful—despite the fact that no subsequent type of tracked-vehicle passed that particular test during the last war.

Meanwhile, Colonel E. D. Swinton (now General Officer Commanding Armoured Forces in Britain) and Colonel Hankey had collaborated on a paper dealing with the need of a tank-like device. To quote from a letter that Mr. Churchill sent to the then Prime Minister (Mr. Asquith): "It would be quite easy to fit up a number of steam tractors, with small armoured shelters in which men and machine-guns could be placed which would be bullet proof. Forty or fifty of these machines prepared secretly and brought into position at night-fall could advance most certainly into the enemy's trenches, smashing away all obstructions, and sweep the trenches with gunfire and grenades thrown from out of the top." The Prime Minister laid the proposal personally before Lord Kitchener, who was immediately interested enough to remit the project to the Master-General of the Ordnance. But that was all that was done. Apparently the War Office was unconvinced of the practicability and value of the new machine. The project was politely buried in the archives of the War Office.

Characteristically, Mr. Churchill was undaunted. In 1915 he ordered the Director of the Air Ministry to experiment with steam rollers. These, he thought, could be used to smash in enemy trenches by the sheer weight of force. Mechanical defects caused this project to fail, but it is clear that it served to stimulate the inventive minds of those who were interested. Official and mechanical troubles were mere obstacles to be overcome by Mr. Churchill,

and he convened a conference with Mr. Tennyson-d'Eyncourt, the Chief Constructor of the Navy. The first committee to supervise the building of Tanks was formed. It was called the Landships Committee of the Admiralty. Mr. Tennyson-d'Eyncourt shortly afterwards informed Mr. Churchill that he had invented two possible types of Landships. Such was Mr. Churchill's faith in these early Tank-like machines that he took personal responsibility of the £70,000 in public money, which went towards the building of 18 Landships. Six of these were the wheel type, the others were the familiar track caterpillar type. Mr. Churchill's faith in the Tank plan was justified, and his risk in spending public money on it bore the fruit of success. The Tank has changed the history of all wars. Of no one man can it be said that he invented the Tank. Rather was it a series of experiments and plans that eventually yielded the forerunner of modern Tanks. But a single man made specific and important strides in its development. That was Mr. Tennyson-d'Eyncourt whose deep knowledge and wide power brought the Tanks to their required efficiency.

But if the Tanks were satisfactory from an engineering point of view, apparently they were not so acceptable politically. A new Board of Admiralty decided to scrap the entire project. If it had not been for the persistent confidence of Mr. Churchill and his colleague, Tank warfare may not have been a reality today. With true British bulldoggedness, our present War Leader finally persuaded the Admiralty to construct a single Tank. And after it's test, it was clear that this was the Mother Tank, the prototype of the modern Tank.

The first attack on the Germans by British Tanks took place near Thiepval in September, 1916. But still, the High Command did not fully realise the potentialities of the new steel weapon. The first twenty tanks to reach France were open to scrutiny by the enemy; the fact that a great new secret was in danger of being made known to Germany was disregarded.

As it happened, the enemy did not try to copy the Tank until their devastating defeat at Cambrai, nor were they interested. At Cambrai, on November 20, 1917, the British Tanks moved into battle. After months of preparation, tactical plans had been carefully rehearsed. As the Tanks advanced, supported by infantry, the enemy quickly panicked. Those who did not turn in full retreat, gave themselves up in bewildered surrender. By four o'clock the same afternoon, the whole German trench system had been penetrated on a six-mile front, and 10,000 prisoners and 200 guns were captured without the loss of no more than 1,500 British soldiers. The Tanks had arrived on the battle scene.

After Cambrai, the world—including the defeated Germans—realised that mechanised warfare was the new battle order, and the Tank rapidly advanced to the highly specialised stage as we know it today. The New Zealand Army Tank Brigade is part of New Zealand's contribution to the mechanised power of the British Forces that will shortly smash the Nazi panzer hordes. —O.F.F.

