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Weber Freiligrath Frey
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas
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Roth Heyse Klopstock Puschkin Homer Kleist Mörike Musil
Luxemburg La Roche Horaz Kraus
Machiavelli Kierkegaard Kraft Kraus
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Nietzsche Nansen Laotse Ipsen Liebknecht Ringelnatz
Marx Lassalle Gorki Klett Leibniz
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Life in a Tank

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Photograph by Underwood & Underwood

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Photograph by Underwood & Underwood

[1]

LIFE IN A TANK

I

THE MEANING OF THE TANK CORPS TōC

TANKS!

To the uninitiated—as were we in those days when we returned to the Somme, too late to see the tanks make their first dramatic entrance—the name conjures up a picture of an iron monster, breathing fire and exhaling bullets and shells, hurling itself against the enemy, unassailable by man and impervious to the most deadly engines of war; sublime, indeed, in its expression of indomitable power and resolution.

This picture was one of the two factors which attracted us toward the Heavy Branch Machine-Gun Corps—as the Tank Corps was known in the first year of its being. On the Somme we had seen a derelict tank, wrecked, despoiled of her guns, and forsaken in No [2] Man's Land. We had swarmed around and over her, wild with curiosity, much as the Lilliputians must have swarmed around the prostrate Gulliver. Our imagination was fired.

The second factor was, frankly, that we were tired of going over the top as infantrymen. The first time that a man goes into an attack, he as a rule enjoys it. He has no conception of its horrors,—no, not horrors, for war possesses no horrors,—but, rather, he has no knowledge of the sudden realization of the sweetness of life that comes to a man when he is "up against it." The first time, it is a splendid, ennobling novelty. And as for the "show" itself, in actual

practice it is more like a dream which only clarifies several days later, after it is all over. But to do the same thing a second and third and fourth time, is to bring a man face to face with Death in its fullest and most realistic uncertainty. In soldier jargon he "gets most awful wind up." It is five minutes before "Zero Hour." All preparations are complete. You are waiting for the signal to hop over the parapet. Very probably the Boche knows that you are [3] coming, and is already skimming the sandbags with his machine guns and knocking little pieces of earth and stone into your face. Extraordinary, how maddening is the sting of these harmless little pebbles and bits of dirt! The bullets ricochet away with a peculiar singing hiss, or crack overhead when they go too high. The shells which burst on the other side of the parapet shake the ground with a dull thud and crash. There are two minutes to wait before going over. Then is the time when a man feels a sinking sensation in his stomach; when his hands tremble ever so slightly, and when he offers up a pathetic little prayer to God that if he's a bit of a sportsman he may be spared from death, should his getting through not violate the divine and fatalistic plans. He has that unpleasant lack of knowledge of what comes beyond. For after all, with the most intense belief in the world, it is hard to reconcile the comforting feeling of what one knows with that terrible dread of the unknown.

A man has no great and glorious ideas that nothing matters because he is ready to die for [4] his country. He is, of course, ready to die for her. But he does not think about it. He lights a cigarette and tries to be nonchalant, for he knows that his men are watching him, and it is his duty to keep up a front for their sake. Probably, at the same time, they are keeping up a front for him. Then the Sergeant Major comes along, cool and smiling, as if he were out for a stroll at home. Suddenly he is an immense comfort. One forgets that sinking feeling in the stomach and thinks, "How easy and jolly he is! What a splendid fellow!" Immediately, one begins unconsciously to imitate him. Then another thinks the same thing about one, and begins to imitate too. So it passes on, down the line. But there is nothing heroic or exalting in going over the top.

This, then, was our possible second reason for preferring to attack inside bullet-proof steel; not that death is less likely in a tank, but there seems to be a more sporting chance with a shell than with a

bullet. The enemy infantryman looks along his sight and he has you for a certainty, but the gunner cannot be so accurate [5] and twenty yards may mean a world of difference. Above all, the new monster had our imaginations in thrall. Here were novelty and wonderful developments.

In the end of 1916, therefore, a certain number of officers and men received their orders to join the H.B.M.G.C., and proceeded sorrowfully and joyfully away from the trenches. Sorrowfully, because it is a poor thing to leave your men and your friends in danger, and get out of it yourself into something new and fresh; joyfully, because one is, after all, but human.

About thirty miles behind the line some villages were set aside for the housing and training of the new units. Each unit had a nucleus of men who had already served in tanks, with the new arrivals spread around to make up to strength.

The new arrivals came from all branches of the Service; Infantry, Sappers, Gunners, Cavalry, and the Army Service Corps. Each man was very proud of his own Branch; and a wonderfully healthy rivalry and affection [6] sprang up between them. The gunner twitted the sapper, the cavalryman made jokes at the A.S.C., and the infantryman groused at the whole lot. But all knew at the bottom of their hearts, how each is essential to the other.

It was to be expected when all these varied men came together, that the inculcating of a proper *esprit de corps*—the training of each individual in an entirely new science for the benefit of the whole—would prove a very difficult and painstaking task. But the wonderful development, however, in a few months, of a large, heterogeneous collection of men into a solid, keen, self-sacrificing unit, was but another instance of the way in which war improves the character and temperament of man.

It was entirely new for men who were formerly in a regiment, full of traditions, to find themselves in the Tank Corps. Here was a Corps, the functions of which resulted from an idea born of the exigencies of this science-demanding war. Unlike every other branch of the Service, it has no regimental history to direct it, no traditions upon which to build, and still [7] more important from a practical point of view, no experience from which to draw for guid-

ance, either in training or in action. In the Infantry, the attack has resulted from a steady development in ideas and tactics, with past wars to give a foundation and this present one to suggest changes and to bring about remedies for the defects which crop up daily. With this new weapon, which was launched on the Somme on September 15, 1916, the tactics had to be decided upon with no realistic experimentation as ground work; and, moreover, with the very difficult task of working in concert with other arms of the Service that had had two years of fighting, from which to learn wisdom.

With regard to discipline, too,—of all things the most important, for the success of a battle has depended, does, and always will depend, upon the state of discipline of the troops engaged,—all old regiments have their staff of regular instructors to drill and teach recruits. In them has grown up that certain feeling and loyalty which time and past deeds have done so much to foster and cherish. Here were [8] we, lacking traditions, history, and experience of any kind.

It is easy to realize the responsibility that lay not only upon the Chief of this new Corps, but upon each individual and lowest member thereof. It was for us all to produce *esprit de corps*, and to produce it quickly. It was necessary for us to develop a love of the work, not because we felt it was worth while, but because we knew that success or failure depended on each man's individual efforts.

But, naturally, the real impetus came from the top, and no admiration or praise can be worthy of that small number of men in whose hands the real destinies of this new formation lay; who were continually devising new schemes and ideas for binding the whole together, and for turning that whole into a highly efficient, up-to-date machine.



KING GEORGE AND QUEEN MARY INSPECTING A TANK ON THE BRITISH FRONT IN FRANCE ToList

"How did the tank happen to be invented?" is a common question. The answer is that in past wars experience has made it an axiom that the defenders suffer more casualties than the attacking forces. From the first days of 1914, [9] however, this condition was reversed, and whole waves of attacking troops were mown down by two or three machine guns, each manned, possibly, by not more than three men. There may be in a certain sector, before an attack, an enormous preliminary bombardment which is destined to knock out guns, observation posts, dumps, men, and above all, machine-gun emplacements. Nevertheless, it has been found in actual practice that despite the most careful observation and equally careful study of aeroplane photographs, there are, as a rule, just one or two machine guns which, either through bad luck or through precautions on the part of the enemy, have escaped destruction. These are the guns which inflict the damage when the infantrymen go over and which may hold up a whole attack.

It was thought, therefore, that a machine might be devised which would cross shell-craters, wire and trenches, and be at the same time impervious to bullets, and which would contain a certain

number of guns to be used for knocking out such machine guns as were [10] still in use, or to lay low the enemy infantry. With this idea, a group of men, in the end of 1915, devised the present type of heavy armoured car. In order to keep the whole plan as secret as possible, about twenty-five square miles of ground in Great Britain were set aside and surrounded with armed guards. There, through all the spring and early summer of 1916, the work was carried on, without the slightest hint of its existence reaching the outside world. Then, one night, the tanks were loaded up and shipped over to France, to make that first sensational appearance on the Somme, with the success which warranted their further production on a larger and more ambitious scale.

[11]

II

FIRST DAYS OF TRAINING ToC

We were at a rest camp on the Somme when the chit first came round regarding the joining of the H.B.M.G.C. The Colonel came up to us one day with some papers in his hand.

"Does anybody want to join this?" he asked.

We all crowded around to find out what "this" might be.

"Tanks!" some one cried. Some were facetious; others indifferent; a few mildly interested. But no one seemed very keen about it, especially as the tanks in those days had a reputation for rather heavy casualties. Only Talbot, remembering the derelict and the interest she had inspired, said, with a laugh,—

"I rather think I'll put my name down, sir. Nothing will come of it, but one might just as well try." And taking one of the papers he filled it in, while the others stood around making all the remarks appropriate to such an occasion.

[12] Two or three weeks went by and Talbot had forgotten all about it, in the more absorbing events which crowded months into days on the Somme.

One day the Adjutant came up to him and, smiling, put out his hand.

"Well, good-bye, Talbot. Good luck."

When a man puts out his hand and says "Good-bye," you naturally take the proffered hand and say "Good-bye," too. Talbot found himself saying "Good-bye" before he realized what he was doing. Then he laughed.

"Now that I've said 'Good-bye,' where am I going?" he asked.

"To the Tanks," the Adjutant replied.

So he was really to go; really to leave behind his battalion, his friends, his men, and his servant. For a moment the Somme and the

camp seemed the most desirable places on earth. He thought he must have been a fool the day he signed that paper signifying his desire to join another Corps. But it was done now. There were his orders in the Colonel's hand.

[13] "When do I start, sir? And where do I go?" he asked.

"You're to leave immediately for B— —, wherever that is. Take your horse as far as the railhead and get a train for B— —, where the Tank Headquarters are. Good-bye, Talbot; I'm sorry to lose you." A silent handshake, and they parted.

Talbot's kit was packed and sent off on the transport. A few minutes later he was shaking hands all round. His spirits were rising at the thought of this new adventure, but it was a wrench, leaving his regiment. It was, in a way, he thought, as if he were turning his back on an old friend. The face of Dobbin, his groom, as he brought the horses round was not conducive to cheer. He must get the business over and be off. So he mounted and rode off through a gray, murky drizzle, to the railhead about eight miles away. There came the parting with Dobbin and with his pony. Horses mean as much as men sometimes, and his had worked so nobly with him through the mud on the Somme. He wondered if there would [14] be any one in the new place who would be so faithful to him as Polly. Finally, there was Dobbin riding away, back to M— —, with the horse, and its empty saddle, trotting along beside him. It was simply rotten leaving them all!

One has, however, little time for introspection in the Army, and especially when one engages in a tilt with an R.T.O. The R.T.O. has been glorified by an imaginative soul with the title of "Royal Transportation Officer." As a matter of fact, the "R" does not stand for "royal," but for "railway," and the "T" is "transport," nothing so grandiose as "transportation." Now an R.T.O.'s job, though it may be a safe one, is not enviable. He is forced to combine the qualities of booking-clerk, station-master, goods-agent, information clerk, and day and night watchman all into one. In consequence of this it is necessary for the traveller's speech and attitude to be strictly soothing and complimentary. Talbot's obsession at this moment was as to whether B— — was near or far back from the line.

[15] If he supposed that B— — was "near" the line, the R.T.O. might tell him—just to prove how kind Fate is—that it was a good many miles in the rear. But no such luck. The R.T.O. coldly informed Talbot that he hadn't the slightest idea where B— — was. He only knew that trains went there. And, by the way, the trains didn't go there direct. It would be necessary for him to change at Boulogne. Talbot noticed these signs of thawing with delight. And to change at Boulogne! Life was brighter.

Travelling in France in the northern area, at the present time, would seem to be a refutation of the truth that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. For in order to arrive at one's destination, it is usually necessary to go about sixty miles out of one's way,—hence the necessity for Talbot's going to Boulogne in order to get a train running north.

He arrived at Boulogne only to find that the train for B— — left in an hour.

He strolled out into the streets. Boulogne had then become the Mecca for all those in [16] search of gaiety. Here were civilized people once again. And a restaurant with linen and silver and shining glass, and the best dinner he had ever eaten.

When he had paid his bill and gone out, he stopped at the corner of the street just to look at the people passing by. A large part of the monotony of this war is occasioned, of course, by the fact that the soldier sees nothing but the everlasting drab of uniforms. When a man is in the front line, or just behind, for weeks at a time he sees nothing but soldiers, soldiers, soldiers! Each man has the same coloured uniform; each has the same pattern tunic, the same puttees. Each is covered with the same mud for days at a time. It is the occasion for a thrill when a "Brass Hat" arrives, for he at least has the little brilliant red tabs on his tunic! A man sometimes finds himself envying the soldiers of the old days who could have occasional glimpses of the dashing uniforms of their officers, and although a red coat makes a target of a man, the colour is at least more cheerful than the eternal khaki. The old-time [17] soldier had his red coat and his bands, blaring encouragingly. The soldier of to-day has his drab and no music at all, unless he sings. And every man in an army is not gifted with a voice.

So Talbot looked with joy on the charming dresses and still more charming faces of the women and girls who passed him. Even the men in their civilian clothes were good to look upon.

Riding on French trains is very soothing unless one is in a hurry. But unlike a man in civil life, the soldier has no interest in the speed of trains. The civilian takes it as a personal affront if his train is a few minutes late, or if it does not go as fast as he thinks it should. But the soldier can afford to let the Government look after such minor details. The train moved along at a leisurely pace through the lovely French countryside, making frequent friendly stops at way-side stations. On the platform at Étaples station was posted a rhyme which read: —

"A wise old owl lived in an oak,
The more he saw, the less he spoke;
The less he spoke, the more he heard;
Soldiers should imitate that old bird."

[18] It was the first time that Talbot had seen this warlike ditty. Its intention was to guard soldiers from saying too much in front of strangers. Talbot vowed, however, to apply its moral to himself at all times and under all conditions.

From nine in the morning until half-past two in the afternoon they rolled along, and had covered by this time the extraordinary distance of about forty miles! Here at last was the station of Saint-P — .

Talbot looked about him. Standing near was an officer with the Machine-Gun Corps Badge, whom he hailed, and questioned about the Headquarters of the Tank Corps.

"About ten miles from here. Are you going there?" the fellow asked.

Talbot explained that he hoped to, and being saturated with Infantry ideas, he wondered if a passing motor lorry might give him a lift.

The man laughed. "Why don't you telephone Headquarters and ask them to send a car over for you?" he asked.

Talbot did not quite know whether the [19] fellow were ragging him or not. He decided that he was, for who had ever heard of "telephoning for a car"?

"Oh, I don't believe I'll do that—thanks very much for the hint, all the same," he said. "Just tell me which road to take and I'll be quite all right."

The officer smiled.

"I'm quite serious about it," he said. "We all telephone for cars when we need them. There's really no point in your walking—in fact, they'll be surprised if you stroll in upon them. Try telephoning and you'll find they won't die of shock."

Partly to see whether they would or not, and partly because he found the prospect of a motor car more agreeable than a ten-mile walk, Talbot telephoned. Here he experienced another pleasant surprise, for he was put through to Headquarters with no difficulty at all. A cheerful voice answered and he stated his case.

"Cheero," the voice replied. "We'll have a car there for you in an hour—haven't one now, but there will be one ready shortly."

[20] Saint-P— — was a typical French town, and Talbot strolled around. There were soldiers everywhere, but the town had never seen the Germans, and it was a pleasant place. There was, too, a refreshing lack of thick mud—at least it was not a foot deep.

Although Talbot could not quite believe that the car would materialize, it proved to be a substantial fact in the form of a box-body, and in about an hour he was speeding toward Headquarters. It was dark when they reached the village, and as they entered, he experienced that curious feeling of apprehensive expectancy with which one approaches the spot where one is to live and work for some time to come. The car slowed up to pass some carts on the road, and started forward with such a jerk that Talbot was precipitated from the back of the machine into the road. He picked himself up, covered with mud. The solemn face of the driver did not lessen his

discomfiture. Here was a strange village, strange men, and he was covered with mud!



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A BRITISH TANK AND ITS CREW IN NEW YORK ToList

Making himself as presentable as possible, [21] Talbot reported to Headquarters, and was posted to "J" Company, 4th Battalion. That night he had dinner with them. New men were arriving every few minutes, and the next day, after he had been transferred to "K" Company, they continued to arrive. The nucleus of this company were officers of the original tanks, three or four of them perhaps, and the rest was made up with the newcomers.

Men continued to arrive in dribbles, from the beginning of December to the first of January. When a new man joins an old regiment there is a reserve about the others which is rather chilling. They wait to see whether he is going to fit in, before they make any attempts to fit him in. In a way, this very aloofness makes for comfort on the part of the newcomer. At mess, he is left alone until he is absorbed naturally. It gives him a chance to find his level.

All this was different with the Tank Corps. With the exception of the very few officers who were "old men," we were all painfully