

U.S. ARMY MILITARY HISTORY INSTITUTE

JAN 13 1932

Retain in Container
when not in use

UG
446.5
U5
U3
1931
v. 7

TANK NOTES

Tank Notes



The Tank School
Fort George G. Meade, Maryland

THE TANK V. TANK FIGHT AT
VILLERS BRETONNEUX

By a Tank Battalion Commander who was an eye-witness of the
Fight

From an article appearing in the ROYAL TANK CORPS
JOURNAL, June 1930.

Note: -- Our attention having been called to the article in "Deutsche Wehr" which gives a description of the tank battle at Villers Bretonneux, we deemed it expedient that a suitable reply should be made. Therefore we asked an officer who commanded a tank battalion at that time, and who was at Villers Bretonneux, to give us the actual facts of the case. In a personal note this officer says, "I think Obit Volckheim is a bit off the rails in his account of the tank versus tank action. No German tanks engaged the "whippets" at Cachy; or if they did, the "whippets" never noticed it. The attached is an account of the tank versus tank action, which I actually witnessed."-- EDITOR.

*****About the middle of April, 1918, the 1st Tank Battalion had been reformed and re-equipped with tanks, and was situated at Frechincourt, two companies being at Fresh Wood, just east of Frechincourt, one company at Tronville Wood, west of Bois l'Abbe, and one section just west of Villers Bretonneux, in Aquienne Wood. The company at Tronville Wood was afterwards moved up to Blangy Wood and reinforced with six "whippet" tanks.

On 24th April the enemy attacked and broke through south of Villers Bretonneux.

The section of tanks in Aquienne Wood has moved clear of the wood on the night of 23rd-24th, and to south and east of it. On the morning of the 24th orders were received from 23rd Infantry Brigade for these tanks to move to Cachy. However, before this could be done they became involved in the fight to the south of Villers Bretonneux. A German tank appeared and two female tanks (armed with Lewis guns only) were put out of action by it. The German tank was firing from a stationary and partly covered position. A third "female" was knocked out by a field gun. The six-pounder tank (male) had one gun put out of action by a shell, but pursued and hit the German tank with the remaining gun, whereupon the German tank became ditched and the crew evacuated it and ran. Two other German tanks were engaged by this tank, and in both cases the crews evacuated and ran.

The first German tank was afterwards salvaged from "no man's land" by the French and driven away by 1st Tank Battalion. The French lost 40 men salvaging this tank. The other tanks remained in the hands of the enemy.

Capt. J.C. Brown commanded the male tank which fought this action and was also the section commander.

This action took place between 8:30 and 9 A.M. and lasted about ten minutes.*****

BATTLE PROBLEMS---TANK V. TANK

"SEE SKETCH MAP AT END
OF ARTICLE"

"An explanation of the Tank Combat near Villers Bretonneux on 24th April, 1918. By: A German War-time Tank Commander who took part in the Fight."

The article "Kampfwagenkampf" (tank battle) in the "Deutsche Wehr" ("German Defence"), No. 34, 1929, page 733, incites this detailed account of the fight near Villers Bretonneux, where for the first time German and English tanks met in battle.

At the same time this article is intended to throw, if briefly, some light on the question "tank versus tank". The account of the fight, as described by an English officer in the Royal Tank Corps Journal, deviates so much from actual fact that it would appear necessary to correct it.

Secondly, it is established that the attack by the German tanks on Villers Bretonneux and Cachy took place not on the 23rd but on the 24th April, 1918.

Three German tank divisions, with 14 heavy "A.7V." tanks, which for the purpose of this operation were formed into three particular groups, advanced to the attack.

As it was possible, later on, to learn, the foe had not remained unaware of the strength of the German tanks, and had in consequence, been enabled to adopt the necessary precautionary measures.

Owing to this fact a French corps of machine-gun sharpshooters had conveniently taken up its positions, as well as a long line of infantry weapons.

The machine-guns were unable to make any impression upon the heavily armoured German tanks, while the defence guns which had everywhere arrived could not become generally effective on account of the dense fog which prevailed and were overrun.

Owing to the fog the preparation of the English tanks on this front was carried out with complete success.

In the English version it is admitted that two machine-gun tanks were put out of action by three more heavily armed German tanks, but it is further asserted that a gun-tank advanced to the attack and succeeded in rendering the enemy tanks useless.

The account goes to state that "one German tank made an effort to escape but fell into a sand pit and remained lying there".

After this, according to the English report, their tank then proceeded to attack the other two, which had however, preferred to disappear quickly and that "Lieut. Mitchell remained master of the situation".

Contrary to the English version, there was not one fight only in which three German tanks together fought with the British. There were actually two engagements, with, in each case, one German tank opposed to several of the enemy.

The events occurred as follows:-

Group III, with three German tanks, was despatched against Hangard Wood and Cachy. The tanks led far in advance of the infantry, with whom, in consequence of the speed of the tanks (up to 16km. per hour) and the prevailing fog, communication was lost.

At 12:30 the driver of one of the tanks, which was now out of touch with the rest of the group, saw, half-right from him, the German infantry retiring in mass.

He drove there, brought the retreating troops to a halt and proceeded on his own initiative to the attack on Cachy.

Before that place, and at a distance of about 700 meters he suddenly observed seven English tanks in front of him and opened fire immediately. Two were set on fire by grenades and a third was disabled and put out of action by a hit from the artillery.

The remaining four tanks were fired upon and hit, but succeeded in escaping.

This German tank which had been so successful was undamaged by hostile fire, but it had developed a gun defect and was only able to make use of its machine-guns in the further fighting which ensued.

After Cachy was firmly in the hands of the infantry he returned, still undamaged, at 15.45 hours to the appointed rendezvous.

Quite independent of this fight, a second, also in the vicinity of Cachy, took place.

Here also, a German tank advanced upon two English tanks and succeeded in bringing them under fire. One was put out of action by a direct hit from the artillery, while the other was compelled to retire. In point of fact, this second German tank sustained several hits, though apparently not from the English tanks but by artillery fire, which was responsible for the wounding of the gun crew. Despite this, however, the driver succeeded in bringing his tank back to the front German line, a distance of approximately 2 km.

Thence it was removed during the night, in safety, to shelter. One German tank went astray in the fight and remained in the hands of the enemy.

The crew of this tank had left their machine in order to engage in the capture of a number of English troops who considerably outnumbered the crew. These troops suddenly took to their arms and shot the crew down. One man was taken prisoner, while one succeeded in escaping to make a report of the incident.

The German tank fell into the enemy's hands undamaged. It is therefore established that both German tanks remained superior to those of their opponents, and that instead of the English being the victors, as stated in the English report, the reverse was, in fact, the case.

Four English tanks were destroyed.

Further, it is a fact that in both cases, the German tanks were outnumbered by their opponents.

The energetic onslaught by the German tanks had, above all, the result that the English tanks, so far as the damage which they had sustained permitted, were forced to take to flight.

There would appear to be nothing worthy of special note in connection with this fight which could serve as a lesson or basis for any eventual fight between tanks in the future.

It simply establishes that the advantage lies with that tank which is capable of being handled the more rapidly.

The German tanks remained the victors on account of their superior armament, and especially the energy displayed by the officers who guided them. The governing principle that the tank itself is the best weapon of defence against tank attack can be accepted as firmly established.

In future wars there will be many collisions between tanks.

The development of the English self-propelled gun-carriages, now that the weapons have been furnished with armour plating, tends to show them as the embryo tank of the future.

The foregoing facts demand that the tank must be capable of fighting against others, and that an endeavor must be made to produce some fundamental principles governing this class of fighting.

Before, however, it can be possible to lay down rules which can be accepted as thoroughly reliable, we must await some practical experience in the science of tank versus tank.

For the time being such actual experience is not available as the war saw only two fights between tanks.

The following can therefore only be accepted as some idea of the probable general principles.

1. Effect of weapons: Of outstanding significance is the fact that the weapon effect demands that the armament should be such as to be definitely capable of deciding the issue in the fighting against armoured vehicles. Here, heavy caliber machine guns and defence weapons of from 4.7 cm. upwards come into the considerations.

The tank of to-day is generally, except in exceptional examples, equipped with guns up to 5.7 cm. caliber, which are capable only of disposing of, at the most, the heavy machine gun. It is of primary importance that while the heavy caliber machine gun must of necessity be available, the main armament must be adequate.

Further, with regard to the weapons, it is important that they should have the greatest possible field of fire in order that they be brought into action with the least loss of time. In this connection the tank may be compared with a warship.

Then, too, the guns designed for engaging armoured vehicles must be capable of being fired in every direction, i.e., they must be housed in pivoted turrets.

A tank equipped satisfactorily from these points of view must, compared with another not so equipped, be definitely superior.

Should however, similarly equipped tanks engage in battle, it is of decisive importance that the services should be those resulting from the finest training.

Finally, the tank which delivered the first well-directed shot would prove the victor.

2. Speed and Turning Capacity: Given opposing tanks to be attacked, success would always depend upon the rapidity of the advance and the opening of fire in the shortest possible space of time.

Therefore, the tank which is to be superior must be provided with the greatest speed and maximum turning capacity both of which, by making the best use of the ground in the position, would enable it to attack the opponent in its weakest post.

3. Making best use of ground: In order to be able to attain the best fire effect the full use of all such opportunities as the ground may offer is of essential importance.

This too, is a matter for the closest study if superiority is to be gained.

These are the essential points of view which have, in the first place, to be observed in the battle of tank versus tank. A knowledge of the existing types in possession of the opponent would tend to make conditions of the fight easier, and give opportunity for recognizing and making the best use of, weak points in his tanks.

This means that we should always be accurately instructed in the existing types to be found in use in foreign armies, and the subject should be one of continuous and permanent study as tank developments are continually making progress.

The development of this weapon would not be materially influenced in the end by being diverted towards rendering it capable of efficiently coping with enemy tanks.

Perhaps the execution of these developments may help towards further enlightenment; but it cannot do more, since the battle of tank versus tank, so long as no compensating experience is forthcoming and so long as no real hard shooting occurs in real fighting, will not effectively establish which of the two opponents is disposed of.

That, the umpire cannot do.

Exercises in the battle of tank versus tank become, however, on the foregoing grounds expedient and valuable.

The duels between tanks during the War cannot be accepted as controlling experiences. In those cases one tank fell upon another without any guiding rules of conduct. In wars of the future, rules governing the mode of attack by one tank on another must be formulated.

"From an article appearing in the Royal Tank Corps Journal, June 1930."

Sketch Map follows:

