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TANKS STOOD GAFF FROM BELGIUM TO ARGONNE BATTLE

American Machines Few in Number but Active All the Time

PERSONNEL LOSSES HEAVY

Enemy Felt Shock of Their Assault on Hindenburg Line and Kriem- hilde-Stellung in Particular

The functions, wondrously combined, of Cavalry, Infantry, Artillery and perambulating fortifications gave to that primarily British invention, the tank, in the early days of its use a prominence out of proportion, no doubt, to the numbers of men who were identified with the operations of these uncouth contrivances, but certainly not out of proportion to the results which they achieved, either in the British or the French armies. On the contrary, the Tank Corps of the American Expeditionary Forces, although it never attained to anything like the proportions which it would have reached had the end of the war not come so suddenly, seems hardly to have received the commendation to which it was justly entitled, in view of the brilliant success with which its units functioned on the occasions when they had opportunity for action.

It would be quite impossible within the limits of a single article even to outline the work of the various units of American tanks, for though comparatively few in number, they were exceedingly active. But it may be possible, by telling something of the battles of a few typical units, to shadow forth in a degree the sort of difficulties and dangers which they all confronted and the splendid spirit of heroism with which they met dangers which were, not only often, but ordinarily, even greater than those encountered by the men of other branches of the service on the battle front.

In describing some weeks ago the operations of the 27th and 30th United States Divisions of the Second United States Army Corps against the Scheldt Canal tunnel sector of the Hindenburg line between Le Catelet and Bellicourt, the fact was mentioned that with the American divisions fought a number of tanks, including the 301st Battalion of the American Tank Corps, the only unit of American heavy tanks on the Western Front. The 301st Battalion, commanded by Maj. R. I. Sasse, functioned under the brigade command of the 2nd United States Tank Brigade, which included the 1st and 4th Battalions of British tanks and the 4th Tank Supply Company, also British. For the attack of September 29 the whole brigade was allotted to the Australian Corps, with which the Second U.S. Corps was affiliated, the 1st Tank Battalion attacking with the 30th U.S. Division and the 301st with the 27th Division.

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Plan of Hindenburg Line Drive

Several days of careful reconnaissance and consultation with the Infantry commanders preceded the attack, and when the plans for the operation were fully developed the three companies of the 301st Battalion were assigned—Company C, with 15 tanks, to the 108th Infantry, which was to attack on the right of the division sector; Company A, with 15 tanks, to the 107th Infantry, which was to attack on the left, and Company B, with ten tanks, to the 105th Infantry, which was to follow up and, after crossing the German trenches, deploy facing north to protect the left flank of the division. The seven remaining tanks of the battalion were held in Australian Corps reserve.

Careful study was made of aerial photographs and all other information available bearing upon the nature of the ground in front, and all obstacles, trenches and enemy works that could be located were noted in record maps for the use of the tank commanders. The advance of the C Company tanks was to be directed upon both sides of Bony, particularly to the south of it, that of A Company upon Le Catelet and the area immediately north of it, and that of B Company upon the area east of Vendhuile and the north entrance of the canal tunnel.

The "tankodrome" of the battalion was located at Manaucourt, about 15 kilometers behind the front line, and the battalion started from there on the night of September 27-28 and went to Villers-Faucou, where the supply dump had been placed. Thence they moved for the front, distant about eight kilometers, on the night of September 28-29.

Camouflaging Their Noise

The noise of their advance to the start line at zero hour—5:50 a.m.—approached was to have been drowned by airplanes flying overhead. Only one airplane made its appearance, but the noise of the approaching tanks was, nevertheless, quite effectually deadened to the enemy by the roar of the artillery preparation fire. Following paths which, for the last 3,000 yards, had already been taped out by pioneers, of whom one was killed and two were wounded in the performance of this hazardous mission, the majority of the tanks went over the line on time and in touch with the Infantry.

The ground was dry enough to make good going, and the mist which covered the ground at zero hour had cleared away by 7 a.m. But the dense obscurity of the smoke barrage and the exploding shells took the place of the mist, and soon most of the tank pilots could see nothing ahead, sometimes not even the noses of their own machines, and had to rely wholly upon their compasses for maintaining the right direction. The tank commanders spent much of their time on the ground, moving ahead of their machines and guiding them, but the main difficulties did not arise in crossing trenches, which most of the machines negotiated successfully, though a few had to be dug out with shovels, while one was unditched by stretching a wire cable across two opposite spuds on each caterpillar track. The constant and terrible peril was the fire of the German artillery and anti-tank rifles. The moment a tank came into view, it was made the center of a concentration of artillery fire, and many machines were demolished or compelled to retire from action by direct hits. The machines on the right, with the 108th Infantry, were able to keep contact with the Infantry and to co-operate directly. Those with the 107th Infantry, on the left, could not do so.

Disaster in Minefield

It will be remembered that two days before the main assault, the 106th Infantry had made a preliminary attack to conquer the intended jumping-off line in the advance trenches of the old British front about the Knoll and Guillemont Farm. This attack had not been completely successful; consequently, the 107th Infantry, in jumping off for the main attack, virtually did so 1,000 yards west of the line

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intended and was considerably behind the front of the rest of the division and behind its own barrage during the advance. Its accompany tanks, on the other hand, were ahead. In going down the small and narrow Macquincourt valley, between the Knoll and Guillemont Farm, they suffered a misfortune which should have been avoidable by running over an old anti-tank minefield which had been laid by the British the previous spring, when the German drive on Amiens was impending. The tank command had not been notified of the existence of this minefield and two American and several British tanks were blown up. Nevertheless, a number of the tanks on this flank went through the Hindenburg line, in spite of all the mines and trenches and the Artillery and anti-tank rifle fire, and ambled about behind it, carrying terror and destruction among the German Infantry and machine gunners with the fusilade of their Hotchkiss guns and six-pounders.

Similar conditions prevailed with the B Company tanks, which could not keep in touch with their Infantry, but which went ahead, nevertheless, and did much damage to the enemy. One tank of one of these units crossed the Scheldt river at Le Catelet by using its "crib" for getting over, though the "cribs" were not found necessary in crossing trenches. A German battery in Richmond Quarry, east of Vendhuile, was particularly destructive to the tanks on the left flank and one "anti-tank fort" was encountered in Le Catelet. The prowling about inside the enemy lines without Infantry support was exceedingly dangerous business, and the crews of several tanks were taken prisoners after their machines had been knocked out and were unable either to proceed or to retreat.

At the end of the day's heroic work, the casualties among the personnel of the 40 tanks of the 301st Battalion which had been in action amounted to 112, of whom three officers and 20 enlisted men were killed, seven officers and 55 enlisted men severely wounded and eight officers and 15 enlisted men slightly wounded, and one officer and six enlisted men missing. Of the tanks engaged, not more than 25 per cent escaped without more or less serious injury, but they had accomplished a great deal of damage to the enemy, not merely in a material sense, but in breaking the morale of his troops.

The 301st Tank Battalion did further excellent service in the operations on October 8, when the 30th Division took Brancourt, the tanks attacking this town from the northern and southern flanks. One tank captured a German battery by approaching it from the rear. On the 17th they again assisted the advance east of St. Souplet and on the 23rd such tanks as still remained serviceable supported the attack of the 6th British Division toward the Sambre river, north of Chatillon.

Tanks in St. Mihiel Salient

It would be interesting to follow in some detail the notable activities of the tanks with the First American Army in the St. Mihiel operation. Perhaps, particularly those of the 344th and 345th Battalions of the 1st American Tank Brigade, which went across the front lines, respectively, near Xivray and Seicheprey, crossed the Rupt de Mad and worked freely through the woods and open country around Lahayville, Nonsard and Heudicourt and around Essey, Pannes and Beney. This brigade was under command of Lieut. Col. G. S. Patton, Jr., and its two battalions embraced 144 light Renault tanks, while the American Army had also with it, operating in other sectors, a large number of French tanks, consisting of a group of 18 medium Schneider tanks, under Commandant Chanoine; the 1st (French) Tank Brigade, under Colonel Wahl, containing two groups of St. Chamond medium tanks, and the 505th Regiment, consisting of 225 light tanks divided into three battalions.

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The American battalions and Commandant Chanoine's French tanks operated with the 42nd and 1st U.S. Divisions and the 39th French Colonial Divisions, and Colonel Wahl's command operated with the 90th, 5th and 2nd U.S. Divisions on the right of the attack, working toward Remenauville, Vieville-en-Haye, Thiaucourt, etc. It will, perhaps, be better, however, to tell a little of the even less well known operations of some of the tank units in the Meuse-Argonne offensive.

Plowing Through the Argonne

The First American Army had for this offensive the 1st American Tank Brigade, under Lieut. Col. George S. Patton, Jr., who was wounded early the first day and was succeeded in command by Maj. Sereno E. Brett; and the 13th and 14th Battalions of the 505th French Tank Regiment. The two battalions last mentioned operated on September 26 in front of the 37th Division, the tanks under command of Capt. Gaitan Liaras doing particularly heroic work in forcing their way across the ravine between the Bois de Malancourt and the Bois de Cuisy, clearing out the machine gun nests ahead of the Infantry and attacking the German trenches south of Montfaucon, all under intense Artillery fire. Major Brett's brigade consisted of the 344th and 345th Battalions of American tanks, embracing 141 tanks, and the 14th and 17th Groups of French tanks. The scene of its operations was on both banks of the Aire river, just east of the Argonne massif, in the sectors of the 35th and 28th Divisions.

The 1st Brigade was disposed for the assault with one company of the 344th Battalion west of the Aire and two companies east of that river, between it and the Buanthe river; the 345th Battalions support with its companies arranged similarly to those of the leading battalion, and the 14th and 17th Groups in reserve east of the Aire and 2,000 meters in rear of the leading battalion.

On moving forward to the attack, immediate and very severe Artillery and machine gun resistance was encountered, but the tanks continued advancing, outdistancing the Infantry, and proceeding alone east of Vauquois Hill, along the edge of the Argonne Forest, and into the towns of Cheppy and Varennes. The town last named was entered by tanks at 9:30 a.m. and by Infantry at 1:30 p.m. After the day's fighting, the tanks west of the Aire that could move assembled at Boureilles and those east of the river in the woods southwest of Cheppy, but the severity of the struggle which they had been through was evidenced by the fact that 43 of them were out of action from more or less severe injuries.

Combatting Pillboxes

Next day, 11 tanks supported the 28th Division's advance along the edge of the Argonne, fighting all day against the great number of German pillboxes in that region. East of the river, two platoons supported an Infantry attack on the plateau north of Very, and at 5 p. m. the 12 tanks of the French groups advanced on the road from Charpentry to Serieux Farm and entered Charpentry, but the Infantry did not follow them. The Germans, being fully aware now of the tank strength in front of them, had developed by September 28 very strong defense methods against this form of attack and the tanks suffered the heaviest casualties of any single day during the offensive, 41 officers and men being killed or wounded among the personnel of the 83 American and 12 French tanks in action.

West of the Aire, the tanks took the town of Apremont five successive times before the Infantry succeeded in consolidating the position, while the French group again did fine work in and around Charpentry.

Only 55 American tanks were able to engage on the morning of the 29th and during the day the French group was withdrawn by the First Army. The 15 tanks with the 28th Division worked all day in the vicinity of Apremont under severe Artillery fire from the edges of the Argonne Forest, while the 40 machines with the 35th Division aided, late in the afternoon, in resisting a counter-attack from the Montrebeau Woods, north of Baulny, holding and patrolling a line between Baulny and Eclisfontaine until the Infantry could organize upon it.

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Enemy Demoralized

About 5:30 on the morning of October 1, the enemy made a violent counter-attack on the 28th Division just north of Apremont. The Americans themselves were preparing to jump an attack over at 6 o'clock, and eight tanks were in position to assist. Their fire into the closely massed ranks of the assaulting Germans produced terrible execution and the First Army Corps Hq. declared officially after the action that "prisoners of the II Landwehr Division state that in the counter-attack north of Apremont they were completely demoralized by our tanks, as most of the soldiers, as well as most of the officers, had never seen tanks before. Tanks did very effective work, and after having gone through the lines turned around and came back through them again, at the same time inflicting casualties." During all the fighting of the day, the tanks themselves suffered only 16 casualties, of whom none were killed.

On October 4 came the second general attack along the whole front of the First American Army. By repair and salvage work on disabled machines, 89 tanks had been made ready for action again, of which one company was assigned to the 28th Division and two companies were assigned to the 1st Division, which had relieved the 35th. The remaining tanks stayed in brigade reserve. The tank commanders with the 1st Division found excellent support from the Infantry, whom they assisted against bitter resistance in the capture of Hill 240, north of Exermont, while those with the 28th Division pressed the fighting along the edges of the Argonne.

Confirmed Optimists Withal

The most direct testimony to the severity of the work which they all underwent is found in the figures. 30 tanks were ready for action on October 5 out of the 89 which had been fit the day before. The rest had been destroyed or disabled, and 28 officers and enlisted men had been killed or wounded during the day.

Moreover, mechanical difficulties, due to long and terribly severe usage, were daily becoming more troublesome, while an epidemic of influenza had caused many men to be evacuated and, wrote Major Brett in a report, "the nightly gassing on the positions around Charpentry has caused a little sickness and inconvenience." Nevertheless, he added, "the men and officers are in good spirits!" It would seem that only confirmed optimists occupied positions in the Tank Corps.

It was not until October 7 that any machines were called into action again, and then the eight which were fit for duty on the west side of the Aire went in to assist the attack of the 28th Division that morning on the heights of Chatel-Chehery. One of the tanks struck a mine and was disabled, but the remaining seven continued in the battle, which was a very severe and important one, throughout the day, being engaged chiefly in patrol work. After this engagement there was no particularly important tank activity for a week and during that time the remaining tanks were reorganized into a provisional company under Capt. Courtney Barnard. The strength of this company was ten officers and 149 enlisted men and it had 24 tanks at its disposal.

Against Kriemhilde-Stellung

On October 14 the Provisional Company was loaned by the First Corps to the Fifth Corps to participate in an operation of the 42nd Division on the morning of the 15th against the Kriemhilde-Stellung positions between Landres-et-St. Georges and St. Georges. The tanks had to make a long night run from Exermont to the jumping off positions and were obliged to make such speed that many of them broke down and only ten arrived, just in time to go over at H hour.

These machines, however, advanced into the enemy's immensely strong positions and across his trenches, where they trundled into what appeared to be the formation of a counter-attack. Their own supporting Infantry was undergoing such a terrific fire in front of the German wire belts that it could not come up, so the tanks contented themselves with dispersing the concentration of German Infantry, and then retired. Fifteen machines repeated the attack in this vicinity on November 1, in support of

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the 2nd Division, one platoon being directed against the town of St. Georges and the wire in front of it and two platoons against Landres-et-Georges and the wire there. In both places excellent results were achieved, and with very few casualties to the attacking tankers.

Supported Eight Divisions

The tanks were not called upon again to participate in action before the armistice, as the fighting after November 1 assumed a character of open warfare in which their services were not so necessary as in the attack of strongly intrenched positions. During the course of the Meuse-Argonne battles, the tank units of the 1st Brigade had lost 3 officers and 16 enlisted men killed, and 21 officers and 131 enlisted men wounded. These losses were suffered in 18 separate engagements, in many of which some of the French tanks also participated, these engagements occurring in the course of supporting eight different divisions, including, besides those already mentioned, the 77th, the 82nd and the 91st.

Eighteen of the 141 American tanks were totally demolished by enemy fire and one tank disappeared entirely and was never found, the theory being that it was either disabled and captured by the enemy or that it fell into the Aire river and was completely submerged. The dangers of tank service were many and among them, oddly enough, that of drowning was not negligible.

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