

Weapons of War—Tanks

The British were the first to design and implement the "Tank," and first agreed to go ahead with the design of their new weapon in 1915, which at that time remained nameless. Its codename ('tank') was given because the shape of the shell resembled water carriers. The name, assigned in December 1915, stuck.

Swinton, one of the creators of the tank, laid down certain key criteria that he argued must be part of the finished design. The tank must boast a minimum speed of four miles per hour, be able to climb a five-foot high obstacle, successfully span a five-foot trench, and - critically - be immune to the effects of small-arms fire. Furthermore, it should possess two machine guns, have a range of twenty miles and be maintained by a crew of ten men.

This first tank was given the nickname 'Little Willie' (soon followed by 'Big Willie') and, as with its predecessors, possessed a Daimler engine. Weighing some 14 tons and bearing 12 feet long track frames, the tank could carry three people in cramped conditions. In the event its top speed was three miles per hour on level ground, two miles per hour on rough terrain (actual battlefield conditions in fact).

In their first battle, thirty-six tanks led the way in an attack at Flers. Although the attack was itself successful - the sudden appearance of the new weapon stunned their German opponents - these early tanks proved notoriously unreliable.

In part this was because the British deployed them before they were truly battle ready in an attempt to break the trench stalemate. They often broke down and became ditched - i.e. stuck in a muddy trench - more often than anticipated.

Conditions for the tank crews were also far from ideal. The heat generated inside the tank was tremendous and fumes often nearly choked the men inside. Nevertheless the first tank operators proved their mettle by operating under what amounted to appalling conditions.

By the time the war drew to a close the British, the first to use them, had produced some 2,636 tanks. The French produced more, 3,870. The Germans produced just 20.

With the French tanks proving more serviceable than their British equivalents they continued to be used beyond wartime.

The French Renault F.T. tank continued to grow in popularity as the concept of the tank as a close aid to advancing infantry prospered.

Both the U.S. and Italy produced their own tank designs, which were based on the French Renault model, a testament to its design strengths. The Italians produced the Fiat 3000 and the U.S. the M1917.

Tank design continued to improve beyond the war and the tank, which helped to make trench warfare redundant, restored movement to the battlefield. Its widespread use continues to the present day.

