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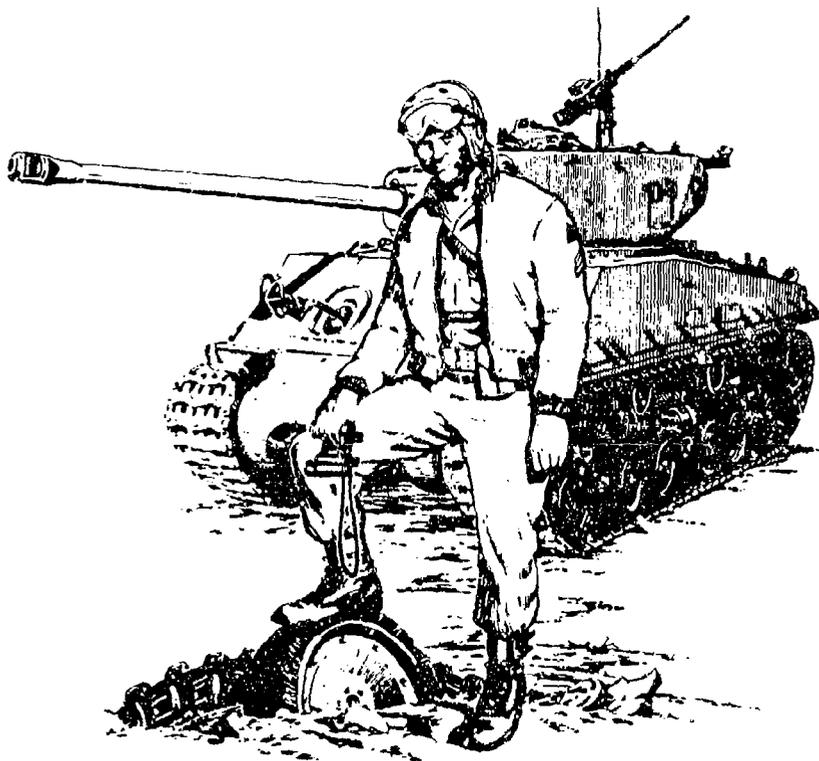
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ARMOR IN BATTLE



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U.S. ARMY ARMOR SCHOOL
FORT KNOX, KENTUCKY
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INTRODUCTION

In 1939, George C. Marshall, then a Colonel in the Infantry, wrote these words in the Introduction to Infantry in Battle:

There is much evidence to show that officers who have received the best peacetime training available find themselves surprised and confused by the difference between conditions as pictured in map problems and those they encounter in campaign. This is largely because our peacetime training in tactics tends to become increasingly theoretical. In our schools we generally assume that organizations are well-trained and at full strength, that subordinates are competent, that supply arrangements function, that communications work, that orders are carried out. In war many or all of these conditions may be absent. The veteran knows that this is normal and his mental processes are not paralyzed by it. He knows he must carry on in spite of seemingly insurmountable difficulties and regardless of the fact that the tools with which he has to work may be imperfect and worn. Moreover, he knows how to go about it. This volume is designed to give the peace-trained officer something of the viewpoint of the veteran.

His words are still valid today. The majority of military history is written at the division, corps, and echelons above corps level. Although the big picture is also important, company level leaders can better understand and learn from small unit actions - military history at an applicable level. Armor in Battle is not intended to be a carbon copy of Infantry in Battle, although the initial concept came from it. The concept behind Armor in Battle is to fill a void in military history. There has never been a dearth of small unit infantry actions, yet small unit armor actions are few and far between. This is an attempt to fill that void by providing an anthology featuring armored action starting with the very first armor battle in 1916. Additionally, Armor in Battle is designed to provide a turret's eye view of armored conflict - military history at the small unit level. This anthology mainly revolves around platoon and company level actions, for it is from such accounts that company grade leaders can benefit most from military history.

LEADERSHIP BRANCH
UNITED STATES ARMY ARMOR SCHOOL

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

George Santayana: The Life of Reason, 1906

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TANK VERSUS TANK:

VILLERS-BRETONNEUX, APRIL 24, 1918.

Fourteen heavy tanks were assigned for this action. They were formed into three groups and assigned: three tanks to the 228th Infantry Division, six to the Fourth Guard Infantry Division, and five to the 77th Reserve Infantry Division. The first two groups were to attack Villers-Bretonneux in conjunction with the infantry and the last group was to attack Cachy.

Among the instructions given to one group commander the following items appeared: "No. 3, the commander's tank will be the guide; the other two will follow at a distance of 200 meters in echelon to the right and rear. If, during the combat, the infantry should request a tank, their request is to be granted in any case. Six men of the 207th Infantry will be assigned to each tank as patrols."

Two motor trucks, loaded with fuel, ammunition, intrenching tools, etc., were assigned to each group. These vehicles were to follow their groups, by bounds.

The terrain was very favorable for the use of tanks. There were few obstacles and the fields over which the attack was to take place, were dry. There was a heavy fog at the start and a heavy bombardment was carried out during the approach march to prevent the British from hearing the noise made by the tanks.

Engine trouble in one of the tanks reduced the number participating to 13. Group No. 1 left its starting point, just in rear of its infantry front line, at 6:50 A.M. crossed the German front line at 7 A.M. and the British front line shortly thereafter. The British troops and especially those in well concealed machine gun nests which, due to the heavy fog, the Germans had not discovered, put up a good fight, bringing all available weapons to bear upon the tanks. After a short but sharp engagement, the British infantry and machine gunners surrendered to the tank personnel and were turned over to the German infantry.

The commander's tank of Group No. 1 advanced under heavy infantry and artillery fire, to within 100 yards of Villers-Bretonneux, when it was discovered that the infantry was not following. It turned back to regain contact and soon wiped out four more machine gun nests which had been firing on the tank from the rear. Rejoining the infantry, this tank moved to the eastern edge of the town under heavy machine gun fire and overcame several machine gun nests at this point. The tank and its infantry then entered the town.

The other two tanks of this group cleaned out strongly intrenched machine gun nests which were holding up the German troops and, after reaching the town where they again supported the infantry attack, they joined tank No. 3, according to plan, near the tile factory. The

factory had been made into a large machine gun nest. The three tanks, using their heavy guns, shot it to pieces. Six British officers and 160 men surrendered. After the German infantry had arrived at the tile factory, tanks No. 1 and No. 2 moved against an airdrome, also heavily armed with machine guns, and destroyed it. After wiping out several machine guns in houses, where more prisoners were taken, they reached their objectives at about noon, and, having reported their departure to the infantry commander, returned to their starting point.

Group No. 2 crossed the German front line a little after 7 AM and attacked a strong point along the railroad embankment from the front, flank and rear, silencing its guns and permitting the infantry to advance. One tank cleaned out a trench nearby and captured 15 prisoners. Two of these tanks moved past the railroad station and one of them fired upon approaching British reinforcements. The other tank was having trouble with its gun recoil mechanism but managed to silence several strong points, and the two tanks, by opening fire on the Bois d'Aquennes and the British reserves west of it, aided the German infantry to enter these woods.

Tank No. 3 cleaned out the British first line, caused several casualties, and took 30 prisoners. It then captured a switch trench with 40 prisoners and moved toward a fortified farm. It reached the farm after a breakdown, and silenced the machine guns located there. The mechanical trouble continued, but before the tank stopped the crew was able to break down strong resistance south of the railroad station, capturing one officer and 174 men. Finally, the carburetor jets became stopped up and the tank could not be moved, so the crew went forward without it. Later, the commander returned to the tank, changed the jets and made another attempt to move the tank. He succeeded in getting it started but soon ran it into a large shell hole which had just been dug by a shell that exploded in front of the tank. As the tank entered the hole it turned over. It was therefore temporarily abandoned but later brought back to a safe position.

Tank No. 4 reached the British front line trenches at 7:10 AM, cleaned them out and attacked a fortified farm south of the town, where it cleared the way for the infantry. Joining tanks No. 1 and No. 2, the three vehicles moved against Bois d' Aquennes and stopped a British counter attack. Tank No. 5 became lost on account of the fog. It came under heavy machine gun fire and the driver was wounded. When he was hit, he lost control of the tank. The engine stopped and the tracks were held fast by the brakes, which jammed. The commander used some of his men as an infantry detachment until the tank was repaired, when, with the men remaining, he moved the tank toward the Bois d' Aquennes, cleaning out a few machine guns which were in the trenches crossed by the tank.

Tank No. 6 advanced at the proper time but its infantry did not follow. The tank came under heavy fire but went on until it was about 20 yards from the British line, when both engines stopped due to overheating. The driver had been wounded and the substitute driver was not with the tank. After the engines cooled off the commander brought the tank back to the German lines.

Group No. 3 lost a tank soon after the action started. This tank advanced with its infantry's first wave, successfully attacked several machine gun nests and portions of the trenches, but soon thereafter it struck a hole and turned over on its side. According to the account of this action, the British troops had started to lay down their arms and the tank commander had ordered his crew out of the tank to support the infantry troops on foot, when the British took up their arms and shot most of the tank crew. One member of the crew succeeded in getting back to the German lines and one was captured by the British. The captured man gave information to the British concerning the German tank troops. The German infantry retreated at this point and the tank was blown up by a German officer since it could not be brought back. Apparently this officer did not make a good job of it for the tank was later captured by the British in fair condition.

Tank No. 2 moved toward Cachy and attacked several machine gun nests including one which had held up the infantry advance for over an hour. This tank then advanced to a point about 700 yards from Cachy, firing on the British position at the village. At this point British tanks appeared and the first, and much discussed, tank-against-tank action occurred. The German account states that one of the German tanks was stopped by artillery fire and another one was forced to retreat in the initial encounter. As the second tank was moving back, it was put out of action by a direct hit from the right. Another shell struck the oil tank. However, the commander finally succeeded in saving the tank and moved it back, a little over a mile, to the German lines.

The British counter attack won back part of the ground captured by the German advance and this caused a change in the plans for using tank No. 3. It was intended that this tank should support the attack on Gentelles, but, since this failed, the tank was sent against Cachy. There it fired upon the eastern edge of the village. Later, however, since the German infantry did not plan to storm Cachy, the tank was released, whereupon it returned to the assembly point.

Tank No. 4 was also used in the attack on Cachy. It succeeded in cleaning out several machine gun nests and got into position where it could enfilade a 200-yard trench, thus causing some casualties and driving the remainder of the garrison back. Toward noon the tank commander noticed that the German infantry were retreating from the direction of Cachy. He turned his tank in that direction, stopped the retreat, and moved his tank toward the village. When within about 900 yards of Cachy, he came upon a number of British tanks which were approaching from the German right flank. Shortly afterward other British tanks made a frontal attack. The British tanks opened fire with their machine guns and the German tank replied with its heavy gun. The second shot struck a British tank and set it on fire. Soon thereafter this gun struck another British tank. The crew of one of the British tanks evacuated their tank and were shot down. The other British tanks left the field, being followed by machine gun fire to within 200 yards of Cachy. During this action the German cannon failed after the second British tank was struck, so, had the British

known it, they were on even terms as regards type of weapons. The German infantry again moved against Cachy but, as they did not enter the town, this tank was released and returned to its assembly point after having been in action eight hours.

These detachments entered the action with 22 officers and 403 men. Of this force, one officer and eight men were killed, three officers and 50 men were wounded, and one man was captured. Twelve of the 13 tanks were brought back to the German lines.

An account of the use of German tanks,¹ written by an English officer who commanded a front line company which was attacked by these tanks on April 24th states that unusually accurate machine gun fire was being received on his support trench and that orders were given for his men to keep their heads down. When this fire ceased he stood up to observe the sources of the fire and saw an enormous and terrifying iron pill-box with automatic weapons bearing down upon him. He got down in the trench and the tank passed over him. The tracks of the tank were within three feet of his face as he lay in the trench. After it had crossed he stood up and fired his pistol at the water jacket of the rear machine gun. Being warned by his men, he looked around quickly and saw a large German crash into the trench, his bayonet sticking into the parapet. Several other Germans ran toward the trench but they were all shot down by the garrison. Next, another German tank appeared, moving along and shooting the men in the front trench, crushing them, or firing into them if they tried to leave it. In this advance, the tanks were aided by German light automatic gunners who followed the tanks. In addition to these light guns, the German foot troops carried flame throwers which they used on the trench garrison. However the flames only reached to the parapet, so that men were not severely burned. They were scorched, however, and had to throw off their equipment. Having cleared up the first line trench, the tanks went on to the second trench, and now a third German tank appeared followed by German infantry. These troops bayoneted the remaining members of the first trench garrison. When the third tank started for the second trench, the officer and the garrison of the second trench retreated. All but five of this group were shot down before a nearby railway cut was reached. The first tank approached the cut firing on the group at this point as they ran down the railway. These shots went over their heads, however, as the machine gun in the tank could not be depressed enough to strike them. Removing his collar and tie for easier breathing, the officer reporting this action, a member of this group of five, outran the German infantry. He organized a counter attack later with men from various regiments. He was wounded during this affair and, while on his way back to the first aid post, met a tank company commander to whom he related the attack by the German tanks. This officer at once ordered British tanks forward to attack the German tanks.

Reprinted from The Fighting Tanks Since 1916, by Jones, Rarey, and Icks.

¹From an account published in the British Army Quarterly.