

WWI TANKS



British Mark V Tank

In the early months of the war, the Germans had hoped their use of poison gas would break the stalemate on the Western Front. Their plan failed and the war dragged on. By 1916, the British had a new weapon they believed might end the long period of trench warfare. This weapon was the tank. The vehicle was called a tank to disguise its true purpose. When the first tanks were transported to France, it is said they were covered and labeled "water tanks for Russia." The word "tank" stuck and has been used ever since.

Although early tanks could travel only 3.7 miles per hour, they were effective when they did not break down or get stuck in mud. Tanks could run over machine gun nests, destroy barbed wire barriers, and provide cover for advancing soldiers. They even carried logs that were used as bridges when the troops crossed trenches. But for the most part, tanks were unreliable because they were plagued by mechanical breakdowns throughout the war. Often times they became stuck in the mud of the Western Front or ran into mechanical difficulties out in No Man's land where the helpless crews were left to fend for themselves.

Tanks first appeared in war at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. The Germans were stunned when they first saw the monstrous vehicles lumbering toward them. Some German soldiers stood and laughed, but most

fled in terror. Only 18 of 49 tanks saw action at the Battle of the Somme. The others were halted by mechanical problems and muddy ground.

Tanks were used in mass formation for the first time at the Battle of Cambrai in 1917. The results were similar to those at the Somme. Of the 378 tanks engaged in the battle, 114 broke down. The tank had a long way to go before it would be considered a reliable fighting machine.

1. How did tanks get their name?

2. Why were tanks an unreliable weapon?



WW1 German Sturmpanzerwagen A7V



First tank produced during World War I “Little Willie”

3. What if the Germans had been the first to deploy the tank in battle?

4. When were tanks first deployed?

5. What if the British had built a more reliable tank?



Tank formation deployed at the Battle of Cambrai, 1918



WW1 German Sturmpanzerwagen A7V tank replica at the Tank Museum, Bovington. It is in working condition and is driven out to participate for open days during TankFest.