

Introduction

On 15 September 1916, a new weapon made its battlefield debut at Flers-Courcelette on the Somme – the tank. Its debut, primarily under the Fourth Army, has overshadowed later deployments of the tank on the Somme, particularly those under General Sir Hubert de la Poer Gough's Reserve Army, or Fifth Army as it came to be known after 30 October 1916. Gough's operations against Thiepval and beside the Ancre made small scale usage of tanks as auxiliaries to the infantry, but have largely been ignored in historiography.¹ Similarly, Gough's employment of tanks the following spring in April 1917 at Bullecourt has only been cursorily discussed for the Australian distrust in tanks created by the debacle.² The value in examining these further is twofold. Firstly, the examination of operations on the Somme through the case studies of Thiepval and Beaumont-Hamel presents a more positive appraisal of the tank's impact than analysis confined to Flers-Courcelette, such as J.F.C. Fuller's suggestion that their impact was more as the 'birthday of a new epoch' on 15 September than concrete success.³ Secondly, Gough's tank operations shed a new light onto the notion of the 'learning curve', the idea that the British Army became a more effective 'instrument of war' through its experience on the Somme.⁴ This goes beyond the well-trodden infantry and artillery tactics, and the study of campaigns in isolation. Gough's operations from Thiepval to Bullecourt highlight the inter-relationship between theory and practice, the distinctive nature

¹ David J. Childs, *A Peripheral Weapon?: The Production and Employment of British Tanks in the First World War* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1999), p.147; J.P. Harris, *Men, ideas and tanks: British military thought and armoured forces, 1903-1939* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), p.67.

² Childs, *Peripheral Weapon?*, p.157; Harris, *Men, ideas and tanks*, p.96.

³ Brevet-Colonel J.F.C. Fuller D.S.O, *Tanks in the Great War 1914-1918* (New York, E.P Dutton and Company, 1920), p.58.

⁴ Gary Sheffield, *The Somme* (London, Cassell, 2004), p.157.

of tank tactical development, and the role of generalship in determining whether lessons are learnt or not.

Battle of Thiepval Ridge

After playing a supporting role at Flers-Courcelette, it was at Thiepval on 26 September where Gough's Reserve Army would deploy tanks for the second time, cooperating with the 18th and 11th Divisions of II Corps, and the Canadian Corps. Thiepval was an incredibly strong German position that had resisted attack on 1 July, with Gough later writing that 'Thiepval was reckoned by the Germans themselves as one of the most formidable points on the whole of the Western Front'.⁵

Tank doctrine up to the Battle of Thiepval Ridge was formulated in two documents. The first of these was produced in February 1916 by Lieutenant Colonel Ernest Swinton, the man responsible for creating the first units of the Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps.⁶ Titled *Notes on the Employment of "Tanks"*, he laid down preliminary doctrine for his 'machine gun destroyer', including the suggestion that they '*should not be used in driblets*'.⁷ The second, and most important regarding the Fifth Army's operations, was O.A.D.111 issued by General Headquarters (GHQ) on 16 August 1916. Here it was laid down that they would not be massed as Swinton intended, but used in operations in mid-September, with the Reserve Army expected to have around 18-24. Despite the general agreement that tanks were

⁵ General Sir Hubert Gough, G.C.M., K.C.B., K.C.V.O., etc, *The Fifth Army* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1930), p.160.

⁶ Philip Ventham, 'Early Tank Tactical Doctrine and Training', in Spencer Jones (ed.), *At All Costs: The British Army on the Western Front 1916* (Warwick, Helion, 2018), p.413.

⁷ Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, Fuller, Major General John Frederick Charles, Fuller 1/1 Tank Training, Tactics, Operations, 1916-1918; Bound volume I/TS, Notes on the employment of "Tanks".

subordinate to the infantry, GHQ suggested a different approach to deployment to Swinton. Rather than foregoing a supporting barrage entirely, the tanks would advance closely under one. Furthermore, their role in eliminating enemy strongpoints meant that allotted numbers of tanks would be instructed to deal with specific German strongpoints, closely followed by infantry as tanks could not capture positions by themselves. They were to provide ‘extra weight’ against heavy resistance, as this could not be done by simply throwing in more infantry.⁸

The deployment of tanks at Thiepval clearly shows the influence of the GHQ instructions and vindicates the small-scale deployment of tanks as auxiliary to the infantry. In line with GHQ’s instructions, tanks were detached to deal with specific strongpoints. Four of the six tanks were assigned to the 18th Division, with two each attacking brigade. Those with the 53rd were to aim first for Thiepval Chateau, and those with the 54th aiming for the eastern end of the village. Both tanks were to act as accessories to mopping up Thiepval village, before proceeding with the infantry to assist the capture of the Schwaben Redoubt, the main defensive feature in the Thiepval sector.⁹ The two tanks assigned to the 34th Brigade were to operate on the flank of the brigade and follow the infantry.¹⁰ While not stated in the divisional or brigade orders, their task was to pass Mouquet Farm, aid the clearance of this formidable strongpoint, and then capture the Zollern Redoubt.¹¹ The Canadian Corps

⁸ ‘O.A.D. 111’ in Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence, *Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1916, 2nd July 1916 to the end of the Battles of the Somme, Maps and Appendices* (London, Macmillan & Co, 1938), pp.39-45.

⁹ The National Archives, Kew [Hereafter TNA], WO 95/2043, 7 Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment, 18th Division G.121. Employment of “Tanks”.

¹⁰ TNA, WO 95/1818, 34 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, 34th Infantry Brigade Order No.13.

¹¹ TNA, WO 95/1818, 34 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, M178 Report on Operations From September 22nd. To September 29th. Appendix 2.: Mouquet Farm.

deployed its two tanks to lead the subsidiary assault of the 28th Battalion, with the tanks clearing trenches and the infantry following to establish posts.¹²

Given that the ground was ‘probably more torn up by shells than any other part of France at that time’, it is unsurprising that there was a high proportion of mechanical breakdowns and occasions of tanks getting stuck in craters.¹³ It appears clear that the technical capabilities of the tanks were not fully understood as, given the state of the ground, the tanks were physically incapable of reaching their final objectives. Both tanks of the 34th Brigade were out of action stuck in craters just an hour into the attack.¹⁴ Similarly, one of the 53rd Brigade’s tanks broke down immediately, and the other got stuck in an immense crater, later recovering itself just to be knocked out by German field guns.¹⁵ Additionally, the two tanks assigned to the Canadian Corps failed to get into action: one did not start, and the other was knocked out by artillery.¹⁶

Despite this, where the tanks did get into combat around Thiepval Chateau in support of the 54th Brigade, they certainly vindicated their role as an adjunct to the infantry assault. Pushing forward, the men of the 12th Battalion Middlesex Regiment were checked by fire from Thiepval Chateau, at which point the leading tank arrived and dealt with the machine guns. It was this crucial intervention as a machine-gun destroyer that led the brigade report to write:

¹² Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, RG9-III-D-3, Volume 4935, File Number: 425, War Diaries 28th Canadian Infantry Battalion. 1915/07/01 – 1917/12/31, 6th Canadian Infantry Brigade Order No.117.

¹³ TNA, WO 95/2041, 54 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, Report on Operations by the 54th Infantry Brigade during the capture of Thiepval and the subsequent attack on Schwaben Redoubt September 26th-28th 1916.

¹⁴ TNA, WO 95/1818, 34 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, M178 Report on Operations From September 22nd. To September 29th. Appendix 2.: Mouquet Farm.

¹⁵ TNA, WO 95/2034, 53 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, General Remarks.

¹⁶ TNA, WO 95/518, Fifth Army: Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, Summary of Operations of Reserve Army up to 6 p.m., 29th September, 1916.

‘It seems doubtful, if the Chateau defence had not been dealt with by the “tank”, whether the attack would have progressed beyond the line.’ It was unfortunate for the brigade that the second tank arrived too late to be of any value, and that both were ditched shortly after, as the left of their attack by the Chateau was subsequently held up by machine-gun fire from further west.¹⁷ Even the 34th Brigade’s ditched tank proved valuable. Two of its machine guns were dismounted to help neutralise the German strongpoint at Mouquet Farm that had remained a thorn in the side of the British infantry that had advanced past it.¹⁸

In the aftermath of the operations against Thiepval, lessons were clearly learnt for future operations. Reports were unanimous in the value of the tanks despite their mechanical issues, with the 12th Middlesex report writing: ‘There can be no doubt whatever, though, that this Tank was of the greatest value particularly at the Chateau, in spite of the unavoidable drawbacks as to its position etc’.¹⁹ Few lessons were derived for future employment; only the 53rd Brigade made suggestions despite none of their tanks coming into action. It was proposed that their slow speed meant they should be pushed forward to deal with strongpoints, as had already been suggested by GHQ, and the limited ability of tanks to cross certain obstacles meant that routes should be reconnoitred for them up to the infantry forming up point.²⁰

¹⁷ TNA, WO 95/2041, 54 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, Report on Operations by the 54th Infantry Brigade during the capture of Thiepval and the subsequent attack on Schwaben Redoubt September 26th-28th 1916.

¹⁸ TNA, WO 95/1818, 34 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, M178 Report on Operations From September 22nd. To September 29th. Appendix 2.: Mouquet Farm.

¹⁹ TNA, WO 95/2044/1, 12 Battalion Middlesex Regiment, Notes on Thiepval Action 26/27th Sept 16.

²⁰ TNA, WO 95/2034, 53 Infantry Brigade: Headquarters, General Remarks.

Instead, the most important set of instructions for future employment came from GHQ on 5 October, which could draw upon and synthesise lessons from a much wider perspective than just that of the Reserve Army, by drawing upon the Fourth Army as well. *Notes on the Employment of Tanks* in doctrinal terms said little different from their August instructions, but was now able to provide justification with cases of successful employment. While success had been gained with tanks both coming up behind or in front of the infantry, it was established that the ideal was that tanks reached the enemy front trench just before. Most importantly in the context of tank operations under Gough, and his later usage at Bullecourt, is the stress that tanks were ‘entirely accessory to the ordinary methods of attack’, that being the ‘advance of infantry in close cooperation with artillery’, and that it would ‘not be justifiable to take any risk interfering with that combination’.²¹

Battle of the Ancre

For Gough’s forces, the next employment of tanks would come at the Battle of the Ancre. Continuous rain throughout October led the Fifth Army’s operational plans to be continuously downscaled until it was finally agreed to attack both sides of the Ancre on 13 November.²² The focus here will be around Beaumont-Hamel north of the Ancre River, where the attacking units were to advance to a line Serre – Beaumont-Hamel - Beaucourt-sur-Ancre.²³

²¹ TNA, WO 95/256/13, War Office: Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, Commander in Chief of British Forces, Western Front: Diaries: Volume XI 1916 1st September to 31st October, Notes on use of Tanks.

²² Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (Yale, 2005), pp.291-294.

²³ TNA, WO 95/518, Fifth Army: Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, S.G.72/81; Fifth Army Operation Order No.34.

Gough's plans for his cancelled operations demonstrate clearly his inability to grasp lessons from experience. His second operation plan, issued on 15 October, sought to use an extremely large tank complement of forty-five against a line Pys - Irlles, split 20:25 to II and V Corps, with potential for a further fifteen that would even the numbers out.²⁴ Given the experience of tanks on broken terrain at Thiepval, and that October had already seen heavy rain, with the subsequent implications on the ground conditions, this suggests Gough's vision of an en masse tank offensive was divorced from reality.

Yet at a tactical level, preparations for both this en masse attack and 13 November clearly drew upon the lessons derived from the mixed experience at Thiepval. Each division's six tanks were to be deployed in a manner suited to their mechanical capabilities. A concrete example, in the light of the 53rd Brigade's suggestions, is the extensive reconnaissance conducted of the routes the tanks would have to take to the front, with that from Mesnil substituted for the far more suitable route from Auchonvillers.²⁵ The conditional deployment of tanks dependent on the judgement of Officer Commanding (O.C.) Heavy Machine Gun Section too appears as a desire to avoid tanks getting stuck as at Thiepval. It is also evident that the tactical principles handed down from GHQ were followed, with the operation orders making it clear that the tanks were only auxiliary, with the infantry ordered to keep close to the barrage, not the tanks. Sensibly, this was an infantry-artillery operation with tank support; the only modification made for the tanks was a noise demonstration to conceal their movement.²⁶

²⁴ TNA, WO 95/518, Fifth Army: Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, Reserve Army Operation Order No.32.

²⁵ TNA, WO 95/110, 4 Brigade Tank Corps: 4 Battalion Tank Corps, War Diary.

²⁶ TNA, WO 95/2845, 51 Division Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, S.G.118/18 Instructions with regard to Offensive Operations; TNA, WO 95/3093, 63 (Royal Naval) Division Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, 63rd (R.N) Division Order No.68.

In eventuality, the handling of the tanks was shambolic. In position at Auchonvillers on the morning of 12 November, the tanks received news at 4pm that they would not be used, only to have the orders countermanded at 11pm. Despite having begun to return to Beaussant at 6.30pm, they were ordered to send two tanks back towards the front despite little chance of reaching their position in time.²⁷ The result was that the infantry advanced at 5.45am on 13 November without their tank support, with consequences for both the 63rd and 51st Divisions. For the 63rd Division, the 188th and 190th Brigades were held up by a concealed German strongpoint that had escaped attention from the preliminary bombardment, and a renewed attack with a re-bombardment failed. At this point the Divisional commander asked Corps for permission to use his six tanks at Auchonvillers, only to be informed that they had been ordered back the previous day, and it would be the next morning before they could come into action against the strongpoint.²⁸ For the 51st Division, they sought to utilise the tanks that had previously been sent back, ordering them to proceed to Beaumont-Hamel and attack the caves. Again, the tanks were hindered by the mechanical capabilities, with both being ditched on the edge of the village.²⁹

Despite again being handicapped by terrible ground conditions and mechanical limitations, the tanks once more vindicated their utility as an auxiliary to the infantry assault. At 8pm that evening, two tanks were ordered to attack the strongpoint that had held the 63rd Division up, and at 6am the next morning they advanced. Firing on it with their 6pdr guns and enfilading the trenches, the strongpoint was quickly neutralised when the defenders surrendered. Despite

²⁷ TNA, WO 95/110, 4 Brigade Tank Corps: 4 Battalion Tank Corps, War Diary.

²⁸ TNA, WO 95/3093, 63 (Royal Naval) Division Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, Report on Operations of 63RD (R.N) Division 13th – 15th November 1916.

²⁹ TNA, WO 95/110, 4 Brigade Tank Corps: 4 Battalion Tank Corps, War Diary.

the tanks being ditched almost immediately, the surrender of 400 Germans was taken:

‘[w]hen the adverse conditions as regards ground are reckoned with, this must be considered a very fine performance.’³⁰

That the ground was a hindrance for a valuable infantry support is evident in the latter stages of the Battle of the Ancre. When orders were received in the afternoon of 14 November for six tanks to move to Beaucourt Station, all were ditched when they attempted to make the move two days later. Yet, when it was managed to extricate one of the tanks, it was utilised to great effect against Beaucourt Trench and Frankfort Trench on 17 November. Here the value of the tank was certainly proven, with ‘guns firing continuously, [it caused] great havoc amongst the enemy’, including the elimination of a German mule train with machine gun fire. With the infantry having failed to advance, the tank returned to British lines unscathed.³¹

As the Ancre drew to a close on 18 November 1916, the process of learning began. While Paddy Griffith sees the winter of 1916-1917 as a crucial period of infantry tactical development, with the lessons of the Somme producing the pamphlets SS 135 and SS 143 that would survive in theory for the rest of the war, this raises the question, what of the tanks?³² As with the aftermath of Thiepval, the value of the tanks was again recognised in after action reports, but suggestions for future employment were again far sparser, such as the suggestion that it was well worth keeping them at hand, even if the chance of using them was unlikely.³³ More importantly, SS 135 *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive*

³⁰ TNA, WO 95/110, 4 Brigade Tank Corps: 4 Battalion Tank Corps, War Diary.

³¹ TNA, WO 95/110, 4 Brigade Tank Corps: 4 Battalion Tank Corps, War Diary.

³² Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army's Art of Attack, 1916-1918* (Yale, Yale University Press, 1996), pp.76-77.

³³ TNA, WO 95/3093, 63 (Royal Naval) Division Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, Some Lessons which may be deduced from the Operations on the Ancre.

Actions devoted a section to tanks. It was hardly revolutionary, with the core tactical principles unchanged from GHQ's *Notes on Employment of Tanks*, just elaborated upon with added guidance. But crucially, in the context of Gough's operations, it made a more explicit warning that 'modifications or alterations required in the plan of attack, when tanks are employed, must be such as will not jeopardise the success of the attack in the event of a failure by the tanks', and that the 'barrage must not be altered for the tanks'.³⁴

Prior to the withdrawal of the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, no mention of tanks was made in the preliminary plans for the Fifth Army's offensive against Achiet-le-Grand.³⁵ Instead, the withdrawal created a flawed opportunity for deployment against the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt.

Lessons Unlearned: First Battle of Bullecourt

For Gary Sheffield, the dividend of the costly process of tactical learning on the Somme comes at the Battle of Arras, highlighting the attack of General Allenby's Third Army as 'evidence of an army that had learned from the Somme, and had applied those lessons to good effect'.³⁶ However, the experience of the Fifth Army in its subsidiary operation at Bullecourt exposes the weakness of such a generalisation. General Gough's forces had seemingly learnt little from their success beside the Ancre.

³⁴ Imperial War Museum, London, LBY EPH 37, SS 135 Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action.

³⁵ TNA, WO 95/518, Fifth Army: Headquarters Branches and Services: General Staff, Plan for Offensive by Fifth Army in 1917.

³⁶ Sheffield, *The Somme*, p.159.

Despite success in their auxiliary role on the Somme, at Bullecourt they were to be unsuitably employed as the vanguard of the assault of the 4th Australian Division on the Hindenburg Line. Charles Bean recalls in the Australian Official History that Gough was persuaded of the utilisation of eleven tanks to lead the assault by the Major Watson, commander of the 11th Company of “D” Battalion of the tanks that were assigned to Gough, and Lieutenant-Colonel Lloyd, commanding officer of “D” Battalion. Taken in by the scheme, Gough decided to attack the next morning, on 10 April.³⁷ The prominence of the tanks was in part to forego the need for more time to cut the wire with artillery, as on 8 April it was reported that any attack would have to take part after 10 April.³⁸ This desire to attack without necessary preparation is certainly in line with his contemporary and historiographical reputation as a ‘thruster’.³⁹ In particular, it appears that the success of the First and Third Armies at Arras created an atmosphere of success in which Gough’s decisions were made.⁴⁰ In eventuality the attack never happened as, with the infantry formed up ready, the tanks lost their way in the dark and none arrived, and orders later that day ordered the attack be carried out at 4.30am the next morning.

From the outset, the plan was a faulty one that did not consider any of the lessons of the Somme. Ignoring the principle recognised by GHQ in August 1916 that tanks could not capture positions, the tanks were to advance at 4.30am, capture the trenches, and then signal

³⁷ Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume IV – The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1917* (Canberra, Halstead Press, 1941), pp.271-274.

³⁸ Australian War Memorial, Canberra [Hereafter AWM], AWM 1/48/13, General Staff, Headquarters 4th Australian Division, April 1917, Report on Attack against Hindenburg Line by 4th Australian Division – April 11th 1917.

³⁹ Gary Sheffield and Helen McCartney, ‘Hubert Gough: Fifth Army 1916-1918’, Ian Beckett and Steven J Corvi (eds.), *Haigs Generals* (Barnsley, Pen and Sword 2007), p.191.

⁴⁰ Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume IV*, pp.268-270.

to the infantry to occupy them.⁴¹ Furthermore, the principle laid down by both O.A.D.111 and SS 135 of not interfering with the artillery barrage was ignored on several occasions. At 5am the shelling of Bullecourt was to cease to allow four tanks to enter and clear the village, and the field artillery barrage on Queant was to temporarily switch to allow the advance of two tanks.⁴² One lesson taken on-board from the Somme was the need for a noise demonstration to cover the tank's movement, with both artillery and machine gun arrangements made, though even this would prove to be faulty.⁴³

On 11 April the attack was carried out as planned, but collapsed under the weight of responsibility wrongly placed on the tanks. To start, the noise demonstration seemingly was not put fully into practice, with the 4th Brigade remarking that not a single artillery round was fired as the tanks moved from Noreuil to their forming up positions.⁴⁴ Of the tanks, only one, in front of the 4th Brigade, actually reached the Hindenburg Line.⁴⁵ It seems that, lit up by German flares, the tanks made easy targets for German artillery against the snow and were quickly knocked out.⁴⁶ Co-operation between the infantry and the tanks appears to have been poor, as 'Tank crews seemed to know little or nothing of an attack by Infantry'.⁴⁷ Particular

⁴¹ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Fourth Australian Infantry Brigade Order No.76.

⁴² AWM, AWM 1/48/13, General Staff, Headquarters 4th Australian Division, April 1917, 4th Australian Divisional Order No.54.

⁴³ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Report on Operations carried out on 11th April near Reincourt.

⁴⁴ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Report on Operations carried out on 11th April near Reincourt.

⁴⁵ AWM, AWM 1/48/13, General Staff, Headquarters 4th Australian Division, April 1917, Report on Attack against Hindenburg Line by 4th Australian Division – April 11th 1917.

⁴⁶ AWM, AWM4 23/12/14, 12th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Report on Operations in the Left Brigade (Bullecourt) Sector 4th. Australian Divisional Front.

⁴⁷ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Special Report on "Tank" Co-operation in attack night of 10/11th April 1917.

criticism was made of the decision of two of the tanks to stop and fire halfway to the first objective, therefore warning the Germans of the attack.⁴⁸

The result was that the infantry was forced to push on unaided and faced with the uncut wire that the tanks were supposed to deal with; predictably their ranks were thinned and they suffered from machine gun fire. Furthermore, a gap was left between the 4th and 12th Brigades from where the Germans were able, unmolested, to launch counterattacks.⁴⁹ The artillery arrangements too were exposed, as the pre-planned barrage lift off Bullecourt, with the inability of the tanks to attack it, meant that the 12th Brigade on the left of the attack suffered heavily from enfilade machine gun fire from the village.⁵⁰

Conclusion

To summarise, in the words of the 4th Australian Infantry Brigade, the ‘Tank Co-operation in the attack made on the Hindenburg Line on the night of 10/11th April 1917 was useless, or – worse than useless’.⁵¹ Despite this, both brigades captured their first objective, with some pushing to within 100 yards of the second objective, before being forced to fall back around midday after heavy fighting. Deprived of artillery support by the arrangements and tank

⁴⁸ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Report on Operations carried out on 11th April near Reincourt.

⁴⁹ AWM, AWM 1/48/13, General Staff, Headquarters 4th Australian Division, April 1917, Report on Attack against Hindenburg Line by 4th Australian Division – April 11th 1917.

⁵⁰ AWM, AWM4 23/12/14, 12th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Report on Operations in the Left Brigade (Bullecourt) Sector 4th. Australian Divisional Front.

⁵¹ AWM, AWM4 23/4/19, 4th Infantry Brigade, April 1917, Special Report on “Tank” Co-operation in attack night of 10/11th April 1917.

support by circumstance, the infantry was simply unable to crack the strong defensive positions of the Hindenburg Line and hold onto them.⁵²

Charting the Fifth Army tank operations from Thiepval to Bullecourt certainly offers interesting insight into the development of the British Army. Further credence is certainly given to the idea of a ‘process’, as argued by William Philpott, rather than a ‘curve’, with learning on the Somme in contrast to the failure at Bullecourt.⁵³ Given that doctrine was issued primarily from GHQ, this demonstrates the distinct importance of ‘formal learning’ in tank tactics, as opposed to the individualised ‘informal’ approaches that Robert Foley identifies predominated in the wartime British Army.⁵⁴ There was little overall change precisely because the tanks proved themselves as auxiliaries to the infantry, despite the terrible ground conditions. It was these ground conditions that render post-war accusations that they were squandered, such as Churchill’s belief they misused a tool for a ‘world-shaking victory’, as unrealistic.⁵⁵

Despite the belief in the learning experience of the Somme, little seems to have been learnt and implemented in the Fifth Army’s first post-Somme tank engagement. Theoretical learning occurred yet, in contrast to the success at Arras, Gough’s operational plan did not display this. Gough’s decisions, in line with his ‘thruster’ tendencies, violated the principles

⁵² AWM, AWM 1/48/13, General Staff, Headquarters 4th Australian Division, April 1917, War Diary.

⁵³ William Philpott, ‘Beyond the ‘Learning Curve’: The British Army’s Military Transformation in the First World War’, *Commentary*, 10 November 2009 at <https://rusi.org/commentary/beyond-learning-curve-british-armys-military-transformation-first-world-war>, accessed 5 January 2019.

⁵⁴ Robert T. Foley, ‘Dumb donkeys or cunning foxes? Learning in the British and German armies during the Great War’, *International Affairs*, Vol.90, No.2, (2014), pp.279-298, p.281.

⁵⁵ Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918* (London, Thornton Butterworth, 1923), p.652.

laid down in SS 135 with distorted attack arrangements utterly dependent on the tank. That he had only eleven mechanically unreliable vehicles was completely ignored. It has been suggested that Gough would have been better suited to the semi-open warfare of the ‘Hundred Days’.⁵⁶ Yet his failure to integrate tanks effectively into a combined arms operation at Bullecourt and later at Passchendaele, where tanks were deployed over swampy terrain, suggests otherwise.⁵⁷

Word Count: 3,496.

⁵⁶ Peter Simkin, ‘Haig and the Army Commanders’, in Brian Bond and Nigel Cave (eds.), *Haig: A Reappraisal 80 years on* (Barnsley, Pen and Sword, 2009), pp.87-88.

⁵⁷ Nick Lloyd, *Passchendaele: A New History* (London, Penguin, 2017), pp.79-80.

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