

Trial by Fire: British Army Centurion Tanks on the Korean Peninsula

Introduction:

While the first six of the Mark I Centurion 'Universal Tanks' had arrived in Europe prior to the end of the Second World War, they came too late to actually see combat, and were only used for troop trials as part of Operation 'Sentry'¹. In fact, it would not be until Kim Il-Sung launched his invasion of South Korea in 1950 that a conflict would arise in which the British Army was able to finally test the design against an actual, living, fighting enemy. The Centurion is nowadays recognised as one of the most successful designs of armoured fighting vehicle ever to enter production², and it was largely due to the Korean War that this reputation was established, to be cemented in later conflicts. This is a testament to the capabilities of the Centurion to fight effectively both in extremely harsh conditions (so hostile, in fact, that one member of the Royal Tank Regiment remarked later that he couldn't understand why there was a fight over Korea and that 'if it [Korea] was mine I would have gave [sic.] it away'³) and in a type of warfare (largely static and built around fixed defensive lines) that the Centurion had never been designed for⁴.

The Tank in Question:

¹ The Tank Museum (Exact site publication date unknown). Vehicles: *Tank Medium A45, Centurion Mark 1 (E1951.34)* [online] tankmuseum.org. Available at: <https://www.tankmuseum.org/museum-online/vehicles/object-e1951-34> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

² Ian Carter, "Britain's Struggle to Build Effective Tanks During the Second World War", iwm.org.uk [online], (9 January 2018). Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/britains-struggle-to-build-effective-tanks-during-the-second-world-war> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

³ Quoted from Trooper Jarleth Donellan of the Royal Tank Regiment. (National Army Museum (Exact site publication date unknown). Explore: *Korean War* [online] nam.ac.uk. Available at: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/korean-war> [Accessed 14/02/2020])

⁴ Lt. Col. David Eshel, *Centurion* (Hod Hasharon: ESHel-DRAMIT, 1979), p. 4

The Centurions which reached the South Korean port city of Pusan in late 1950 were a different beast to those Mark Is which had been undergoing troop trials in Europe at the tail end of the Second World War. On these, the new Mark III, the 17-pounder gun (calibre 76.2 millimetres) was gone in favour of the newly-designed 20-pounder (calibre 83.4 millimetres) rifled cannon, giving the Mark III greater firepower in both the anti-tank and anti-personnel roles⁵, the upper glacis plate (already 3 inches thick⁶) was given extra protection through the addition of spare track links⁷, and the turret design was switched to a different, fully cast pattern, thus providing improved thickness and strength⁸. As well as a powerful main armament and a good level of armour protection, reasonable (although hardly class-topping) mobility was provided by a Rolls-Royce Meteor engine, producing 650 brake horsepower⁹ (up from 600 in the Marks I and II¹⁰) and giving a top speed of 21.5 miles per hour¹¹. The Centurion Tank, as sent to participate in the Korean War, was thus a design which could fittingly be termed a 'universal tank', that is to say, one which was equally capable when it came to killing the enemy, surviving the enemy's attempts to do the same, and moving to be in a better position than the enemy for those other two purposes.

Initial Deployment and Early Engagements:

⁵ "Centurion", Military Vehicles Forecast (Archived Report) [online] (January 1997), p. 2. Available at: https://www.forecastinternational.com/archive/disp_old_pdf.cfm?ARC_ID=1123 [Accessed 14/02/2020]

⁶ The Tank Museum (Exact site publication date unknown). Vehicles: *FV4017 Tank Medium, Centurion Mark 3 (E1970.151)* [online] tankmuseum.org. Available at: <https://www.tankmuseum.org/museum-online/vehicles/object-e1970-151> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

⁷ The Royal New South Wales Lancers (2006). Lancers' Museum: Vehicle Collection: *Centurion Tank* [online] lancers.org.au. Available at: www.lancers.org.au/site/Centurion_Tank.php [Accessed 14/02/2020]

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Bill Munro, *The Centurion Tank* (Marlborough: Crowood Press, 2005), p. 81

¹⁰ Ibid., p37

¹¹ Ibid., p81

The first Centurions to arrive on the Korean Peninsula were those of the 8th King's Royal Irish Hussars, reaching Pusan by ship on the 15th of November 1950¹². They were immediately despatched by train to the Northern capital of Pyongyang, but, before they could be dismounted from the trains upon which they had spent a full fortnight making the slow journey northwards, word was received of a major defeat nearer to the Chinese border¹³, and - to prevent the brand-new and technologically advanced tanks falling into Communist hands - the Centurions were ordered to withdraw from the fighting and move to Japan¹⁴. Nonetheless, a single Centurion had to be abandoned during this retreat, and was presumed captured by the enemy¹⁵. It would not be until the 11th of February in the next year, 1951, that the Centurions would fire their first ever shots in anger¹⁶. At a range of 3,000 yards, hitting and destroying the target with only the second shell fired, the first confirmed tank-to-tank kill by any unit of the British Army in the post-war era took place¹⁷. The Centurion involved came from 'C' Squadron, 8th KRIH. The victim of the 20-pounder's fury was a Cromwell Mk. V formerly of the 8th Hussars¹⁸, which had been captured by the Chinese People's Volunteer Army during the earlier 'hideous struggle'¹⁹ of the Battle of Happy Valley, before being handed over to the Korean People's Army²⁰. As Eshel states, 'it is perhaps ironic

¹² Simon Dunstan, *Tank War Korea* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1985), p. 47

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁴ George Forty, *The Royal Tank Regiment, A Pictorial History 1916-1987* (Tunbridge Wells: Guild Publishing, 1989), p. 204

¹⁵ "Centurion Tanks, Korea", Hansard Volume 482 (14 December 1950) [online]. Items 125-126. Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1950-12-14/debates/0443c4a3-cba5-4073-afcb-596ca25f1787/CenturionTanksKorea> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

¹⁶ Eshel, *Centurion*. p. 13

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Andrew Salmon, "The ghosts of 'Happy Valley'", *The Korea Times* (29 April 2013)

²⁰ Republic of Korea Ministry of Defence (2011), *War History: Mystery Cromwell Tank of the Korean War* [online] [mnd.nara-tistory.com](https://mnd-nara.tistory.com/637). Available at: <https://mnd-nara.tistory.com/637> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

that the Centurion's first action was against the tank it was designed to replace'²¹.

During this phase of the war, the Centurions continued to see usage, but the North Korean tank force had been decimated by American M26 Pershings and M46 and M47 Pattons in the Battle of the Bowling Alley²². As such, the Communist forces were reluctant to deploy armour again, and tank-to-tank engagements were as such far from commonplace²³. This meant that the Centurions were deprived of the type of warfare they had been designed for; there was no chance to demonstrate the full capability of the 20-pounder to pierce 330 millimetres of steel plate at 100 yards²⁴ - more than twice the performance of the infamous 88 millimetre KwK 36 fitted to German tanks during the Second World War²⁵. Rather, Centurions were more commonly deployed in the anti-infantry role. In the words of Whitehouse, 'United Nations' armour was employed chiefly as a form of mobile artillery, rather than an armoured cavalry force attempting high-speed breakthroughs or attacks in movement.'²⁶ Even so, whilst acting as hilltop artillery had not been the intended purpose for the Centurion, it was a battleground which the crews and vehicles nonetheless adapted to, with the Centurions coming to be viewed as 'guardian angels,' to be 'invoked... at every point of threat or crisis'²⁷. High Explosive shells fired from the 20-pounder were effective against both bunkers and infantry forces as direct-fire infantry support artillery, with the maximum range for 'pin point [sic.] shooting' in this role considered to be 4,000

²¹ Eshel, *Centurion*. p. 13

²² Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu: United States Army in the Korean War* (Washington DC: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1961), p. 362

²³ Munro, *The Centurion Tank*. pp. 159-160

²⁴ Simon Dunstan, *Centurion Universal Tank 1943-2003* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003), p. 10

²⁵ Thomas L. Jentz, *Germany's Tiger Tanks: Tiger I and Tiger II - Combat Tactics* (London: Schiffer Publishing, 1996), p. 9

²⁶ Arch Whitehouse, *Tank* (Dunstable: MacDonald & Co., 1960), p. 360

²⁷ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 51

yards²⁸. The Centurion was rapidly proving itself to be a capable fighting vehicle during the early phases of the Korean War.

Imjin:

The Battle of Imjin is perhaps, from a British perspective, the most famous battle of the Korean War. The 'famous stand of the Gloucesters'²⁹ became ubiquitously-known as an heroic tale of British valour in the face of a numerically vastly superior foe and 'captured the imagination of the Western World'³⁰. Two of the four Victoria Crosses of the entire war were awarded to troops of the Gloucestershire Regiment for their fight on the banks of the Imjin river³¹.

This was a battle in which the Centurion played a critical role, with tanks from 8th KRIH distinguishing themselves by providing fire support to the British, Belgian, and Luxembourgish infantry deployed on the hilltops, alongside the converted Churchill Crocodiles of 'C' Squadron, 7th Royal Tank Regiment³². The terrain was 'totally unsuited to tanks, but they [the Centurions] still took an extravagant toll on the enemy'³³, according to Dunstan. It was not just the terrain which was inhospitable - the weather was as well, to the extent that unless the tanks were parked atop rice straws (to insulate them from the ground), condensation in the night would quite literally freeze the road wheels onto the ground. This would leave the tank immobile until the ice could be melted away by pouring gasoline onto the frozen areas and

²⁸"Centurion Tanks in Korea" Report by Lt. J. Brown RNZAC (March 1952) [online], Available at: antipodeanarmour.blogspot.com/p/centurion-tanks-in-korea-report-by-lt-j.html [Accessed 14/02/2020]

²⁹Forty, *The Royal Tank Regiment*. p. 205

³⁰Max Hastings, *The Korean War* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2010), p. 301

³¹Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum (2014), *Our Story: Battle of Imjin River, Korea 22-25 April 1951* [online] soldiersofglos.com. Available at: <https://www.soldiersofglos.com/battle-of-the-imjin-river-korea/> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

³²Soldiers of Gloucestershire Museum (2015), *The Battle of Imjin River* [online] soldiersofglos.com. Available at: <https://www.soldiersofglos.com/announcement/the-battle-of-imjin-river/> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

³³Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 51

igniting it³⁴. On multiple occasions, the Centurions were deployed up along steep-sided valleys on tracks only wide enough for a single vehicle, coming to the aid of the infantry in near-totally inhospitable conditions and under almost constant shelling, mortaring and small-arms fire³⁵.

The Centurions were sent in to provide fire support for the infantry, being at times swarmed with Communist footsoldiers to the point that the tanks would have to 'hose each other down'³⁶ with machine-gun fire to try and hold back the tide³⁷. At other times the paths would be blocked by the lead vehicle, in one example by a pair of Centurions at the head of the column becoming bogged down in the mud³⁸, in another by an American M24 Chaffee being taken out by a handheld 'sticky bomb' and slewing across the road, leaving the road impassable and forcing the recovery force (on the way to alleviate the strain on the Gloucesters) to turn back³⁹.

As the battle wore on, the situation became more and more untenable, and eventually, the orders were given to withdraw from the banks of the river Imjin. 'C' Squadron, 8th KRIH were ordered to provide cover for Y Company of the Northumberland Fusiliers⁴⁰, and came under extremely heavy fire in the process. Not only that, they were once more physically swarmed by enemy infantry, but managed to make their escape successfully. The Fusiliers, riding atop the Centurion's engine decks, suffered heavy casualties, but not a single tank was lost or even badly damaged in this exchange⁴¹. In their

³⁴ Lt. J. Brown, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

³⁵ National Army Museum (2019), *Explore: Korean War: Battle of the Imjin River* [online] nam.ac.uk. Available at: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/battle-imjin> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *The Battle of Imjin River* [online] soldiersofglos.com

⁴⁰ Hastings, *The Korean War*. p. 308

⁴¹ *Battle of the Imjin River* [online] nam.ac.uk

final action of the battle, the Centurions once more commenced fire on the Communist Chinese forces, expending enormous quantities of ammunition in a rearguard action to safeguard the Royal Ulster Rifles' withdrawal. During one engagement in this rearguard action, a single pair of Centurions were reported to hold back a force of more than 2,000 Chinese infantry⁴².

Yet again the Centurions had proven themselves to be effective in combat, and were demonstrably resistant to almost any munitions the enemy could bring to bear against them. This was true even all the way up to 155 millimetre artillery shells, which Centurions reportedly took direct hits from without suffering any more than 'superficial damage'⁴³. In fact, the level of resistance to artillery boasted by the Centurion was so high that when swarmed by the Chinese, as well as spraying machine-gun fire over each-other's hulls, Centurion crews would sometimes even call in artillery fire on their own positions⁴⁴.

Stalemate:

Once the Chinese offensive, which included the push over the Imjin river, had been halted, the war transitioned to a Great War-esque stalemate; there were fixed frontlines, trenches, barbed wire, and no man's land⁴⁵. The final withdrawal from Imjin, through narrow and claustrophobic valleys, would be the last time the Centurions were engaged in anything coming even close to resembling manoeuvre warfare, and they would spend the rest of the war as 'pillboxes on tracks'⁴⁶, sometimes even being dug into hull-down positions,

⁴² Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 50

⁴³ Lt. J. Brown RNZAC, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

⁴⁴ *The Battle of Imjin River* [online] soldiersofglos.com

⁴⁵ Forty, *The Royal Tank Regiment*. p. 206

⁴⁶ Whitehouse, *Tank*. p. 363

with everything below the hull side being buried⁴⁷. When they weren't dug in, they used their thick armour to great effect: Centurions would wait behind a ridge line for reports of an enemy presence across the valley and then, upon receiving confirmation, 'creep up to the crest and fire two or three shots before retiring behind the hill and closing down against the inevitable enemy action' - much to the annoyance of the surrounding infantry, who were far more vulnerable to high explosive artillery fire⁴⁸. The Centurion tanks on the frontlines during the stalemate period were manned largely by the 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards and the 1st Royal Tank Regiment, with 1 RTR replacing 8 KRIH on the 6th of December 1951⁴⁹, and 5 RIDG replacing *them* on the 9th of December 1952⁵⁰. It is worth noting that while the crews were cycled through on one-year tours of duty, the tanks 'in-country' remained the same throughout the war - a fact which stands out as a testament to the ease of maintenance afforded by the Centurion: it was reputedly 'easier to repair and maintain than any other tank in its class'⁵¹.

As the war entered its stalemate phase, the 20-pounder gun continued to be an excellent piece of equipment. According to Lt. J. Brown's report (Lt. Brown having served with the 8th KRIH before returning to the Royal New Zealand Armoured Corps), the gun could be used to effectively 'snipe' individual enemy soldiers out to a range of 3,600 yards, and, as has been said before, was accurate enough out to 4,000 yards when firing high explosive munitions⁵². The main threat at this point was provided not by enemy infantry or vehicles, but by artillery and mortar fire. While the tanks were largely

⁴⁷ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 53

⁴⁸ Simon Dunstan, *Armour of the Korean War, 1950-53* (London: Osprey Publishing, 1982), p. 82

⁴⁹ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 54

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57

⁵¹ Whitehouse, *Tank*. p. 363

⁵² Lt. J. Brown RNZAC, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

able to take fire with impunity (although, on one occasion, a stray piece of shrapnel did ignite a smoke discharger, which in turn caused the engine of a Centurion to catch fire, eventually destroying the entire tank⁵³), the infantry remained vulnerable. The tanks were thus called in to silence the enemy guns by 'discomforting the OP [Observation Post] crews.' This was done by firing shells into the viewing slits of the OP bunkers 'in the manner of posting a letter'⁵⁴.

Positions became even more fixed as the stalemate continued, and the crews were able to properly range in on the opposite hillsides and create pre-assigned firing positions, which could then be called upon for precise fire support to either stave off hostile raids, or support friendly ones⁵⁵. Ranging in for these pre-determined targets was undertaken in the midst of normal return fire, such as when firing at observation posts during artillery bombardments. During these periods of firing, the Tank Commanders would calibrate their gunsights toward locations the enemy was known to frequent at other times, so as to avoid suspicion on the part of the Chinese or North Koreans that their resupply routes, for example, had been compromised⁵⁶. The fighting during these raids was brutal - in the most significant one to involve 1 RTR, in May of 1953, a single squadron of tanks expended more than 500 rounds of high explosive 20-pounder ammunition, 22,500 rounds of BESA (the co-axial machine-gun) ammunition and 4,500 rounds of .303 ammunition for the Browning LMGs mounted on the commander's cupola⁵⁷. This last weapon had been noticeably lacking from the original Centurion Mark III specification when the tanks arrived in Korea, but they had

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ "The Korean Journal", 1st Royal Tank Regiment (1953) [Forty, *The Royal Tank Regiment*. pp. 206-207]

⁵⁵ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 57

⁵⁶ "The Korean Journal", 1 RTR [p. 207]

⁵⁷ Ibid. [p. 208]

been scrounged from other units, according to Lt. Brown, 'at high cost (in gin)'⁵⁸. Later on, the .303 calibre Browning machine-gun mounted on the Commander's cupola would become an official part of the Centurion's standard equipment⁵⁹. During the same raid, the enemy fired back an estimated 10,000 artillery shells and mortar bombs, averaging no fewer than five direct, physical, 'hits' per tank in the squadron⁶⁰. None of the Centurions were seriously damaged in the engagement, although a number did have to be sent back to rear areas for repairs after suffering minor damage from 122 millimetre artillery fire and 85 millimetre direct fire from towed anti-tank guns⁶¹.

The Centurions stayed on the frontlines right up to and beyond the Panmunjom armistice, without any further significant advances by either the United Nations or by the Communist forces. With the ceasefire coming into effect on the 27th of July, 1 RTR were withdrawn and sent to Egypt in December 1953, to be replaced by the 5th Royal Tank Regiment, who remained to hold the 'Kansas line' in case the North Korean government did not adhere to their end of the ceasefire agreement⁶². The last Centurion was withdrawn from the Korean Peninsula in December 1954, by which time the borders were considered both permanent and secure enough to no longer require constant guarding⁶³.

Conclusion:

On the whole, then, the Centurion tank definitively proved itself to be potent in the Korean War, earning a reputation as the finest of all the tanks sent to Korea by any

⁵⁸ Lt. J. Brown, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

⁵⁹ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 50

⁶⁰ "The Korean Journal", 1 RTR [p.207]

⁶¹ Dunstan, *Tank War Korea*. p. 58

⁶² Forty, *The Royal Tank Regiment*. p. 209

⁶³ Ibid.

side⁶⁴, a fact even attested to by USA as well as Commonwealth troops⁶⁵. Although never given the chance to truly demonstrate its anti-tank capabilities, it was demonstrated that the 20-pounder, when firing armour-piercing discarding sabot shot, could penetrate the frontal armour of a T-34 (the most prominently-used tank amongst the Communist forces⁶⁶) at a range of at least 2,800 yards⁶⁷. The Centurion Mark III had a gun that could destroy any enemy tank, and armour strong enough to prevent any damage to crews (besides one single case of concussion⁶⁸), along with the best cross-country mobility of any United Nations tank⁶⁹, leaving it without an equal in the entire theatre of war.

Having succeeded at engaging tanks and infantry, firing in course of manoeuvre and from static positions, and from hilltops and valley floors, the 'universal tank' is rightly considered one of the finest pieces of military hardware Britain has ever produced.

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⁶⁴ Whitehouse, *Tank*. p. 363

⁶⁵ Lt. J. Brown, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

⁶⁶ Richard Marian Ogorkiewicz, Encyclopaedia Britannica "Tank: Postwar Tank Development" [online] britannica.com. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/technology/tank-military-vehicle/World-War-II#ref57391> [Accessed 14/02/2020]

⁶⁷ Lt. J. Brown, *Centurion Tanks in Korea*

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

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