

THE STORY OF THE CANADIAN TANKS.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE ORIGIN, FORMATION AND ACTIVITIES OF THE FIRST CANADIAN TANK BATTALION.

By Lieut. R. M. LAW, M.C.

In this war, apart from its vastness, one of the main features which distinguish it from all previous wars is the enormous extent to which mechanical warfare has been developed and employed by all the belligerents. It would be almost true to say that in every operation one side or another produces some new weapon or some scientific invention calculated to find some vital spot of the enemy by a way hitherto left unguarded.

Among these many surprises which have been sprung on the world, perhaps the greatest of all was the sudden and undreamed of appearance of the Tanks in September, 1916, during the campaign on the Somme, and among the first to wonder at them were our own Canadian troops.

Their achievements on that day, limited as they were, in the light of later performances, and their effect on the enemy morale, satisfied enterprising and scientific soldiers that enormous possibilities for the future conduct of the war lay in their development and wholesale employment, and a vast extension was at once decided upon.

When they were first employed the tanks consisted merely of four companies of the Machine Gun Corps, and were known as the "Heavy Branch." By the following spring these companies had grown into four battalions, and ever since one battalion has followed another as fast as they could be trained and equipped, until to-day the tanks are a self-contained corps. Not only has the number increased but the weapon itself has been in a constant state of development; its efficiency increases every day. There are now several types, not only weapons of assault, but for transporting guns, ammunition and men over ground impassable to any other means of transport and right in the face of fire. The employment of tanks has become so general that one rarely reads of an action nowadays in which tanks have not played a telling part. The mere fact that our Allies, not to mention the enemy, have seriously and actively taken up the tanks is justification enough, and now Canada has shown her faith in the latest arm of the service by taking up an active part in the work.

A Battalion is Suggested.

In January of the present year of 1918, the seeds of the 1st Canadian Tank Battalion may have been said to have been sown in a conversation between Major-General Elles, C.B., G.O.C., Tank Corps, France, and Lt.-Col. Mills, D.S.O., Can. Art., when Col. Mills by reason of his great interest in the tanks, expressed the wish that Canada had an active part in the work of the corps. "The seed fell on good ground and bore fruit," for the G.O.C. took hold of the idea with enthusiasm, so much so that he at once communicated the suggestion, and his desire for a Canadian battalion, to the Tank H.Q.

in London. There the idea was approved and pushed forward, and in March the War Office officially asked the Minister of the Overseas Forces of Canada, Sir Edward Kemp, if Canada would furnish the personnel for a tank battalion.

The request was forwarded to Ottawa and the authorities agreed without hesitation and immediately took steps towards the formation of the battalion, while at the same time preparations were at once set in motion in England for the training of this battalion when it arrived on this side. Lt.-Col. Mills, with Major L. E. Haines, D.S.O., as 2nd in command, were detailed to proceed to Bovington Camp, the training centre of the Tank Corps in England, with a party of 20 officers and 50 other ranks to qualify as instructors.

On March 28th, two days after the request from England had been received, the authorities at Ottawa appointed L.-Col. R. L. Denison to the command of the battalion when formed. At the time of the appointment, Col. Denison was in command of the Canadian Machine Gun Depot, at Toronto. He reported at Ottawa on April 2nd, and set about the formation of the unit. By April 10th, plans were complete and active organisation commenced, and by May 15th an incredibly short period, the 1st Canadian Tank Battalion, with a full establishment of personnel, was on record.

Raised by Universities.

The large number of applications from officers and men to serve in the new unit demonstrated the popular place which the tanks occupy in the minds of the country and made a start of good promise for the Canadian Tanks. However the officers and men who ultimately formed the rank and file of the battalion were carefully selected, for having in mind the fact that to learn quickly and well the multiple and highly technical duties involved in the operation of tanks, and in addition the high standard of physique necessary for their manipulation, Col. Denison asked the University Companies of the C.O.T.C. to give the men under their control, whom they should recommend, the opportunity of serving overseas with the tanks.

This was done, and the chance was so eagerly sought after that the supply was greater than the demand, and the C.O. was thus in the enviable position in these late days of the war to pick and choose.

The Universities of Toronto and McGill each supplied one company, while the third company was composed of recruits from the other universities of Canada, and here it may be mentioned that the battalion is thus unique in that every province of Canada has representatives on its roll. Col. Denison, himself wounded early in the war at Festubert, while serving with the 8th Battalion, appointed to command the companies and