

A SHORT HISTORY OF TANK DEVELOPMENT

PART 1
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The French "Char B" designed in the mid-twenties, built in the thirties by Renault and used in 1940.

Seven tanks for armoured warfare

TANKS HAVE BEEN AROUND for more than half a century now. Familiar things, we take them for granted: they are just part of the scene, for soldiers as for war-gamers. How many of us ask exactly they are supposed to do? Is what they are supposed to do now, what has always been expected of them?

Well, the work a tank has to do has some effect on its shape, and when we learn that during the period between the World Wars there were tanks as light as 2 tons and as heavy as 75; some with crews of one man and others crews of 13; that some large tanks were scarcely bullet-proof while some little ones could keep out most anti-tank shot; that some tanks would do 65 m.p.h. across country while others could do only 5 m.p.h.; and that weapons varied enormously, some having only machine guns, others howitzers, others general-purpose guns, and some cannon which fired only solid shot... when we see this great variety of machinery all classified under the word 'tanks', we see at once that they must have been designed for different kinds of action, by people who had differing notions of what tanks are supposed to do.

These differences date from the very dawn of tank history. The battles of 1914-18 cost so many lives because troops still advanced in close lines, which were accounted for by machine guns. Hence, tanks were invented to knock out the machine guns, and were in fact called Machine Gun Destroyers until Colonel E. D. Swinton gave them the name 'tank', to fool enemy spies.

Although this work seems straightforward, the French and British had very different ideas about it. The former thought that two types were needed—a self-propelled armoured gun carriage to "come into action when the attack had advanced to the point when wheeled artillery would have to limber-up and move forward"; and a small two-man vehicle armed with a machine gun, to accompany each infantry company.

The British thought this was putting the cart before the horse, and that if tanks were to save infantry lives, they must lead, not follow them. Hence, the great lozenge-shaped British tanks of World War One which could cross any obstacle, making paths for the infantry to follow, and fighting on their own if need be.