

## Second Lieutenant Edward de Faye



On the right, A.25 'Arethusa'.

I was intrigued to see the picture in the JEP of Friday the 8<sup>th</sup> February of 2Lt [Edward de Faye](#) of the Heavy Branch Machine Gun Corps, and great uncle of Deputy Guy de Faye, who was subsequently killed while commanding a tank at the Battle of Cambrai. The Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps went on to become the Tank Corps, the Royal Tank Corps and finally the Royal Tank Regiment, the Regiment in which I served; and the Battle of Cambrai remains the Regiment's principal Battle Honour.

I conducted a little research with the archivists at the Tank Museum at Bovington and with my good friend Philippe Gorczynski who lives in Cambrai and is the World's leading expert on the battle. Interestingly, he recently used his extraordinary knowledge of the battlefield to work out where he believed one of the tanks immobilised in the battle still lay buried. With a little help from the Royal Engineers he dug up the tank and it is now on show in a barn beside the battlefield where it lay for nearly 90 years.

2Lt de Faye was in command of a Mk IV male tank at Cambrai. The male tank mounted 6 pounder naval guns in the side sponsons whereas the female version had machine guns. His tank was A25 and was named Arethusa. It had a crew of eight. The tank carried an enormous bundle of sticks on the roof, known as a Fascine, which would be dropped in the enemy trenches to help with crossing the gap. The tanks also carried an Unditching Spar on the roof of the tank. This was a beam the size of a railway sleeper which could be chained to the tracks to help extraction of the Tank if stuck in a ditch.

2Lt de Faye's tank was part of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company of A Battalion and they were attached to 20<sup>th</sup> Division for the great breakthrough attack on the first day of battle on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1917. Success on that first day was stunning. The tanks, supported by infantry, smashed through the Hindenburg Line to a depth of some 10 km: so remarkable was this success that the church bells rang out across England. 2Lt de Faye in his own Report of Action said, *"No opposition was met with till we were some way past our own front line, when very heavy Machine Gun Fire was opened up on us. We crossed the HINDENBURG LINE at the exact spot intended, dropped our infantry at their objective, and then swung right to silence a nest of Machine Guns. Here I opened fire with my left 6 pdr gun and with the second shot put out a Machine Gun and then accounted for the crew with a Lewis Gun at close range. Some good shooting was done here, and the left hand gun again silenced a Machine Gun and 10 minutes later the right hand gun did likewise"* He goes on to say, *"I then followed the other two tanks in the direction of MARCOING and made use of my fascine to effect a safe crossing over a wide piece of trench. We then proceeded about 1400 yds when I received a direct hit in the left hand officers locker, which tore a large hole in the side of the Tank and completely exposed both brakesman and driver to fire"* They stood by all night and then in the morning received orders to withdraw to VILLERS PLOUICH. In his Battle History Sheet which he later submitted he reports that he fired 60 6 pdr rounds during the day and 1000 rounds from the Lewis Guns. The Tank was in action for 4 1/2 hours and covered 5400 yds; one corporal was wounded and no messages were sent by pigeon during the battle! He also reports that the Tank was so badly damaged that it was condemned by the Battalion Workshops Officer. It is all written in a very matter of fact way bearing in mind the appalling conditions

and extreme danger that they had been subjected to throughout the day.

I am not certain what happened to 2Lt de Faye over the next several days. The situation in that part of France was certainly very confused. The dramatic breakthrough achieved on the first day of the battle was not exploited, the German forces counterattacked and gradually the ground that had been captured was surrendered. Many of the Tanks had suffered mechanical breakdown and battle damage and small groups of Tanks were being thrown into action as and when they became available in an attempt to blunt the German counter attack. The next record we have of 2Lt de Faye is on 1<sup>st</sup> December, the day on which he was killed. We know that by then he had been issued with a new tank, also a Mk IV male and also designated A25. The battle report following the action of the day was probably written by one of his crew who survived. He says, *“On the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> December at 6.30 we moved off from near Revelon Farm and proceeded across our front line. We then turned left and proceeded in the direction of GOUZEAUCOURT. About ¾ hour after starting off we observed enemy, and opened fire, and turned half right so that both 6 pdr guns were firing. About this time a shell struck the unditching spar, and blew it off, but did not damage the Tank at all.....We cruised about in the vicinity of GAUCHER Wood then the officer decided to enter it. We were in the wood for ¼ hour but did not find many targets there so we came out. Just after we came out a shell struck the drivers turret, and burst inside, killing the officer and driver, and wounding two gunners.....I can safely say that we did great damage to enemy Machine Guns. I myself put two out of action near GAUCHER Wood near to where our Tank now is”*. In the original report the name of the wood is left blank probably because the crewman who wrote the report did not know its name!

The crew of A25 clearly showed huge courage on that day. They knew that their job was to close with and defeat the enemy advance which they, with their colleagues, achieved. The battle lines stabilised and the German counterattack was contained. The Battle of Cambrai was over. The sadness was that, after the extraordinary success of the first day, 2Lt de Faye and his crew fought their last battle on almost exactly the same spot on which they had formed up before the attack on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> November. The tank ended up in no man's land and it was not possible to recover the bodies of 2Lt de Faye and that of Private

Voice who was killed alongside him. They, like so many of their comrades, have no known grave but their names appear on the Cambrai Memorial at Louveral Cemetery. The members of today's Royal Tank Regiment return regularly to the battlefield at Cambrai and to the 20 separate cemeteries in which the fallen tank crewmen are buried to pay tribute to the extraordinary courage and determination of the young men who gave their lives in the cause of peace over 90 years ago.



Anyone interested in learning more about the Tanks of the First World War and since should visit the Tank Museum at Bovington in Dorset or the website at <http://www.tankmuseum.co.uk>

FEAR NAUGHT!

Lieutenant General Andrew Ridgway CB CBE  
Royal Tank Regiment