



At 0610 hours on 20 November 1917 the tanks began to move from the start line towards the German front. 213 tanks of the Tank Corps had begun the largest armoured vehicle attack in history on that misty morning.

Zero hour at 0620 saw the 1000 plus guns, which had been surveyed only, begin a rolling barrage 200 yards ahead of the advancing tanks and infantry. Surprise was complete for the Germans knew that a preliminary artillery barrage, often lasting days, preceded any British attack.

On a 16000 yard plus front the advance began. First reaching the German barbed wire which the tanks either flattened or drew out of the way by grapnels. Once the wire was removed the following Infantry had no impediment to their advance, as they had previously. Second obstacle for the tanks were the three lines of German trenches. However by the use of fascines dropped into the trenches, such lines proved not to be obstacles at all. The fascines were bundles of brushwood tied tightly into a round bundle, similar to the grass hay you see in the countryside today. Once dropped into the trench the tank drove over to the other side. Once across the trench the advance continued.

Initially the Germans reacted by either surrendering or rapidly withdrawing. As the attack continued resistance by the Germans stiffened. At Flesquieres in the centre the attack was held up until the next day, Mainly because the 51st Highland Division under General Harper had left the tanks to their own. For rather than following the tanks as others did, Gen Harper had his men in extended line. This meant once an obstacle was breached the Highlanders had to run to the breach, pass through, then get back into extended line again. It was partly this failure to keep with the tanks, that Gen Harper assisted in losing the battle of Cambrai.

One of the myths of Cambrai is the "gunner of Flesquieres", a German sometimes known as Unteroffizier Kruger of the 8th Field Battery, who was supposed to have knocked out seven tanks personally. In fact the hold up at Flesquieres was caused by a number of gunners and snipers.

Meanwhile everywhere else the advance continued with the capture of Havrincourt and later that of Graincourt by the 62nd Division on the left. Then Welsh Ridge and Lateau Wood by the 20th and 12th Divisions. All looked well except for the hold up in the centre at Flesquieres. It was this hold up which upset the time table, by not having Bourloun Wood captured by the end of the first day. As well the cavalry had a reluctance to gallop forward to Cambrai, in the face of increasing German sniper and machine gun fire.

Brigadier - General Hugh Elles, the tank Corps Commanding Officer, led the attack from zero hour by riding in H Battalions tank "Hilda". Standing head and shoulders through the manhole of the tank with his Tank Corps flag attached to his ash plant, Elles got a tankers eye view of the battle. Until that is "Hilda" reached the first German trench line, when Elles judged it time to return to his Headquarters. So Hugh Elles returned to the British lines, pipe in mouth and waving away a number of Germans who tried to surrender to him. On the 20th November Elles must have been beside himself at the vindication of his new weapon.

