



**Ian Verrinder *Tank Action in the Great War: B Battalion's Experiences 1917*, Pen and Sword 2009, ISBN: 1 8488 4080 2 hardback £19.99**

That Great War guru, Peter Simkins, often talks about all historians working in that field of study – professional and amateur, trained and untrained – each adding another ‘brick in the wall’ as we build our understanding of the amazing experience of 1914-1918 that still affects our lives and our world to this day.

Ian Verrinder is a professional railwayman – a real train driver (every schoolboy’s proletarian hero!) – and, like so many others, came to a serious study of the Great War through an interest in a family member. His great uncle, Harry Moon, had joined the 8<sup>th</sup> Royal Sussex and might have been surprised when they were made a pioneer battalion. After serving with them through the Somme, we find that he and eight of his mates, all presumably with Harry’s interest in all things mechanical, or perhaps just bored with the pioneer’s life, answered a late-1916 call for volunteers to serve in the new and still secretive Heavy Branch of the Machine Gun Corps.

Ian then delivers a master class in ‘amateur sleuthing’ as he follows the careers and fates of these nine volunteers as they serve as tank crew in B Battalion in its battles of 1917 (before it becomes 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, The Tank Corps). The book benefits from the detailed study of one small unit, of its war diaries and the plentiful reminiscences of its officers. You develop a real interest in these men and their trials and tribulations as the use of this ‘novel engine of war’ slowly improves.

They do their best in their first battle at Messines, but they know this clinical victory had little to do with tanks. (I will allow Ian his misconception that it was the explosion of huge mines that won the battle – he is in good company there! It was the utterly devastating artillery barrages that did the business.) Their next efforts, during Third Ypres, must have been depressing. It seems that three in every four tanks hardly made it across the start line because of ditching, bellying and sundry mechanical failures.

What really comes across well is how these men, living cheek by jowl with each other and their machines, learn their duty well and continually improve their understanding of the possibilities and limitations of the tank in 1917, and how it might be made more effective. More than any other book, and entirely to its credit, this one gives proper attention to the training of the men, and the discussion of their preparations for Cambrai is first-class. The way in which they thought through the problems posed by the massive Hindenburg Line defences, coming up with innovative ideas for crossing wide trenches etc, is covered very well.

Initial success on 20<sup>th</sup> November was a great morale boost for them. The fighting for Fontaine Notre Dame, when tanks found out just how dangerous it was to fight for a village without supporting infantry, was a heartbreaker. I found his page or two of reflections on this fight, where he views the action as if seen from the air, a pure delight to read.

Harry Moon got a well-earned MM. Three of his mates were killed; one was captured; one was commissioned. The other three made it through. There are some nice stories along the



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Page 2 / 2

way. One tank is fitted with a carpet so the Queen of the Belgians can take a ride; her husband hitched a ride in an 'unmodified' machine and found it a very unpleasant experience. We see 2/Lt Haseler grinning into the camera that filmed a visit by King George and Queen Mary – he had just survived a spectacular thirty foot drop seen in the film. It is a bit of a wrench to read of him killed in his tank 'Bulldog' just four months later.

An excellent choice of photographs, and imaginative use of maps so we can plot the fate of each individual tank in their battles, round off this good book. I hope the editors at Pen and Sword encourage Ian Verrinder to continue his study and tell us of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Tank Corps and how it developed its experience in 1918.

**John Lee**

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