

# TANKS

In September 1916 the British introduced a new secret weapon to break the stalemate of trench warfare – the **tank**. The idea originated with **Colonel E.D. Swinton**. It was dismissed by the military chiefs but was picked up by Winston Churchill the First Sea Lord, so the first tanks were actually developed by the Royal Navy who called them land ships. When in transit they were called water tanks to mislead any German spies – and the name stuck.

Haig and his generals were at first unconvinced of their value, but on 15th September 1916 a few tanks were used in an attack at **Flers/Courcelette** on the Somme, with some success. When the metal monsters rolled across no man's land, crushing barbed wire and trench defences, the German troops in their path were totally panic stricken and fled. Each tank had a crew of ten and was armed with a cannon and/or machine guns. Unfortunately though, there were too few of them to make a proper breakthrough, and though they could withstand machine gun fire, their top speed of 3 mph made them fairly easy targets for the enemy artillery. Also they had not been properly tested and several of them broke down.



*Tanks going into action*



*Tank and barbed wire*

Nevertheless, the tank was the way forward. When used properly at **Cambrai**, in November 1917, over 300 tanks, supported by aircraft, were able to punch a 6 mile wide hole in the German lines; but unfortunately there were not enough reserves to follow up their success. Part of the problem was that British senior officers – mostly cavalry men – were slow to recognise that the day of the cavalry charge was over and the tank was the weapon of the future. The early tanks were nicknamed “Big Willies”, apparently after the Kaiser.

*“A pretty mechanical toy, but the war will never be won by such machines.”*

**Lord Kitchener in 1916.**