

On British tanks at Gaza, 1917

Introduction



HMLS Ole-Luk-Oie.

From Source 1.

While reading the book *British Mark I Tank 1916* by David Fletcher I came across some older articles in which the eight tanks that were sent to Egypt and then to Palestine are mentioned. As the information is otherwise not immediately available, it may be appropriate to pass on some of the information here.

HMLS is the abbreviation for *His Majesty's Land Ship*.

Ole Luk Eye is probably the least warlike nickname you have come across for tanks, but behind the name is one of the main men behind the invention of the tank - Sir Ernest Swinton - who before the war wrote short stories under this pseudonym.

The wagon is shown here without gun turrets, which were removed during rail transport.

The Egyptian Tank Detachment

22 officers as well as 226 non-commissioned officers and privates, under the command of Major NH Nutt, boarded the troop transport ship HMT Euripides in December 1916 bound for Egypt. They brought 8 tanks with them, which were supposed to go to the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, which was stationed on the Gaza peninsula, in front of the Turkish positions on the border with Palestine.

However, there was doubt as to how the combination of tanks and sand would fare, and shortly after the landing in January 1917, a series of tests were carried out near the Suez Canal. Much like the mud in Flanders, the desert sand also penetrated everywhere, but the mechanics were sufficiently rough that it did not impede use. Worst of all was the sun's heating of the armor plates, and various improvised shields were improvised.

In March 1917, the force was transported by rail towards the front at Gaza. The force is kept in reserve

during the First Battle of Gaza 26-27 March 1917, but did not manage to be deployed before the operations were interrupted from the English side.

The following tanks took part in the Second Battle of Gaza

HMLS Pincher	Mark I, paint
HMLS Ole-Luk-Oie	Mark I, paint
HMLS Otazel	Mark I, paint
HMLS Sir Archibald	Mark II, painting
HMLS Tiger	Mark I, female
HMLS War Baby	Mark I, female
HMLS Nutty	Mark II, female
HMLS Kia Ora	Mark II, female

Replacement vehicles accessed before the Third Battle of Gaza

HMLS Sir Reginald	Mark IV, painting
HMLS War Baby II *	Mark IV, female
HMLS Lady Wingate	Mark IV, female

*) Source 1 mentions that the wagon may also have been named *HMLS Revenge*, and that it may be a *painting*.

The tanks were well-used training vehicles and neither the fascines (for rolling down trenches or shell holes) nor the wooden beams (*unditching beam*, for release when stuck) were brought along, which on the Western Front had quickly become natural accessories for tanks.

The Second Battle of Gaza

On 17 April 1917, the Second Battle of Gaza began, and here the tanks really got into battle.

A lack of knowledge about deploying tanks and a corresponding reluctance to listen to good advice from the young armored officers led to the tanks being deployed individually. Two were assigned to the 54th Infantry Division, four to the 52nd Infantry Division, while the last two came to the 53rd Infantry Division. It might have been hoped that the Turkish soldiers would flee in terror at the sight of these tanks, but there were several examples of this not happening. The tanks *Sir Archibald*, *War Baby* and *Nutty* were destroyed during the battle.

Where the tanks were successful in engaging the Turkish positions the battle went well, but where they were bogged down or destroyed by effective artillery fire the attack stalled. The fighting was interrupted on 19 April 1917, and people retreated to lick their wounds.

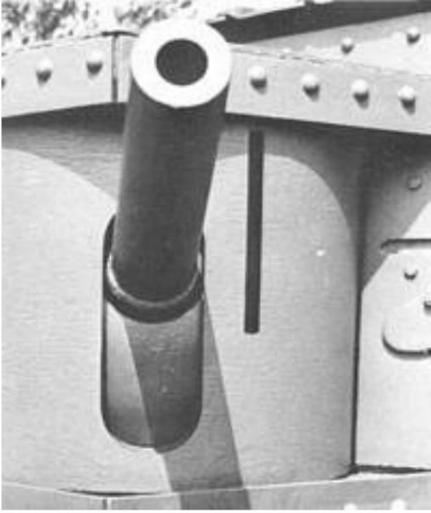


HMLS Sir Archibald.

The tank was named after the then Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, Sir Archibald Murray.

The Third Battle of Gaza

In June 1917, General Allenby assumed the function of Commander-in-Chief [1](#)); Sir Archibald was clearly unable to complete the task and was recalled.



Right gun turret on a Mark IV tank.

From Source 3.

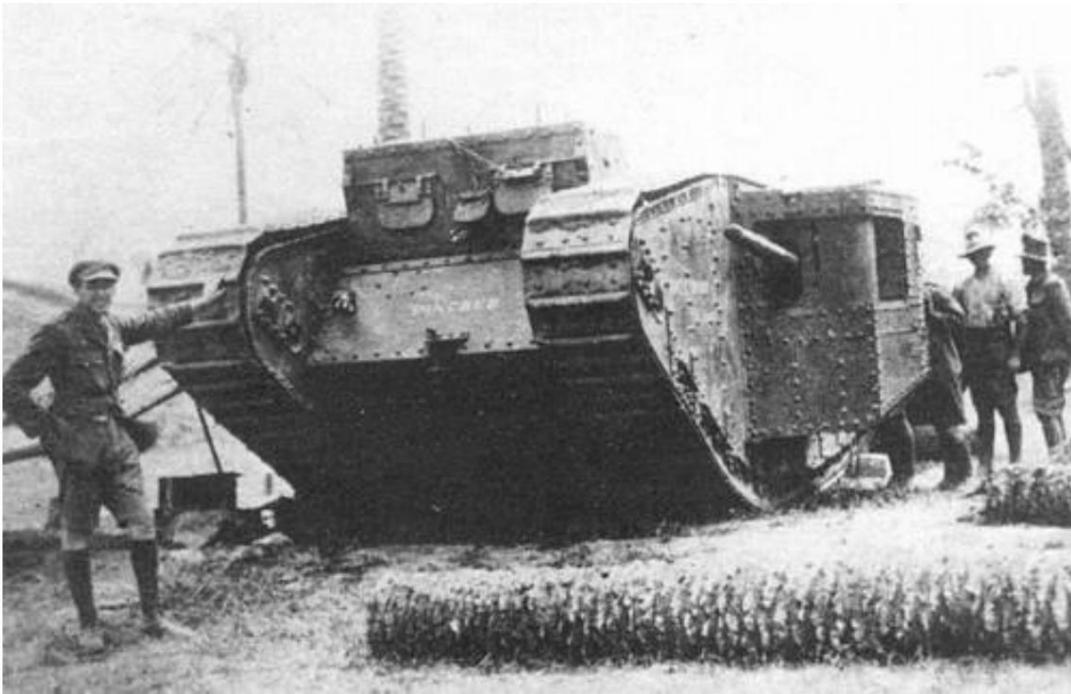
General Allenby now set about planning the final and decisive battle on the Palestine frontier.

The tank force, now under the designation *Detachment Tank Corps*, was supplied with replacement tanks, now of the Mark IV type. *The Male* version was equipped with a shorter version of the 57 mm cannon.

The force was deployed in the initial night attack which took place in the early hours of 2 November 1917. Six tanks took part and two were held in reserve. The use was apparently more concentrated than before, but the tanks had been assigned no fewer than 29 different targets.

This time they had more success with their venture and the tanks managed to penetrate the Turkish positions near the coast, and the tanks played a significant role in the capture of the position areas codenamed El Arish Redoubt, Rafa Redoubt, *Sea Post and Cricket Redoubt* . One of the vehicles was very successful in destroying a large Turkish barbed wire barrier between the *Sea Post* and *Beach Post positions*.

Five of the tanks were lost, but my currently available sources do not mention which ones.



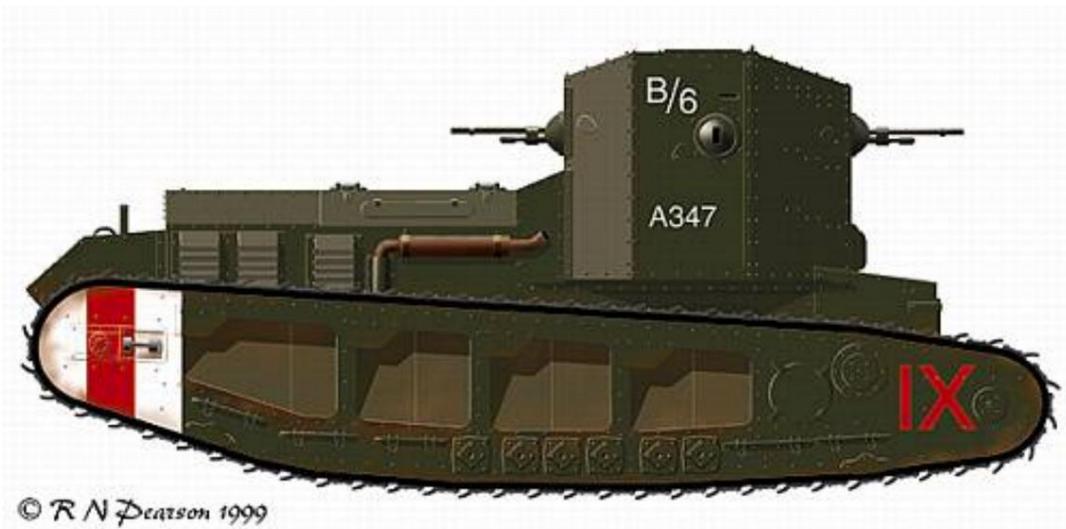
HMLS Pincher.
From Source 1.

Closing

After the conquest of Gaza, the nature of the war changed, whereby the heavy tanks did not fully come into their own.

They were, however, interested in having a number of light tanks of the Whippet type [2 added](#)). —

A delegation was sent to France to negotiate this issue. Unfortunately, the delegation arrived at the same time as the start of the great German offensive on 21 March 1918, and the venture had to be abandoned.



Medium Mark A tank. The type was also called the Whippet.
From History in Illustration.

Shortly afterwards, the tank force was ordered to deliver the remaining tanks to a depot in Egypt and then return home to England.

As a weapon system, the tank had demonstrated its mettle during desert warfare, a task it has performed almost continuously ever since.

Sources

1. *The 5th RTR in WW1* by G. Dorman and D. Accid, Military Modeling magazine, September 1981.
2. *The Tanks - The History of the Royal Tank Regiment, Volume 1 1914-1939* by BH Liddell Hart, Cassel, London 1959.
3. *Return of a Veteran*, by John Stubs, Battle magazine, September 1975.
4. *British Mark I Tank 1916* by David Fletcher, Osprey, New Vanguard Nr. 100, London 2004, ISBN 1-84176-689-5.

Per Finsted

Notes:

1) See e.g. my article General Sir Edmund Allenby's joint operations in Palestine, 1917-1918 by John Mordike.

2) Whippet tank data:

Length 6 m

Width (incl. side towers) 2.6 m

Height 2.7 m

Weight 14 t

Range of action / top speed 128 km - 13 km/h

The tanks had a crew of 3-4 men (commander, driver and 1-2 machine gunners) and an armament of 4. Hotchkiss air-cooled machine guns.

Often, for reasons of space, one gunner and one (rear-facing) machine gun were omitted.