

THE ANNIVERSARY OF LEAMINGTON TANK HERO MILES ATKINSON AT THE BATTLE OF CAMBRAI

The Battle of Cambrai began on the 20th November 1917 and is generally acknowledged as the first time that tanks were used successfully on the western front in the First World War.



Although they had been introduced a year earlier, the muddy terrain and early mechanical unreliability had produced disappointing results. Now the plan was to use a mass tank attack on the firmer chalky subsoil in the area of Cambrai and this succeeded in piercing the German defences including the strategically important Hindenburg line. One of the tank commanders killed in action on the first day of the battle was 2nd Lieutenant Miles Linzee Atkinson, whose name is on the roll of honour of Lillington Parish Church, and elsewhere in Leamington.

The following account of his life, achievements and death during the battle of Cambrai, is sourced from information and photographs kindly provided by Peter Coulls of Lillington Local History Society, and the Tank Museum.

Miles Linzee Atkinson, 2nd Lieut., "E" Battalion, the Tank Corps, was the son of Miles Hugh Christopher Atkinson MD, of 24 Kenilworth Road, Leamington, Mayor of Leamington 1915-1918. He was born in Kenilworth in July 1888 and educated at South Eastern College, Ramsgate, Fettes College, Edinburgh, and Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he took his BA degree in 1910.

He entered St Thomas's Hospital, London and had nearly completed his training but on the outbreak of war, he enlisted in the 1st Section, 7th Battalion, Motor Machine Gun Service. He served with the Expeditionary Force in France and Flanders and was invalided home suffering from blood-poisoning in 1915. Having recovered, he was commissioned into the newly formed Tank Corps in 1916, returned to France in June 1917, and was killed in the action before Cambrai on the 20th November.

The Battle of Cambrai (20th November - 3rd December 1917) was executed in three phases: "The Tank Attack" (20th-21st November); "Capture of Bournon Wood" (23rd-28th November); and "The German Counter Attack" (30th November-3rd December), and was the last phase of the Third Battle of Ypres (31st July - 8th December 1917).

Just before dawn on Tuesday 20th November 1917, 216 tanks had been moved forward into camouflaged positions along a six-mile front from Inchy in the north to Banteux in the south. Behind them were a further 96 tanks in support. Right of the centre of the British line was IV Corps and under its command was the 51st Highland Division, whose 152nd Brigade was supported by three companies of E Battalion of the 1st Tank Brigade, Tank Corps, 13th Company (Major Morgan), 14th Company (Major Bargate) and 15th Company (Major Montgomery).

The 15th Company consisted of three sections, each of three tanks. The 3rd Section was commanded by Captain Spreat and his three tank Commanders were Second Lieutenants Howells, Miles (Atkinson) and Whyte. Miles commanded a Male Mk IV "Fighting Tank", named Edinburgh II.

The battle began at 6.20 am after an artillery barrage which was kept up throughout the attack, rolling forward some 300 yards ahead of the advancing troops, as the front line tanks (Wire Cutters) drove forward into no-man's land followed by the infantry some 200 - 250 yards behind.

As they drove forward, they cut the German wire, opening it up for the following "Fighting Tanks" to exploit the gaps into the German trenches, so that with the help of the following infantry, these trenches would be cleared.

At the end of the first day of the Battle, the "Hindenburg Line" had been smashed, but due to insufficient mobile reserves a complete breakthrough and exploitation by the waiting Cavalry Divisions was not possible.

Miles was killed in action during the day near the village of **Flesquieres** on his left, two miles northeast from the start line between the village of Trescault in the north and Beaucamp in the south, (within III Corps Boundary whose 29th Division was being supported by the 1st (Warwick) Battery, Warwickshire Royal Horse Artillery), by a shell air burst, while he was evacuating his disabled tank, which had been hit by a gun from the German 213th Field Artillery Regiment, 54th Division positioned in the area of the village of Ribecourt on his right, ripping off its left track.

During the attack on the village of Flesquieres, Miles was supporting the Seaforth Highlanders, Gordon Highlanders and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders of the 152nd Brigade, 51st Highland Division, who took heavy casualties during their initial assault along the approach slope, which was swept by machine gun fire.

By that evening, the infantry had worked around the village, which fell the following morning. Afterwards they advanced a further three miles, taking Cantaing and finally Fontaine-Notre-Dame, with help from the remaining tanks and Squadrons from the 1st Cavalry Division who had just been released.

They were counter-attacked at Fontaine and pushed out on the afternoon of the 22nd November and suffered grievously in an attempt at its recapture on the 23rd November.

Miles's Commanding Officer, Major Montgomery, wrote to his father:

"Your son was one of several gallant young officers who laid down their lives in a real soldierly way in the recent battle. They have gained great renown and brought credit on their unit by their action. I shall miss your son. He was the best type of a sporting British officer and his loss to the Battalion is a great one".



Miles Linzee Atkinson's name recorded on Lillington war memorial

Captain Spreat wrote:

"I was his Section Commander and went over in his tank. We started from our lines at 5.45 am. on the 20th. For the first two or three hours I was standing behind your son, watching him navigate his tank. During the latter part of the action I was working the left-hand gun. We had broken through the "Hindenburg System," when your son changed places with the driver, as we were then in a position from which only the greatest skill and determination would extricate us. We then advanced to the attack of (Flesquieres) Village: we reached the village and came under the fire of a German field battery at point- blank range."

"Your son continued to fight his tank until we were put out of action. He consulted with me and we decided to evacuate the tank. Just as he got out a shell burst almost on top of him. Although at the time we were under hostile machine-gun fire, I think it was this shell that killed him. I hope you will treat the name of the village as confidential. I chose your son's tank to go over in, having the greatest faith in him and knowing that while he lived nothing would stop him. Although I had only known him a short time, we were great friends, and I must send you my sincerest sympathy in your great loss."

Another officer wrote:

“He was killed instantaneously by a shell, whilst standing outside his tank after he had reached the objective we were attacking. He behaved most gallantly throughout the action and his untimely death is a loss to us all.”

This tribute is recorded as being written by 2nd Lt Howells, 15th Company, E Battalion, Tank Corps. However John Howells is recorded as being killed in action, aged 25 on the same day as Miles and is buried alongside him at **Ribecourt British Cemetery**, Nord Pas de Calais (plot reference: Special Memorial A3), with another of the Battalion’s tank commanders who also fell that day, 2nd Lt Thomas Wilson, aged 22.

2nd Lt Whyte wrote:

“I feel that as I was a very great friend of your son’s while in France, I might take the liberty of saying what a really fine chap he was, always cheerful and always ready to help anyone in trouble both with sympathy and real aid. I was very fond of him and in a slighter degree than your own, I admit, I feel deeply grieved to hear of his death. But I can say with all confidence that he died as a man should, amongst his men, cheering them to the last. His name will be amongst those who have made the supreme sacrifice for their fellow men.”

Oliver le Maistre

July 2017