

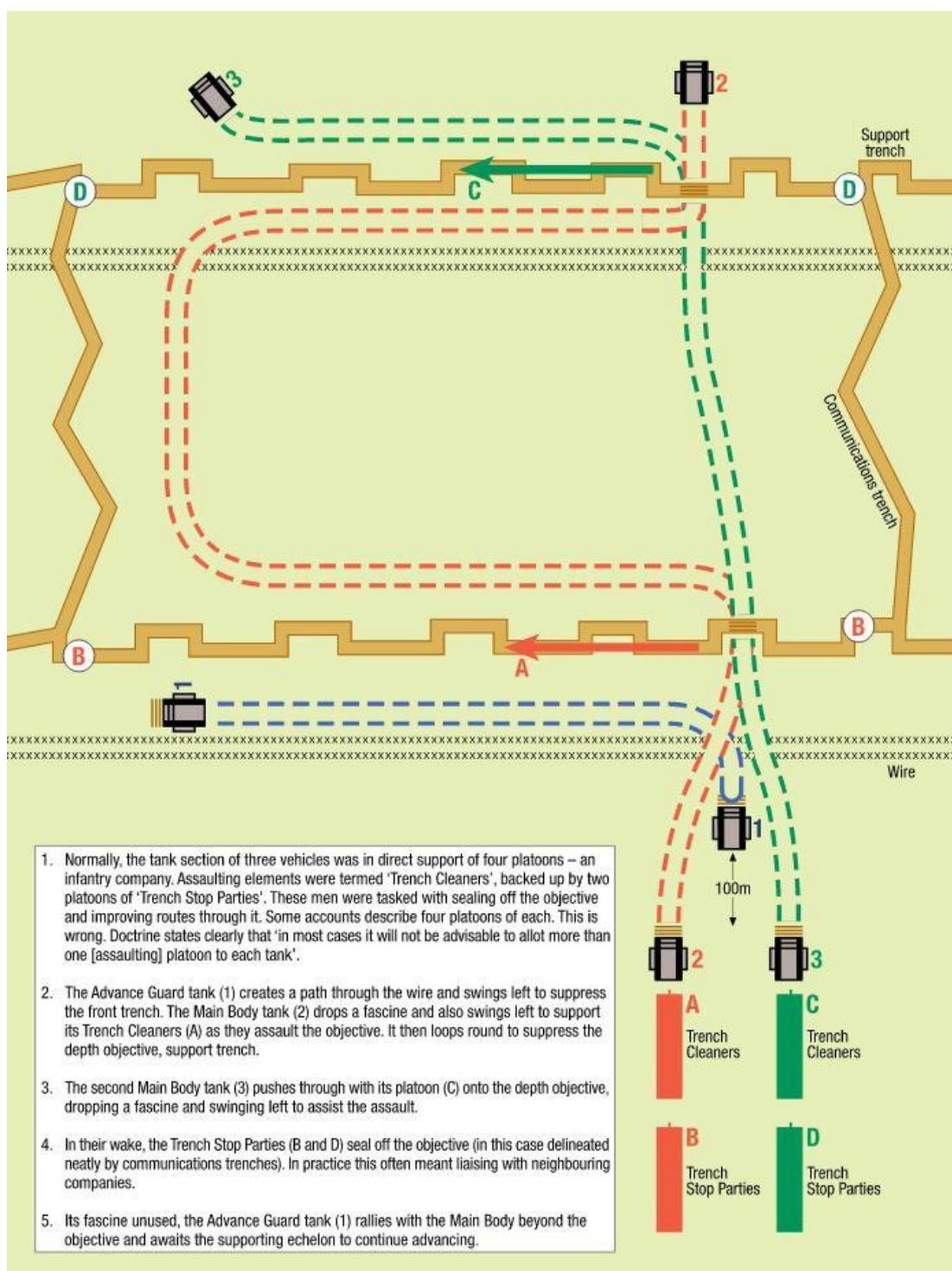
Eddie Parks' Talk on Cambrai- Summary

The talk was well attended with the Grammar School Lecture Theatre being almost full. Eddie started with a summary of the war situation up to Cambrai, with charts illustrating all the alliances that led to the escalation of war. He then showed maps and diagrams of the trench systems and explained how they were and why the situation on the Western Front had been static despite huge loss of life.

The usual military tactics such as outflanking were impossible because of the continuous lines of trenches. The Allies needed a way of getting through barbed wire and across trenches to break the German Hindenberg line and good aerial reconnaissance so that the heavy artillery to the rear of the trenches could hit unseen targets.

Cambrai saw two innovations that solved these and led to an initial Allied success. Aeroplane design had improved dramatically by 1917 but more importantly better cameras with German Zeiss lenses (imported via Switzerland) led to the ability to take very clear photos from which excellent maps were drawn. He showed examples of both and compared them with German maps of the same era. This allowed the heavy artillery to have much more information about targets that could be miles away so their equipment could be set up more accurately.

The problem of getting through barbed wires and across trenches was solved by the use of tanks. Cambrai wasn't the first example of tanks used in war but the way they were used was new. The system was known as Fuller's Clockwork Battle. It depended on very precise planning and co operation between the different sectors of tanks, infantry, cavalry and artillery. Each sector had a very precisely defined task. - see diagram below, which Eddie used in the talk.



It worked, the line was broken and considerable Allied advances were made with relatively little loss of life. In the first 10 days of the battle the RGLI lost just over 30 men and succeeded in the objective they had been given which was to capture Nine Wood.

However after this it all began to go wrong. 374 tanks had been in action at the start of the battle but 179 of them were lost so a mass tank attack was no longer possible. Vital bridges had either been damaged or not secured. Also supplies of ammunition etc. had not kept up with the rapid advance. Nor had proper preparation been made for a German counter attack. The line had moved forward but in doing so had created a salient which was very vulnerable to attack.

On 1st December 1917 the RGLI were trapped in Masnières/ Les Rues Vertes with a broken bridge and a canal between them and reinforcements. The Germans attacked using a new technique involving fast moving storm troopers who moved through to open spaces for the troops behind them. When they attacked from Crèvecoeur the only advantage the RGLI had was the sugar factory which gave them a

view and offered some protection. But after fighting all day and losing the village twice then recapturing it again the Allied troops including the RGLI held the line. However a salient was again created and this time it couldn't be held. Losses were very great -about 100 RGLI men were killed on or around 1st December.

After the fighting was over the lines were more or less back to where they had been pre Cambrai. The Germans had gained some 90 British tanks abandoned on the battlefield and these formed the basis of their Tank Corps. Each side suffered about 442000 casualties, dead or wounded and about 10000 prisoners of war.

Historians have always disputed what happened at Cambrai and for this reason the first history of the battle wasn't written until the 1930s. Incidentally both of its authors were discredited during WW2.



This is a very brief overview of the talk which was well illustrated with charts, maps and photos that really brought it to life. There were several questions at the end, including one asking Eddie to compare Cambrai with the Lys, which he did very succinctly. Basically the RGLIs stand at Cambrai was important in that if they had lost and the Germans had moved forward the war would probably have been prolonged. However if the line had broken at the Lys the outcome of the war could have been altered significantly and the map of Europe might be very different from what it is now.