

Let's Talk Tanks

Transcript

(Emily is walking and talking in The Tank Story gallery at The Tank Museum)

From the D-Day landings on the beaches of France in June 1944, all the way to the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, the tanks crews of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry saw almost constant fighting in that last year of the conflict.

But what was everyday life like for a tank crew? Have you ever wondered how you make a cup of tea in a tank or how you go to the toilet? Well then, you've come to the right place. Welcome to Let's Talk Tanks with me, Emily - the Family Learning Producer at the National Army Museum.

Today, we are going to set off on a mission to discover what it was really like for a Second World War tank crew. We will be taking a closer look at their roles, their kit and even speaking to tank expert James Holland as we discover what it was like to fight and survive onboard a Second World War tank.

(Emily pops out of the turret of a Sherman M4 tank)

I'm here at The Tank Museum in Dorset, inside a Sherman tank. But who was who in a British Army tank crew?

Well, a tank crew was typically made up of five people and each person had an integral role to play. First up, you have the commander and there is a slight clue in their name, they are in charge of the tank and responsible for all the decisions made in battle. They're also in charge of the radio, which was a really essential piece of kit inside the tank.

Next up, you have the driver and co-driver. For the driver and the co-driver, it was all about getting the tank to where it needed to go. They were stuck in a cramped position and they needed to keep a cool head in times of intense pressure.

(Emily is sat inside a Sherman M4 Tank)

The gunner was in charge of firing the gun on the tank. Now, I'm inside a tank right now and it is so so cramped, and although for the gunner it might sound like they have an easy job. You've got to factor in that they are in this tight cramped space, there is noise all around them, they're moving across bumpy terrain and that they are trying to hit another moving target. This certainly wasn't any easy job.

Last, but not least, you have the loader. The loader was responsible for supplying the ammunition to keep the gun firing. They had three different types to choose from - smoke, high explosive or armour piercing. They really needed physical strength and stamina to keep up with the pace.

Now, to keep a tank moving on all four cylinders, both in and out of battle, was no easy ride. From mechanical issues to rats chewing through the wires, it was really important for a tank crew to work together, think on their feet and remain calm under pressure. Now, we know a little bit more about the different roles in a tank crew, let's take a closer look at their kit.

(Emily is stood in front of a Cromwell Mark IV Tank)

When you stop and think about it, a tank is basically just a big metal box on wheels. It is bound to get pretty hot, smelly and stuffy in there, before you add in an engine and five crew members. However, the winter of 1944-45 when the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry were crossing Europe, it was freezing freezing cold - even inside the tanks.

Tank crews needed a uniform that was a little bit different to your standard soldier's kit. Enter the Pixie suit.

The Pixie suit was designed as winter wear for tank crews, it's warm with a thick lining and rubberised parts, which make it waterproof. It has a zip that runs all the way from the top to the bottom, meaning you can get in and out of it easily. In fact, you can even zip the legs together to turn it into a sleeping bag.

Something I really like about the Pixie suit is its pockets, often in quite unusual places. If you were the driver or the co-driver you'd be sat down, so you wouldn't be able to reach something from a pocket on your waist or your hip, but you could reach something from a pocket on your leg.

Now, I'm sure you are wondering - why is it called the Pixie suit? Well, can you see these poppers on the back here? These are used to attach a hood - another way of keeping tank crews warm and dry. However, when you were in the suit, fully zipped up, hood on, it did look a little bit like the pointy hats worn by pixies and elves in fairytales. Hence the name the Pixie suit.

The British Army produced a few different variations of the Pixie suit to suit tank crews working in different climates and environments such as the jungle and the desert. I think the winter-weight Pixie suit is my favourite though!

(Emily and James Holland stood in front of a Sherman Firefly tank)

To really understand what it was like for the tank crews of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry, I think we need to speak to an expert! Let me introduce James Holland. James is a historian, author and all-round font of knowledge when it comes to tanks. So, James,

what can you tell me about this tank we are stood in front of here. What has it got to do with the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry?

JH: Well, this is the ubiquitous Sherman tank. This is a British adapted version. This is a Firefly with a 17-pounder gun in it and that is a really high velocity gun and velocity is the speed through which the projectile, the shell, actually passes through the air. The mainstay was the 75 mm one which had a slightly lower velocity and really it was the second most produced tank in the world ever, after the T-34. 49,000 of these Sherman tanks were produced, 74,000 Sherman hulls which were adapted into other things. A lot of the parts were very transferrable but a very, very good all-round tank. Mechanically reliable, easy to repair, very quick firing gun. Lots of things in its favour. The Sherwood Rangers were using them from the Battle of El Alamein in October 1942, right through to the end of the war. Sherman Fireflies were coming in for D-Day.

ER: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it would have been like inside a tank? What kind of things would you be able to hear? What could you smell?

JH: Yeah, it's pretty uncomfortable to be perfectly honest. I mean a Sherman is more roomy than a lot of tanks, but even so it is pretty cramped. There is lots of things for you to kind of knock your shoulder on, your elbow, head or whatever. Um... incredibly noisy, lots of fumes, you know this was not an age of health and safety executive. This was not an age where people were worrying about you know polluting the planet or anything like that. So, it would have been really, really uncomfortable. I mean a crew were very very tight. You would all have to completely trust one another; you were all completely interdependent on one another. Food wise, smell wise, the smell in there would have been pretty unpleasant. Sweaty in summer, you know it would have smelt of pee and things like that as well. Fumes from the firing, cordite, you know, gets in. There is an extractor there, but even so it's kind of residual. So, the smell of sort of rubber, metal and oil and urine and sweat. You know, it gets pretty high in there to be perfectly honest. Not very comfortable at all.

ER: Do you think it was fair to say that for the tank crews, the tank was kind of like their home - the place where they slept, relaxed, worked? And with that in mind, how would they make their dinner? Or a cup of tea when they were not, you know, driving about in their tank.

JH: Yeah, the tank absolutely is their home. It's their complete base. You know, even in a crew, you have a five-man crew, you know, you might have an officer as the commander of the tank. It's all Christian names, it's first-name terms. No one stands on ceremony,

because you are all in it together. So yes, you would have lots of stowage on the outside of the tank. So, canvas sacks and baggage and so on. You'd have all the kind of soft stuff on the outside and you might have a few creature comforts inside but very very few and far between. Lots of people had pets, I mean there were crews with dogs in there and all sorts of stuff. You might have a chicken wandering around, for extra eggs but your food would come from ration packs. So you would get composite rations and that would either be a pack for seven days for one man or for seven people for one day and you'd have a little primus stove, basic basic stove, and you would make your food on the outside of the tank for the most part. People would brew up tea whenever they could, whenever there was a pause and there were lots of pauses, lots of hanging around, waiting for mines to be cleared or something to happen or orders to come through. You would make a cup of tea; it's like that nectar that just keeps everyone going. It's not tea as you and I would know it, its its tea leaves, carnation milk - sort of horrible sweet long life milk - sugar, all stirred in together, brewed up on a pot, whooshed down in your enamel tin mug and that would be drunk a lot during the day.

ER: And with all that talk of eating and drinking, I mean looking around I can't see a toilet on the Firefly, so how do you go to the toilet in a tank?

JH: Basically, what you would do if you needed to do a number two, you'd wander off with a shovel and you'd go behind a hedge and you'd dig a hole, you'd squat down and do your business and similarly you'd just go pee in a hedge if you needed to go. But obviously, if you are absolutely desperate and it's the middle of a battle, you'd just have to go wherever you can. That is usually into a shell case and then chuck it out later, but it is pretty basic. You know, it is pretty pretty brutal and you know I suppose you just get used to it, don't you. I mean it's like sort of very bare-bones camping. It's the same as sleeping - you might sleep under the tank, you might sleep in the tank, you might just pull a tarpaulin out from the side, something like that, but it's really really rudimentary. No creature comforts really.

ER: How would you sum of the experience of the Sherwood Rangers Yeomanry during that last year of the war?

JH: Yeah, really really unbelievably tough. I mean, there is this sort of ongoing perception I think that North-West Europe from June 1944 to VE Day in May 1945, that sort of somehow the British and the Western Allies had it lightly compared to what was going on to the Eastern Front. Well, possibly; it depends on what part of the Army you are, because what one has to understand is that the way British and American armies are organised is that they have a very very long tail. So, the logistical chain, the supply chain, is incredibly long and what that means is that you have an awful lot of service troops. So, in the case

of the British Army, 43% are service troops. Only 14% are infantry and only 8% are part of armoured units, tank units. But of those tank units, only about 48% of those are actually in tanks. So, it's a very very small number. But those who are, the chances of getting through unscathed are statistically absolutely zero. In the case of the Sherwood Rangers, their casualty rate was 142% and it was 52% dead if you were an officer. Unbelievably brutal, it's just that you're in the front line all the time and so the law of averages says at some point there is going to be a shell, a bit of shrapnel, a bit of mortar or whatever that's got your name on it. That was the case - there wasn't a single Sherwood Rangers tank that landed on D-Day that went all the way through to the end of the war that wasn't hit at some point.

ER: And do you think there was just a real strain on those that were in command in the tank crew?

JH: Yeah, it was just the responsibility of those people was just absolutely incredible. I mean if you are a tank commander you've got to have your head out of the turret because you can see on there, they have periscopes, but those periscopes are like tiny little windows and you can't see. You have to have 360-degree vision. So, you've got to be watching, watching, watching all the time. As a tank commander you're listening to your own crew on the intercom, because it's so noisy in there, otherwise you can't hear yourself think. So, you're listening to that, then you're listening to rest of the squadron of 19 tanks on the B-Net, which is a particular type of frequency on your radio. Then you're listening to the rest of the regiment on the A-Net and the infantry, so you've got three different sequences of voices that you've got to be listening too. You've got to be watching all the time because the moment you're not watching is the moment you're gonna get hit. So, concentration, concentration, concentration and incredibly long days. Days that in, certainly in the summer of 1944 might start as early as 3.30 in the morning and might not finish til after midnight. So, you are just dead on your feet, it's just... I don't know how they did it, I don't know how they did it. And at the same time they've got to adapt, they've got to make snap decisions and snap orders. On the basis of those orders, lives might be lost. So, you know, huge responsibility and you know it's just the relentlessness of it. They were in action pretty much the whole time. I mean the Sherwood Rangers ended up with 18 battle honours between D-Day and the end of the war and 30 in the entire war and that put them as the single unit with more battle honours than any other in the British Army. The reason they are getting all these battle honours is because they're in battle all the time. So, it was absolutely brutal.

(Emily is walking and talking in The Tank Story gallery at The Tank Museum)

Although we might think of tanks in terms of size, speed, armour or weapons, it was the crews inside that kept them moving, fighting, surviving in that last year of the Second

World War. And tank crews weren't just from the UK either. You had Indian tank crews in the British Indian Army fighting in Italy, Africa and Burma - now Myanmar. In Russia, you had female tank commanders and women in other combat roles.

Thanks for watching Let's Talk Tanks. I hope to see you in the museum sometime soon.

Images from the National Army Museum Collection used in this video :

- Major Murray, Cpl Fitzpatrick, Cpl Gell, L/Cpl Leader, Tpr Griffiths, 1944
- 19 set in a Sherman, John Boles tries to figure it out, 1943
- A Squadron crossing the frontier into Belgium at Roubaix, 1944
- 17 pounder Sherman working its way through very close country, 1944-1945
- Tanks on the move to VIRE over the tank runs, 1944-1945.
- Ronnie Grant and Sid Hicks working on a tank engine, 1944
- L/Cpl. Pritchard, Tpr. Pool, Tpr. Tuckwood, Sgt. Moffat, 1944-1945
- HQF Tank Park, Asten, 1944
- The Pixie Suit being used as a bed, 1944
- The arrival of the Pixie Suit, 1944
- Hugh 'Bluebell' Moffatt in 'Pixie Suit', 1944
- Camouflage Tank Suit Universal pattern, Royal Armoured Corps, 1944
- Alan Murray in his Tank, 1944
- British Tank Crewmen eating lunch, 1944
- The evening meal at Vernay, 1944
- Belgian people inspecting a British tank whilst the crew have a brew during the halt, 1944
- The morning shave, 1944
- O.F.J.B. Woods Esq., and HQF, having an afternoon 'yock' near Montesanger, 1944-1945
- The Squadron Leader's Tank after the accident, 1944-1945
- 'B' Squadron tank knocked out during the attack on Ruffini, 1944-1945
- Frank Day viewed through the tank commanders periscope, 1941
- Brew-up, breakfast and a wash, 1944-1945
- Indian Tank Crew astride their Sherman, 1944