



# Tanks

*By Murray Leinster*

... The deciding battle of the War of 1932 was the first in which the use of infantry was practically discontinued. ...

—History of the U. S., 1920-1945 (Gregg-Harley).



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Written by  
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THE persistent, oily smell of fog-gas was everywhere, even in the little pill-box. Outside, all the world was blotted out by the thick gray mist that went rolling slowly across country with the breeze. The noises that came through it were curiously muted—fog-gas mutes all noises somewhat—but somewhere to the right artillery was pounding something with H E shell, and there were those little spitting under-current explosions that told of tanks in action. To the right there was a distant rolling of machine-gun fire. In between was an utter, solemn silence.

Sergeant Coffee, disreputable to look at and disrespectful of mien, was sprawling over one of the gunners' seats and talking into a field telephone while mud dripped from him. Corporal Wallis, equally muddy and still more disreputable, was painstakingly manufacturing one complete cigarette from the pinched-out butts of four others. Both were rifle-infantry. Neither had any rights or reason to be occupying a definitely machine-gun-section post. The fact that the machine-gun crew was all dead did not seem to make much difference to sector H.Q. at the other end of the telephone wire, judging from the questions that were being asked.

"I tell you," drawled Sergeant Coffee, "they're dead. . . . Yeah, all dead. Just as dead as when I told you the firs' time, maybe even deader. . . . Gas, o'course. I don't know what kind. . . . Yeh. They got their masks on."

He waited, looking speculatively at the cigarette Corporal Wallis had in manufacture. It began to look imposing. Corporal Wallis regarded it affectionately. Sergeant Coffee put his hand over the mouthpiece, and looked intently at his companion.

"Gimme a drag o' that, Pete," he suggested. "I'll slip y' some butts in a minute."

CORPORAL WALLIS nodded, and proceeded to light the cigarette with infinite artistry. He puffed delicately upon it, inhaled it with the care a man learns when he has

just so much tobacco and never expects to get any more, and reluctantly handed it to Sergeant Coffee.

Sergeant Coffee emptied his lungs in a sigh of anticipation. He put the cigarette to his lips. It burned brightly as he drew upon it. Its tip became brighter and brighter until it was white-hot, and the paper crackled as the line of fire crept up the tube.

"Hey!" said Corporal Wallis in alarm.

Sergeant Coffee waved him aside, and his chest expanded to the fullest limit of his blouse. When his lungs could hold no more he ceased to draw, grandly returned about one-fourth of the cigarette to Corporal Wallis, and blew out a cloud of smoke in small dribblets until he had to gasp for breath.

"When y' ain't got much time," said Sergeant Coffee amiably, "that's a quick smoke."

Corporal Wallis regarded the ruins of his cigarette with a woeful air.

"Hell!" said Corporal Wallis gloomily. But he smoked what was left.

"Yeah," said Sergeant Coffee suddenly, into the field telephone. "I'm still here, an' they're still dead. . . . Listen, Mr. Officer, I got me a black eye and numerous contusions. Also my gas-mask is busted. I called y'up to do y' a favor. I aim to head for distant parts. . . . Hell's bells ! Ain't there anybody else in the army—" He stopped, and resentment died out in wide-eyed amazement. "Yeh. . . . Yeh. . . . Yeh. . . . I gotcha, Loot. A'right, I'll see what I c'n do. Yeh. . . . Wish y'd see my insurance gets paid. Yeh."

He hung up, gloomily, and turned to Corporal Wallis.

"We've got to be heroes," he announced bitterly. "Sit out here in the' stinkin' fog and wait for a tank t' come along and wipe us out. We' the only listenin' post in two miles of front. That new gas o' theirs wiped out all the rest without report."

He surveyed the crumpled figures which had been the original occupants of the pill-box. They wore the same uniform as himself and when he took the gas-mask off of one of them the man's face was strangely peaceful.

"Hell of a war," said Sergeant Coffee bitterly. "Here our gang gets wiped out by a helicopter. I ain't seen sunlight in a week, and I got just four butts left. Lucky I started savin' 'em." He rummaged shrewdly. "This guy's got half a sack o' makin's. Say, that was Loot'n't Madison on the line, then. Transferred from our gang a coupla months back. They cut him in the line to listen in on me and make sure I was who I said I was. He recognized my voice."

CORPORAL WALLIS, after smoking to the last and ultimate puff, pinched out his cigarette and put the fragments of a butt back in his pocket.

"What we got to do?" he asked, watching as Sergeant Coffee divided the treasure-trove into two scrupulously exact portions.

"Nothin'," said Coffee bitterly, "except find out how this gang got wiped out, and a few little things like that. Half th' front line is in th' air, the planes can't see anything, o'course, an' nobody dares cut th' fog-gas to look. He didn't say much, but he said for Gawd's sake find out somethin'."

Corporal Wallis gloated over one-fourth of a sack of tobacco and stowed it away.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," he said gloomily. "I'm goin' to roll me a whole one, pre-war, and smoke it, presently."

"Hell yes," said Coffee. He examined his gas-mask from force of habit before stepping out into the fog once more, then contemptuously threw it aside. "Gas-masks, hell! Ain't worth havin'. Come on."

Corporal Wallis followed as he emerged from the little round cone of the pill-box.

The gray mist that was fog-gas hung over everything. There was a definite breeze blowing, but the mist was so dense that it did not seem to move. It was far enough from the fog-flares for the last least trace of striation to have vanished. Fifteen miles to the north the fog-flares were placed, ranged by hundreds and by thousands, burning one after another as the fog service set them off, and sending out their incredible masses of thick gray vapor in long threads that spread out before the wind, coalesced, and made a smoke-screen to which the puny efforts of the last war—the war that was to make the world safe for democracy—were as nothing.

Here, fifteen miles down wind from the flares, it was possible to see clearly in a circle approximately five feet in diameter. At the edge of that circle outlines began to blur. At ten feet all shapes were the faintest of bulks, the dimmest of outlines. At fifteen feet all was invisible, hidden behind a screen of mist.

"Cast around," said Coffee gloomily. "Maybe we'll find a shell, or tracks of a tank or somethin' that chunked the gas here."

IT was rather ludicrous to go searching for anything in that mass of vapor. At three yards distance they could make each other out as dim outlines, no more. But it did not even occur to them to deplore the mist. The war which had already been christened, by the politicians at home, the last war, was always fought in a mist. Infantry could not stand against tanks, tanks could not live under aircraft-directed artillery fire—not when forty guns fired salvos for the aircraft to spot—and neither artillery nor aircraft could take any advantage of a victory which either, under special conditions, might win. The general staffs of both the United States and the prominent nation—let us say the Yellow Empire—at war with it had come to a single conclusion. Tanks or infantry were needed for the use of victories. Infantry could be destroyed by tanks. But tanks could be hidden from aerial spotters by smoke-screens.

The result was fog-gas, which was being used by both sides in the most modern fashion when, their own unit wiped out and themselves wandering aimlessly in the general direction of the American rear, Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis stumbled upon an American pill-box with its small garrison lying dead. For forty miles in one direction and perhaps thirty in the other, the vapor lay upon the earth. It was being blown by the wind, of course, but it was sufficiently heavier than air to cling to the ground level, and the industries of two nations were straining every nerve to supply the demands of their respective armies for its material.

The fog-bank was nowhere less than a hundred feet thick—a cloud of impalpable particles impenetrable to any eye or any camera, however shrewdly filtered. And under that mattress of pale opacity the tanks crawled heavily. They lurched and rumbled upon their deadly errands, uncouth and barbarous, listening for each other by a myriad of devices, locked in desperate, short-range conflict when they came upon each other, and emitting clouds of deadly vapor, against which gas-masks were no protection, when they came upon opposing infantry.

THE infantrymen, though, were few. Their principal purpose was the reporting of the approach or passage of tanks, and trenches were of no service to them. They occupied unarmed little listening-posts with field telephones, small wireless or ground buzzer sets for reporting the enemy before he overwhelmed them. They held small pill-boxes, fitted with anti-tank guns which sometimes—if rarely—managed to get home a shell, aimed largely by sound, before the tank rolled over gun and gunners alike.

And now Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis groped about in that blinding mist. There had been two systems of listening-posts hidden in it, each of admittedly little fighting value, but each one deep and composed of an infinity of little pin-point posts where two or three men were stationed. The American posts, by their reports, had assured

the command that all enemy tanks were on the other side of a certain definite line. Their own tanks, receiving recognition signals, passed and repassed among them, prowling in quest of invaders. The enemy tanks crawled upon the same grisly patrol on their own side.

But two miles of the American front had suddenly gone silent. A hundred telephones had ceased to make reports along the line nearest the enemy. As Coffee and Wallis stumbled about the little pillbox, looking for some inkling of the way in which the original occupants of the small strong-point had been wiped out, the second line of observation-posts began to go dead.

Now one, now another abruptly ceased to communicate. Half a dozen were in actual conversation with their sector headquarters, and broke off between words. The wires remained intact. But in fifteen nerve-racking minutes a second hundred posts ceased to make reports and ceased to answer the inquiry-signal. G.H.Q. was demanding explanations in crisp accents that told the matter was being taken very seriously indeed. And then, as the officer in command of the second-line sector headquarters was explaining frenziedly that he was doing all any man could do, he stopped short between two words and thereafter he, also, ceased to communicate.

Front-line sector headquarters seemed inexplicably to have escaped whatever fate had overtaken all its posts, but it could only report that they had apparently gone out of existence without warning. American tanks, prowling in the area that had gone dead, announced that no enemy tanks had been seen. G-81, stumbling on a pill-box no more than ten minutes after it had gone silent, offered to investigate. A member of her crew, in a gasmask, stepped out of the port doorway. Immediately thereafter G-81's wireless reports stopped coming in.



THE situation was clearly shown in the huge tank that had been built to serve as G.H.Q. That tank was seventy feet long, and lay hidden in the mist with a brood of other, smaller tanks clustered near it, from each of which a cable ran to the telephones and instruments of the greater monster. Farther off in the fog, of course, were other tanks, hundreds of them, fighting machines all, silent and motionless now, but infinitely ready to protect the brain of the army.

The G.H.Q. maneuver-board showed the battle as no single observer could ever have seen it. A map lay spread out on a monster board, under a pitiless white light. It was a map of the whole battlefield. Tiny sparks crawled here and there under the map, and there were hundreds of little pins with different-colored heads to mark the position of this thing and that. The crawling sparks were the reported positions of American tanks, made visible as positions of moving trains had been made visible for years on the electric charts of railroads in dispatcher's offices. Where the tiny bulbs glowed under the map, there a tank crawled under the fog. As the tank moved, the first bulb went out and another flashed into light.

The general watched broodingly as the crawling sparks moved from this place to that place, as varicolored lights flashed up and vanished, as a steady hand reached down to shift tiny pins and place new ones. The general moved rarely, and spoke hardly at all. His whole air was that of a man absorbed in a game of chess—a game on which the fate of a nation depended. He was thus absorbed. The great board, illuminated from above by the glaring bulb, and speckled with little white sparks from below by the tiny bulbs beneath, showed the situation clearly at every instant. The crawling white sparks were his own tanks, each in its present position. Flashing blue sparks noted the last report of enemy tanks. Two staff officers stood behind the general, and each spoke from time to time into

a strapped-on telephone transmitter. They were giving routine orders, heading the nearest American patrol-tanks toward the location of the latest reported enemies.

THE general reached out his hand suddenly and marked off an area with his fingers. They were long fingers, and slender ones: an artist's fingers.

"Our outposts are dead in this space," he observed meditatively. The use of the word "outposts" dated him many years back as a soldier, back to the old days of open warfare, which had only now come about again. "Penetration of two miles — "

"Tank, sir," said the man of the steady fingers, putting a black pin in position within that area, "let a man out in a gas-mask to examine a pillbox. The tank does not report or reply, sir."

"Gas," said the general, noting the spot. "Their new gas, of course. It must go through masks or sag-paste, or both."

He looked up to one of a row of officers seated opposite him, each man with headphones strapped to his ears and a transmitter before his lips, and each man with a map-pad on his knees, on which from time to time he made notations and shifted pins absorbedly.

"Captain Harvey," said the general, "you are sure that dead spot has not been bombarded with gas-shells?"

"Yes, General. There has been no artillery fire heavy enough to put more than a fraction of those posts out of action, and all that fire, sir, has been accounted for elsewhere."

The officer looked up, saw the general's eyes shift, and bent to his map again, on which he was marking areas from which spotting aircraft reported flashes as of heavy guns beneath the mist.

"Their aircraft have not been dropping bombs, positively?"

A second officer glanced up from his own map.

"Our planes cover all that space, sir, and have for some time."

"They either have a noiseless tank," observed the general meditatively, "or...."

The steady fingers placed a red pin at a certain spot.

"One observation-post, sir, has reopened communication. Two infantrymen, separated from their command, came upon it and found the machinegun crew dead, with gas-masks adjusted. No tanks or tracks. They are identified, sir, and are now looking for tank tracks or shells."

The general nodded emotionlessly.

"Let me know immediately."

HE fell back to the ceaseless study of the board with its crawling sparks and sudden flashes of light. Over at the left, there were four white sparks crawling toward a spot where a blue flash had showed a little while since. A red light glowed suddenly where one of the white sparks crawled. One of the two officers behind the general spoke crisply. Instantly, it seemed, the other three white sparks changed their direction of movement. They swung toward the red flash — the point where a wireless from the tank represented by the first white flash had reported contact with the enemy.

"Enemy tank destroyed here, sir," said the voice above the steady fingers."

"Wiped out three of our observation posts," murmured the general. "His side knows it. That's an opportunity. Have those posts reoccupied."

"Orders given, sir," said a staff officer from behind. "No reports as yet."

The general's eyes went back to the space two miles wide and two miles deep in which there was only a single observation-post functioning, and that in charge of two strayed infantrymen. The battle in the fog was in a formative stage, now, and the general himself had to watch the whole, because it was by small and trivial indications that the

enemy's plans would be disclosed. The dead area was no triviality, however. Half a dozen tanks were crawling through it, reporting monotonously that no sign of the enemy could be found. One of the little sparks representing those tanks abruptly went out.

"Tank here, sir, no longer reports."

The general watched with lack-luster eyes, his mind withdrawn in thought.

"Send four helicopters," he said slowly, "to sweep that space. We'll see what the enemy does."

One of the seated officers opposite him spoke swiftly. Far away a roaring set up and was stilled. The helicopters were taking off.

THEY would rush across the blanket of fog, their vertical propellers sending blasts of air straight downward. For most of their sweep they would keep a good height, but above the questionable ground they would swoop down to barely above the fog-blanket. There their monstrous screws would blow holes in the fog until the ground below was visible. If any tanks crawled there, in the spaces the helicopters swept clear, they would be visible at once and would be shelled by batteries miles away, batteries invisible under the artificial cloud-bank.

No other noises came through the walls of the monster tank. There was a faint, monotonous murmur of the electric generator. There were the quiet, crisp orders of the officers behind the general, giving the routine commands that kept the fighting a stalemate.

The aircraft officer lifted his head, pressing his headphones tightly against his ears, as if to hear more clearly.

"The enemy, sir, has sent sixty fighting machines to attack our helicopters. We sent forty single-seaters as escort."

"Let them fight enough," said the general absently, "to cause the enemy to think us desperate for information. Then draw them off."

There was silence again. The steady fingers put pins here and there. An enemy tank destroyed here. An American tank encountered an enemy and ceased to report further. The enemy sent four helicopters in a wide sweep behind the American lines, escorted by fifty fighting planes. They uncovered a squadron of four tanks, which scattered like insects disturbed by the overturning of a stone. Instantly after their disclosure a hundred and fifty guns, four miles away, were pouring shells about the place where they had been seen. Two of the tanks ceased to report.

The general's attention was called to a telephone instrument with its calllight glowing.

"Ah," said the general absently. "They want publicity matter."

The telephone was connected to the rear, and from there to the Capital. A much-worried cabinet waited for news, and arrangements were made and had been used, to broadcast suitably arranged reports from the front, the voice of the commander-in-chief in the field going to every workshop, every gathering-place, and even being bellowed by loud-speakers in the city streets.

THE general took the phone. The President of the United States was at the other end of the wire, this time.

"General?"

"Still in a preliminary stage, sir," said the general, without haste. "The enemy is preparing a break-through effort, possibly aimed at our machine-shops and supplies. Of course, if he gets them we will have to retreat. An hour ago he paralyzed our radios, not being aware, I suppose, of our tuned earth-induction wireless sets. I daresay he is puzzled that our communications have not fallen to pieces."

"But what are our chances?" The voice of the President was steady, but it was strained.

"His tanks outnumber ours two to one, of course, sir," said the general calmly. "Unless we can divide his fleet and destroy a part of it, of course we will be crushed in a general combat. But we are naturally trying to make sure that any such action will take place within point-blank range of our artillery, which may help a little. We will cut the fog to secure that help, risking everything, if a general engagement occurs."

There was silence.

The President's voice, when it came, was more strained still.

"Will you speak to the public, General?"

"Three sentences. I have no time for more."

There were little clickings on the line, while the general's eyes returned to the board that was the battlefield in miniature. He indicated a spot with his finger.

"Concentrate our reserve-tanks here," he said meditatively. "Our fighting aircraft here. At once."

The two spots were at nearly opposite ends of the battle field. The chief of staff, checking the general's judgment with the alert suspicion that was the latest addition to his duties, protested sharply.

"But sir, our tanks will have no protection against helicopters!"

"I am quite aware of it," said the general mildly.

He turned to the transmitter. A thin voice had just announced at the other end of the wire, "The commander-in-chief of the army in the field will make a statement."

THE general spoke unhurriedly.

"We are in contact with the enemy, have been for some hours. We have lost forty tanks and the enemy, we think, sixty or more. No general engagement has yet taken place,



but we think decisive action on the enemy's part will be attempted within two hours. The tanks in the field need now, as always, ammunition, spare tanks, and the special supplies for modern warfare. In particular, we require ever-increasing quantities of foggas. I appeal to your patriotism for reinforcements of material and men."

He hung up the receiver and returned to his survey of the board.

"Those three listening-posts," he said abruptly, indicating a place near where an enemy tank had been destroyed. "Have they been reoccupied?"

"Yes, sir. Just reported. The tank they reported rolled over them, destroying the placement. They are digging in."

"Tell me," said the general, "when they cease to report again. They will."

He watched the board again and without lifting his eyes from it, spoke again.

"That listening-post in the dead sector, with the two strayed infantrymen in it. Was it reported?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Tell me immediately it does."

The general leaned back in his chair and deliberately relaxed. He lighted a cigar and puffed at it, his hands quite steady. Other officers, scenting the smoke, glanced up enviously. But the general was the only man who might smoke. The enemy's gases, like the American ones, could go through any gas-mask if in sufficient concentration. The tanks were sealed like so many submarines, and opened their interiors to the outer air only after that air had been thoroughly tested and proven safe. Only the general might use up more than a man's allowance for breathing.

THE general gazed about him, letting his mind rest from its intense strain against the greater strain that would come on it in a few minutes. He looked at a tall blond man

who was surveying the board intently, moving away, and returning again, his forehead creased in thought.

The general smiled quizzically. That man was the officer appointed to I. I. duty—interpretative intelligence—chosen from a thousand officers because the most exhaustive psychological tests had proven that his brain worked as nearly as possible like that of the enemy commander. His task was to take the place of the enemy commander, to reconstruct from the enemy movements reported and the enemy movements known as nearly as possible the enemy plans.

"Well, Harlin," said the general. "Where will he strike?"

"He's tricky, sir," said Harlin. "That gap in our listening-posts looks, of course, like preparation for a massing of his tanks inside our lines. And it would be logical that he fought off our helicopters to keep them from discovering his tanks massing in that area." The general nodded.

"Quite true," he admitted. "Quite true."

"But," said Harlin eagerly. "He'd know we could figure that out. And he may have wiped out listening posts to make us think he was planning just so. He may have fought off our helicopters, not to keep them from discovering his tanks in there, but to keep them from discovering that there were no tanks in there!"

"My own idea exactly," said the general meditatively. "But again, it looks so much like a feint that it may be a serious blow. I dare not risk assuming it to be a feint only."

He turned back to the board.

"Have those two strayed infantrymen reported yet?" he asked sharply.

"Not yet, sir."

THE general drummed on the table. There were four red flashes glowing at different points of the board—four points where American tanks or groups of tanks were

locked in conflict with the enemy. Somewhere off in the enveloping fog that made all the world a gray chaos, lumbering, crawling monsters rammed and battered at each other at infinitely short range. They fought blindly, their guns swinging menacingly and belching lurid flames into the semi-darkness, while from all about them dropped the liquids that meant death to any man who breathed their vapor. Those gases penetrated any gas-mask, and would even strike through the sag-pastes that had made the vesicatory gases of 1918 futile.

With tanks by thousands hidden in the fog, four small combats were kept up, four only. Battles fought with tanks as the main arm are necessarily battles of movement, more nearly akin to cavalry battles than any other unless it be fleet actions. When the main bodies come into contact, the issue is decided quickly. There can be no long drawn-out stalemates such as infantry trenches produced in years past. The fighting that had taken place so far, both under the fog and aloft in the air, was outpost skirmishing only. When the main body of the enemy came into action it would be like a whirlwind, and the battle would be won or lost in a matter of minutes only.

The general paid no attention to those four conflicts, or their possible meaning.

"I want to hear from those two strayed infantrymen," he said quietly. "I must base my orders on what they report. The whole battle, I believe, hinges on what they have to say."

He fell silent, watching the board without the tense preoccupation he had shown before. He knew the moves he had to make in any of three eventualities. He watched the board to make sure he would not have to make those moves before he was ready. His whole air was that of waiting: the commander-in-chief of the army of the United States, waiting to hear what he would be told by two strayed infantrymen, lost in the fog that covered a battlefield.

THE fog was neither more dense nor any lighter where Corporal Wallis paused to roll his pre-war cigarette. The tobacco came from the gassed machine-gunner in the pill-box a few yards off. Sergeant Coffee, three yards distant, was a blurred figure. Corporal Wallis put his cigarette into his mouth, struck his match, and puffed delicately.

"Ah!" said Corporal Wallis, and cheered considerably. He thought he saw Sergeant Coffee moving toward him and ungenerously hid his cigarette's glow.

Overhead, a machine-gun suddenly burst into a rattling roar, the sound sweeping above them with incredible speed. Another gun answered it. Abruptly, the whole sky above them was an inferno of such tearing noises and immediately after they began a multitudinous bellowing set up. Airplanes on patrol ordinarily kept their engines muffled, in hopes of locating a tank below them by its noise. But in actual fighting there was too much power to be gained by cutting out the muffler for any minor motive to take effect. A hundred aircraft above the heads of the two strayed infantrymen were fighting madly about five helicopters. Two hundred yards away, one fell to the earth with a crash, and immediately afterward there was a hollow boom. For an instant even the mist was tinged with yellow from the exploded gasoline tank. But the roaring above continued—not mounting, as in a battle between opposing patrols of fighting planes, when each side finds height a decisive advantage, but keeping nearly to the same level, little above the bank of cloud.

Something came down, roaring, and struck the earth no more than fifty yards away. The impact was terrific, but after it there was dead silence while the thunder above kept on. Sergeant Coffee came leaping to Corporal Wallis' side.

"Helicopters!" he barked. "Huntin' tanks and pill-boxes! Lay down!"

He flung himself down to the earth. Wind beat on them suddenly, then an outrageous blast of icy air from above. For an instant the sky lightened. They saw a hole in the mist, saw the little pill-box clearly, saw a huge framework of supporting screws sweeping swiftly overhead with figures in it watching the ground through wind-angle glasses, and machine-gunners firing madly at dancing things in the air. Then it was gone.

"One o' ours," shouted Coffee in Wallis' ear. "They're tryin' to find the Yellows' tanks!"

THE center of the roaring seemed to shift, perhaps to the north. Then a roaring drowned out all the other roarings. This one was lower down and approaching in a rush. Something swooped from the south, a dark blotch in the lighter mist above. It was an airplane flying in the mist, a plane that had dived into the fog as into oblivion. It appeared, was gone—and there was a terrific crash. A shattering roar drowned out even the droning tumult of a hundred aircraft engines. A sheet of flame flashed up, and a thunderous detonation.

"Hit a tree," panted Coffee, scrambling to his feet again. "Suicide club, aimin' for our helicopter."

Corporal Wallis was pointing, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

"Shut up!" he whispered. "I saw a shadow against that flash! Yeller infantryman! Le's get 'im!"

"Y'crazy," said Sergeant Coffee, but he strained his eyes and more especially his ears.

It was Coffee who clutched Corporal Wallis' wrist and pointed. Wallis could see nothing, but he followed as Coffee moved silently through the gray mist. Presently he too, straining his eyes, saw an indistinct movement.

The roaring of motors died away suddenly. The fighting had stopped, a long way off, apparently because the helicopters had been withdrawn. Except for the booming of artillery a very long distance away, firing unseen at an unseen target, there was no noise at all.

"Aimin' for our pill-box," whispered Coffee. They saw the dim shape, moving noiselessly, halt. The dim figure seemed to be casting about for something. It went down on hands and knees and crawled forward. The two infantrymen crept after it. It stopped, and turned around. The two dodged to one side in haste. The enemy infantryman crawled off in another direction, the two Americans following him as closely as they dared.

He halted once more, a dim and grotesque figure in the fog. They saw him fumbling in his belt. He threw something, suddenly. There was a little tap as of a fountain pen dropped upon concrete. Then a hissing sound. That was all, but the enemy infantryman waited, as if listening...

THE two Americans fell upon him as one individual. They bore him to the earth and Coffee dragged at his gas-mask, good tactics in a battle where every man carries gas-grenades. He gasped and fought desperately, in a seeming frenzy of terror.

They squatted over him, finally, having taken away his automatics, and Coffee worked painstakingly to get off his gas-mask while Wallis went poking about in quest of tobacco.

"Dawggone!" said Coffee. "This mask is intricate."

"He ain't got any pockets," mourned Wallis.

Then they examined him more closely.

"It's a whole suit," explained Coffee. "H-m. ... He don't have to bother with sag-paste. He's got him on a land diving-suit."



"S-s-say," gasped the prisoner, his language utterly colloquial in spite of the beady eyes and coarse black hair that marked him racially as of the enemy, "say, don't take off my mask! Don't take off my mask!"

"He talks and everything," observed Coffee in mild amazement. He inspected the mask again and painstakingly smashed the goggles. "Now, big boy, you take your chance with th' rest of us. What' you doin' around here?" The prisoner set his teeth, though deathly pale, and did not reply.

"Hm-m. ..." said Coffee meditatively. "Let's take him in the pill-box an' let Loot'n't Madison tell us what to do with him."

They picked him up.

"No! No! For Gawd's sake, no!" cried the prisoner shrilly. "I just gassed it!"

THE two halted. Coffee scratched his nose.

"Reckon he's lying, Pete?" he asked. Corporal Wallis shrugged gloomily.

"He ain't got any tobacco," he said morosely. "Let's chuck him in first and see."

The prisoner wriggled until Coffee put his own automatic in the small of his back.

"How long does that gas last?" he asked, frowning. "Loot'n't Madison wants us to report. There's some fellers in there, all gassed up, but we were in there a while back an' it didn't hurt us. How long does it last?"

"Fur-fifteen minutes, maybe twenty," chattered the prisoner. "Don't put me in there!"

Coffee scratched his nose again and looked at his wrist-watch.

"Alright," he conceded, "we give you twenty minutes. Then we chuck you down inside. That is, if you act real agreeable until then. Got anything to smoke?"

The prisoner agonizedly opened a zipper slip in his costume and brought out tobacco, even tailor-made cigarettes. Coffee pounced on them one second before Wallis. Then he divided them with absorbed and scrupulous fairness.

"Right," said Sergeant Coffee comfortably. He lighted up. "Say, you, if you want to smoke, here's one o' your pills. Let's see the gas stuff. How' y' use it?"

Wallis had stripped off a heavy belt about the prisoner's waist and it was trailing over his arm. He inspected it now. There were twenty or thirty little sticks in it, each one barely larger than a lead pencil, of dirty gray color, and each one securely nested in a tube of flannel-lined papier-mache.

"These things?" asked Wallis contentedly. He was inhaling deeply with that luxurious enjoyment a tailor-made cigarette can give a man who had been remaking butts into smokes for days past.

"Don't touch 'em," warned the prisoner nervously. "You broke my goggles. You throw 'em, and they light and catch fire, and that scatters the gas."

COFFEE touched the prisoner, indicating the ground, and sat down, comfortably smoking one of the prisoner's cigarettes. By his air, he began to approve of his captive.

"Say, you," he said curiously, "you talk English pretty good. How'd you learn it?"

"I was a waiter," the prisoner explained. "New York. Corner Forty-eighth and Sixth."

"My Gawd!" said Coffee. "Me, I used to be a movie operator along there. Forty-ninth. Projection room stuff, you know. Say, you know Heine's place?"

"Sure," said the prisoner. "I used to buy Scotch from that blond feller in the back room. With a benzine label for a prescription?"

Coffee lay back and slapped his knee.

"Ain't it a small world?" he demanded. "Pete, here, he ain't never been in any town bigger than Chicago. Ever in Chicago?"

"Hell," said Wallis, morose yet comfortable with a tailor-made cigarette. "If you guys want to start an extra war, go to knockin' Chicago. That's all."

Coffee looked at his wrist-watch again.

"Got ten minutes yet," he observed. "Say, you must know Pete Hanfry—"

"Sure I know him," said the enemy prisoner, scornfully. "I waited on him. One day, just before us reserves were called back home..."

In the monster tank that was headquarters the general tapped his fingers on his knees. The pale white light flickered a little as it shone on the board where the bright sparks crawled. White sparks were American tanks. Blue flashes were for enemy tanks sighted and reported, usually in the three-second interval between their identification and the annihilation of the observation-post that had reported them. Red glows showed encounter 3 between American and enemy tanks. There were a dozen red glows visible, with from one to a dozen white sparks hovering about them. It seemed as if the whole front line were about to burst into a glare of red, were about to become one long lane of conflicts in impenetrable obscurity, where metal monsters roared and rumbled and clanked one against the other, bellowing and belching flame and ramming each other savagely, while from them dripped the liquids that made their breath mean death. There were nightmarish conflicts in progress under the blanket of fog, unparalleled save perhaps in the undersea battles between submarines in the previous European war.

THE chief of staff looked up, his face drawn.

"General," he said harshly, "it looks like a frontal attack all along our line."

The general's cigar had gone out. He was pale, but calm with an iron composure.

"Yes," he conceded. "But you forget that blank spot in our line. We do not know what is happening there."

"I am not forgetting it. But the enemy outnumbers us two to one—"

"I am waiting," said the general, "to hear from those two infantrymen who reported some time ago from a listenpost in the dead area."

The chief of staff pointed to the outline formed by the red glows where tanks were battling.

"Those fights are keeping up too long!" he said sharply. "General, don't you see, they're driving back our line, but they aren't driving it back as fast as if they were throwing their whole weight on it! If they were making a frontal attack there, they'd wipe out the tanks we have facing them; they'd roll right over them! That's a feint! They're concentrating in the dead space—"

"I am waiting," said the general softly, "to hear from those two infantrymen." He looked at the board again and said quietly, "Have the call-signal sent them. They may answer."

He struck a match to relight his dead cigar. His fingers barely quivered as they held the match. It might have been excitement—but it might have been foreboding, too.

"By the way," he said, holding the match clear, "have our machine-shops and supply-tanks read to move. Every plane is, of course, ready to take the air on signal. But get the aircraft ground personnel in their traveling tanks immediately."

Voices began to murmur orders as the general puffed. He watched the board steadily.

"Let me know if anything is heard from these infantrymen..."

THERE was a definite air of strain within the tank that was headquarters. It was a sort of tensility that seemed to emanate from the general himself.

Where Coffee and Wallis and the prisoner squatted on the ground, however, there was no sign of strain at all. There was a steady gabble of voices.

"What kinda rations they give you?" asked Coffee interestedly.

The enemy prisoner listed them, with profane side-comments.

"Hell," said Wallis gloomily. "Y'ought to see what we get! Las' week they fed us worse'n dogs. And the canteen stuff—"

"Your tank men, they get treated fancy?" asked the prisoner.

Coffee made a reply consisting almost exclusively of high powered expletives.

"—and the infantry gets it in the neck every time," he finished savagely. "We do the work—"

Guns began to boom, far away. Wallis cocked his ears.

"Tanks gettin' together," he judged, gloomily. "If they'd all blow each other to hell an' let us infantry fight this battle—"

"Damn the tanks!" said the enemy prisoner viciously. "Look here, you fellers. Look at me. They sent a battalion of us out, in two waves. We hike along by compass through the fog, supposed to be five paces apart. We come on a pill-box or listenin' post, we gas it an' go on. We try not to make a noise. We try not to get seen before we use our gas. We go on, deep in your lines as we can. We hear one of your tanks, we dodge it if we can, so we don't get seen at all. O'course we give it a dose of gas in passing, just in case. But we don't get any orders about how far to go or how to come back. We ask for recognition signals for our own tanks, and they grin and say we won't see none of our tanks till the battle's over. They say 'Re-form and march back when the fog is out.' Ain't that pretty for you ?"

"You second wave?" asked Coffee, with interest.

The prisoner nodded.

"Mopping up," he said bitterly, "what the first wave left. No fun in that! We go along gassin' dead men, an' all the time your tanks is ravin' around to find out what's happenin' to their listenin'-posts. They run into us—"

Coffee nodded sympathetically.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," said Wallis morosely.

SOMEWHERE, something blew up with a violent explosion. The noise of battle in the distance became heavier and heavier.

"Goin' it strong," said the prisoner, listening.

"Yeh," said Coffee. He looked at his wrist-watch. "Say, that twenty minutes is up. You go down in there first, big boy."

They stood beside the little pill-box. The prisoner's knees shook.

"Say, fellers," he said pleadingly, "they told us that stuff would scatter in twenty minutes, but you busted my mask. Yours ain't any good against this gas. I'll have to go down in there if you fellers make me, but—"

Coffee lighted another of the prisoner's tailor-made cigarettes.

"Give you five minutes more," he said graciously. "I don't suppose it'll ruin the war."

They sat down relievedly again, while the fog-gas made all the earth invisible behind a pall of grayness, a grayness from which the noises of battle came.

In the tank that was headquarters, the air of strain was pronounced. The maneuver-board showed the situation as close to desperation, now. The reserve-tank positions had been switched on the board, dim orange glows, massed in curiously precise blocks. And little squares of green showed there that the supply and machine-shop tanks were massed. They were moving slowly across the maneuver-board. But the principal change lay in the front-line indications.



The red glows that showed where tank battles were in progress formed an irregularly curved line, now. There were twenty or more such isolated battles in progress, varying from single combats between single tanks to greater conflicts where twenty to thirty tanks to a side were engaged. And the positions of those conflicts were changing constantly, and invariably the American tanks were being pushed back.

THE two staff officers behind the general were nearly silent. There were few sparks crawling within the American lines now. Nearly every one had been diverted into the frontline battles. The two men watched the board with feverish intensity, watching the red glows moving back, and back....

The chief of staff was shaking like a leaf, watching the American line stretched, and stretched....

The general looked at him with a twisted smile.

"I know my opponent," he said suddenly. "I had lunch with him once in Vienna. We were attending a disarmament conference." He seemed to be amused at the ironic statement. "We talked war and battles, of course. And he showed me, drawing on the tablecloth, the tactical scheme that should have been used at Cambrai, back in 1917. It was a singularly perfect plan. It was a beautiful one."

"General," burst out one of the two staff officers behind him. "I need twenty tanks from the reserves."

"Take them," said the general. He went on, addressing his chief of staff. "It was an utterly flawless plan. I talked to other men. We were all pretty busy estimating each other there, we soldiers. We discussed each other with some freedom, I may say. And I formed the opinion that the man who is in command of the enemy is an artist: a soldier with the spirit of an amateur. He's a very skilful fencer, by the way. Doesn't that suggest anything?"

The chief of staff had his eyes glued to the board.

"That is a feint, sir. A strong feint, yes, but he has his force concentrated in the dead area."

"You are not listening, sir," said the general, reprovingly. "I am saying that my opponent is an artist, an amateur, the sort of person who delights in the delicate work of fencing. I, sir, would thank God for the chance to defeat my enemy. He has twice my force, but he will not be content merely to defeat me. He will want to defeat me by a plan of consummate artistry, which will arouse admiration among soldiers for years to come."

"But General, every minute, every second—"

"We are losing men, of whom we have plenty, and tanks, of which we have not enough. True, very true," conceded the general. "But I am waiting to hear from two strayed infantrymen. When they report, I will speak to them myself."

"But, sir," cried the chief of staff, withheld only by the iron habit of discipline from violent action and the taking over of command himself, "they may be dead! You can't risk this battle waiting for them! You can't risk it, sir! You can't!"

"They are not dead," said the general coolly. "They cannot be dead. Sometimes, sir, we must obey the motto on our coins. Our country needs this battle to be won. We have got to win it, sir! And the only way to win it—"

THE signal-light at his telephone glowed. The general snatched it up, his hands quivering. But his voice, was steady and deliberate as he spoke.

"Hello, Sergeant—Sergeant Coffee, is it?... Very well, Sergeant. Tell me what you've found out.... Your prisoner objects to his rations, eh? Very well, go on.... How did he gas our listening-posts.... He did, eh? He got turned around and you caught him wandering about.... Oh, he was second wave! They weren't taking any chances on any of our listening-posts reporting their tanks, eh.... Say that again, Sergeant Coffee!" The

general's tone had changed indescribably. "Your prisoner has no recognition signals for his own tanks? They told him he wouldn't see any of them until the battle was over.... Thank you, Sergeant. One of our tanks will stop for you. This is the commanding general speaking."

He rang off, his eyes blazing. Relaxation was gone. He was a dynamo, snapping orders.

"Supply tanks, machine-shop tanks, ground forces of the air service, concentrate here!" His finger rested on a spot in the middle of the dead area. "Reserve tanks take position behind them. Draw off every tank we've got—take 'em out of action!—and mass them in front, on a line with our former first line of outposts. Every airplane and helicopter take the air and engage in general combat with the enemy, wherever the enemy may be found and in whatever force. And our tanks move straight through here!"

Orders were snapping into telephone transmitters. The commands had been relayed before their import was fully realized. Then there was a gasp.

"General!" cried the chief of staff. "If the enemy is massed there, he'll destroy our forces in detail as they take position!"

"He isn't massed there," said the general, his eyes blazing. "The infantrymen who were gassing our listening-posts were given no recognition signals for their tanks. Sergeant Coffee's prisoner has his gas-mask broken and is in deadly fear. The enemy commander is foolish in many ways, perhaps, but not foolish enough to break down morale by refusing recognition signals to his own men who will need them. And look at the beautiful plan he's got."

HE sketched half a dozen lines with his fingers, moving them in lightning gestures as his orders took effect.

"His main force is here, behind those skirmishes that look like a feint. As fast as we reinforce our skirmishing line, he reinforces his—just enough to drive our tanks back slowly. It looks like a strong feint, but it's a trap! This dead space is empty. He thinks we are concentrating to face it. When he is sure of it—his helicopters will sweep across any minute, now, to see—he'll throw his whole force on our front line. It'll crumple up. His whole fighting force will smash through to take us, facing the dead space, in the rear! With twice our numbers, he'll drive us before him."

"But general! You're ordering a concentration there! You're falling in with his plans!"

The general laughed.

"I had lunch with the general in command over there, once upon a time. He is an artist. He won't be content with a defeat like that! He'll want to make his battle a masterpiece, a work of art! There's just one touch he can add. He has to have reserves to protect his supply-tanks and machine-shops. They're fixed. The ideal touch, the perfect tactical fillip, will be—Here! Look. He expects to smash in our rear, here. The heaviest blow will fall here. He will swing around our right wing, drive us out of the dead area into his own lines—and drive us on his reserves! Do you see it? He'll use every tank he's got in one beautiful final blow. We'll be outwitted, outnumbered, out-flanked and finally caught between his main body and his reserves and pounded to bits. It is a perfect, a masterly bit of work!"

He watched the board, hawklike.

"We'll concentrate, but our machine-shops and supplies will concentrate with us. Before he has time to take us in rear we'll drive ahead, in just the line he plans for us! We don't wait to be driven into his reserves. We roll into them and over them! We smash his supplies! We destroy his shops! And then we can advance along his line of

communication and destroy it, our own depots being blown up— give the orders when necessary—and leaving him stranded with motor-driven tanks, motorized artillery, and nothing to run his motors with! He'll be marooned beyond help in the middle of our country, and we will have him at our mercy when his tanks run out of fuel. As a matter of fact, I shall expect him to surrender in three days."

THE little blocks of green and yellow that had showed the position of the reserve and supply-tanks, changed abruptly to white, and began to crawl across the maneuver-board. Other little white sparks turned about. Every white spark upon the maneuverboard suddenly took to itself a new direction.

"Disconnect cables," said the general, crisply. "We move with our tanks, in the lead!"

The monotonous humming of the electric generator was drowned out in a thunderous uproar that was muffled as an air-tight door was shut abruptly. Fifteen seconds later there was a violent lurch, and the colossal tank was on the move in the midst of a crawling, thundering horde of metal monsters whose lumbering progress shook the earth.

Sergeant Coffee, still blinking his amazement, absent-mindedly lighted the last of his share of the cigarettes looted from the prisoner.

"The big guy himself!" he said, still stunned. "My Gawd! The big guy himself!"

A distant thunder began, a deeptoned rumbling that seemed to come from the rear. It came nearer and grew louder. A peculiar quivering seemed to set up in the earth. The noise was tanks moving through the fog, not one tank or two tanks, or twenty tanks, but all the tanks in creation rumbling and lurching at their topmost speed in serried array.

Corporal Wallis heard, and turned pale. The prisoner heard, and his knees caved in.

"Hell," said Corporal Wallis despairingly. "They can't see us, and they couldn't dodge us if they did!"

The prisoner wailed, and slumped to the floor.

Coffee picked him up by the collar and jerked him out of the pill-box.

"C'mon Pete," he ordered briefly. "They ain't giving us an infantryman's chance, but maybe we can do some dodgin'!"

THEN the roar of engines, of metal treads crushing upon earth and clanking upon their joints, drowned out all possible other sounds. Before the three men beside the pill-box could have moved a muscle, monster shapes loomed up, rushing, rolling, lurching, squeaking. They thundered past, and the hot fumes of their exhausts enveloped the trio.

Coffee growled and put himself in a position of defiance, his feet braced against the concrete of the pill-box dome. His expression was snarling and angry but, surreptitiously, he crossed himself. He heard the fellows of the two tanks that had roared by him, thundering along in alignment to right and left. A twenty-yard space, and a second row of the monsters came hurtling on, gun muzzles gaping, gas-tubes elevated, spitting smoke from their exhausts that was even thicker than the fog. A third row, a fourth, a fifth....

The universe was a monster uproar. One could not think in this volume of sound. It seemed that there was fighting overhead. Crackling noises came feebly through the reverberating uproar that was the army of the United States in full charge. Something came whirling down through the overhanging mist and exploded in a lurid flare that for a second or two cast the grotesque shadows of a row of tanks clearly before the trio of shaken infantrymen.

Still the tanks came on and roared past. Twenty tanks, twenty-one... twenty-two.... Coffee lost count, dazed and almost stunned by the sheer noise. It rose from the

earth and seemed to be echoed back from the topmost limit of the skies. It was a colossal din, an incredible uproar, a sustained thunder that beat at the eardrums like the reiterated concussions of a thousand guns that fired without ceasing. There was no intermission, no cessation of the tumult. Row after row after row of the monsters roared by, beaked and armed, going greedily with hungry guns into battle.

AND then, for a space of seconds, no tanks passed. Through the pandemonium of their going, however, the sound of firing somehow seemed to creep. It was gunfire of incredible intensity, and it came from the direction in which the front-rank tanks were heading.

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, forty-ten, forty-'leven," muttered Coffee dazedly, his senses beaten down almost to unconsciousness by the ordeal of sound. "Gawd! The whole army went by!"

The roaring of the fighting-tanks was less, but it was still a monstrous din. Through it, however, came now a series of concussions that were so close together that they were inseparable, and so violent that they were like slaps upon the chest.

Then came other noises, louder only because nearer. These were different noises, too, from those the fighting tanks had made. Lighter noises. The curious, misshapen service tanks began to rush by, of all sizes and all shapes. Fuel-carrier tanks. Machine-shop tanks, huge ones, these. Commissary tanks....

Something enormous and glistening stopped short. A door opened. A voice roared an order. The three men, beaten and whipped by noise, stared dumbly.

"Sergeant Coffee!" roared the voice. "Bring your men! Quick!"

Coffee dragged himself back to a semblance of life. Corporal Wallis moved forward, sagging. The two of them loaded their prisoner into the door and tumbled in.

They were instantly sent into a heap as the tank took up its progress again with a sudden sharp leap.

"Good man," grinned a sooty-faced officer, clinging to a handhold. "The general sent special orders you were to be picked up. Said you'd won the battle. It isn't finished yet, but when the general says that—"

"Battle?" said Coffee dully. "This ain't my battle. It's a parade of a lot of damn tanks!"

THERE was a howl of joy from somewhere above. Discipline in the machine-shop tanks was strict enough, but vastly different in kind from the formality of the fighting-machines.

"Contact!" roared the voice again. "General wireless is going again! Our fellows have rolled over their reserves and are smashing their machine-shops and supplies!"

Yells reverberated deafeningly inside the steel walls, already filled with tumult from the running motors and rumbling treads.

"Smashed 'em up!" shrieked the voice above, insane with joy. "Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! We've wiped out their whole reserve and—" A series of detonations came through even the steel shell of the lurching tank. Detonations so violent, so monstrous, that even through the springs and treads of the tank the earth-concussion could be felt. "There goes their ammunition! We set off all their dumps!"

There was sheer pandemonium inside the service-tank, speeding behind the fighting force with only a thin skin of reserve-tanks between it and a panicstricken, mechanically pursuing enemy.

"Yell, you birds!" screamed the voice. "The general says we've won the battle! Thanks to the fighting force! We're to go on and wipe out the enemy line of



communications, letting him chase us till his gas gives out! Then we come back and pound him to bits! Our tanks have wiped him out!"

COFFEE managed to find something to hold on to. He struggled to his feet. Corporal Wallrs, recoving from the certainty of death and the torture of sound, was being very seasick from the tank's motion. The prisoner moved away from him on the steel floor. He looked gloomily up at Coffee.

"Listen to 'em," said Coffee bitterly. "Tanks! Tanks! Tanks! Hell! If they'd given us infantry a chance—"

"You said it," said the prisoner savagely. "This is a hell of a way to fight a war."

Corporal Wallis turned a greenish face to them.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," he gasped. "Now they—now they' makin' infantry ride in tanks! Hell!"