



The First Tank Crews: The lives of the Tankmen who fought at the Battle of Flers Courcellette 15 September 1916

Stephen Pope

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This remarkable new book reveals the hitherto unknown story of the soldiers who took the first tanks into action on the Somme battlefield in September 1916. Drawing on official records, contemporary newspaper reports and family memories, Stephen Pope provides a fascinating insight into the lives of the First Tank Crewmen, covering their recruitment, scant training, rapid deployment and their premature use in battle. He then traces their inter-connected lives over the next two years as tanks played a key role in the defeat of the Germany Army in 1918. He reveals the story of their return to civilian life and their often difficult struggle to build a family life. Sadly many of the First Tank Crews died young, some due to injuries or illnesses developed as a result of their wartime service.

Amongst the stories revealed are those of the grandson of the social reformer Joseph Rowntree, the champion rose grower Bill Harkness, the Scottish chemist Stuart Hastie who introduced science into the whisky distilling process and the Liverpool school teacher Graham Nixon who tried to teach John Lennon mathematics. None of those who fought in the tanks achieved great fame for their actions and few revealed their wartime secrets to their families. However, many became pillars of their local communities, giving a life of service to those around them.

This book tells the previously untold stories of bravery, determination and dedication by a group of unsung heroes. The author has used his contacts with more than fifty relatives of those who fought at the First Tank Action and used their input to provide a detailed description of their lives after the war. He has also gathered together many previously unpublished pictures including many of the tankmen in France, and has revealed the backstory to several well known photographs. Above all, he has linked individual lives together to create a fascinating story of ordinary men who took part in extraordinary events. The story of the First Tank Crews is one well worth reading.

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