



This
MONTH in
military
history ...

- 1620: Mayflower reached Plymouth
- 1675: The Great Swamp Fight
- 1773: Boston Tea Party
- 1777: Valley Forge
- 1779: Benedict Arnold court-martialed
- 1786: Shay's Rebellion
- 1803: Louisiana Purchase
- 1814: Treaty of Ghent signed
- 1837: Battle of Lake Okeechobee
- 1846: Doniphan occupied El Paso
- 1863: Emancipation Proclamation
- 1865: 13th Amendment ratified
- 1941: Arcadia Conference
- 1944: Battle of the Bulge, General McAuliffe replied to a German surrender request with "Nuts"
- 1972: Operation Linebacker II
- 1979: Soviets invaded Afghanistan
- 1989: Operation Just Cause
- 2004: Battle for Fallujah

The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I: RIA and the Mark VIII Tank

World War I saw the introduction of many technological advancements in weaponry and tactics. One of the most revolutionary was the development of the tank. The main objective of the tank was to break the stalemate of trench warfare on the western front. Only in this regard, would the Allies be able to drive back the invading German army.

Perhaps the most notorious tank that was developed for this purpose was the Mark VIII. Weighing about 40 tons with a height of 10 feet, 3 inches, the Mark VIII Tank was nothing short of an industrial marvel. Two 57mm guns flanked the sides of the tank, with an additional five M1917 Browning machine guns.

The armor and armament made the Mark VIII a perfect weapon of war during campaigns on the western front. However, the other key feature of the tank was its powerful engine and its uniquely shaped tracks. Nicknamed the "Liberty Tank" after its engine, the Mark VIII was capable of speeds up to 5 mph utilizing its 300 horsepower Liberty V-12 engine.

The tank was designed to hold a total of 8 men, with a driver, an engineer, a commanding officer, and five gunners. Additionally, over 200 rounds of artillery for the 57mm guns and over 20,000 rounds of ammunition for the Browning machine guns could be carried in the tank. This reduced the need for resupply while breaking through enemy lines.

The greatest feat, as well as its greatest shortcomings were overcome in the assembly and development stages. The tanks were manufactured in pieces between the United States and Britain during 1919, and then shipped to Rock Island Arsenal for assembly in the Spring.

The Rock Island Arsenal had already been operating at war capacity since before the United States entered World War I, and the order for assembly of 100 of these monolithic tanks was the largest order to date. It is during assembly that the most difficult obstacles in this tank's production would be met and overcome.

Assembly at the Rock Island Arsenal began on 1 July 1919 and took approximately 286 days to complete. The last Mark VIII tank assembled at Rock Island Arsenal was completed and ready for drive testing on 5 June 1920. 100 of the total 125 tanks built were assembled at this arsenal. The other 25 were assembled in Britain by the North British Locomotive Company.

The armor and armament were supplied by Britain, with the Browning machine guns being supplied from British inventory. The transmission and engine were supplied by contractors in the United States. Virtually all of the parts were then sent to Rock Island Arsenal for assembly.

Problems arose during the assembly process due to different countries supplying parts for one body. Fittings and dimensions needed to be

adjusted in order to correctly assemble the parts onto the body proper without compromising the design or integrity of the tank.

Rock Island Arsenal workers overcame the obstacles and organizational woes associated with the Mark VIII, and successfully turned out the full order. Even as the war died down and ended, the demand for tanks remained high, keeping workers at the arsenal well into the inter war period.

The completed Mark VIII tanks that were produced by the Rock Island Arsenal would remain in the United States active inventory until 1932. Few tanks remain on display today, with their size being the biggest obstacle in the retention.

Only two of these titans of the Great War remain today, with one on Fort Meade, Maryland (with full Rock Island Arsenal identification) and the other at Fort Benning, Georgia. Only one tank remains in Britain at the Bovington Tank Museum. Today the Mark VIII tank lives on largely only in stories, histories, and pictures. However, it is a permanent reminder of the history of the Rock Island Arsenal.

