

# “With the British Army Cheering Behind”

## *Flers-Courcelette: The First Tank Battle*

by Captain Richard S. Faulkner

It was 0515 on 15 September 1916. The German listening posts on the edge of the Delville Woods picked up strange and ominous sounds coming from the British trenches, but the defenders were not overly alarmed. British bodies still littered No Man’s Land from the last futile attempt to dislodge the Bavarians from their strongpoint. But now, something was desperately wrong. Out of the pre-dawn darkness rolled a weapon the likes of which the Bavarian farm boys had never seen. As the mechanical monster opened fire, the startled Germans quickly fled or surrendered. This mechanical monster was “D1,” a Mark I tank of D Company, Heavy Section, Machine Gun Corps; the first tank in history to go into combat.

The Battle of Flers-Courcelette is separated from the stunning armored penetrations of the Gulf War by only 75 years. Though the tanks of those battles are as dissimilar as the Wright Brothers’ Flyer is to a stealth fighter, some of the basic concepts and problems of armored warfare have not changed. The first tank battle begins a legacy of training, maintenance, and infantry-armor cooperation that has remained with us even as technology and tactics have evolved.

### Bringing Tanks to the Battlefield

In August of 1916, Sir Douglas Haig, the commander of British Forces on the Western Front, faced a dilemma. If a major attack was not launched on the Somme before winter, there was little chance of organizing a combined Allied offensive before the spring of 1917. With the French counterattacks at Verdun, Brusilov’s ongoing offensive on the Eastern Front, and the Italian attacks on the Isonzo Line, Haig was certain that one more “big push” would overtax Germany and the Central Powers and crack open the Western Front. To accomplish this breach, the British

commander would mount the heaviest attack since the abortive battle of 1 July. The four attacking corps would be supported for the first time by the Heavy Section, Machine Gun Corps, the unit which would later become the Royal Tank Corps.

As early as December 1915, Haig had been informed of a new secret weapon that could possibly restore open warfare to the Western Front.<sup>1</sup> In January, “Mother,” the prototype of all British World War I tanks, rolled out of the workshop and began trials. The following month, LTC Ernest Swinton published “Notes on the Employment of Tanks,” the first attempt to establish doctrine for the new system. Swinton described the weapon as a...

*“Caterpillar” bullet-proof climbing motor, or “Tank,” a machine designed for the express purpose of assisting attacking infantry by crossing the defenses, breaking through the obstacles, and disposing of the machine guns. It is primarily a machine-gun destroyer...”<sup>2</sup>*

After reading the memorandum and meeting with Swinton, Haig was convinced that the tank was a resource that must be used at the opening of the upcoming Somme Offensive.

Problems with training and procurement prevented tanks from reaching France in time for beginning of the offensive on 1 July 1916. The loss of almost 60,000 men on the first day of the battle led Haig to pressure the War Committee to send whatever tanks were available. Swinton and most of the other tank pioneers were against sending small numbers of tanks to the front. In “Notes on the Employment of Tanks” Swinton had argued:

*“Since the chance of success of an attack by tanks lies almost entirely in its novelty and in the element of surprise, it is obvious that no repetition of it will have the same opportunity of succeeding as the first unexpected effort. It follows, therefore, that these machines*

*should not be used in dribbles” (original emphasis)<sup>3</sup>*

The British commander would not be moved. In a letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Haig stated:

*“Even if I do not get so great many as I hope, I shall use what I have got, as I cannot wait any longer for them, and it would be folly not use every means at my disposal in what is likely to be our crowning effort this year.”<sup>4</sup>*

On 13 August 1916, the first tanks left England for France. By the end of August, two full companies, a total of 50 tanks, were on the Western Front.<sup>5</sup>

### Training the Force

Haig’s constant pestering had gotten the tanks to France, but the two companies were far from ready for combat. The training in England had been rushed and woefully lacking. As late as June, “Mother” was the only tank available for driver training at the tank training camp at Elveden.<sup>6</sup> Instruction on map reading, reconnaissance, and gunnery was also substandard. Though replica German trench works had been constructed, a shortage of tanks prevented most crews from practicing on the site. This shortage also resulted in many drivers leaving for France with as little as two hours of driving experience.<sup>7</sup>

A new training center was established in France at Yvrench. However, a lack of time and instructors prevented effective training prior to the tankers moving into the line. Most importantly, there was no training that integrated the tanks and the infantry. The secrecy surrounding the new weapon was so complete that many British infantrymen were as startled as the Germans by the tank’s first battle appearance.<sup>8</sup> These training deficiencies would have disastrous effects on 15 September.

## Problems With Maintenance

Once in France, the tanks were feverishly prepared for the coming battle. The majority of this time was spent establishing logistical and organizational bases for the new arm. The corps and division commanders that the tank companies would support were encouraged to observe the new weapons to get an appreciation of their capabilities and limitations. Many of these commanders wanted to see the tanks knock over trees and perform other “circus tricks.”<sup>9</sup> These demonstrations, combined with the fact that the Mark I design had not been completely proven, resulted in growing maintenance problems. Shortages of spare parts, lack of trained mechanics, and the poor experience level of the crews, would decrease the already small number of tanks going into battle.

## The British Plan

On 31 August 1916, Haig issued his battle orders. General Rawlinson's Fourth Army would be the main attack with the mission of making a gap through the Germans' three defensive belts. To accomplish this, nine divisions would attack on a six-mile front to capture Morval, Les Boeuifs, Flers, and Gueudecourt. General Gough's Reserve Army would simultaneously launch one corps in a supporting attack to capture Courcellette. Once the Fourth Army had made a gap in the Germans' last defensive line, the Cavalry Corps would exploit the breach and begin rolling up the enemy lines to the northwest.<sup>10</sup> To support the attack, 42 tanks were assigned to the Fourth Army and six were allotted to the Reserve Army.

Rawlinson opted to spread his tanks over the length of the front rather than concentrate them on one or two critical axes. In the XIV Corps, three tanks were given to the 56th Division, three to the 6th Division, and ten to the Guards Division. The XV Corps allocated four tanks to the 14th Division, ten to the 41st Division, and four to the New Zealand Division. The III Corps assigned four tanks to the 47th Division, and two each to the 50th and 15th Divisions.<sup>11</sup> These “penny packets” of tanks would be further depleted by mechanical failures prior to reaching the

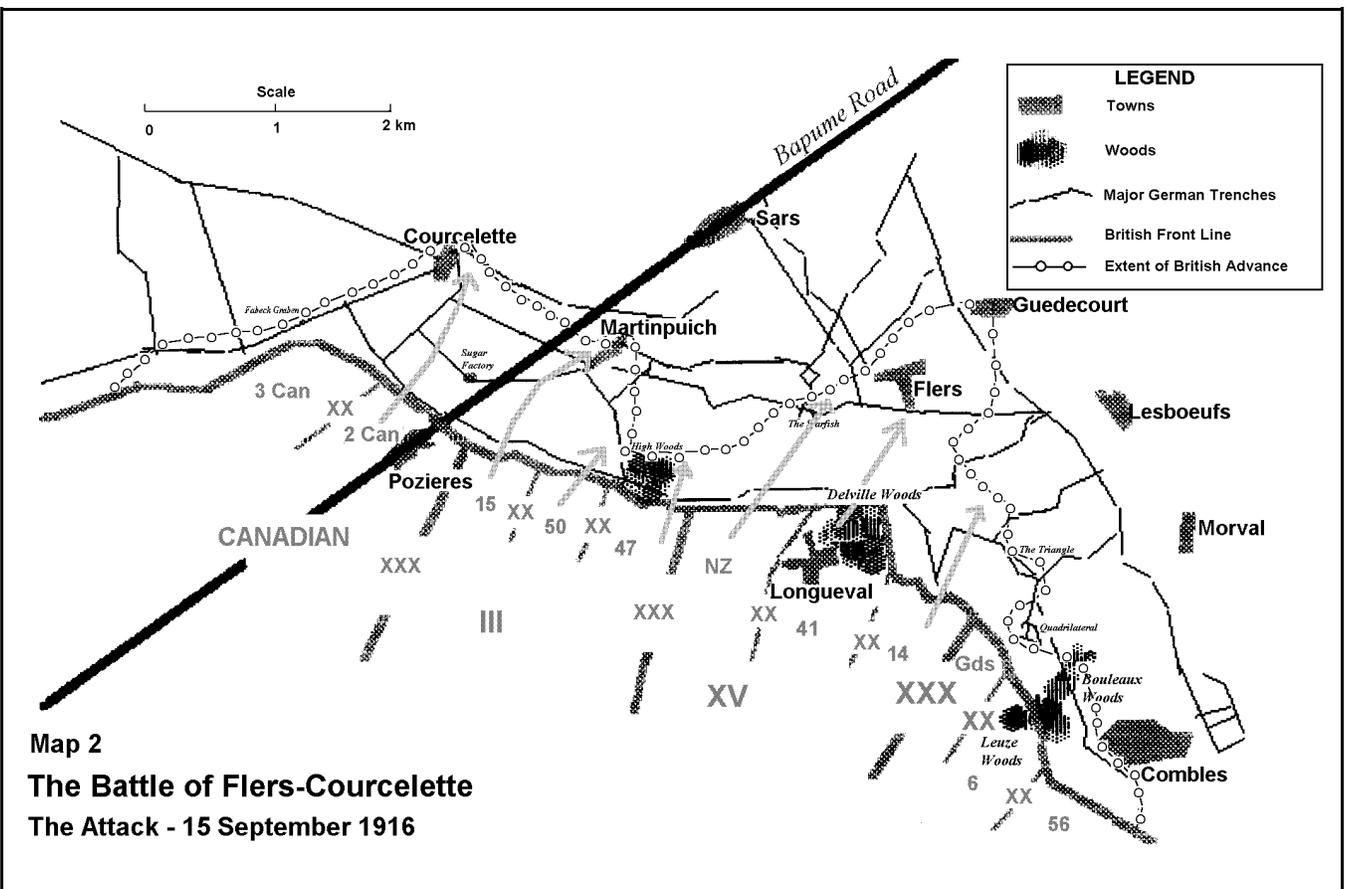
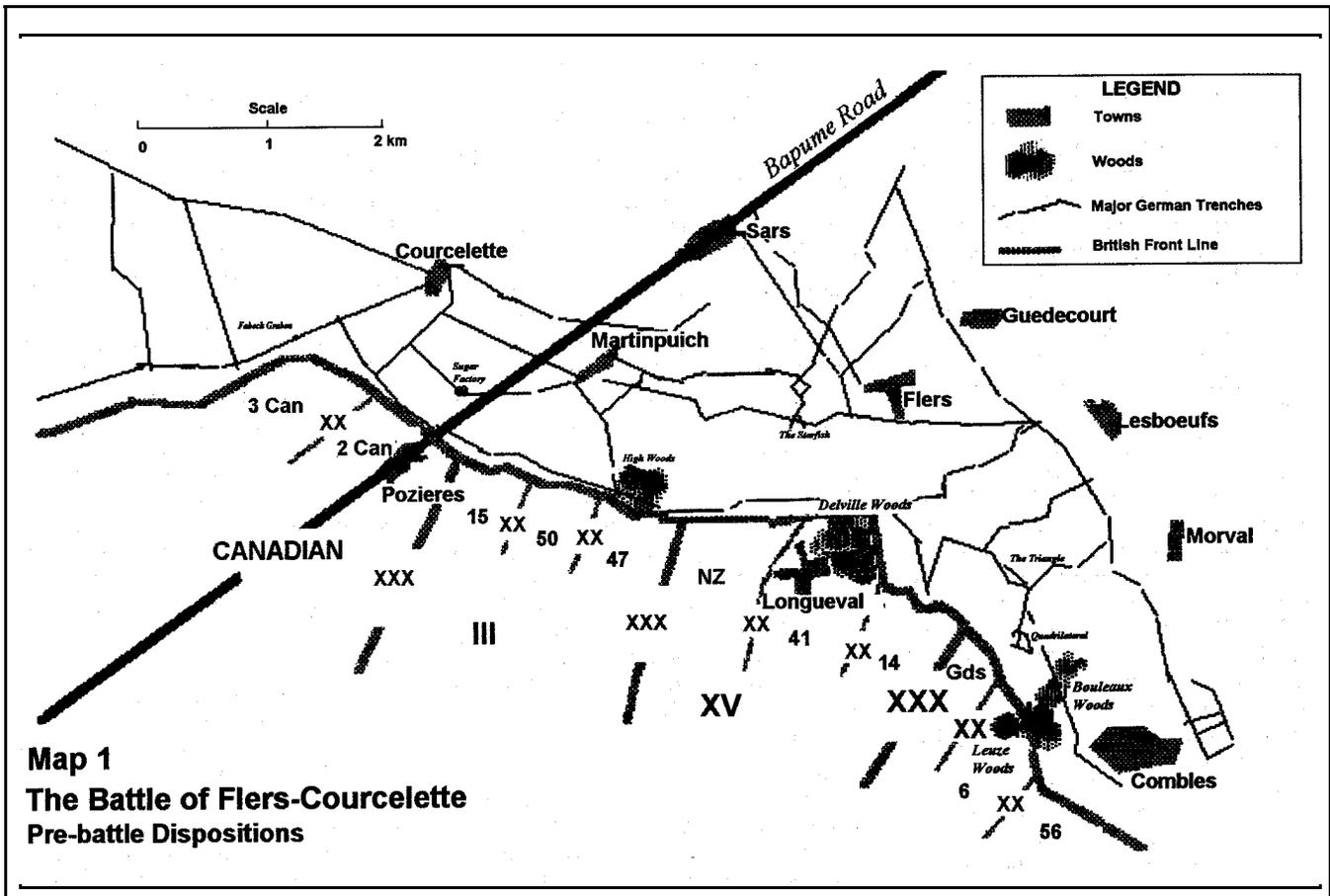


line of departure. Swinton's fear of wasting the element of surprise with “dribble” attacks was about to be proven true.

## On the Other Side of the Front

Since July, the Germans had been strengthening the defensive lines on which the British attack would fall. The villages of Combles, Morval, Flers,

Martinpuich, and Courcellette had all been heavily fortified. Between these strongpoints ran uninterrupted lines of fighting, support, and communications trenches. These trenches were strengthened with thick belts of barbed wire and overlapping machine gun coverage. Other key terrain was made nearly impregnable by a liberal use of reinforced concrete bunkers and deep, shell-proof dugouts. These positions,



with names like the “the Quadrilateral,” “the Triangle,” “the Sugar Factory,” and the “Fabeck Graben,” were to be included in the British objectives for 15 September. The Germans also held strong positions on the center of the British lines in the High Woods. The High Wood positions had resisted numerous attacks and inflicted great slaughter on all attackers since 16 July. The Germans planned to make any attack on their lines an expensive venture for the British.

The British hoped that a ceaseless three-day artillery barrage of the German lines would fragment the German defenses enough to ensure the success of the ground attack. The heaviest concentrations of fire were reserved for the fortified villages and other strongpoints. The barrage accomplished little in reducing the enemy works. The only result was the further churning of the already shell-torn ground. This, combined with heavy rains on 13 September, would create trafficability problems for the attacking tanks. As the barrage thundered overhead, the assaulting tanks and infantry moved into their assembly trenches and positions.

### The Battle Is Joined

The Battle of Flers-Courcelette began at 0515 with tank D1’s attack at Delville Wood. The 14th Division had been given permission for an early attack on the German works to prevent enemy crossfire as the British soldiers left their trenches. The first-ever tank assault went well. A British infantryman attacking just behind the tank recalled:

*“The tank waddled on with its guns blazing and we could see Jerry popping up and down, not knowing what to do, whether to stay or run... The Jerries waited until our tank was only a few yards away and then fled — or hoped to! The tank just shot them down and machine gun posts...just disappeared”<sup>12</sup>*

Soon after clearing the trench, D1 was knocked out of action by German shell fire. The elements of success and failure illustrated by D1’s brief life would be typical of tank actions for the remainder of the day.

On the British right flank, the tanks attached to the XIV Corps accomplished little. Of the three tanks attacking with the 56th Division, one threw

track at the line of departure and another became ditched near the German front line. The remaining tank was immobilized by shell fire in “no man’s land” but provided effective fire support to the infantry attacking the Combles Trench.<sup>13</sup>

In the 6th Division, the three attached tanks were to be used to reduce the “Quadrilateral” strongpoint. Mechanical problems left the division with only one tank to make the attack. The tank led the assault, but became disoriented and opened fire on a trench occupied by the 9th Norfolk Battalion. Quick action by a Norfolk company commander prevented a serious fratricide incident and also got the tank oriented toward the objective.<sup>14</sup> The 6th Division’s lone tank failed to damage the “Quadrilateral.” When the infantry attacked, they found the strongpoint’s barbed wire and machine guns intact. Casualties were heavy and the “Quadrilateral” remained in German hands.

The performance of the ten tanks attacking with the Guards Division was even more dismal. Five of the ten tanks broke down or were ditched prior to the line of departure. Of the remainder that attacked, one broke its steering tail, one ditched, and three returned to the British lines after cruising around in “no man’s land” and accomplishing little.<sup>15</sup>

The tanks had better success in the XV Corps sector. Fourteen of 18 tanks assigned to XV Corps crossed the line of departure. These tanks were to pave the way for the 14th, 41st, and New Zealand divisions’ attacks, by destroying enemy machine gun positions in the fortified towns of Flers and Gueudecourt. The seven tanks that attacked with the 41st Division made the most spectacular gains of the day. These tanks pushed through the Germans’ first two trench lines and reduced the strongpoints in and around Flers. In Flers, the tanks spread panic in their wake. A Bavarian prisoner of war told his interrogators,

*“One stared and stared as if one had lost the power of their limbs. The big monsters approached us slowly, hobbling, rolling, rocking, but always advancing. Someone shouted “the devil is coming” and the word passed along the line.”<sup>16</sup>*

One tank, “D16,” attacked directly up the main street of Flers, doing considerable damage as it went. At 0845, this

event was reported by an aircraft observer flying over the town as “Tank seen in main street Flers going on with large number of troops following it.”<sup>17</sup> This message was picked up by the British press and changed to read, “A tank is walking up the high street of Flers with the British Army cheering behind.”

Four tanks from the 14th and 41st Divisions broke through the Germans’ last defensive belt and managed to push to the outskirts of Gueudecourt. Unfortunately, the infantry attacking with the tanks had been disorganized when taking Flers. The Germans quickly rallied and patched up a hasty defense of the town. One by one, the tanks were bracketed and destroyed by shell fire. The moment passed, and the British allowed a great window of opportunity to close.

In the III Corps, seven of eight tanks started the battle. Though these tanks proved to be of assistance, they failed to live up to expectations. The closeness of the British and German lines along the High Woods had prevented suppression of the enemy during the opening bombardment. The III Corps and 47th Division commanders hoped to use the division’s four tanks to break the Germans’ hold on the strongpoint. The tanks were expected to move through the stump-studded and trench crossed woods to open the way for the attacking infantry. The going proved too rough for the primitive machines and all were lost to ditching or shell fire.<sup>18</sup> The 47th Division’s attack against the High Woods stalled. After the commitment of most of the division’s reserves and a high number of casualties, the German strongpoint fell.

Both of the 50th Division’s tanks provided effective support to the infantry attacking between the High Wood and Martinpuich. One tank penetrated the German frontline and laid down a deadly enfilading fire. This tank was knocked out by shell fire, but not before its fire had allowed the infantry to secure their first objective with light losses. The remaining tank broke through two belts of German trenches and knocked out three machine guns on the eastern side of Martinpuich. However, the tank was unable to continue the attack due to lack of fuel and a bullet through its oil cylinder.<sup>19</sup>

The 15th Division started the attack with only one of two assigned tanks. The lone tank attacked behind, rather than forward of, the infantry. When the

infantry advance was held up to the southwest of Martinpuich, the tank moved forward and destroyed several machine guns and dugouts. The tank soon had to return to British lines for fuel, and was later used to bring ammunition forward to the infantry.<sup>20</sup>

On the front of the Reserve Army, the tanks also met with mixed results. The Canadian Corps' 2d Canadian Division, with six tanks, was to launch a supporting attack toward Courcellette. Three tanks were tasked to aid in the reduction of the German "Sugar Factory" strongpoint. One tank became ditched in the Canadian frontline, and the other two were unable to keep up with the infantry. When the two lagging tanks reached the "Sugar Factory," they were used to mop up remaining pockets of enemy resistance. Of the other three tanks, one broke track prior to the line of departure, and the remaining two inflicted great loss on the enemy until becoming mired. A captured German soldier remarked that the use of tanks was "not war but bloody butchery."<sup>21</sup>

The first tank battle was less than auspicious. Though the tank had been very successful in some sectors and had succeeded in reducing casualties, all in all the tanks performed much more poorly than expected. Thirteen months of training, battle experience, and mechanical improvements would be required to turn the tanks into the

force that broke the German lines at Cambrai.

## Conclusion

What is the relevance of this battle in an age of sabot rounds and turbine engines? Perhaps, it shows us that the challenges of training, maintenance, use of combined arms, and the massing of combat power are not new concepts of warfare. There are lessons in this battle from which we can profit. The British tankers, no matter how brave, were not prepared for battle. Their training prior to 15 September was not focused on the tasks required to survive and win on the battlefield. Though the tank was considered an infantry support weapon, no effort was made to bring the two arms together prior to the battle. This caused a lack of understanding that led many commanders to overestimate the abilities of the tanks. At the Quadrilateral and the High Wood, the dependence on tank support resulted in increased casualties to the infantry when the tanks failed to perform.

The tanks of 1916 were temperamental and prone to break down. This was due not only to their engineering, but also to the inexperience of their crews and mechanics. The first tank battle presents a hard lesson on the value of

maintenance and driver skills. Of the 48 tanks committed to the attack, 12 never made the line of departure and 10 became ditched or broken down during the battle. The PMCS and troubleshooting steps practiced by today's M1A1 crewmen are the legacy of the lessons learned by crews of those Mark I tanks.

The Battle of Flers-Courcelette also presents tactical lessons on employment of armor. Rawlinson's plan to spread the tanks across the whole of the Fourth Army front had disastrous results. His plan, coupled with mechanical losses, negated the shock effect and tactical surprise that the tanks allowed. The need to mass combat power is a problem with which we still wrestle. The weak, piecemeal attacks parried by the OPFOR at the NTC and CMTC are daily reenactments of the worst parts of 15 September 1916. Operation DESERT STORM, on the other hand, is the offspring of the aggressiveness, shock, and firepower demonstrated in other parts of the battle. D16's attack up the main street of Flers is the grandfather of Patton's drives of World War II, and the great grandfather of the VII Corps' destruction of the Iraqi Republican Guard.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Terraine, *Ordeal of Victory*, (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1963), p. 220.

<sup>2</sup>CPT Wilfrid Miles (compiler), *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916: 2d July 1916 to the End of the Battles of the Somme-Maps and Appendices*, (London: MacMillan and Co., 1938), p. 50. (Hereafter "Maps and Appendices")

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 53

<sup>4</sup>CPT Wilfrid Miles (compiler), *Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916: 2d July 1916 to the End of the Battles of the Somme* (Official Narrative History), (London: MacMillan and Co., 1938), p. 235. (Hereafter "Official Record")

<sup>5</sup>CPT D.G. Browne, *The Tank In Action*, (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1920), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup>Basil Liddell Hart, *The Tanks*, Vol. I, (New York: Fredrick A. Praeger, Inc., 1956), p. 61.

<sup>7</sup>Browne, p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>Lyn MacDonald, *Somme*, (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1983), p. 279.

<sup>9</sup>Liddell Hart, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup>Miles, "Maps and Appendices," p. 61.

<sup>11</sup>Among three major sources; J.F.C. Fuller's *Tanks in the Great War*, the British Official Records, and Liddell Hart's *The Tanks*, there are minor discrepancies regarding the total number of tanks involved in the battle and which divisions they supported. I gathered 48 tanks by scrubbing the divisional battle narratives in the Official Records pages 307-343.

<sup>12</sup>MacDonald, p. 275.

<sup>13</sup>Miles, "Official Record," p. 307.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 311-312.

<sup>16</sup>John Foley, *The Boilerplate War*, (New York: Walker and Co., 1963), p. 23.

<sup>17</sup>Miles, "Official Records," p. 323.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 333-334.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 334-335.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 339-340.

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