

June 1918...

Out in 'No Man's Land' sit five motionless tanks – two British and three German. Inside one of the British tanks sits Frank Norton, a Brandon lad from 23 George Street. Frank is not injured, nor are his comrades, and their tank is in full working order. So why are they sat there in full view of the enemy, a sitting duck for any anti-tank gun?

Britain bloodied its first tanks in the autumn of 1916, followed by the French the following year. Germany's initial response was to develop means to stop them rather than pursue its own. However, intelligence gathered at the beginning of 1918 led the Allies to believe the Germans had finally got a tank of their own. Rumours circulated of huge monsters, needing twenty men to operate them. In March this year our fears were confirmed when they were unleashed on the battlefield and it was no surprise we did what the Germans had done in front of our tanks. We ran. Those who did not run surrendered. These tanks, measuring eleven feet tall and twenty-four feet long, are bristling with six machine guns and a six-pounder artillery gun.

A few weeks ago the Germans threw fourteen of their tanks at a four-mile stretch of the British line near Villers-Bretonneux. Intelligence suggests this is probably the sum total of all the tanks they currently possess. Even so, they broke through and were only stopped when we threw our own tanks back at them. Here, we saw a world first - a tank versus tank battle. The Germans retreated, leaving behind one tank destroyed and two abandoned. Their tanks, like battleships of the sea, are all named before entering service. "Nixe" was destroyed, while "Mephisto" is stranded in a bomb crater and "Elfriede" lies on its side although otherwise unscathed. This is where our Frank comes into the story. Germany, on account of the long service and vast numbers of our tanks, have captured a few examples, gaining intelligence from them. We on the other hand have had very little opportunity to capture one of theirs. "Elfriede" has been identified as being our best chance so far to correct this.

At 04.00 hours on 15th May, 1918, just as the cover of darkness is lifting, Frank and his crew complete the first part of their mission - to journey into 'No Man's Land' and arrive at "Elfriede" in one piece. Now they must wait until darkness returns tonight before they can step out of their machines to attach ropes and tow the "Elfriede" nine hundred yards back to Allied lines. If the enemy have any anti-tank artillery nearby then the men are doomed. Seventeen hours pass in the hot cramped tank, before the men begin towing the enemy tank back. Miraculously, none are injured and they reach safety, handing their bounty over to the waiting French top brass.

Now, in June, the fall out of that heroic deed plays out. The tank is on display as a war trophy in Paris and a French general has awarded Frank and his comrades the Croix de Guerre, which is with Frank's proud parents, Walter and Ada. As an aside, the other tank, "Mephisto", will be captured by the Aussies when they take that part of 'No Man's Land' in three months' time. "Mephisto" will be transported to Australia and put into a museum. One hundred years later, in 2018, it will be the only surviving German tank from WW1.