Bare Hands, Steel Tracks
The Chinese Labour Corps in the Service of British Tanks during the Great War
by Dr. Lee Ho Yin and John Crampton

While tanks are remembered as a weapon invented and introduced in the Great War, it is a little known fact that the lumbering metal beasts were cared for by the skilful hands of the Chinese Labour Corps (CLC). Who would have thought that there existed in the Great War such an improbable connection between Chinese men and British war machines? This article tells the story of how the CLC came to lay hands on the steel tracks of early tanks. The objective is not to provide an impassioned overview of historical events, but a story laden with historically accurate ‘ground details’ that will give as close as possible an eye-witness account of a human drama told through a fictional member of the CLC named Wang Fu. (1)

The narrative structure of this epic story is in three parts, told in month-by-month detail within the timeframe of one year from mid-November 1916 to mid-November 1917, up until shortly before the Battle of Cambrai, a campaign that massed more tanks for battle than before. Part I is the story of the ‘big picture’ providing the background to the next part. Part II is a detailed reconstruction; a fictionalised but historically accurate personal story to provide a composite account of the collective experience of CLC members, from their recruitment in China to their service in France. Part III relates the story of how the CLC became involved in the maintenance and repair of British tanks. In the story, place names are Romanised in the way they were used during the time of the story, place names are Romanised.

The research references for this story are expectedly scarce in published sources, given the fact that the CLC is considered a minor player in the Great War, and often merited no more than a few sentences or a footnote in many history books. Michael Summerskill’s China on the Western Front (1982) is a notable exception; as far as it is known, it is one of the first scholarly books devoted to the CLC topic and it contains the detailed information that has helped in structuring the narrative of the story. The fact that Summerskill’s book is self-published speaks volumes of the continued academic neglect and general ignorance of the history of the CLC. Another equally obscure self-published book, War History of the Sixth Tank Battalion (1919), nominally attributed to Lord Somers, who was one of the battalion’s former commanders, provided useful historical information on the long-disbanded tank unit that is central to this story. Given the passage of time, it is no longer possible to source primary information from veterans.

Part I: Establishment of the Chinese Labour Corps
The Chinese Labour Corps began in earnest at the British leased territory of Wei-hai-Wei (today’s Weihai) in northern China’s Shantung (Shandong) province. By the time recruitment ceased in February 1918, the actual number of Chinese recruited had reached a staggering 96,000 men, almost ten times Jordan’s suggested number.

At Wei-hai-Wei, Bourne set up a recruitment depot with an English administrative staff of four officers, a surgeon and a stenographer, and a Chinese administrative staff of 10 clerks and 10 assistants, and a security staff of 10 Chinese and 10 Sikh guards. The recruitment staff was supported by a recruiting agent, the British firm Forbes and Co., which had been contracted to supply Chinese indentured labourers to South Africa’s gold mines back in 1904 (a number of whom were shipped through Hong Kong, and interned at the former site of the Lai Chi Kok Hospital while in transit). Even though it was a ‘recruitment’ operation in the normal sense of the word, the term carried different implications in the British military in terms of responsibilities and obligations to the welfare of the men and their families. The War Office advised Bourne not to use the word ‘recruitment’ and, instead, substitute it with ‘enrolment’ to render it legally a business arrangement bound only by a contract. (4)

On 18 January 1917, a little more than three months after Bourne’s appointment as the recruitment chief, 1,088 ‘enrolled’ labourers set sail from Wei-hai-Wei. But the number was a disappointment; a mere 1,000 labourers in three months wasn’t deemed to be an effective solution to the significant labour problem – rather like administering two aspirin to a soldier with a severe and life-threatening hemorrhage. On 18 January 1917, the recruitment underperformance was due to two
reasons: the first was the relative inaccessibility of Wei–hai–Wei, which was far away from the railways, the only means of economical mass transportation for potential recruits; the second was active obstruction by local Chinese authorities who were rightly weary of foreigners exploiting the local population. The Chinese had experienced the same as annual British recruiting agents operating outside the British leased territory, and they only relented after the Chinese Foreign Ministry intervened, probably under British pressure.

Tsingtao Depot

The solution to the recruitment problems was found by John Thomas Pratt, British Consul General at the Shandong provincial capital of Tsinsin (today’s Jinan), who realised that the British would have virtually a free rein in recruitment within areas in which the Shantung Railway ran. These were areas formerly controlled by the Germans, which had been leased by the Japanese, a close ally of the British. The German zone extended from the provincial capital of Tsinsin (Jinan) to the port–city of Tsingtao (Qingdao), had a bigger population than the leased territory of Wei–hai–Wei, which therefore had a bigger population than the leased territory of Wei–hai–Wei, which was far away from the railway line. These were areas formerly controlled by the British would have virtually a free rein in recruitment within areas in which the Shantung Railway ran. These were areas formerly controlled by the Germans, which had been leased by the Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two foreigners exploiting the local population. The British recruiting agents operating outside the Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two foreigners exploiting the local population. The local population. The Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two foreigners exploiting the local population. The British recruiting agents operating outside the Chinese authorities went as far as arresting two foreigners exploiting the local population.

Almost exactly one year later, the Tsingtao Depot became an independent and the main recruitment centre backed up by Carnabé Tsingtao Depot’s medical officers, who screened them and they only relented after the Chinese Foreign Ministry intervened, probably under British pressure.

Part II: A Recruit for the Chinese Labour Corps

Enter Wang Fu – a fictional character based on historical facts

Our fictional Wang Fu was a native of a small rural township of just under a thousand people in the county of Yang–hsin (Yangxin) in Shantung province. (5) Born in 1892, his ancestors had been living in the small orchard, where pear trees were grown. Pears were a specialty in the area and an important cash crop that helped in cushioning the heavy taxation levied by the local warlord government. The income earner for the family came from the production of vinegar from the pear they harvested from their orchard. Vinegar was, and still is, an important ingredient in Shantung cooking. It is this regional culinary tradition stemmed from the realization that a dash of citric vinegar would significantly improve the taste of agricultural products grew from the highly alkaline Shantung soil. Produced from a secret ancestral receipt that had been handed down from father to son through generations, the pear vinegar of the Wang family had developed a local reputation and sold well within its limited market.

As Wang grew up, he dreamed of going to the city to earn enough money to propose marriage to a girl from Hui–min. The Wang family had come to know about the girl through her father, a respected school teacher who regularly visited the Wang family farm to buy vinegar. As typical in a traditional society steeped in the Confucian tradition in which dating was an unknown concept, Wang did not know the girl’s name and had not even had the chance to speak with her. However, they did smile at each other on occasions that she followed her father to Hui–min’s market square, where Wang and his elder brother came on a seasonal basis to sell their preserved pears. Wang dreamed of proposing marriage to her some day. It was only through daydreaming and fantasizing about love and marriage that Wang found solace and hope in his dull, hard life.

By late January 1917, Wang had heard about the recruitment for labourers at Wei–hai–Wei and Tsingtao. Reading advertisement posters put up by trains’ stationmasters, Wang dreamt of being a labourer at the market square, where Wang and his elder brother came on a seasonal basis to sell their preserved pears. Wang dreamed of proposing marriage to her some day. It was only through daydreaming and fantasizing about love and marriage that Wang found solace and hope in his dull, hard life.

At the beginning of the train journey, Wang, who had never travelled beyond his native county, was worried about how he would be able to find the place for recruitment. As the train headed towards Tsingtao and more passengers came on board, he realised that his worries were unnecessary, as the passengers were obviously heading the same way as he was, and all he needed to do was to follow the crowd. At the Tsingtao train station, Wang and other passengers got off, and were immediately ushered by several of the depot’s Chinese guards to a designated place on the train platform, and herded like cattle towards the recruitment depot located at the abandoned German silk factory complex that had been adapted as the recruitment depot.

By this time – hungry and tired – he was nevertheless hardly aware of his physical discomfort, as he was too apprehensive about the uncertainty of what was to come, and awed by the sights and sound around him. He and others were herded by stick–carrying security guards to one of the impressively large brick buildings in the recruitment depot. They were ordered to remove their outer clothes, which were confiscated and left in a pile, and stand in line. Unexpectedly, an Englishman in uniform came and doused them with disinfectant.

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for medical conditions that would disqualify them for service. The medical officers were looking for signs of trachoma, tuberculosis and venereal diseases, as well as such poor dental health. Wang, who grew up with enough to eat in a better–than–average farming family, was bigger and taller than most of the people around him. His hair was long and healthy, and Wang anxiously waited for his turn as he saw some of his compatriots were taken off from the line and led out of the room.

**Wang Fu the CLC Recruit**

Wang knew that he had passed the medical examination when he was given a contract. It was printed on a single sheet of paper, in English on one side and Chinese on the other, and it began with:

‘By the terms of this Contract dated the day of 19, I, the undersigned coolie recruited by the British Emigration Bureau, declare myself to be a willing labourer under the following conditions, which have been explained and made clear to me by the British Emigration Bureau…’(7)

The nature of the employment was stated as ‘work on railways, roads, etc., and in factories, mines, dockyards, fields, forests, etc.’ but ‘not to be employed in military operations.’ The contract also listed the daily rate of pay for various classes of labourers, the lowliest of which received 10 Chinese dollars (equivalent to 0.7 shillings and 6 pence) to be paid in China. The highest class would beinterpreters and administrative clerks, who would receive up to 5 francs a day in Europe, with a monthly allotment of 60 Chinese dollars (equivalent to 8.5 shillings) to be paid in China.(8) Most of these English–speaking Chinese came from such big cities as Shanghai and Tientsin (Tianjin), where they had learned English in Missionary schools and universities. Many of them were also Christians and members of the YMCA. For Wang, even the hope of earning an enormously attractive amount, and he quietly congratulated himself for having made the right decision to come to Tsingtao.

Also stated in the contract was the duration of the employment, which was three years, but the employer had the liberty to ‘terminate contract at any time after one year on giving six months’ notice, or at any time for misconduct or inefficiency on the part of the labourer.’

As Wang read the contract, he learned that he would have to ‘work ten hours daily’ for ‘seven days a week, but due consideration will be given to Chinese Festivals.’ Wang thought to himself that this did not seem too hard, as he had worked longer hours back home. As he quickly read on, he found that there were strict conditions under which he would earn his pay:

‘No daily pay abroad during sickness, but food given. Monthly pay in China continues up to six weeks’ sickness. After six weeks’ sickness no monthly pay in China. No daily pay abroad for time lost owing to misconduct. In cases of absence involving loss of pay for 28 days or more, deductions of monthly pay in China will be made.’(9)

Wang wondered what the ‘monthly pay in China’ meant, and he almost cried out loud with joy when it was explained further down in the contract that it was a monthly allotment paid in Chinese dollars to his family in China, the amount of which matched his daily pay rate abroad. Wang made a quick calculation and found that if he was paid 5 francs a day for a French F a day in Europe, his family would receive 10 dollars a month in China. At this point, images of the dream bride from Hui–min flashed across Wang’s mind. There were even more attractive additional benefits: ‘free passages to and from China under all circumstances,’ and ‘free food, clothing, housing, fuel, light and medical attendances.’

Wang could hardly believe it when the contract stated that his family would receive 10 dollars on his passing the medical examination, and he would receive the same amount when he embarked on his journey to France. The happy thoughts that went through Wang’s mind made him oblivious to the ominous part of the contract, which stated:

‘Compensation to Family in case of Accident Death or total disablement…150 dollars Partial Disablement…… up to 75 dollars.’(10)

The Chinese clerk started yelling impatiently at Wang to complete the contract, which he did so by declaring his name, age and home address to the clerk, who filled in the information in put a seal of the British Emigration Bureau on it, and had Wang place his thumb–prints on the contract next to the words ‘Willing Labourer’s thumb prints’ at the end of the paper. Wang found the last procedure insulting; he could have signed the contract with an ink brush as an educated person instead of with his two thumbs like an illiterate criminal. Before he could dwell on this thought, he was ushered to a corner of the building where an aluminum bracelet stamped with a five–digit identification serial number was cuffed to his left wrist, which gave Wang the impression that he was treated like a convict. Wang now had a new identity; he was now officially a member of the CLC, a collective identity that people would remember and write about 100 years later.

**Wang Fu’s Odyssey – travelling east to reach the West**

In the next two weeks until early March, Wang and his compatriots were fed, quartered and kitted out in preparation for their journey to the West, which filled Wang with both excitement and trepidation. British sergeant corporals and corporals in the camp, with the help of Chinese guards, drilled the labourer recruits with discipline, with particular emphasis on maintaining personal hygiene and the tidiness of their quarters. They quickly adapted to the daily military–style routines, organising themselves in groups and learning to follow orders promptly and quickly. They washed themselves regularly at bathing sheds and shaved their heads. Some of the men were still wearing the Manchu long queue – their hair braided into a long ‘pony’ or ‘pig tail’ – when they arrived at the recruitment depot. They were invariably older farmers from the more remote inland villages. A quick snip of the barber’s clippers, and they looked like members of the British administrators brought their hairstyle to the modern period. No one seemed to mind losing his ‘pigtail,’ since it was no longer a mandatory requirement in the post–revolution Chinese Republic, and those who wore it simply did so out of habit or ignorance.

Like everyone else, Wang was issued with two sets of blue cotton summer suits that resembled the working clothes of a Shantung peasant, but with house–cleaning puttees, which he found not as comfortable as the Chinese shoes, but far more suitable for working in the cold, wet and battered landscape of France. (11)

On 12 March 1917, a bright sunny day on, Wang and others by the hundred, who had by this time been familiarised with military drills, lined up smartly in formations of four men abreast, all carrying a small amount of personal possessions in their individual reddish–brown canvas rucksacks. They were marched down to the train station led by a few British administrators and a larger number of Chinese guards. Wang and the men boarded not passenger coaches, but cargo and cattle carriages, bound for the dockland of Tsingtao. With minds filled with anticipation and apprehension, no one noticed the discomfort of the transportation. In any case, the train ride lasted less time than it took for everyone to board the carriages. Arriving at the dockyard, everyone hurried down the train and organised into formations amidst the fearsome yells of burly British sergeants and the terrifying faces of lanky Sikh guards. They were to a large warehouse by the wharves under the embarkation building, which the British unsentimentally named the ‘Going Away Shed.’ They stood in formation as their identities were checked for the last time. The men then received their embarkation payment as promised in their contracts, as well as another spray of disinfectant. Remembering his embarrassing moment at the recruitment depot, Wang shut his eyes and held his breath this time to avoid another embarrassment.

As the disinfectant was drying off the men’s uniforms, it was time for them to board the ship. The warehouse doors were pulled opened, and as Wang’s vision became adapted to the bright daylight, the awesome sight of a gigantic ship, the biggest he had ever seen, came into view. Many people in the formations reacted in the same way and responded to the sight with an collective gasp of astonishment. As the men slowly moved along the wharves to board the ship, everyone’s eyes were locked on the magnificent ship, which, unbeknown to them, was the Empress of Russia of the Canadian Pacific Line. At 570 feet long and 80 feet wide, the Empress of Russia was an impressive presence, especially at close range. Together with her sister ship, the Empress of
Asia, the two empresses would ferry troops of the CLC in their thousands from northern China to France through Canada until the end of the war, and then bring them back to China after the war.

Wang and 1,990 of his fellow CLC members were not treated as passengers, but were ‘sea–credits’ and never allowed to go ashore. Ships were never made more seaworthy than could regularly be allowed for regular passengers However, the CLC men adapted to the crowded living environment well. A surprising number of people managed to bring along musical instruments, which were somehow allowed, especially the two–string ‘Chinese violin’ known as the er–hu. The music fostered camaraderie among the men, and it was not only made live tolerable, but sometimes enjoyable during the otherwise boring sea voyage. Quarrels were surprisingly few, and when they happened, they were quickly settled without attracting the attention of the British officers and fearsome sergeants, as the issue was often over winnings at gambling games, with the CLC men winning by a margin of 2:1. More serious quarrels were made with some of the ship’s Cantonese seamen as a result of cultural and language differences.

The ship took a much longer indirect route to avoid the menace of German submarines. It crossed the Pacific and arrived three weeks later on 2 April 1917 at William Head on Vancouver Island, from where the CLC men were transported by rail in closed carriages and under armed guards by Railway Service Guards, a euphemistically named military unit specially formed for the purpose. The reason for such security was partly to maintain the secrecy of the operation, and mostly out of xenophobic worries that the Chinese labourers might be tempted to jump train and remain in Canada. The train journey lasted nearly two weeks as it traversed Canada to Halifax in Nova Scotia on the east coast, where the men disembarked from the trains, camped for another two weeks before boarding troopships and government–requisitioned passenger ships on the last leg of their journey across the Atlantic to their final destination in Europe.

Part III: British Tanks and the Chinese Labour Corps

Put to work in France

In early June 1917, after an exhausting voyage across an ocean, followed by a continent and then another ocean, Wang and his comrades finally arrived in France, docking at the military port facility in Boulogne–sur–Mer. They went through the now familiar routine of disembarkation from the ship and re–boarding onto a train waiting by the wharves. The train took the men 60km south into the town of Noyelles–sur–Mer, the base depot of the CLC, where everyone offloaded their equipment and supplies and prepared to move into their camp. They were divided into companies of about 500 men, and each company was assigned to a segregated camp site and quartered in groups of 40 men in Nissen huts, half–barrel–shaped shelters made of a steel skeleton frame covered with corrugated steel sheets. No time was wasted on the newly–arrived CLC men, and they were quickly assigned to work for which their skills had been contracted, mostly loading and unloading materials and supplies at the railheads.

Two months went by quickly, and during the daily parade on a cool early August morning, the company major, who spoke Chinese badly (but, prudently, no one thought it should be pointed out), asked all men with skills and experience with metal work to step forward. Sensing the opportunity for promotion and a rank, Wang and 150 others stepped forward, and the company company stepped forward. Wang was one of them, but he was an honest man and not an opportunist. He had experience in repairing farm tools, something he had learned from helping his blacksmith neighbour, whose son attended school with him. The men who stepped forward were ordered to report to the workshop hut, where they were individually questioned and given simple trade tests to verify their claims of expertise, and those who passed had their names and serial numbers on their bracelets recorded. In all, some 50 men passed – Wang was one of them.

The next morning, those whose names had been recorded were called out at the parade, with words of praise and encouragement. Twenty–four hours later, on 8 August 1917, Wang and his band of brothers joined up with 150 selected men from other companies at the train station, and, together with four British officers, 12 British NCOs and several Chinese interpreters, they boarded a train of the Nord Railway and headed in a westerly direction towards the town of Erin, about 50km away by rail. The men on the train were now members of the 51st Company of the Chinese Labour Corps, and where they were heading was the Central Workshops of the Tank Corps.

By this time, the British military was critically short of skilled workers, and all branches of service were fighting for technical personnel – the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service for people to service their aircraft, the Royal Navy for their warships, and the Army for their tanks, which, in particular, were a particularly labour intensive maintenance headache. The manpower shortage became so acute that tank crews were required to spend time not on training, but on time–consuming technical tasks best left to qualified technicians and mechanics, such as maintenance and repair of their vehicles, and even manufacturing and modification of spare parts in the field. Then someone had the bright idea of using the CLC to relieve the manpower pressure in servicing the tanks, but the general attitude of the British military establishment towards the CLC was condescending at best, regarding the men as more ‘coolies,’ fit only for menial work. But desperate situations called for desperate measures, and racism was put aside to allow the CLC men to prove their worth in tank repair workshops.

Erin

The 51st CLC Company arrived at the town of Erin on 8 August, at half strength; although a further 270 men arrived on 26 August to boost the company to full strength. The Erin compound covered 10 hectares of land in a shallow valley between the Ternoise River in the north and the main railway in the south. As Wang and his mates marched towards the camp, they were able to get a panoramic view of the tanks en–route, scattered around the ground from a short distance outside the perimeter fencing. The camp complex consisted of three types of buildings, the most numerous of which were the ubiquitous Nissen huts with the half–round roof, identical to the ones Wang had lived in at Noyelles–sur–Mer. There were 55 such huts that housed the CLC men and other–rank military personnel, and this cluster of huts sat in between a common mess hall for other–rank personnel, and a tankers’ accommodation block.

Officers’ quarters consisted of 22 Armstrong huts – these were wood–frame and canvas–cover collapsible shelters of an elegant design favoured by British officers for use in the field and at semi–permanent camps.

When Wang first saw the neat layout Nissen huts arranged end–to–end in parallel rows it reminded him of the Chinese sausage his mother made and laid out to dry in the dry autumn air every year after the autumn harvest. Wang shook the thought out of his head as he began to miss home. A short distance away from the closely packed rows of Nissen huts was a fenced off area, a flat open ground guarded by armed sentries and forms of punishment, all surrounded by a low wire fence with barbed wire on the perimeter fencing. This was the tank park and testing ground, where damaged tanks awaited repair, repaired tanks went through their paces, and newly–arrived tanks transported via a railway spur from the main railway. Along one end of the tank park were long row of sheds descriptively referred to as Tank Stables. Nearby was a cluster of 11 large buildings the shape and size of contemporary aircraft hangars. These were Type B hangers borrowed from the Royal Flying Corps. They were constructed of heavy duty canvas over a light steel frame, and each hanger covered a footprint of about 22m by 18m. The hangars housed the different specialised workshop units, including the Tank Repair Section, the Engine Shop and the Camouflage Section, the last of which was basically a painting shop.

Wang Fu the tank track repairman

The Tank Corps’ Central Workshops compound was a busy place where hundreds of tanks passed through every month, either in factory–fresh condition shipped from the factories of England or more likely battle–ravaged recovered from the battlefields. Harold Aylmer Littledale, a Canadian enlisted in the British Army as a tank driver in the E Battalion of the Tank Corps, gave a vivid description of the place in an article published in the December 1918 issue of the Atlantic Monthly:

Central Workshops was a tank hospital, for it was there that tanks which had been damaged in action went for overhauling and repair, and there at any time one could see tanks with great wounds in their sides, and, searching among the heap of cartridges on the floor [inside a tank], find some button or shred of clothing which told for only too clearly what had happened. Later we were to see much of Central Works, for it was here, too, that all new tanks arriving from England were first tested before being turned over to the men who were to take them into battle; and it was upon flat cars moved into this siding [a low–speed auxiliary railway track] that we drove our tanks, and so move to within striking distance of the fighting line.
Wang, with his experience working on metal farming implements, was assigned together with 23 others to the Track Riveting Shop under the Tank Repair Section. They were organised in four teams of six men, and they underwent a brief training session, which was, in fact, no more than a British army technician showing the men the work in which they were to be involved. Afterwards, each team was assigned to one of the four gap riveting machines in the shop. To compensate for the minimal training, every skilful team member paired with a less-skilled partner to expedite the learning process. The work involved was not complicated, but mind-numbingly repetitive; punching rivets bigger than a man’s thumb through hardened steel plates of about half-a-metre by a quarter-of-a-metre in size. These were the track plates that, when linked together, formed the continuous caterpillar track that enabled a tank to crawl across muddy terrain.

The fragility of the tracks was the Achilles’ heel of the primitive tanks of the Great War. Tank tracks typically lasted no more than 30km of travel before they started to fall apart, and had to be serviced. To service the tracks, they had to be broken out from the tank and disassembled into the 90 plates that made up a track. On each plate were eight rivets that were equally spaced and arranged in two rows, and these rivets had to be removed and replaced by new ones. Wang did not mind the repetitiveness of the work, as he could sometimes daydream about the girl from Huei-min as he worked. He and his comrades were able to handle about 40 track plates a day within the contractual 10-hour shift, a rate that impressed many British officers in the Tank Corps. By now, Wang was considered a skilled labourer and had been promoted to Riveter and the leader of his team. While Wang won his promotion by impressing his supervising officer with his technical competence, he also had to win the approval of his team-mates, which he managed to do so with his mature demeanour despite his relatively youthful age. Wang was now entitled to a daily pay of two francs, twice the amount he received when he first arrived in France. His family back home was now entitled to collect 20 Chinese dollars a month, which gave him immense pride. The day he received his pay increase, Wang thought of going home in the manner of the Chinese saying, ‘a glorious homecoming in splendid clothing.’

Although Wang and his team were contracted to work at least 10 hours a day, 7 days a week, in reality the workshop personnel worked in 8-hour shifts, and the supervising British officer sometimes let the teams off early on Sundays when they had done sufficient work. The officer, a Scotsman who seemed too senior in age for the junior rank of second lieutenant, spoke passable Mandarin (which is similar to the common Shandong language except in tonal variations) and treated Wang and his team mates affectionately nicknamed the Scot lao-bah, meaning ‘old dad,’ because of his kindliness and the fatherly appearance accentuated by his handlebar moustache. One day, an army photographer came into Wang’s riveting shop and instantly everyone crowded around and gawked at the large camera that the photographer brought along. Lao-bah shoved everyone back to work while the photographer took several pictures, one of which showed Wang on the left side of the photo, staring curiously into the camera.

**Prelude to an epic and innovative battle**

The Central Workshops at Erin would eventually be served by three companies of the CLC. The 69th Company arrived on 15 September, followed by 90th Company on 10 October. Unknown to the CLC men, the surge of manpower needed at the Central Workshops was in preparation for a new military campaign known as the Battle of Cambrai. The battle plans were approved on 20 October and the attack would begin exactly a month later, on 20 November 1917. The plans called for the commitment of the entire force of the British Tank Corps in a single operation. In all, 476 tanks were amassed for battle, representing the biggest tank deployment in the war. This battle was one in which the tanks would prove their worth and become established as an indispensable machine of war. By mid–October, the camp was a flurry of activity in the run up to opening day of the campaign.

On 24 October, the Tank Corps Headquarters issued orders to the Central Workshops to produce two types of tank-related equipment critical to the Battle of Cambrai – 110 tank–towed sledges and 400 tank–mounted fascines. The sledges were meant to be loaded with equipment and supplies and towed three in a row by a tank. The fascine was a huge bundle of brushwood carried atop a tank and would be released into a deep trench to form an improvised bridge that could allow the tank to cross. Producing the 110 sledges consumed 70 tons of timber logs, and producing the 400 fascines took up 400 tons of brushwood. The brushwood for the fascines was harvested from the Crécy Forest by other units of the CLC, who tied them into 21,500 bundles before loading them onto 220 trucks that carried them to the Central Workshops. Wang and his fellow CLC men then unloaded the brushwood bundles and combined a number of them to form a fascine about 5m long and 1.1m tall. Each fascine weighted well over a ton and required at least 20 men to push and roll it along. As time was pressing, the CLC men worked non-stop in eight-hour shifts, and moved and loaded the fascines continuously. On one occasion, they even managed to load 144 fascines onto rail trucks within a span of twenty-four hours. It was a feat that brought a smile to the normally stern face of the camp commandant.

In addition to the sledges and fascines, there was also an order to repair and overhaul 127 broken and damaged tanks salvaged from the battlefields of the Third Battle of Ypres which had seen the last major tank operation on 9 October 1917. This desperate measure was brought on by the lag in the production schedule of new Mark IV tanks. Salvaged tanks would have to make up for the number needed for the coming Cambrai operation. The urgency of repairing the salvaged tanks got Wang and other skilled labourers sent back to their workshops, while the fascines business was left to their less skilled compatriots. The workshops operated day and night in rotations to cope with the mammoth task of repairing damaged tanks. On 8 November, about two weeks after the work orders were issued, the CLC men completed all the tasks that had been assigned to them. Finally, the sledges, the fascines and the tanks were loaded on flatbed carriages. Back at the Central Workshops the CLC men and British officers were at last able to breathe a collective sigh of relief as camp life returned to its regular pace.
About a week before the start of the Battle of Cambrai, a series of long whistle shrills broke the tranquility of the chilly morning. Powerful locomotives huffed smoke and puffed steam as they started pulling trains of heavily laden flatbed carriages. Wang watched dispassionately as the impressive armada set off to an assembly position, where the tanks would be unloaded and assembled for their eventual fate in battle. It had been almost a year since Wang had left home and began his epic journey from China to France. Given what he had gone through, Wang felt it had been much longer. Huddled in his army issue greatcoat, Wang was not thinking about the fate of the men and machines in the battle ahead. Instead he was dreaming about the end of his contract, when he would ‘gloriously return home in splendid clothes’ according to the Chinese saying to marry the girl from home in splendid clothes’ according to the Chinese saying to marry the girl from home in splendid clothes’.

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**References**

(1) Wang Fu is a fictional character adopted for this historical narrative; his story is a composite reconstruction of historical accounts of the lives of CLC members. The Romanisation of the name is based on that appearing on the tombstones of the CLC members buried at war cemeteries in France.

(2) Quoted in Summerskill, 1982, p.50.

(3) As described in his appointment letter; see Summerskill, 1982, p.53.

(4) Griffins, 1976, p.103.

(5) The profile of Wang Fu is loosely adapted from the life of a centenarian in Yangxin county of Shandong province published on the Yangxin county government website (www.yangxin.gov.cn).


(8) The rates of pay for various CLC ranks are given in Summerskill, 1982, p. 92.

(9) Ibid, p.95.


(11) The point concerning footwear unsuitability is mentioned in Fawcett 2001, p. 68.

(12) This quintessential army camp building type is named after its inventor, Major Peter Norman Nissen, a mining engineer of the 29th Company of the Royal Engineers, who developed the design in early 1916 and obtained a patent in the same year.


(14) The description of the Erin camp is based on three sources: Littledale’s article (1918); the Internet article published by Western Front Association (2008); a photograph of the camp illustrated in Fletcher 2001, p.123.

(15) See: Littledale 1918.

(16) According to Childs 1999, 36, Table 3.1, at the new Central Workshops at Teneur (which moved from Erin on 29 March 1918), there were 36 Chinese riveters working on six riveting machines; this means there were six people to a machine.

(17) According to Childs 1999, p.66, the four riveting machines at Erin handled an average of 4,700 plates a month, which amounts to about 40 plates per machines per day.


(19) This account of the army photographer is fictional, but the photograph described is real, and it is illustrated in Fawcett 2001, p.108. It shows a photograph of the CLC Company working in the tank riveting shop. However, it was actually taken not at Erin, but at the later facilities at Teneur, as the Central Workshops facilities were relocated to Teneur on 29 March 1918.

(20) This section on the production of sledges and fascines is based on information from Mitchell 1933, np and Fletcher 2001, pp.104–105.

**Bibliography**


**Western Front Association**