**RETROKIT**

**72101 Gun Carrier 72101**

By 1915, the Western front is relatively stabilized. Any attack by the infantry loses definition as soon as the front line of the attacker’s artillery range. The ground on and near the front line is so devastated that the artillery, even when motorized, is more or less unable to follow the advancing troops.

When the tank appears on the battlefield and promises to break the deadlock, the British start studying the idea of a “Gun Carrier”. A fully tracked vehicle is selected because it is the only mean to get across the lunar landscape the British forces are fighting in, in Northern France. The MK I is the basis of this new vehicle, even if it will reveal itself, in the longer term, ender-powered. By March 1917, the new vehicle is already being tested, and a contact for 50 Gun Carriers follows in June. Soon after, this is reduced to 48 units, with two extra vehicles being modified into recovery cranes. The later will never see service on the front line but are being very useful, and very appreciated, in warehouses in France: they can lift up to 3 tonnes without any preparation, and up to 10 if fitted with tails.

The Gun Carrier tracks do not run all around the vehicle as on the MK I: it does operate in areas where the ground is not as lunar as nearer the front line and the crew has more opportunities to choose a decent itinerary. The internal volume is divided in two: at the front is a space to fit the artillery piece, with two drivers’ stations above the tracks. At the back, inside an armoured compartment, the engine and the ammunition store. The roof is strong enough to be used as an “attic” for additional heavy or cumbersome equipment: the maximum load is about 10 tonnes and the heaviest piece available is the 60pdr, at 4.5T. The rear of the armoured compartment features two doors and ventilation grilles. A set of wheels can be fitted at the back (as on the Mk I) but are in practice not used because they are not very effective at all in helping steer the vehicle. The armor plating is of 8mm all over. The gun, either the 6in 26cwt Mk I (152mm) or the 60pdr Mk I, II or III (127mm) is carried without its wheels (those are attached to the side of the gun carrier) on a moveable trolley. The trolley is first brought under the gun, secured to it and then pulled with a winch onto its final position in the gun carrier.

If the 62pdr needs to be unloaded first to be used, the 6in gun can be fired directly from the gun carrier. The crew consists of 4 men (2 pilots and 2 men operating the gear boxes), plus a number of men needed to operate the artillery piece. The gun carriers are affected to two “gun carrier companies”, within the Tank Corps (and not within the Royal Artillery).

The first gun carrier become operational in France in July 1917, and will take part in the 3rd Battle of Ieper. The 48 vehicles are split between 2 companies, each strong of 24, each divided between 4 sections of 6 gun carriers.

One section is used in July 1917 in an ammunition carrier role (one vehicle, GC 102 will be lost). Then three sections (A, B and C) take part in the Battle of Cambrai in November, when the first Company is officially created. In May 1918, the vehicles of those four sections are modified for a supply transport role (the system to fix the gun in is removed), and it is in this new role that section A and D are supporting the 4th Australian division during the Battle of Hamel in July 1918. Each gun carrier can carry 5.5T of equipment, saving the backs of many men ! The gun carriers will also carry the wounded Australian troops back from the front. However, 14 vehicles are lost, caught by surprise in a wood near

Villers Bretonneux and destroyed by the German artillery at the eve of the Battle of Amiens. However, more and more Mk IV Supply tanks are being available and this loss will not affect much the outcome of the war.

The second company is created in December 1917 and is moved to France in January 1918. At the end of May and in early June 1917, two Sections A gun carriers harass the German lines during the night, and their mobility allows them to escape the German response. Strangely, only the second company will use its gun carriers in the role they were intended for …

One can wonder why the gun carrier was developed around those two artillery pieces, the 60pdr and the 6in ; the former has a range of 11Km and the later of 9Km, and other, shorter range guns would have benefited far more from becoming more mobile …

Studies to motorize smaller guns will eventually all fail, both in the UK (not much was even tried there!) and in France (the 75mm mod 1897 and the 105mm long mod 13 will be fitted onto Renault FT, but none will ever enter production). The gun carrier remains the first to appear in a long line of self-propelled artillery vehicles, this well before the French 194 GPF on a Saint-Chamond chassis that will only enter service after WW1.

In service, the tracks of the gun carrier are found to be inadequate. It is also under-powered. It is not, therefore, a very good all-terrain vehicle. Its length makes it hard to steer and it is rather unstable in soft grounds. A Gun Carrier Mk II would have fixed most of those problems, but its development, started in June 1917, will not go much further and only a wooden mock-up will ever be built.

In terms of colour schemes, the first vehicles are sporting a overall light grey scheme, later changed to overall green or brown following the evolution of the art of camouflage for the British tanks. Markings are sparse: white-red-white ID stripes at the front of the track units, and, on the sides of the armoured pilot stations, a name: KINGSTON, DARLINGTON, DUBLIN and HARWICH are known. The serial number, the letters GC (for Gun Carrier) followed by 3 digits in the 100-147 series, appears under the pilot stations, either in a dark colour on light schemes, or in lighter colour on darker schemes. The vehicles used by the first Company (when used in a supply role) wear the “SUPPLY” titles in white towards the back of the hull.

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