

## THE BATTLE ON THE AISNE RIVER IN MAY-JUNE 1940

The Heeresgruppe A (Rundstedt) is launched on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940 towards the Meuse River. It will cross Luxembourg, advance in Belgium and France through the Ardennes and reach the Meuse River on 12<sup>th</sup> May.

Heeresgruppe A is composed of 37 German divisions (including 7 armored divisions and 3 motorized infantry divisions) and contains, among other elements :

- 1,762 tanks in the 7 Panzerdivisionen
- About 550 armored cars (392 in the 7 PzD, 78 in the 3 motorized infantry divisions and about 80 in the remaining infantry divisions)
- 6 8.8cm FlaK (Sfl) auf Sd.Kfz.8 (1./s.Pz.Jg.Abt.8, attached to 1.PzD)
- 30 15cm sIG.33 auf PzI
- 18 Sturmgeschütz III
- Probably all the 99 Panzerjäger I

→ 2,465 AFVs concentrated against the weak allied forces in the Ardennes

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1940, after having crossed the Ardennes in Belgium, the XIX.AK (mot.) from general Guderian crosses the Meuse at Sedan with the 1.PzD, 2.PzD, 10.PzD and the "Grossdeutschland" infantry regiment, heavily supported by the Luftwaffe. On 14-15<sup>th</sup> May a breakthrough is achieved between the French 2<sup>nd</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armies. The orders given to the German troops from XIX.AK (mot.) on 14<sup>th</sup> May at 14h00 are followings :

- "Grossdeutschland" regiment with 2 heavy artillery groups : take the heights of Stonne and cover the southern flank.
- 1.PzD : attack to the west, cross the Ardennes canal at Malmy and Omicourt.
- 2.PzD : attack to the west, cross the Ardennes canal at Hannogne
- 10.PzD : this division is belated and still around Sedan

From 15<sup>th</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> May 1940, fierce battles will take place in the Mont Dieu area (including Stonne), only 15 km south of Sedan. The Aisne River (and especially the area of Rethel), also south of Sedan in the Ardennes, will resist from 15<sup>th</sup> May to 11<sup>th</sup> June 1940. The French Ardennes will therefore see several of the bloodiest battles of May-June 1940. About 10,000 French soldiers died in the Ardennes (10% of the total number of 100,000 KIA). On the German side there are about 9,500 KIAs in the Ardennes in May-June 1940 for a total of 45,218 KIA during the campaign. Therefore about 21% of the German KIAs fell in the French Ardennes. Most of them were killed in the area of Stonne / Tannay (about 2000 KIAs) and during 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> June 1940 when attacking the French lines on the Aisne River (especially in the area of Rethel) with about 3500 KIAs.

But back on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1940 and to the German Panzerdivisionen moving to the north to encircle the advanced allied troops. The French high command tries to create again a continuous front and urges reinforcements west of Sedan to try to stop Guderian. Among these units, the 14<sup>e</sup> DI (general De Lattre de Tassigny, future commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> French Army in 1943) is launched in the battle.

At that time the division is mainly composed of :

- 35<sup>e</sup> RI (régiment d'infanterie)
- 152<sup>e</sup> RI (régiment d'infanterie) (nicknamed the "Red Devils")
- 3<sup>e</sup> demi-brigade de chasseurs
  - 2<sup>e</sup> BCP (bataillon de chasseurs à pied)
  - 21<sup>e</sup> BCP (bataillon de chasseurs à pied)
  - 31<sup>e</sup> BCP (bataillon de chasseurs à pied)
- 25<sup>e</sup> GRDI (groupe de reconnaissance de division d'infanterie)
- 4<sup>e</sup> RAD (régiment d'artillerie divisionnaire)
- 204<sup>e</sup> RALD (régiment d'artillerie lourde divisionnaire)

A rather uncommon fact is that the 35<sup>e</sup> RI and the 152<sup>e</sup> RI have 1 platoon of 20mm M<sup>le</sup>1939 AA guns each.

### MAY 1940

On 15<sup>th</sup> May, remnants from the 3<sup>e</sup> BS (3<sup>rd</sup> Spahis Brigade) defend the town of La Horgne during 10 hours against half the 1.PzD. Advanced elements from the 14<sup>e</sup> DI (I/152<sup>e</sup> RI, II/152<sup>e</sup> RI, 2<sup>e</sup> BCP), remnants from the 5<sup>e</sup> DLC (I/15<sup>e</sup> RDP) and elements from the 53<sup>e</sup> DI (elements from the 208<sup>e</sup> RI) defend also several towns (La Bascule, Poix-Terron, Chagny, Bouvellemont, Mazerny, Wignicourt, Faissault etc.) against the advancing 1.PzD. Most of their few 25mm SA34 AT guns are lost but they manage to destroy about 40 German tanks and to delay the German advance. This allows the French units engaged during the previous days to retreat. North of these elements, the core of the 53<sup>e</sup> DI cannot stop the 2.PzD and the 14<sup>e</sup> DI is finally ordered to pull back behind the Aisne River and to establish a defensive line (between Taizy and Attigny) with a bridgehead north of the Aisne River in the town of Rethel.

Only on 17<sup>th</sup> May all the units of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI are in position and the 35<sup>e</sup> RI releaves the two battalions of the 152<sup>e</sup> RI heavily engaged during the 15<sup>th</sup> May. The I/152e RI and II/152e RI are put into reserve to recover near Annelles and Perthes between the Aisne and the Retourne rivers.

The following battle on the Aisne River will last from 17<sup>th</sup> May to the 11<sup>th</sup> June. The 14<sup>e</sup> DI illustrated itself by resisting to all the German attacks and it even took some 800 German POWs during the month of June. De Lattre requisitioned many isolated troops from various units to strengthen his defensive line and the bridgehead of Rehel. The requisitioned troops included 3 replacement B1bis tanks from the 8<sup>e</sup> BCC (bataillon de chars de combat) ("Villers-Bretonneux", "Téméraire" and "Lunéville") under the command of sous-lieutenant Robert. *After 5 days of combats (17<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>th</sup> May 1940) these 3 B1bis tanks had destroyed 20 tanks (including 5 Panzers IV), 9 armored cars, 12 motorcycles / side-cars, 10 cars and 16 trucks.*



*sous-lieutenant Robert, 8<sup>e</sup> BCC*



*B1bis "Téméraire"*



*German medic helping a WIA in the Rethel area*



*German POWs in Rethel*



*German POWs in Rethel*

The two first main German attacks are launched on 17<sup>th</sup> May (mainly from the 21.ID and 23.ID but all the German assaults are defeated by the 152<sup>e</sup> RI supported by the 3 B1bis tanks.

The Germans are reinforcing their troops and an other large scale attack, well supported by the artillery, is launched on 19<sup>th</sup> May. In front of the increasing German power, General De Lattre orders to move all the units south of the Aisne River but the 3 B1bis are ordered to hold the bridges of Rethel which could be blown only partially. The Germans try then to cross the River east of Rethel but are pulled back by a French counter-attack.

On 20<sup>th</sup> May 1940 at 6h00, after a heavy artillery preparation, the assaults are renewed in Rethel and the German infantry manages to cross the destroyed bridges and to create a bridgehead south of the Aisne River. At 16h00 the I/152e RI and II/152e RI in reserve, supported by 2 B1bis tanks, lead a vigorous counter-attack and all the Germans are killed, pulled back or captured.

General De Lattre himself declared that without the B1bis tanks the defense line would have been crushed : *"they were the striking hammer, the hunter in ambush, the armored knight charging the enemy. This young Robert, what a leader ! He did better than many colonels"*.

General De Lattre organized a tank recovery/repair workshop and requisitioned all what he could. Finally he managed to add 11 other B1bis tanks from the 8<sup>e</sup>, 15<sup>e</sup>, 28<sup>e</sup> and 41<sup>e</sup> BCC to support his infantry division.

On 21<sup>th</sup> May the front is somewhat reorganized and it has an impact on the deployment of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI :

- the 25<sup>e</sup> GRDI is in reserve in Perthes
- a second line is organized on the Retourne River from Neufelize to Alincourt with the II/35<sup>e</sup> RI reinforced by the XXI/15<sup>e</sup> RTA (attachment)
- in Rethel the I/152<sup>e</sup> RI is replaced by the 2<sup>e</sup> BCP

Concerning the B1bis tanks :

- the "Flamberge", the "France", the "Amiens" and the "Cantal" are in Rethel, reinforcing the 3 tanks from sous-lieutenant Robert
- the "Jura" is in Thugny-Trugny
- the "Trombe", the "Alsace", the "Mulhouse", the "Poitou" and the "Verdun" are on the second line in Menil-Annelles
- the "Rhin" is in reserve in Neuville

Their primary mission is to defend the Rethel - Tagnon road including the bridge as well as the rail-road bridge in Sault-lès-Rethel.

On 20<sup>th</sup> May, the "France" is lost in Sault-lès-Rethel. 1 or 2 men with civilian clothes launch incendiary grenades or Molotov cocktails on the tank which is put on fire. 1 member of the crew dies and an other is wounded.

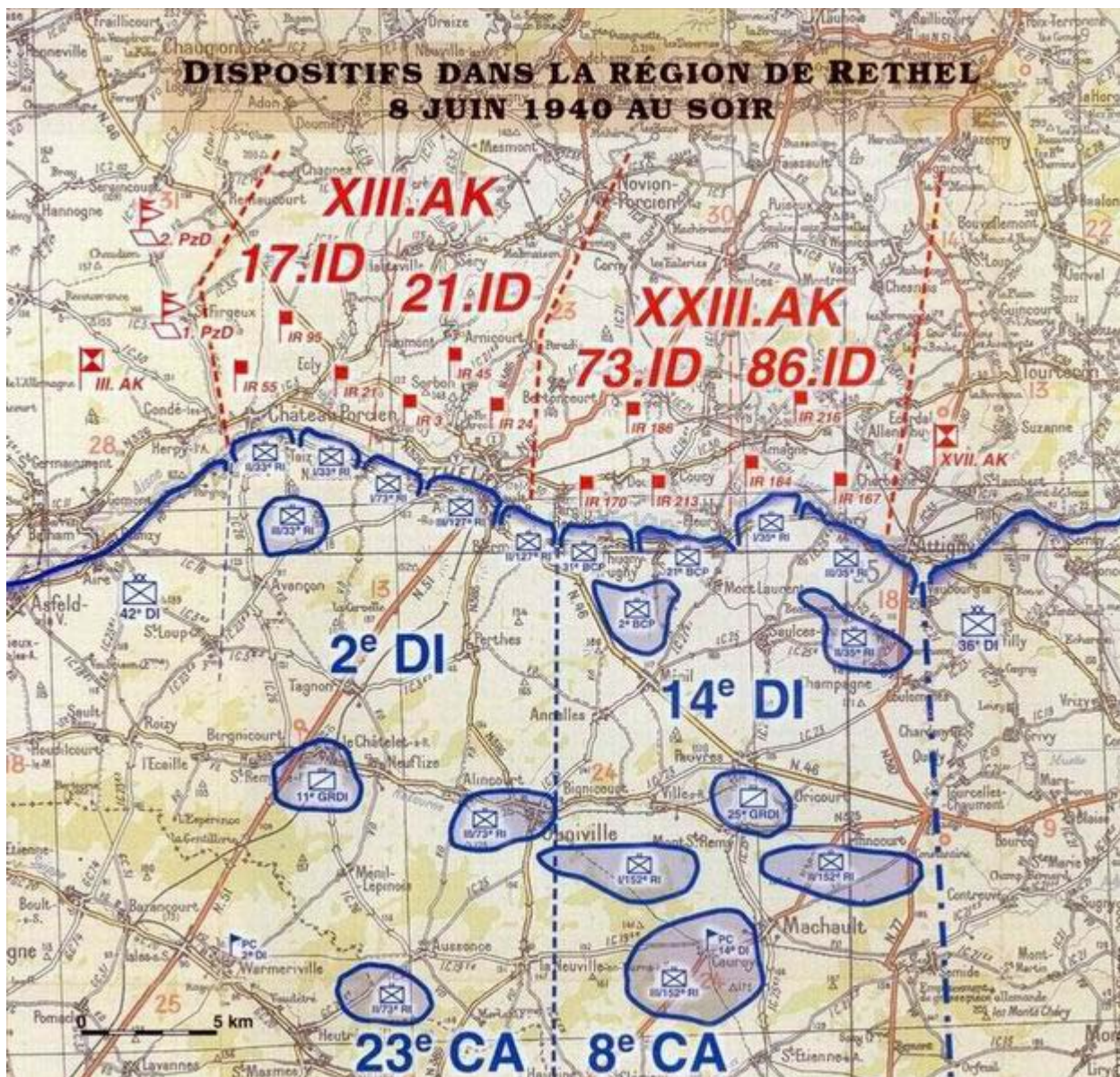
On 22<sup>nd</sup> May the Germans launch an other attack at 0h00, in Ambly-Fleury, but they are easily pulled back by the French MGs and the artillery and at 3h00 all is quiet again.

The same day at 6h30 the B1bis tanks "Cantal" and "Amiens" defending a bridge on the road from Rethel on the Aisne River are engaged by a 8.8cm Flak18 or a 10.5cm leFH18 (according to various sources) which has been hidden in a house by the German troops during the night. The "Amiens" is hit on the track and immobilized. The "Cantal" is penetrated by 3 consecutive shells and the driver is killed. The "Amiens" fires back with the 47mm SA35 turret gun and destroys the German gun firing.

On 25<sup>th</sup> May the XXI/15<sup>e</sup> RTA and 3 artillery groups are removed from De Lattre's command. The second line is then only occupied by several instruction companies from various regiments (3<sup>e</sup> RIC, RICM, 23<sup>e</sup> RIC and 46<sup>e</sup> RI). The front remains quiet until 9<sup>th</sup> June 1940.



JUNE 1940

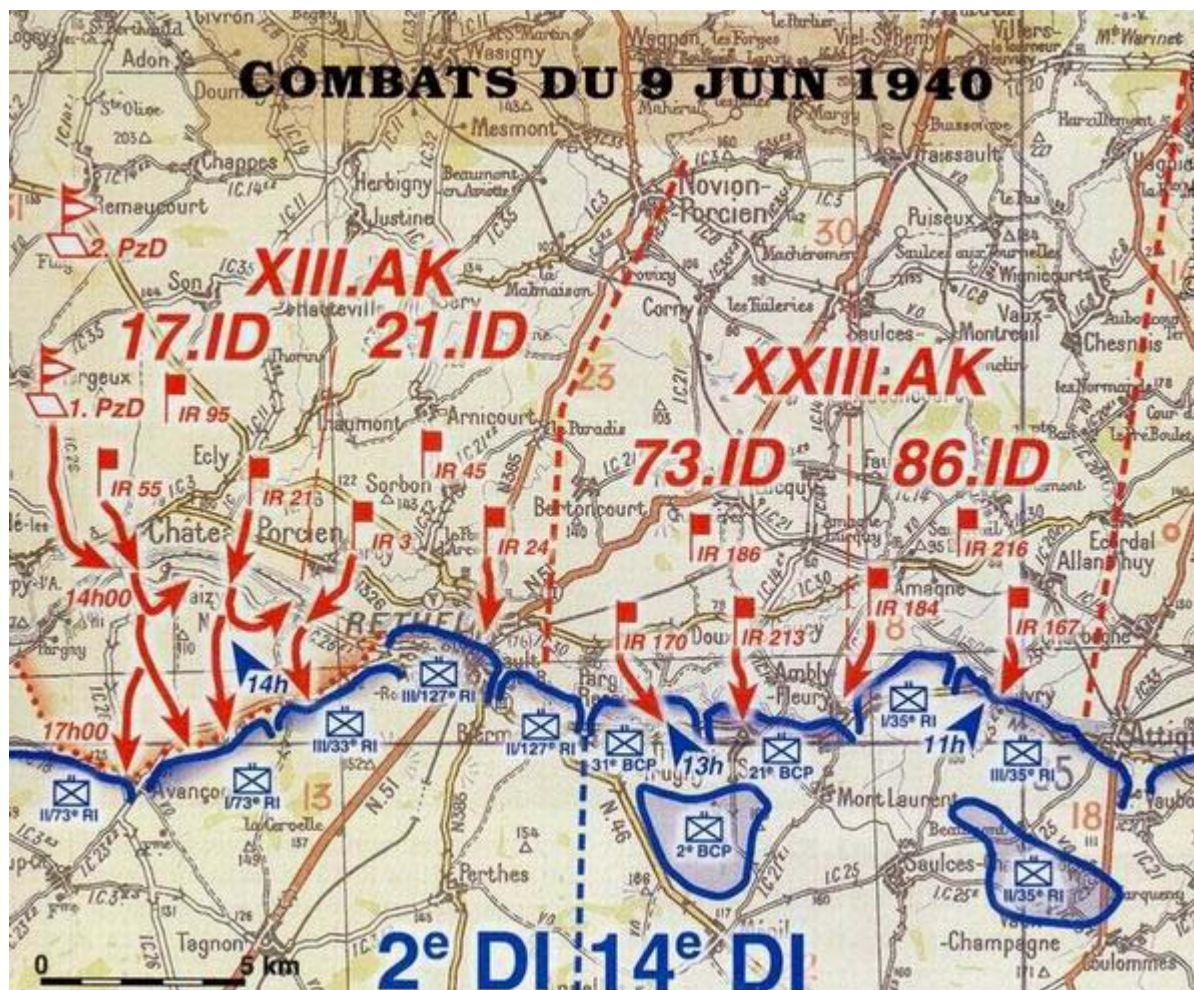


9<sup>th</sup> JUNE 1940

The German offensive is prepared for the 9<sup>th</sup> June morning. During this battle, 5 French infantry divisions and about 160 tanks are facing 4 Panzerdivisionen (about 1200 tanks) and 14 infantry divisions. The French 10<sup>e</sup> DI is attacked by 3 infantry divisions (3.ID, 23.ID and 298.ID). The French 2<sup>e</sup> DI will have to stop 2 Panzerdivisionen (1.PzD and 2. PzD supported by 29.ID(mot)) and 3 infantry divisions (17.ID, 21.ID and 52.ID). The French 14<sup>e</sup> DI is attacked by 3 infantry divisions (73.ID, 82.ID and 86.ID). The French 36<sup>e</sup> DI is opposed to 3 infantry divisions (26.ID, 10.ID and SS-Polizei) whose task is to open the way to the 6.PzD and 8.PzD supported by 20.ID(mot). Each French division has to defend a front of 20 km whereas such a division should normally defend a front of 5-7 km.

Initially, the XIII.AK and the XXIII.AK (17.ID , 21.ID, 73.ID and 86.ID) are facing the French 2<sup>e</sup> DI and 14<sup>e</sup> DI. The Germans infantry divisions have the task to break the French lines between Château-Porcien on the west and Attigny on the east to establish strong bridgeheads across the Aisne River in order to enable the Panzergruppe Guderian to pierce deep in the French lines. This Panzergruppe is composed of the XXXIX.AK(mot) (1.PzD, 2.PzD and 29.ID(mot), general Schmidt) and the XLI.AK (6.PzD, 8.PzD and 20.ID(mot), general Reinhardt). The odds seem not in favour of the French troops. One anecdote is that the German artillery is reinforced by 5 French 220mm heavy mortars captured north of the Aisne River, with 5000 shells. Ironically they will cause important losses among the French troops.





→ **FRONT OF THE 14<sup>e</sup> DI (east of Reithel) : from Thugny-Turny to Attigny**

The German assault (73. and 86.ID) begins at 4h20 after a 35 minutes long artillery preparation. The 170.IR (73.ID) manages to cross the Aisne River at Thugny-Trugny and begins to infiltrate in the French lines. The 31<sup>e</sup> BCP is very close to be encircled in the town. De Lattre sends colonel Paraire to counter-attack with elements from the 25<sup>e</sup> GRDI, the 2<sup>e</sup> BCP and 9 Renault R35 tanks coming from the 3<sup>e</sup> BCC. They pull the German regiment back inflicting them heavy losses. On all the front hold by the 14<sup>e</sup> DI the attack of the XXIII.AK is a failure.

→ **FRONT OF THE 2<sup>e</sup> DI : from Château-Porcien to Thugny-Turny (including Reithel)**

The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is attacked by the 17.ID and the 21.ID, leading to heavy street fights in Château-Porcien and the southern part of Reithel. No German bridgehead can be established; at each attempt the French troops launch a vigorous counter-attack that defeats the Germans. About 500 German POWs are captured by the 2<sup>e</sup> DI.

During the afternoon two breaches will be opened and enlarged in the French lines. West of Reithel 6 assault groups from the 3.IR (21.ID) crosses the River on a lock in Nanteuil despite heavy losses. This breakthrough allows the Schützen of the 3.IR to take some hills south of Nanteuil and to cut the Avançon-Reithel road. Immediately the engineers of the 21.ID build a bridge over the Aisne to allow the tanks to cross the River.

A second breach is made east of Château-Porcien which is now threatened to be encircled by the two breakthroughs. The front is broken in this area despite the resistance of the II/31<sup>e</sup> RI. The garrison in Château-Porcien will fight until being out of ammunition and surrendered only after violent close combats, delaying the building of an engineer bridge for about 6 hours.

A counter-attack is rapidly organized with the 1<sup>st</sup> company of the 23e BCC (Renault R35 tanks), two infantry platoons and two dismounted cavalry platoons but it fails due to heavy bombardment from the German artillery and aviation as well as a very efficient anti-tank artillery destroying 9 from the 13 R35 tanks. At 7h00, the German have achieved a bridgehead south of the Aisne River, deep of about 5 km from Château-Porcien to Avançon. The engineers build bridges for Guderian in Château-Porcien and Taizy.

On 9<sup>th</sup> June evening there is an animated discussion between General De Lattre (14<sup>e</sup> DI) and General Klopfenstein (2<sup>e</sup> DI). The first one would like to mount an immediate counter-attack, being aware that the German tanks will soon



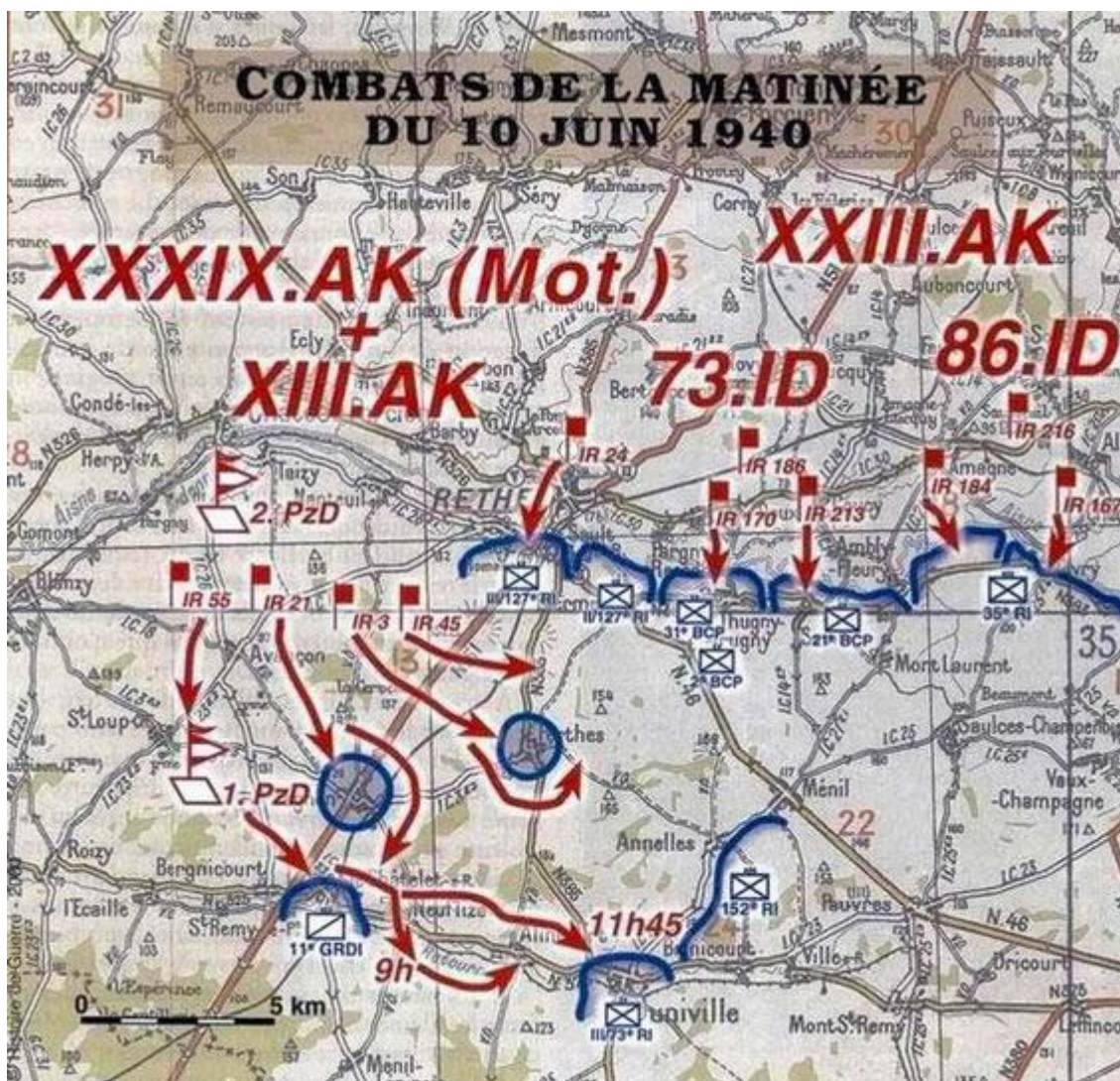
spread from the bridgehead but the second one wants to retreat 3 km south and does it. General De Lattre is therefore forced to reinforce his left flank which is not covered anymore.

### 10<sup>th</sup> JUNE 1940 : the Panzergruppe Guderian crosses the Aisne River

General List orders Guderian to cross with the tanks as rapidly as possible and at first an attack against Tagnon is planned for 22h00. All the issues and organization problems postpone the attack to the morning. Guderian wants first to increase the bridgehead to allow all the tanks to cross the Aisne River.

The 1.PzD and 2.PzD have the task to strengthen the bridgehead while the 17.ID and 21.ID will launch an attack towards Perthes in the south-east of the bridgehead. This offensive should crush the left flank of De Lattre and force the French to abandon Rethel and move more east – south/east if they don't want to be outflanked and turned, leaving more space for the Germans to cross the River.

Guderian himself leads the operations from Avançon and the offensive is launched at 5h30 after an intense artillery preparation. The French troops (2<sup>e</sup> DI) have created several strongpoints in the villages instead of a weak continuous line : the villages of Perthes, Tagnon, Le Châtelet, Alincourt and Juniville as well as the southern part of Rethel will give a bad licking to the German infantry regiments of the 17.ID and 21.ID. The tanks of Guderian can avoid the combat but the infantry is stuck on the French positions.



The Germans reach Juniville at 9h00 and launch 3 assaults against the outnumbered but entrenched III/73<sup>e</sup> RI without any success.

In Le Châtelet the Germans fight against the 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI from 13h30 to 19h30. The French reconnaissance battalion is under the rubbles of the town that has been destroyed by the German artillery and aviation. At 19h30 they leave Le Châtelet for Ménil-Lépinos and Warmeriville where they establish new defensive positions.

The town of Alincourt falls in German hands only at 17h45 and finally at the end of the day the offensive is concentrated on Juniville which will be hold by the French battalion until 23h45.



Tagnon and Perthes are encircled by the IR.55 and IR.3 at about 8h30. The IR.45 tries to infiltrate in the northern part of Perthes to attack the French troops in Rethel on their rear. The French troops will fight for each house. Only at 12h15 the Germans managed to enter in Tagnon but the street fights will last during 4 hours before they control the town. At 22h00 Perthes is conquered (but elements of the French 127<sup>e</sup> RI are still holding some parts of the town) and the southern part of Rethel surrenders late in the night only.

On the front of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI, the whole XXIII.AK (73.ID and 86.ID) launches an assault but again the Germans are pulled back everywhere by furious counter-attacks. The left flank is now facing the German troops from the XXXIX.AK(mot) (1.PzD, 2.PzD and 29.ID(mot) but mainly the 1.PzD at the moment) and the XIII.AK (17.ID and 21.ID). On this flank, the defensive position follows a line between Juniville and Ménéil and it is defended by only 1 infantry regiment (the "Red Devils" of the 152<sup>e</sup> RI) and 2 reconnaissance battalions (10<sup>e</sup> GRCA (groupe de reconnaissance de corps d'armée) and the 60<sup>e</sup> GRDI) supported by a 75mm M<sup>e</sup>1897 battery.

The high losses inflicted to the German infantry divisions by the 14<sup>e</sup> DI and 2<sup>e</sup> DI create an opportunity for a more important French counter-attack.

On 10<sup>th</sup> May morning, the "groupement Buisson" is the single unit able to lead a counter-attack in the area of Rethel. But it was south of the Retourne River and had first to cross it. The tanks reached their base line only at 14h00. At this moment the German bridgehead's size has already considerably increased. After refuelling, the unit is ready to attack at 15h00 but is only launched at 17h00.

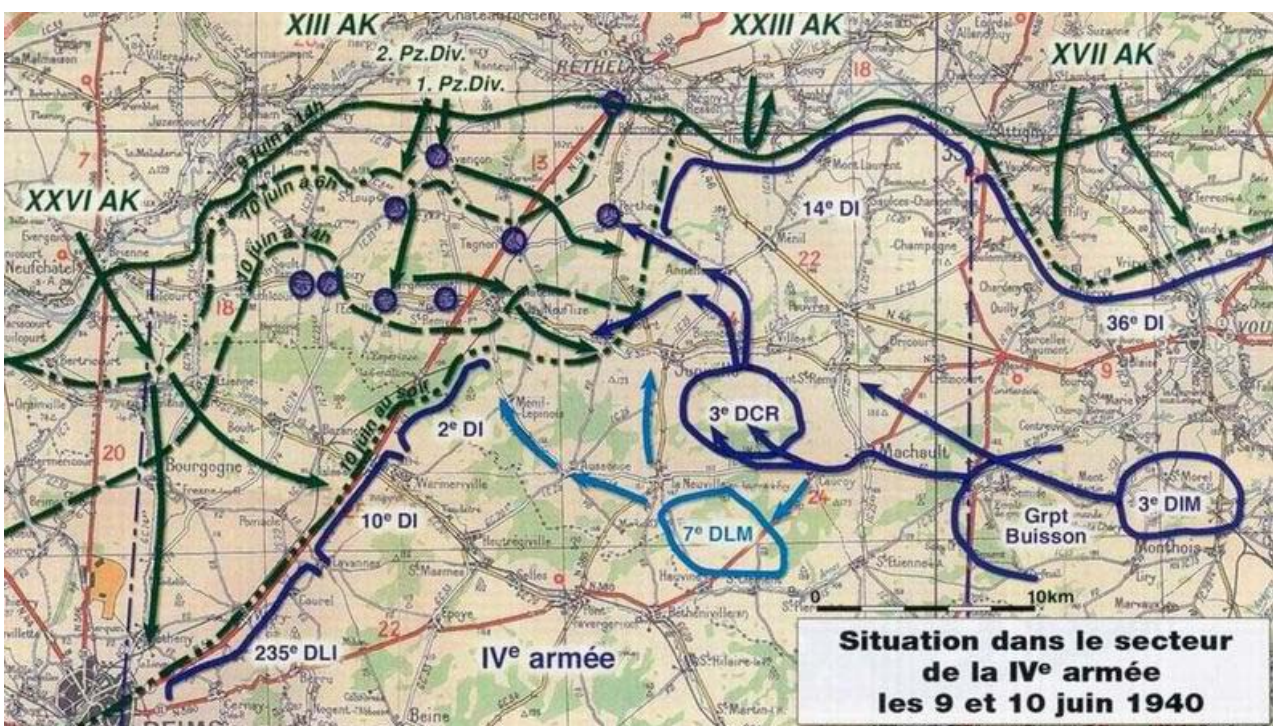
The French counter-attack is launched without artillery or aviation support. The movements of the "groupement Buisson" are spotted by the Luftwaffe and will be stopped mainly by the numerous guns installed in anti-tank role by the 21.ID.

The "groupement Buisson" is split in 2 parts :

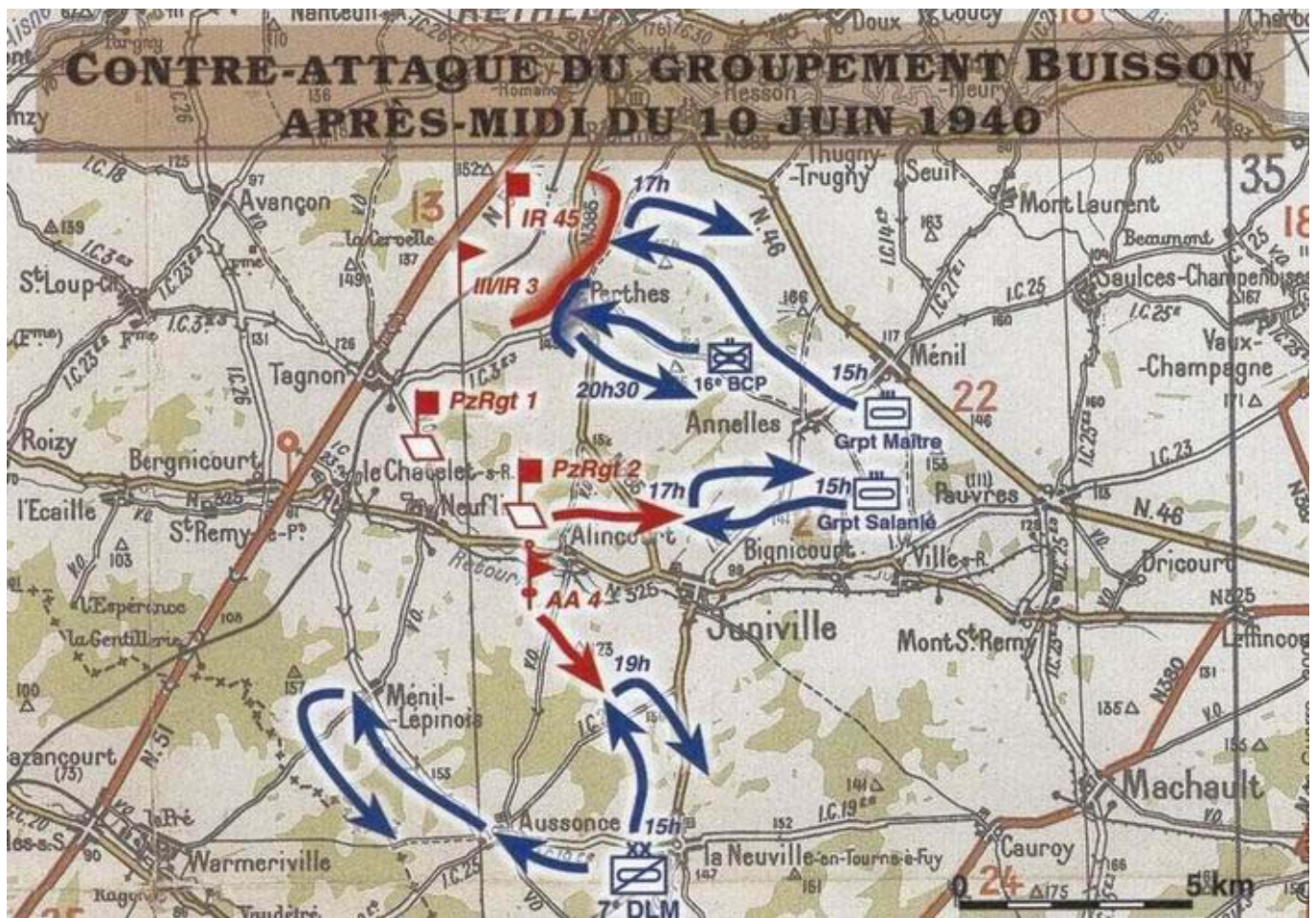
1) One part which has crossed the Retourne River more on the east and will attack the Germans from an east / south-east axis :

- Northern attack on the Annelles - Perthes axis (groupement of lieutenant-colonel Maître) with elements of the 3<sup>e</sup> DCR : 17 Hotchkiss H39 (2/42<sup>e</sup> and 3/42<sup>e</sup> BCC), 9 Renault B1bis (2/41<sup>e</sup> BCC) and the 3 infantry companies of the 16<sup>e</sup> BCP (bataillon de chasseurs portés).
- Southern attack on the Juniville - Tagnon axis (groupement of lieutenant-colonel Salanié) with elements of the 3<sup>e</sup> DCR : 25 Hotchkiss H39 (45<sup>e</sup> BCC), 10 Renault B1bis (1/41<sup>e</sup> BCC) and of the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM : reduced 31<sup>e</sup> RDP (Régiment de Dragons Portés).
- A few B1bis tanks from the 3/41<sup>e</sup> BCC remain in Annelles as protection and take not part to the attack.

2) One part south of the Retourne River, composed of the 10<sup>e</sup> BCC (40 Renault R35) and of the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM (Division Légère Mécanique) from general Marteau which will counter-attack on the Ménéil-Lépinos - Alincourt - Le Châtelet axis.







The "groupement Maître" (26 tanks) includes these 9 B1bis tanks :

- B1bis "Châteauneuf-du-Pape" (capitaine Gasc)
- B1bis "Aisne" (lieutenant Homé)
- B1bis "Yonne" (aspirant Laval)
- B1bis "Corbières" (sous-lieutenant Tuffet)
- B1bis "Durance" (lieutenant Carraz)
- B1bis "Arlay" (aspirant Thoré)
- B1bis "Bayard" (sous-lieutenant Soulet)
- B1bis "Villers-Marmery" (adjudant-chef Maréchal)
- B1bis "Pinard" (aspirant Bergeal)

The French tanks crushes some German troops, reaches Perthes and inflicts heavy losses to the German troops of the IR.3 and IR.5 (21.ID). A German artillery barrage added to the direct fire of the 8.8cm Flak and 10.5cm leFH18 guns from the 21.ID, reinforced by the Panzerjäger-Abteilung 560 (8.8cm Flak), blocks the French advance, destroying 9 Hotchkiss H39 and 3 Renault B1bis tanks.

The action is here described by sous-lieutenant Tuffet, commander of the B1bis "Corbières".

*The Hotchkiss H39 are progressing in front of the B1bis tanks. After having crossed a hill the H39s are engaged by very numerous AT guns and HMGs deployed behind and along a road. The 9 B1bis of the 2/41° BCC charge then against the German positions to cover the Hotchkiss tanks.*

*With their 47mm turret guns and the 75mm hull gun the French B1bis tanks fire towards the flashes revealing the German AT guns' positions. With its coaxial MG lieutenant Tuffet kills a whole group of German soldiers moving along the road. A bit later he destroys 2 self-propelled guns (no information about the exact type).*

*Many anti-tank guns are firing on the B1bis "Aisne" which is hit many times but without effect and it fires intensively back. The B1bis "Aisne" reached the road, crushes some German soldiers and a AT guns under its tracks and destroys a MG nest.*

*The B1bis "Corbières" is hit by many 3.7cm shells, no penetration at all but the bad feeling of being a target. About every 5 seconds a 3.7cm shell is clicking against the armor. The periscope of the copula is destroyed. One bolt goes away and hits the helmet of the radio but without any injury. The B1bis "Corbières" fires with all its weapons while advancing in the German lines.*

Added to the German AT gun firing, the German artillery barrage is always more intense. Lieutenant Tuffet sees the "Aisne" and "Yonne" tanks firing on the enemy's position. On the left he spots an AT gun firing on the "Aisne" and he destroys it with its 47mm turret gun. A running German soldier is also killed with the coaxial MG. Suddenly a violent shock, the 47mm gun sight is destroyed and the turret is blocked. Through the episcopes lieutenant Tuffet sees the B1bis "Yonne" being abandoned and scuttled by its crew. The B1bis "Corbières" fires then only with the 75mm hull gun but a second very violent explosion neutralizes the 75mm SA35 gun too. The radio antenna is also destroyed. Unarmed, the B1bis "Corbières" moves back and recovers the crew of the "Yonne" which embarks thanks to the bottom hatch. Equipments stored on the tank roof (blankets) are put on fire. The tank pulls back in cover and lieutenant Tuffet stops the fire with an extinguisher. It is about 20h30 and the B1bis "Corbières", damaged, moves back to the departure line in Annelles. Perthes is on fire and the German artillery barrage is still very intense.

The B1bis "Aisne" is still advancing in the German lines and destroys a German infantry squad hidden in a field. A violent shock on the hull, a second one on the copula which destroys the binoculars. Lieutenant Homé is WIA and blind during several minutes. One fuel tank is also damaged and fuel is leaking on the floor. The "Aisne" pulls back in the French lines. It is more than 21h00, after more than 3 hours of combat.

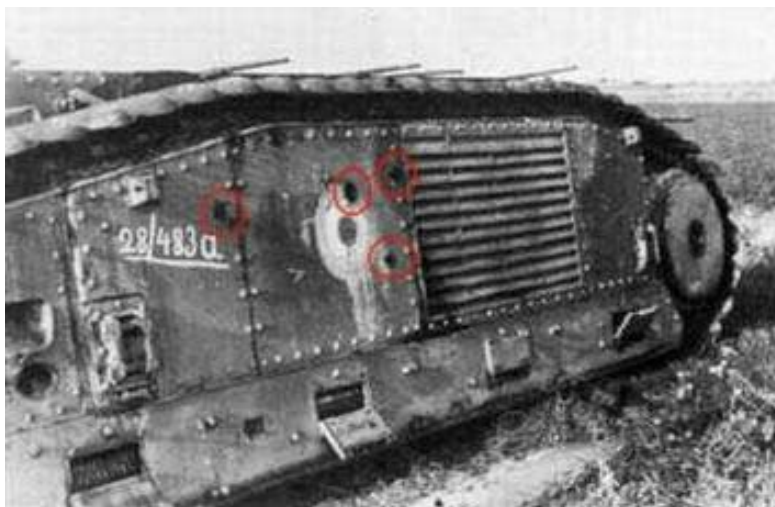
The B1bis "Bayard" has its turret MG damaged by a 3.7cm shell at the very beginning of the engagement. A 10.5cm shell penetrates the right side hull and 1 crew member is lightly wounded but the tank is still operational and destroys many AT guns before retreating to the French lines.

From the 9 B1bis, 3 have been destroyed or abandoned ("Yonne", "Durance" and "Arlay"), 4 are damaged ("Aisne", "Corbières", "Villers-Marmery" and "Bayard") but returned in the French lines and 2 are still fully operational.

All the surviving tanks are covered by numerous 3.7cm shells impacts that did not penetrate the armor. On the B1bis "Corbières" more than 100 gouges, as big as eggs, could be counted.

Destroyed/abandoned B1bis :

- B1bis "Yonne" : under fire from 10 various field/AA/AT guns firing from the front and the left. The tanks destroys 5 of them but one German shell ignites a fire in the engine. It is extinguished but the tank is immobilized, the 75mm SA35 hull gun is therefore grossly useless. The tank continues to fire with the 47mm turret gun and the coaxial MG but one shell finally blocks the turret. The tank is scuttled and the tank explodes. The crew is safe and retreats in the French lines in the B1bis "Corbières".



- B1bis "Durance" : destroyed by 10.5cm shells, the 75mm gun loader is KIA.





- B1bis "Arlay" : destroyed by several 10.5cm shells, all the crew members are KIA



The attack of the "groupement Maître" is led by the capitaine De Hautecloque (as known as "Leclerc", future commander of the famous 2<sup>e</sup> DB, the 2<sup>nd</sup> French armoured division), he walks in front of the infantry and the tanks with his famous stick. 12 tanks have been lost but the German advance has been delayed.

The 16<sup>e</sup> BCP manages to take Perthes and to rescue the French 127<sup>e</sup> RI still fighting in the town (only 7 officers, 3 NCOs and 35 men still alive). Together they will defend the town until 22h00 when they received the order to pull back. Thanks to this attack the 14<sup>e</sup> DI (general De Lattre) could retreat in good conditions.

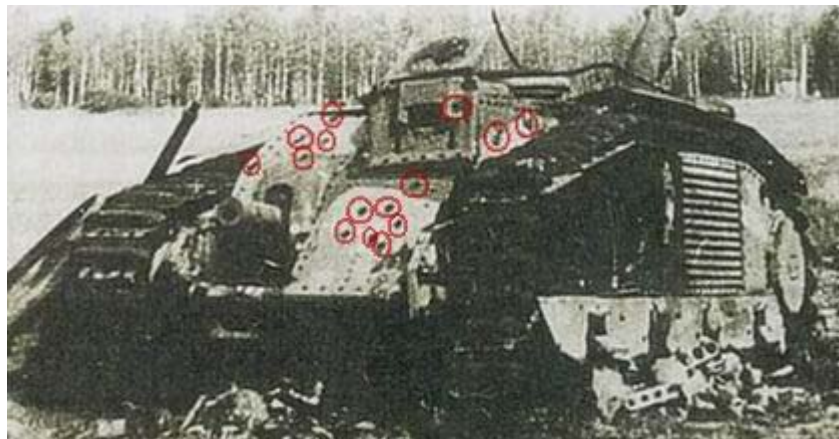
On its side, the "groupement Salanié" (35 tanks) encounters elements of the 1.PzD (including PzRgt.2) north of Juniville. The 10 B1bis tanks from the 1/41<sup>e</sup> BCC led by capitaine Billotte (the famous captain from Stonne on 15th May 1940) are stopped next to the Pommery farm. The company is encircled at 19h00 by tanks from the Pz.Rgt.2, by AT guns and by field guns used in direct fire. The 1/41<sup>e</sup> BCC has to assault the German troops. 4 Renault B1bis are put out of combat : "Silvaner", "Volnay", "Vauquois" and "Maury".



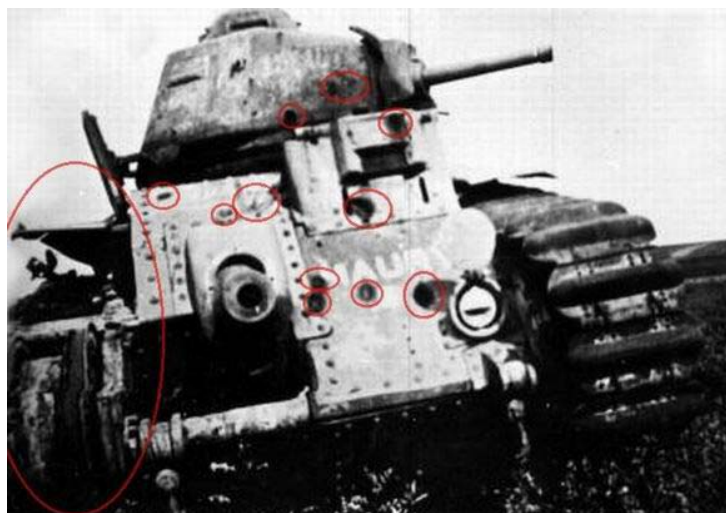
- B1bis "Silvaner" : destroyed by heavy field/AA guns, the driver is KIA.



- B1bis "Volnay" : first hit by numerous not penetrating shells but fuel leaking on the bottom ignites a fire in the tank. The crew is forced to evacuate, all the men are WIA, taken POWs (one man will die 6 days later) and the tank explodes.



- B1bis "Vauquois" : hit by artillery (10.5cm) shells, damaged (1 WIA). The tank is scuttled and abandoned.
- B1bis "Maury" : hit by numerous AT shells and artillery shells. The right track is destroyed and the tank is put on fire. The crew leaves the B1bis and is captured by German troops. Two of the men will die later in the German hospital. On the B1bis "Maury", many impacts (not penetrating shells) can be seen. The cooling intake shutter seems to have been hit many times but apparently there is no clear penetration and it seems that these side impacts were made on the wreck long after the battle.





Nevertheless, it seems that the gouges around the cooling intake shutter were made after the battle, on the wreck between 1940 and 1942, probably during tests or propaganda photos. The tank has been knocked out by a big shell on the front, destroying the right track.

Launched at 17h00, the counter-attack of the 3<sup>e</sup> DCR elements is blocked and the remaining troops are ordered to retreat at 21h00 after more than 3 hours of combat. 19 B1bis have been engaged and 7 have been destroyed or scuttled/abandoned.

The 7<sup>e</sup> DLM counter-attack is launched earlier, at the beginning of the afternoon, towards Alincourt and Ménéil-Lépinos. Ménéil-Lépinos at less than 10km from Le Châtelet is reached but at the same moment the right flank of the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM is attacked by the 1.PzD crossing the Retourne River south of Alincourt and Juniville. The following heavy fights turn in favour of the Germans but they are also exhausted and out of supply. The French troops can regroup and reorganize on the Ménéil-Lépinos – Aussonce – La Neuville line in good conditions.

On 10<sup>th</sup> June night, the French counter-attack led by the "groupement Buisson" (south of the Retourne River by the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM and north of the Retourne River by elements of the 3<sup>e</sup> DCR) is a failure and the French IV<sup>th</sup> Army will be forced to retreat slowly while fighting.

126 French tanks have been engaged in 3 groups against the 1.PzD, the 17.ID and the 21.ID. They faced about 260 tanks from the 1.PzD. The 2.PzD did probably not participate to the battle. 30 French tanks have been destroyed and about 15-20 more damaged on 10<sup>th</sup> June. The German advance has been delayed for half a day and about 100 various German vehicles have been knocked out (including several dozen tanks, self-propelled guns, halftracks, armoured cars, trucks, cars etc.) and many AT guns destroyed by the fire of the B1bis or crushed under their tracks.

During the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> June, several German divisions were roughly handled by the French troops, especially on the Aisne River.

- the French 36<sup>e</sup> DI captured 714 German POWs
- the 14<sup>e</sup> DI captured about 800 Germans POWs and many assaults were defeated
- the 2<sup>e</sup> DI captured about 500 German POWs
- at the same time, the German 36.ID and 299.ID Divisions lost some 2,500 men while fighting the French 6<sup>e</sup> DI.
- the German 58.ID lost 1,600 men, while attacking the French 1<sup>e</sup> DIC.

## 11<sup>th</sup> JUNE 1940 : the retreat

The failure of the counter-attack forces the 14<sup>e</sup> DI to retreat in order to avoid being attacked on its rears by 2 Panzerdivisionen and 3 infantry division. With an aching the soldiers from the 14<sup>e</sup> DI, undefeated on the Aisne River, have to move south with the remnants of the 2<sup>e</sup> DI. Despite its failure the counter-attack allowed the French troops to move in good conditions.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June the tanks from Guderian have opened their way towards Reims, isolating definitively the eastern French armies from the rest of France.

The defense during the battle of Rethel, even if having no real impact on the whole strategic outcome, proved the value of the French soldier, condemned by the deficiencies of his high-command.

Beside the numerical superiority of the German troops (ability to concentrate forces) two elements played a role in the defeat on the Aisne River :

- General Klopfenstein (2<sup>e</sup> DI) refused to counter-attack on the evening of 9<sup>th</sup> June despite the pressing of General De Lattre (14<sup>e</sup> DI). That allowed the German tanks to cross the River and to increase the bridgehead during following morning.
- The time required to launch the "groupement Buisson" counter-attack, shifting from a favourable morning situation to a desperate situation during the afternoon. In fact the delay is not only due to the time required by the movements, apparently the officers in charge of the attack did not reach at time because their convoy has met German tanks. Therefore capitaine de Hautecloque (Leclerc) took the command of the "groupement Maître". Once again the tanks were not all concentrated in a single attack and the excellent B1bis tanks were blocked by 8.8cm Flak and 10.5cm leFH used as anti-tank guns.

The German rapidity and the quality of a generals like Guderian made the difference and led to the brilliant German victory, much more than a supposed German armaments or troops superiority.

# DETAILED REPORT ABOUT THE COMBATS INVOLVING THE 1.PzD AND THE 7<sup>e</sup> DLM SOUTH OF THE RETOURNE RIVER ON 10<sup>th</sup> JUNE 1940

## GERMAN FORCES : 1.Panzerdivision

Commander : general Kitchner

- Panzerbrigade 1
  - Pz.Rgt.1
  - Pz.Rgt.2
- Schützenbrigade 1
  - Kradschützenbtl.1
  - Schützenregiment 1
  - s.Inf.Gesch.Kp.702 (15cm)
- Artillerieregiment 73
- Pz.Aufkl.Abt.4
- Pz.Jg.Abt.37
- 1./s.Pz.Jg.Abt.8
- Pz.Pi.Btl.37 (engineer battalion)
- Le.Flak-Abt.73
- Nachrichtenabteilung 37
- Nachschubdienste 81

Including these means (if at full strength) :

PzBfWg	: 18
Panzer I	: 52
Panzer II	: 98
Panzer III	: 58
Panzer IV	: 40
-----	: 258 tanks (including 98 PzIII/IV)

armored cars : 56 (including about 23 with a 2.0cm L/55 gun)

8.8cm Flak (Sfl) auf SdKfz8	: 6 (self-propelled 8.8cm anti-tank gun) – but at least one was lost on 14 <sup>th</sup> May
8.8cm Flak	: 9 (often used in anti-tank role)
3.7cm PaK	: 48

2.0cm / 3.7cm FlaK : 24

15cm sIG33 auf PzKpw I	: 6
7.5cm leIG	: 24
15cm sIG	: 8
10.5cm leFH18	: 24 (sometimes used in anti-tank role)
15cm sFH	: 12

### TOTAL :

tanks	: 258 (including 98 Panzer III and Panzer IV)
armored cars	: 56 (including about 23 with a 2.0cm L/55 gun)
AT guns	: 63 (including 15 8.8cm guns)
AA guns	: 24
artillery	: 74

### REINFORCED BY ELEMENTS OF THE 17.ID and 21.ID.

**Note : before "Fall Rot" in France, the 1.PzD seems to have been reinforced to 276 tanks.**



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## FRENCH FORCES : 7e Division Légère Mécanique

The 7<sup>e</sup> DLM was formed on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1940 from remnants of the 4<sup>e</sup> DLC (Division Légère de Cavalerie) but it has not the nominal strength of a DLM.

Commander : general Marteau

Staff commander : commandant Freiss

- **14<sup>e</sup> BLM** (Brigade Légère Mécanique) : lieutenant-colonel Grévy
  - **4<sup>e</sup> RAM** (Régiment d'Auto-Mitrailleuses) : commandant Chapel  
2 squadrons with armored cars and motorcyclists (10 Panhard 178, 14 AMR-33/35)
  - **8<sup>e</sup> RD** (Régiment de Dragons) : commandant Deron  
44 Hotchkiss tank squadrons (22 very old Hotchkiss H35 tanks and 20 new Hotchkiss H39 tanks with the 37mm SA38 gun). **But only about 25 tanks will reach the deployment area, most of the exhausted Hotchkiss H35 tanks have been immobilized during the move.**
  - **4<sup>e</sup> EDAC** (Escadron Divisionnaire Anti-Char) : capitaine Hapette Saint-Martin  
(12 25mm SA34/37 AT guns)
- **4<sup>e</sup> BCM** (Brigade de Cavalerie Motorisée) : colonel Préaud
  - **14<sup>e</sup> RDP** (Régiment de Dragons portés) : commandant Sonnerly  
1 motorcyclists / armored cars squadron (7 Laffly 50AM, 16 LMGs, 1 60mm mortar)  
3 infantry squadrons (54 LMGs, 12 MMGs, 3 60mm mortars)  
1 support squadron (4 25mm SA34/37 AT guns, 4 81mm mortars, 8 MMGs)
  - **31<sup>e</sup> RDP** (Régiment de Dragons portés) : commandant De Villers  
1 motorcyclists / armored cars squadron (7 Laffly 50AM, 16 LMGs, 1 60mm mortar)  
3 infantry squadrons (54 LMGs, 12 MMGs, 3 60mm mortars)  
1 support squadron (4 25mm SA34/37 AT guns, 4 81mm mortars, 8 MMGs)  
**But the 2/31e RDP and 5/31e RDP squadrons are engaged north of Juniville, with the groupement Salanié. They are not available for the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM.**
  - **4<sup>e</sup> escadron de réparation divisionnaire** (recovery/repair squadron) : capitaine Palies
- **77<sup>e</sup> RATT** (Régiment d'Artillerie Tractée Tout Terrain) : lieutenant colonel Baratchart  
(12 75mm Mle1897 guns, 12 105mm C guns, 5 47mm SA37/39 AT guns, 3 25mm AA guns)
- **33/1 compagnie de sapeurs mineurs** (engineer company)
- **REINFORCED BY THE 10<sup>e</sup> BCC (40 Renault R35 tanks)**

### TOTAL :

tanks	: 82 but about only about 65 participated (including only 20 with the 37mm SA38 gun, the others have the weak 37mm SA18 gun)
armored cars	: 38 (including 10 with the 25mm SA35 gun)
AT guns	: 25 (including 20 25mm SA34/37 guns and 5 47mm SA37/39 guns)
AA guns	: 3
artillery	: 24

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The various reconnaissance patrols launched by the 4<sup>e</sup> RAM spot 60 enemy tanks between Neuville and Alincourt at 10h30. At 11h00 about 100 German tanks are reported north of Juniville. At 12h05 the patrols report the encirclement of Perthes by 30 tanks and motorcyclists. One Panhard 178 is lost during the morning by one of the numerous Ju87 Stuka attacks, the German control the skies and use their Luftwaffe as often as possible to support their attacks. The French air force is inactive and the AA guns are rather rare.

At 12h30, the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM is deployed in the area of La Neuville in order to control the line Ménéil-Lépinois – Aussonce – La Neuville.

The Hotchkiss H35 tanks of the 8<sup>e</sup> RD have been taken in schools and are very old and exhausted vehicles. Most of them have been immobilized by mechanical failures. All the 20 Hotchkiss H39 tanks but only very few Hotchkiss H35 tanks are operational in the 8<sup>e</sup> RD which is therefore reduced (probably about 25 tanks).

The 1/31<sup>e</sup> RDP infantry squadron/company is deployed north of La Neuville in a wood on the border of the road between Juniville and La Neuville.

2 infantry companies, 1 support company and armored cars are in Aussonce.

3 Hotchkiss tanks squadrons of the 8<sup>e</sup> RD (about 20 tanks) relieve Panhard 178 armored cars from the 4<sup>e</sup> RAM in Ménéil-Lépinois : the 3/8<sup>e</sup> RD in the town itself and the 2/8<sup>e</sup> RD and 4/8<sup>e</sup> RD next to it.



French reconnaissance patrols are in contact with German tanks on the road between Juniville and La Neuville. The Panhard 178 armored cars try to delay the advancing German tanks but one vehicle is lost and the reconnaissance patrol retreats.

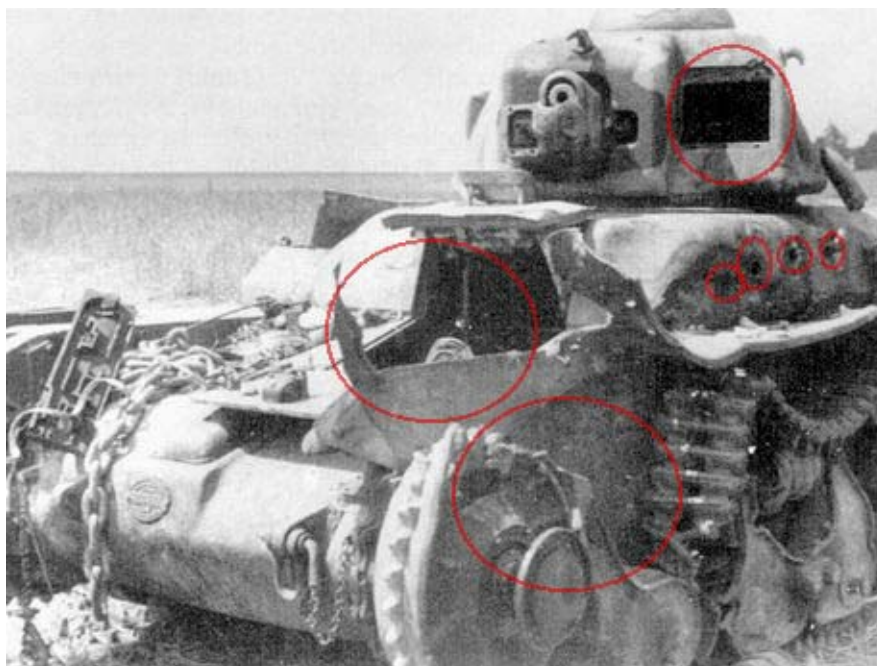
The groupement Aussenac next to La Neuville is composed of :

- 10<sup>e</sup> BCC (40 Renault R35)
- 1/8<sup>e</sup> RD (8 Hotchkiss H35/39)
- 4/14<sup>e</sup> RDP (1 infantry squadron/company) reinforced by AT guns from the EDAC

The 1/10<sup>e</sup> BCC (13 Renault R35 tanks) remains in La Neuville and the other elements of the "groupement Aussenac" begin their movement towards Juniville at 13h30 but they are blocked 2 km north by numerous German tanks and AT guns.



The 2/10<sup>e</sup> BCC (13 Renault R35 tanks) engages the battle but their 37mm SA18 gun lacks power and they have to go to close range (< 25-100m) with more numerous German tanks which can engage them from at 200-300m. 9 Renault R35 are destroyed and the 4 other retreat. Of these 4 tanks only one is able to continue to fight.



*Renault R35 from 10<sup>e</sup> BCC*

The German tanks continue their progression and encounter the trucks carrying the 4/14<sup>e</sup> RDP (infantry company). The French troops disembark in a hurry and take position in the woods around the road.

Immediately, the 1/8<sup>e</sup> RD with only 8 tanks counter-attacks against about 30 German tanks. The squadron commander (captain de Loriol) with 3 other tanks manages to outflank the enemy and 2 German tanks are destroyed by the maréchal-des-logis Flouret. Surprised, the Germans stop their attack and move back. On the French side 2 immobilized Hotchkiss tanks are scuttled.



*Destroyed Panzer IV from 1.PzD*

The 3/10<sup>e</sup> BCC (13 Renault R35 tanks) is then ordered to push towards Juniville to rescue the survivors of the 2/10<sup>e</sup> BCC. They are soon stopped by a German artillery barrage followed by German tanks attacking on the flank.

One Renault R35 is destroyed, the others retreat in the cover of the woods hold by the French infantry. During all the afternoon, the 3/10<sup>e</sup> BCC launches successive counter-attacks to delay the 1.PzD, losing 7 more R35s, but they manage to rescue the survivors from the 2/10<sup>e</sup> BCC and to recover several immobilized tanks. One motorcycle platoon advances 500m more north and capture several items and documents in a German tank wreck. Under heavy fire they retreat with 3 WIAs.

At about 16h00, the German tanks and mechanized troops attack the woods hold by the French infantry supported by the remaining 6 Renault R35 and 6 Hotchkiss H35/39. Two German tanks are destroyed and once more they are pulled back. On the French side 2 men have been killed and several WIA. Two German AT guns take position next to the woods and open fire on a R35 tank. 2 shells miss the tank and both AT guns are destroyed.

The Germans cancel their attack and the task is given to the German artillery which bombards the woods occupied by the French troops. During the evening, most of the French tanks move back to La Neuville. At 21h00, the French infantry is close to be out of ammunition but is still controlling the road, supported by 3 Renault R35 tanks and 2 25mm AT guns.

The French infantry in the woods is being slowly encircled and at 23h30 they are ordered to retreat to La Neuville, on the main French line.

At 18h00 German tanks are also spotted in the woods north of Aussonce, between Ménil Lépinos and Juniville. Lieutenant De Villèle from 2/8<sup>e</sup> RD moves with 4 Hotchkiss tanks to meet them. They first encounter ambushed German AT guns and later tanks. 2 Hotchkiss tanks are destroyed and lieutenant De Villèle is KIA with his driver.

From the 27 Renault R35 tanks engaged by the 2/10<sup>e</sup> BCC and 3/10<sup>e</sup> BCC (two companies of 13 tanks and the battalion commander's tank) :

- 10 have been destroyed
- 10 are damaged but recovered and under repair
- 7 are operational

The 1/10<sup>e</sup> BCC has 13 more tanks and there are also the 5 replacement tanks of the battalion for a total of 20-25 operational tanks.

The remnants of the 1/8<sup>e</sup> RD (1 fully operational tank and 5 tanks under repair) deploy at La Neuville at 01h00. At the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> June, 4 Hotchkiss tanks have been destroyed, 5 are under repair and about 16 are still operational.

That makes a total of 36-41 operational tanks and several armoured cars to stop the German Panzerdivisionen moving south. But the Germans have to delay the advance, out of fuel and ammunition they return to their lines on the Retourne River and will proceed with their offensive on 11<sup>th</sup> June.

The town of La Neuville will be bombarded all night long by the German artillery, 1 AMR is destroyed by the indirect hit of a 150mm shell.

At 22h30 the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM is reinforced by a company of the 152<sup>e</sup> RI, the "Red Devils" of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI.

On 11<sup>th</sup> June 1940 the French forces move about 10-15km south / south-west while fighting all the day long. During all the day the French troops will be attacked by the Luftwaffe. During following days the battle strength of the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM will quickly fall to about 50%.

On 11<sup>th</sup> June morning the reinforcement company of the 152<sup>e</sup> RI stops German infantry between Aussonce and La Neuville. The French strongpoints south of La Neuville (3/31<sup>e</sup> RDP and 4/31<sup>e</sup> RDP), next to the Le Merlan farm, immobilize a few German tanks thanks to their AT guns. The German artillery enters in action, destroying several French trucks and side-cars.

The 8 remaining Panhard 178 armored cars from capitaine Gobert delay the German advance south of La Neuville while the French infantry retreats. Ambushed in the woods they surprise 30 German tanks : 2 are immobilized and 3 are knocked out. The swift French armored cars hit and run without having to sustain losses until they are ordered to retreat too.

In Selles and Heutrégiville, the few tanks from the 4/8<sup>e</sup> RD delay the German advancing tanks. In Pontfaverger 2 Hotchkiss from the 1/8<sup>e</sup> RD resist against 50 German tanks until their complete destruction.

In Béthenville, engineers supported by dragoons (infantry) mine the bridges (2 bridges and 1 rail-road bridge) and blow them at 12.30 AM. They entrench behind the Suipe River and face the German attacks. But the Germans have crossed the River in Pontfaverger and enters in Béthenville from the south-west. Thanks to an alcohol distillery put on fire while the German tanks were in the corresponding street, a real firewall is created, blocking the



German advance. The remaining tanks of the 8<sup>e</sup> RD prevent the encirclement while the infantry exits from Bétherville and retreats. The last Hotchkiss tanks of the 8<sup>e</sup> RD are destroyed and sacrificed against impossible odds to save their comrades.



*Panzer III knocked out in La Neuville (or Neuville which would be an other location)*

The 7<sup>e</sup> DLM will fight continuously until 25<sup>th</sup> June 1940, sacrificing its men and vehicles to cover other troops, inflicting heavy losses to the enemy.

## NOTES ABOUT THE "PANZERTRUPPEN" AAR :

After Action Report (AAR) from the book "Panzertruppen" (Thomas Jentz) about a battle taking place on the road between Juniville and Aussonce on 10<sup>th</sup> June :

*"After halting for about an hour to reorganize, the Abteilung renewed the attack toward the road from Juniville to Aussonce. The 5.Kompanie was on the left next to Panzer Regiment 2. Under fire from the Panzers, several French motorcycle messengers attempted to reach Aussonce, but only a few succeeded.*

*At this time, several enemy R35 and B1 tanks appeared on the wood line southeast of the road. They were first spotted and reported by the 5.Kompanie. The Abteilung established a fire front and engaged the enemy with all guns firing. It was quickly determined that the strong French armor not only withstood hits from 2cm Panzergranaten but also from the 3.7cm and 7.5cm Panzergranaten. Almost all of the hits rebounded. Even the new Panzergranate 40 was ineffective because the range was over 300 meters. The enemy was completely blanketed by fire and blinded by the smoke and dust.*

*Three French tanks were knocked out at close range when the French tanks attempted to close the range and our own Panzers advanced. The other enemy tanks pulled back into the woods. While advancing on both sides of the road toward Aussonce, elements of the 5. and 4.Kompanie, and Panzer Regiment 2, again encountered enemy tanks that were firing out of the woods on the left. Fire was returned and a French tank was knocked out at close range."*

The AAR from the book "Panzertruppen" (Thomas Jentz) corresponds to a battle between the 1.PzD and the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM on the Juniville- Aussonce road. The AAR indicates that the Germans "renewed" their attack, implying one or several previous failures. It is also said that the French take cover in the woods. That would perfectly correspond to the combat against the advancing 3/10<sup>e</sup> BCC which is at first blocked by the German artillery and then attacked by tanks. One tank is destroyed and the other moves in the woods. Then there is again a combat against these Renault R35s and it is probably the event described in the report. If the French tanks tries to come closer it is because of the lack of power of the 37mm SA18 gun not because of any bad French tactics.

We can note that at a range "over 300m", probably 300-400m (assumed below 400-500m otherwise they would probably have mentioned over 400-500m) no 3.7cm or 7.5cm shell was able to penetrate the Renault R35 tank (front cast armor is 40mm round for the lower front hull, 43mm/37° for the upper front hull and 40mm/23° for the driver's hatch). If real at longer range it would have been probably mentioned and the Renault R35 would never have opened fire with the short barrelled gun at such a range. The French mentions the fact that 7 Renault R35 tanks have been destroyed. The Germans do not indicate their own losses if any.

What does not fit to the story at all is the presence of B1bis tanks. No B1bis tank should normally be with the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM, only Renault R35 and Hotchkiss H35/39 tanks. Nevertheless, one cannot exclude one or two isolated tanks, perhaps from those which have been requisitioned by De Lattre. But once more, these ones are at the moment all north of the Retourne. The other B1bis tanks are more east and on the move to attack the Germans north of the Retourne River.

In the AAR we can also read that on the road the Germans had 1 tank regiment and 2 tank companies, more than 150 tanks with probably at least 50 Panzer III and IV. They face only 26 R35s and 8 H35/39s on this road, as well as French infantry with several 25mm AT guns. Even the whole 7<sup>e</sup> DLM has not more than about 65 tanks and only about 20 of them have a 37mm SA38 gun.

Guderian in his memories mentions the presence of B1bis tanks on the whole battlefield but it is still hard to know what the truth is really. From French sources there are "theoretically" no B1bis tanks here but the battle can rapidly become confuse and B1bis tanks were not that far.

Guderian also notes the inefficiency of the 3.7cm PaK against the thick armor of the French B1bis and concludes "... therefore we had to suffer heavy losses". He also indicates that he intervened himself to command the fire of a captured French 47mm AT gun against a Renault B1bis tank but without success.

## Sources :

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- "L'arme blindée française - Tome 1 : Mai-Juin 1940, les blindés français dans la tourmente" (colonel Gérard Saint-Martin)
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- "Blitzkrieg Legende" (colonel Karl-Heinz Frieser)
- "Achtung Panzer !" (general Heinz Guderian)
- <http://www.chars-francais.net/> (Antoine Misner's website about French armor)