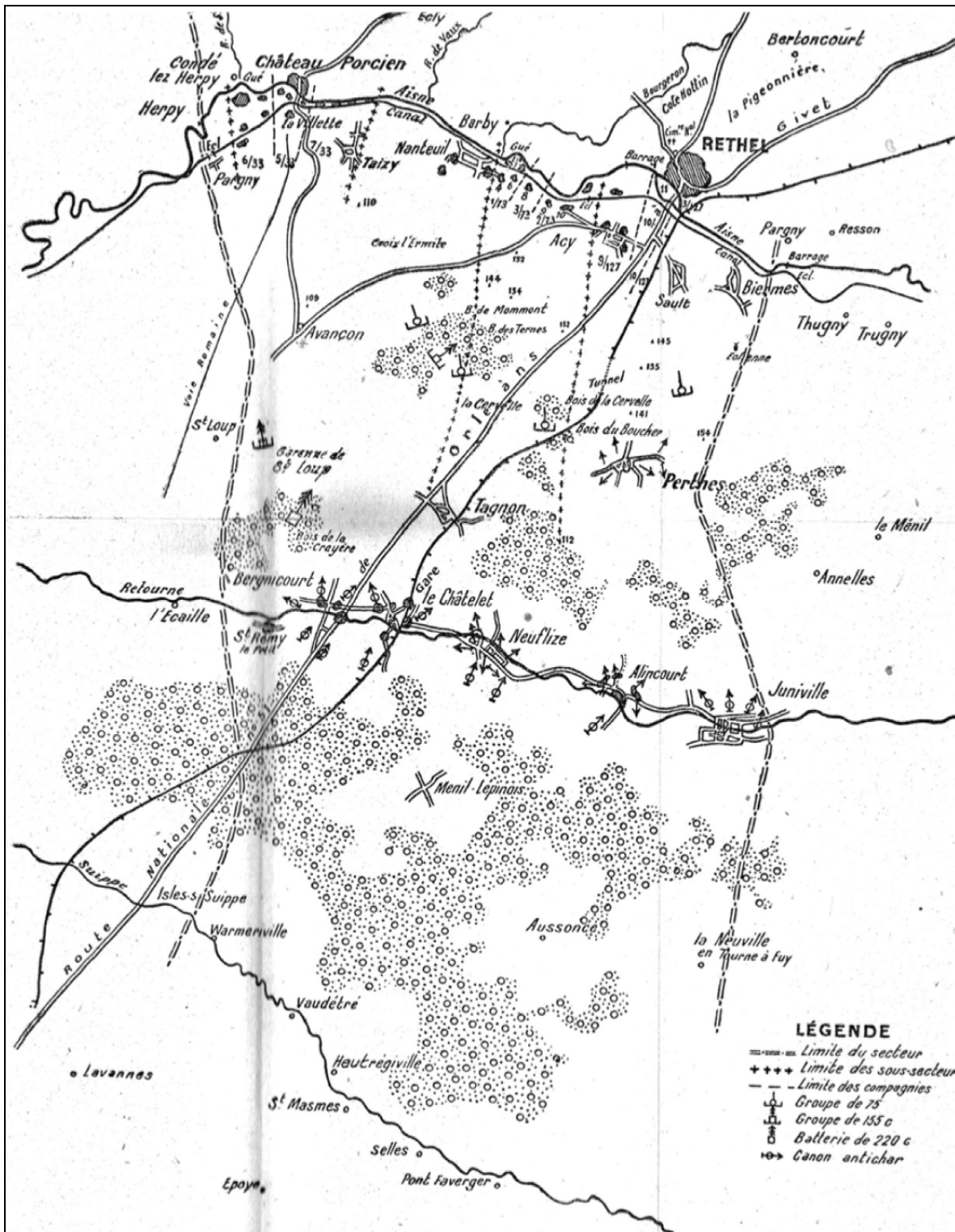


## The 2<sup>e</sup> DI on the Aisne and Retourne Rivers - June 9-10, 1940.

### 1. PRESENTATION OF THE 2<sup>e</sup> DI AND ITS FRONT

From north to south the area is split by the Aisne River, the Ardennes canal just next to it, the Retourne River 10 km more south and again further south the Suipe River. The Retourne does not really constitute an obstacle for vehicles or infantry and there are 12 bridges crossing it. In May 1940, the Germans were stopped on the Aisne by various elements from 14<sup>e</sup> DI and 10<sup>e</sup> DI for example. Defensive emplacements are almost inexistent early June, since these units were each overstretched on a 20-km front and had to prevent multiple incursions and crossing attempts. The 2<sup>e</sup> DI arrives on this front between May 31 and the 1<sup>st</sup> of June to deploy between the 10<sup>e</sup> DI (west) and the 14<sup>e</sup> DI (east).



Source: "Le lion des Flandres à la guerre. La 2<sup>e</sup> Division d'Infanterie pendant la campagne de 1939-1940."

The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is a series A reserve division mobilized on 1939/09/07. It consists in:

- A divisional HQ (General Klopfenstein, HQ staff Lieutenant Colonel Villate)
- 3 infantry regiments; each with a command company (CHR = compagnie hors-rang), a weapons company (CRE, compagnie régimentaire d'engins) and 3 infantry battalions (each with a command company, 3 rifle companies and a weapons company).
  - 33<sup>e</sup> RI (created in 1625, former Touraine regiment) (Lieutenant Colonel Vivien)
    - CHR
    - CRE (Capitaine Tissinier)
    - I/33<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Tissot)
    - II/33<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Labour)
    - III/33<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Vigreux)
  - 73<sup>e</sup> RI (created in 1674, former Royal Comtois regiment) (Lieutenant Colonel Terrier)
    - CHR (Capitaine Mauriaucourt)
    - CRE (Lieutenant Delfosse)
    - I/73<sup>e</sup> RI (Capitaine Dautel)
    - II/73<sup>e</sup> RI (Capitaine Barré)
    - III/73<sup>e</sup> RI (Capitaine Crochemore)
  - 127<sup>e</sup> RI (created in 1794, former 127<sup>e</sup> demi-brigade originating from Beauce regiment) (Lieutenant Colonel Gabriel)
    - CHR (Capitaine Mazaleyrat)
    - CRE (Capitaine Drouillet)
    - I/127<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Soulé)
    - II/127<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Grassart)
    - III/127<sup>e</sup> RI (Commandant Boutry)
- A (13<sup>th</sup>) divisional pioneer company (attached to 73<sup>e</sup> RI)
- A divisional reconnaissance "battalion", the 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI (Commandant Hennocque) of normal type (horse mounted cavalry, motorcycles/side-cars and light motor vehicles but no armored cars).
- A light artillery regiment, the 34<sup>e</sup> RAD (Colonel Henriet) (regiment created in 1873)
  - 3 artillery groups (36x 75mm M<sup>le</sup>1897 field guns)
  - A 10<sup>th</sup> divisional AT battery (BDAC) (8x 47mm SA37 AT guns, horse drawn) (Capitaine Bernis)
- A heavy artillery regiment, the 234<sup>e</sup> RALD (24x 155mm C M<sup>le</sup>1917 howitzers) (regiment created in 1917) (Lieutenant Colonel Streissel)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> divisional artillery park (PAD = parc d'artillerie divisionnaire) (Capitaine Liabastre)
- 2/1 and 2/2 sapeurs-mineurs companies (Capitaine Pennequin and Capitaine Leboulleux respectively)
- 2/81 telegraph company (Lieutenant Beuque)
- 2/82 radio company (Capitaine Lamarche)
- 2/1 horse-drawn HQ transport company (Capitaine Parmentier)
- 102/1 motor HQ transport company (Lieutenant Davidson)
- 2/1 divisional quartermaster service (Lieutenant Lessens)
- 2<sup>nd</sup> divisional medical group (Médecin Commandant Le Guillas)

The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is defending a front of 12 km (whereas a typical infantry division is theoretically in charge of defending a front of 5-7 km) on a depth of 10 km, between the Aisne and the Retourne Rivers included, despite the fact that the division is lacking manpower. The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is attached to 5<sup>th</sup> Army, itself arrived in the area only 15 days ago. All the parks, depots and main supplies are still 80 km more south. Advanced supply depots are only being created. The division is then shifted to 4<sup>th</sup> Army, whose supplies are even not installed before the battle. The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is under the newly created 23<sup>rd</sup> Corps. Drawing this picture explains to a large extent why defensive improvement of the area is at first very limited. The divisional elements did their best in the last days before the attack and the division receives 2,020 AT mines. On the assigned front, the elements of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI previously in charge are replaced by the 127<sup>e</sup> RI. The same in the western part with the elements of the 10<sup>e</sup> DI replaced by the 33<sup>e</sup> RI. The 2<sup>e</sup> DI is in charge of the front between Château-Porcien and Biermes (these points included).

Organization of the front:

- The main resistance line (LPR = Ligne Principale de Résistance) is materialized by the southern bank of the Aisne River.
- The "stopping line" (LA = Ligne d'Arrêt) is passing by height 131, Croix l'Ermite, Mommont woods, Ternes woods, height 135 and height 154, which are organized as closed strongpoints (point d'appui) with AT guns.
- The "rear barrage" (barrage arrière) is formed by the Retoune River.

These "horizontal" lines are divided in 3 "vertical" areas ("sous-secteurs"):

- West (sous-secteur de Château Porcien) = 33<sup>e</sup> RI

- 2 battalions on the LPR and 1 battalion on the LA
- Centre (sous-secteur de Barby) = I/73<sup>e</sup> RI  
2 companies and 1 MG platoon from CRE on the LPR and 1 company on the LA
- East (sous-secteur de Rethel) = 127<sup>e</sup> RI  
2 battalions on the LPR and 1 battalion on the LA

On the Aisne, there are only 70 MGs and 150 LMGs, meaning about 1 automatic weapon every 65 meters. There is also 1 60mm or 81mm mortar every 600 meters. It is far from being sufficient. Closed hedgehogs ("points d'appui" or PA) are formed to defend the Aisne River and the canal. For example, the I/73<sup>e</sup> RI has 8 PA (between Aisne and canal, others south of the canal) defend by infantry platoons. The platoons are lacking men and are only composed by 20-25 men. These PA are separated by 300-400 meters. There is not much barbed wire, no shelter and little ammunition. Despite this situation, the 2<sup>e</sup> DI will have to face the assaults from 17.ID, 21.ID and 1.PzD.

Behind the LPR, the villages, towns, cities, woods are organized in strongpoints / hedgehogs. The points are listed below with the units in charge of the defense:

- Between Aisne and Retourne Rivers:
  - Avançon: elements from 33<sup>e</sup> RI
  - Perthes: elements from 127<sup>e</sup> RI
  - Tagnon: 1 company from III/73<sup>e</sup> RI (probably the command company)
- On and along the Retourne River:
  - Saint-Remy: elements from 234<sup>e</sup> RA
  - Bergnicourt: CHR from 33<sup>e</sup> RI and 2/1 company of sapeurs-mineurs
  - Châtelet-sur-Retourne: 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI (minus one motorcycle platoon)
  - Neufelize: 2 companies from III/73<sup>e</sup> RI
  - Alincourt: 1 company from III/73<sup>e</sup> RI and 2/2 company of sapeurs-mineurs
  - Juniville: CHR from 127<sup>e</sup> RI and other elements from 127<sup>e</sup> RI
- Between Retourne and Suippe Rivers:
  - Menil-Lépinois: CHR from 73<sup>e</sup> RI and the telegraph company
  - Aussonce: divisional medical group
- On the Suippe River:
  - Warmeriville: horse-drawn HQ transport company (Capitaine Parmentier, this company is only armed with obsolete M<sup>e</sup>1874 carbines and rifles), command squadron from 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI, 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment and horse mounted cavalry squadron from 19<sup>e</sup> GRCA
  - Vaudétré: one motorcycle platoon from 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI and one MG platoon from 73<sup>e</sup> RI
  - Heutrégiville: 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment
  - Saint-Masmes: 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment and the radio company
  - Selles: II/73<sup>e</sup> RI and 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment
  - Pont Faverger: 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment, motor HQ transport company, motorized squadrons from 19<sup>e</sup> GRCA
  - Bétheniville: motorized group Prost-Toulant (?) and 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment
- More south (out of the enclosed map, roughly at the level of Reims)
  - Epoye: 1 company from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment
  - Beine: 2 platoons from 623<sup>e</sup> pioneers regiment

Originally all the roads, trails etc. in the area between the Aisne and the Retourne Rivers are planned to be blocked but time and means were lacking to materialize that. The strongpoints are ordered to fight on the spot, even if they are encircled and to wait for counter-attacks. At the division level, the units maintained in reserve for counter-attacks are:

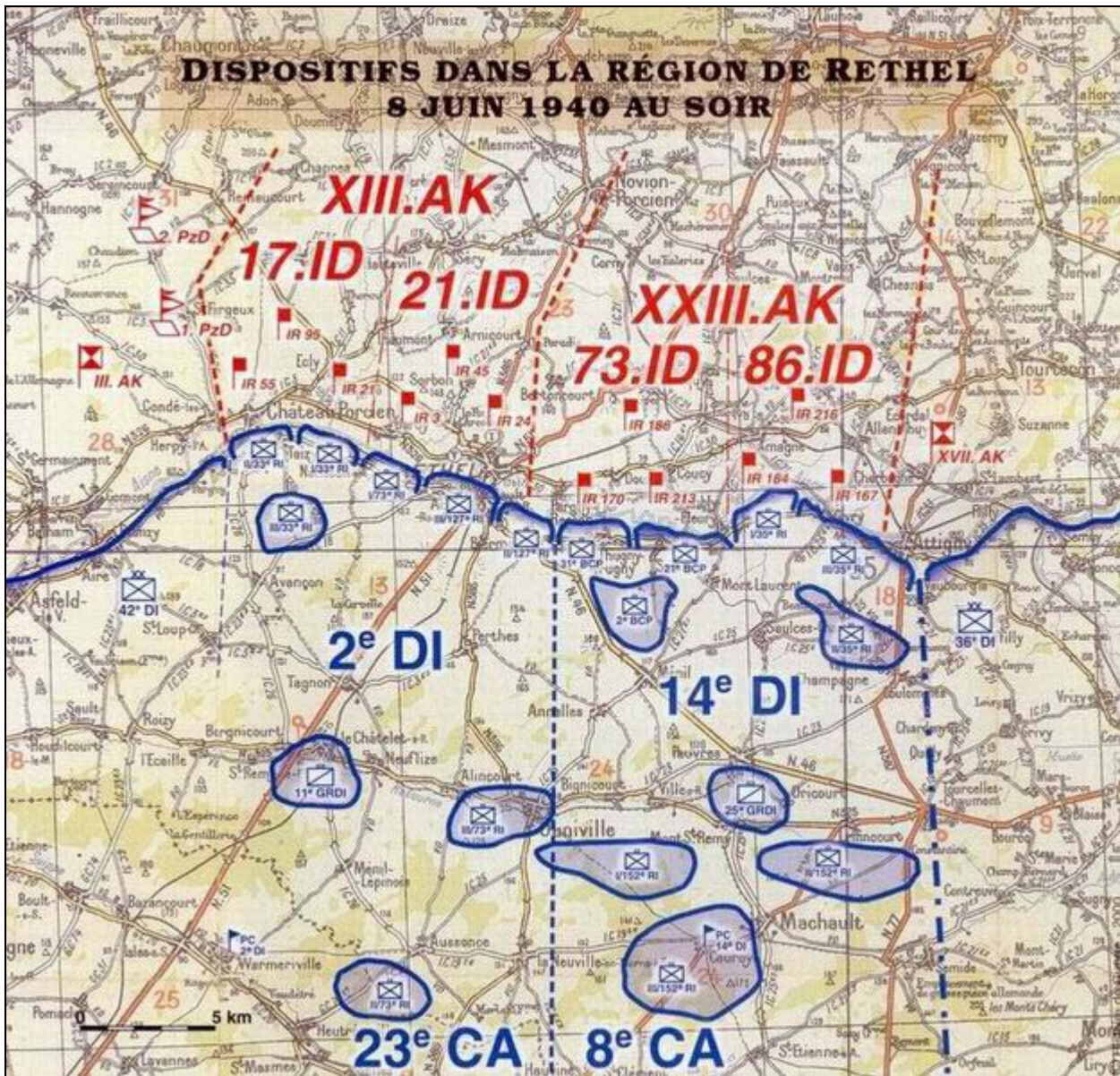
- 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI deployed at Châtelet-sur-Retourne (minus one motorcycle platoon kept in Vaudétré)
- III/73<sup>e</sup> RI deployed at Neufelize (minus one company which is in Alincourt)

Under Army Corps command the units are:

- 19<sup>e</sup> GRCA (at Warmeriville for horse mounted cavalry and Pont Faverger for motorized cavalry)
- Prost-Toulant motorized group (?) at Bétheniville



- II/73<sup>e</sup> RI at Selles
- One company from 23<sup>e</sup> BCC (Renault R35 tanks)



Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine

The whole divisional artillery is deployed between the Aisne and Retourne Rivers.

- I/34<sup>e</sup> RAD in La Cervelle and Boucher woods
- II/34<sup>e</sup> RAD in Mommont woods
- III/34<sup>e</sup> RAD in Ternes and Faisanderie woods
- The 2 groups from 234<sup>e</sup> RALD are deployed east of Saint-Loup and in the south-west part of Mommont woods.

It is reinforced by 1 battery of four 220mm C howitzers deployed in the Crayère woods, north of Bergnicourt. The Army Corps is providing two 155mm GPF batteries (8 guns) and one 105mm L M<sup>o</sup>1936 battery (4 guns) for counter-battery fire missions as well as general support to the 2<sup>e</sup> DI. The whole artillery able to act in support of the 2<sup>e</sup> DI consists therefore in 74 guns/howitzers. Note that a standard "tir d'arrêt" (stopping fire mission) can therefore be applied on only 2 km of the front, whereas the division is in charge of a front of 12 km. The 75mm field guns will have to fight on the spot against German infantry, firing canister shells at point blank range, and German tanks as well.

Concerning the anti-tank means there would be a (14<sup>th</sup>) divisional anti-tank company (CDAC, attached to 33<sup>e</sup> RI in March 1940) but I did not see mention of it in Villate's book. In the different "sous-secteurs", there are:

- West: 9x 25mm AT guns from 33<sup>e</sup> RI
- Centre: 3x 25mm AT guns from I/73<sup>e</sup> RI and 4x 25mm AT guns from the CRE of the 73<sup>e</sup> RI
- East: 9x 25mm AT guns from 127<sup>e</sup> RI



Deployed with the field artillery and in Tagnon, there are:

- The BDAC (8x 47mm SA37 AT guns)
- Several 75mm M<sup>le</sup>1897 field guns used in AT role
- 1 platoon from the CRE of the 73<sup>e</sup> RI (4x 25mm SA34 AT guns).

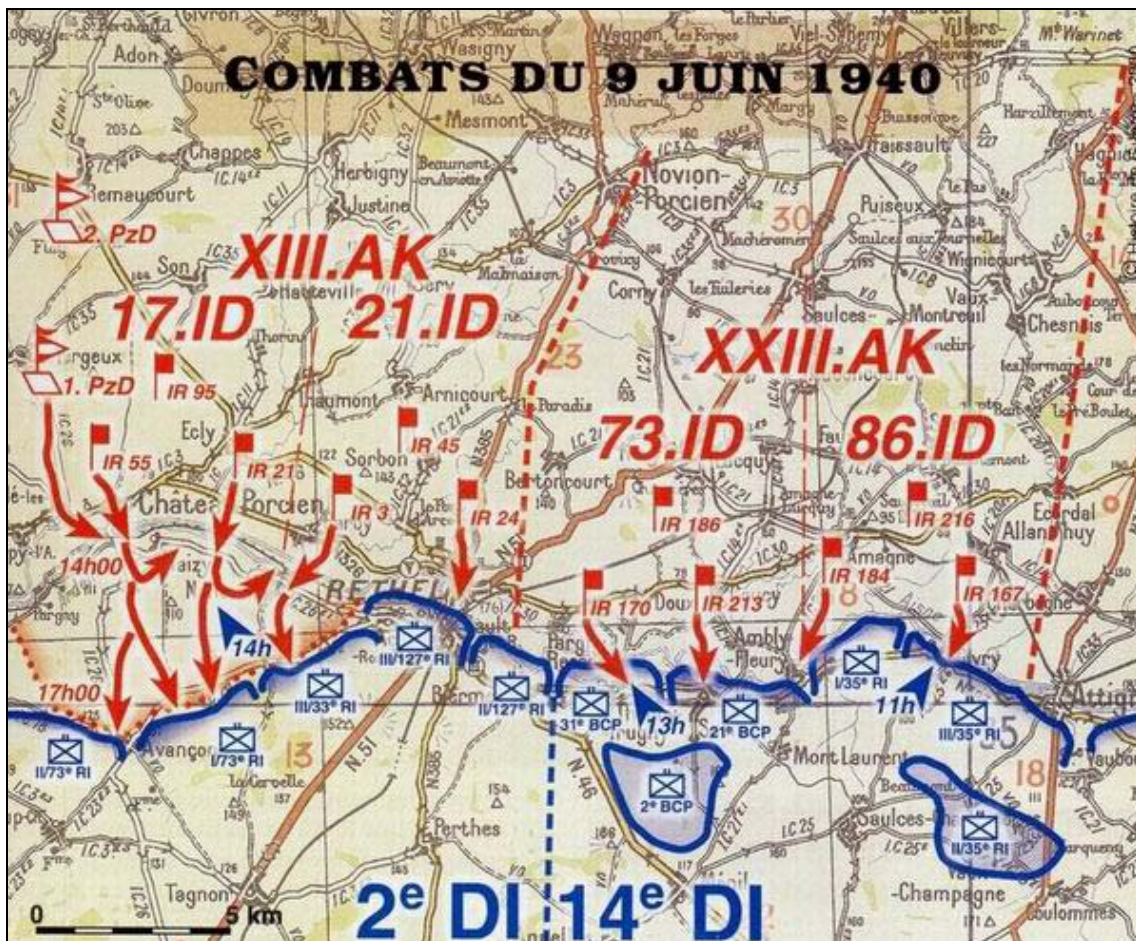
To defend the Retourne River there is mention of the 504<sup>th</sup> AT company from general reserve (12x 24mm SA34 guns probably). The positions are also reinforced by 2x 25mm AT guns from 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI (further south, in Vaudétré, on the Suipe River) and 1x 25mm AT gun from a reserve battalion.

The divisional AA battery (BDAA) is formed with the 731/409<sup>e</sup> batterie de DCA (25mm AA guns) under command of Lieutenant Puerari. It is added to the division on June 6 only. One officer, 6 NCOs and 33 men were sent to the rear on May 25 to be trained and form the core of the BDAA. It could have been efficiently deployed on the plateau between Tagnon and Perthes but it is deployed more south on the Suipe River to complete training. The infantry regiments of the division are therefore devoid of AA defense. The German omnipresent observation planes do nonetheless not dare to fly below 1,500 meters since the AA guns from the 10<sup>e</sup> DI (formerly in that area) did shot down 2 of them at low altitude.

Positions of the different HQs and command posts:

- 2<sup>e</sup> DI HQ at Vaudétré.
- West "sous-secteur" HQ at Avançon
- Centre "sous-secteur" HQ originally planned at the La Cerveille farm, but since it is already destroyed it has been moved to Tagnon
- East "sous-secteur" HQ at Perthes
- Division reserve HQ at Châtelet-sur-Retourne
- Army corps reserve HQ at Epoye

## 2. GERMAN ASSAULTS ON JUNE 9



Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine

On the Aisne River front, the 10<sup>e</sup> DI will face 3 infantry divisions (3.ID, 23.ID and 298.ID). The French 2<sup>e</sup> DI will have to stop 2 infantry divisions (17.ID and 21.ID) followed by the 1.PzD and later the 2.PzD supported by 29.ID(mot) and 52.ID. The 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 an overstretched front of 12 to 20 km.

On June 9, after an intense artillery preparation the German infantry from 17.ID and 21.ID, including assault engineers with flamethrowers, assault the 2<sup>e</sup> DI on the Aisne River. There are heavy fights in Château-Porcien and the southern part of Rethel. At first no German bridgehead can be established; at each attempt the French troops launch a vigorous counter-attack that defeats the Germans. During the afternoon two breaches will be opened and enlarged in the French lines. West of Rethel, 6 assault groups from 3.IR (21.ID) crosses the River on a lock in Nanteuil despite heavy losses. This breakthrough allows the Schützen from 3.IR to take some hills south of Nanteuil and to cut the Avançon-Rehethel road. Immediately the engineers from 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/33<sup>e</sup> RI. The garrison in Château-Porcien fights until being out of ammunition and surrenders only after violent close combats, delaying the building of an engineer bridge for about 6 hours. In the area of Avançon, elements from 33<sup>e</sup> RI are moving back and a counter-attack is decided with:

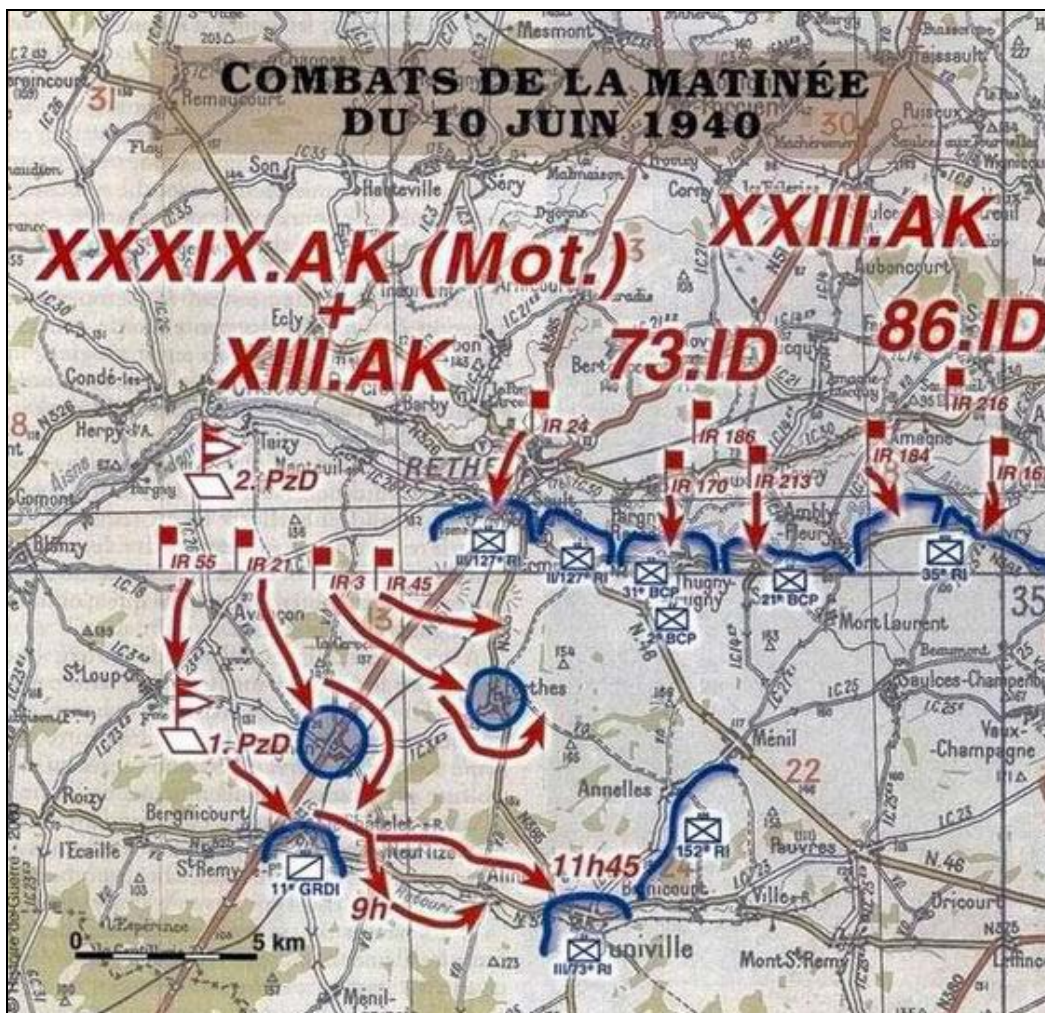
- 2 companies from II/73<sup>e</sup> RI (the rest of the battalion is maintained on the Retourne River)
- 1 Renault R35 tanks company from 23<sup>e</sup> BCC
- 2 dismounted cavalry platoons from 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI, led by Lieutenant Heysch
- And rare retreating elements from 33<sup>e</sup> RI

The whole is placed under command of Lieutenant Colonel Vivien (commander of the 33<sup>e</sup> RI). The attack is blocked at the level of Avançon and Croix l'Ermite, where it joins 75mm field guns still in position, and does not manage to push the Germans back on the other bank of the Aisne. Nine out of 13 R35 tanks are out of combat (AT guns, artillery and air support). The counter-attack manages at least to restore the contact with the 10<sup>e</sup> DI at 16:00. The troops used for the counter-attack move back to the Retourne River. Several local counter-attacks will be launched on June 9 by the 2<sup>e</sup> DI. During these attacks 63 POWs will be captured. They belong mainly to 17.ID and 21.ID, but several of them are from 73.ID and there is even one POW already from a Panzerdivision. At 7:00 the Germans 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. At 12:00 there is news that the division can receive 1,300 additional AT mines but they can hardly be brought from the depots to the front line. The II/73<sup>e</sup> RI kept in Army Corps reserve at Selles is boarded on trucks and unloaded in the woods south of the Retourne River at 21:00 on June 9. During the night, it moves north of the Retourne to reinforce the defense between La Cervelle and Châtelet. These troops reach Garenne de Saint-Loup, where they enter in contact with the enemy. Guderian is ordered to cross with the tanks as rapidly as possible and at first an attack against Tagnon is planned for 22:00. Organization problems postpone the attack to the morning of June 10. Guderian wants first to increase the bridgehead to allow all the tanks to cross the Aisne River more safely.

### 3. GERMAN ASSAULTS ON JUNE 10

On June 10, the infantry having established bridgeheads, the assault is now led by the 1.PzD (apparently reinforced to 276 tanks at the time of Fall Rot) south of Avançon (followed by the 2.PzD, but this unit might have little participation on June 10) to increase the size of the bridgehead. The German infantry is also launching an attack towards Perthes. This offensive should crush the left flank of the 14<sup>e</sup> DI and force the French to abandon Rethel 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 around 5:00 after an intense artillery preparation. There will be intense combats around the French strongpoints from 2<sup>e</sup> DI. The French troops are ordered to hold the ground even if they are encircled. The goal is to cut the tanks from the supporting infantry, if they want to push deep inside the French positions, and to wait for a counter-attack led by armoured "groupement Buisson" (3<sup>e</sup> DCr and 7<sup>e</sup> DLM). The II/73<sup>e</sup> is wiped out on the spot by the 1.PzD. The battalion manages to slightly slow down the tanks and several survivors manage to withdraw to the Retourne River. The German infantry from 17.ID is tired from the combats of June 9 and has difficulties to follow the action of the 1.PzD.





Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine

### 3.1 COMBATS ON THE RETOURNE RIVER

#### 3.1.1 LE CHATELET-SUR-RETOURNE

The town is now defended by elements of the 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI (commanded by Capitaine des Roches de Chassay) and various troops from 73<sup>e</sup> RI and 127<sup>e</sup> RI. Commandant Hennocque (commander of 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI) has transferred his HQ in the woods south of the Retourne, next to the 2/3<sup>e</sup> BCC (Renault R35 tanks). At 5:13 German tanks are coming from N/W and N/E. The 2 first AFVs explode on AT mines and crew members bailing out are killed by LMG fire. Other tanks move back. A German mechanized column including also motorcycles and trucks is engaged by French MGs at 1,500 meters. The fire is causing significant losses. At 6:30 Le Châtelet is now directly assaulted. At 10:00, a French officer from an armoured car regiment (probably belonging to the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM) arrives at the southern blockade. He leads a reconnaissance mission prior to a French counter-attack. Enemy action is slowing down; many elements are seen moving back (due to French mechanized troops?). At 18:00, the first German attack against Le Châtelet stops. After heavy artillery preparation, a second attack is launched at 19:30. German troops are progressing and moving south of the Retourne. French troops in the city are first ordered to regroup and to defend the southern part of the city. They will finally be ordered to retreat. The 2/3<sup>e</sup> BCC will cover the retreat of the 11<sup>e</sup> GRDI towards Warmeriville.

#### 3.1.2 NEUFLIZE

There are two "points-d'appui" defended by the III/73<sup>e</sup> RI (2 companies), 2x 25mm AT guns and 4x MGs. At 5:30 German tanks are spotted north of Neuflize. They attack only at 8:00 after having been reinforced by infantry. The bridge in the town cannot be destroyed because the French troops are ordered to keep it for the future counter-attack. The Germans trigger heavy artillery shelling at 7:00, under which French troops continue to add AT mines to the defenses. Around 7:30, about 150 tanks are spotted, several of them neutralized by AT mines. The 2x 25mm AT guns are both neutralized after having hit several tanks. The companies from III/73<sup>e</sup> RI are counter-attacking the Germans inside Neuflize. The blockades, which had been destroyed by the enemy, are quickly rebuilt. Three Panzers remain in the town and 2 of them are rapidly destroyed by men using AT mines. At 9:00, most of the German AFVs are seen moving east. One Panzer trying to crush a blockade is immobilized by an AT mine and finally improves the blockade.

Neuflize is now outflanked and Panzers are attacking from the south. Part of the French troops retreat to Menil-Lépinois, the 10<sup>th</sup> company (Lieutenant Leprince) remains in the town. At 11:30, Leprince tries to keep open the way to Menil-Lépinois. He launches a successful attack with 1 platoon supported by the fire of the 4 MGs. This platoon deploys 400 meters more south. Neuflize is completely in fire, the French troops are moving back but without stopping to fight. They continue to place AT mines in the tracks of the tanks in the streets. The last resistance is anchored in the Café de la Mairie, but tanks are embossed at short range and fire directly on the building. The Germans progress also in the streets using French POWs as human shields. At 18:30, Neuflize falls in German hands. The 12 last French soldiers surrender. The 1<sup>st</sup> platoon (Sergent-Chef Latour) manages to escape and will continue to fight later during the retreat of the division. A Renault R35 tank platoon from 2/3<sup>e</sup> BCC deployed in the woods on the heights behind Neuflize is engaged to cover the retreat of the infantry.

### **3.1.3 ALINCOURT**

The town is defended by Lieutenant Charlier with 2 infantry platoons from 10<sup>th</sup> company of the 73<sup>e</sup> RI and an engineer company. At 6:00 they are attacked by more than 20 tanks, which are encircling the town but remain at distance. At 10:30 a major assault is launched against Alincourt with tanks and infantry. The houses are burning. Bayonet charges are necessary to regroup the French troops in the centre of the town. Lieutenant Charlier, Sergent Priau and Caporal Sauvage are KIA during this action. Three German tanks and 2 armored cars or APCs are destroyed by soldiers using AT mines. At 12:00 the battle is over in the town. There is a last stand with several men regrouped in the marshes south of the Alincourt. It will last until 18:00.

### **3.1.4 JUNIVILLE**

The Germans reach Juniville in the morning and launch 3 unsuccessful assaults against the outnumbered but entrenched French troops. Juniville will directly benefit from the French counter-attack led by the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM. The garrison will therefore manage to withdraw at the end of the day. Juniville is in French hands until 23:45.

## **3.2 COMBATS ON THE AISNE AND BETWEEN AISNE AND RETOURNE RIVERS**

During the combat on the Retourne River, the battle continues nonetheless on the Aisne and between Aisne and Retourne Rivers.

### **3.2 1 LA CERVELLE**

During June 9-10 night, elements from III/127<sup>e</sup> RI are ordered to retreat from their emplacements on the Aisne River to restore liaison with the 73<sup>e</sup> RI around La Cervelle. Early on June 10, the Germans attack with many tanks supported by infantry. The French soldiers are grouped around Capitaine Dautel, Lieutenant Consille and Capitaine Fontaine. They have no AT weapons and lack ammunition. Lieutenant Consille and his platoon are destroyed at hill 152. Only few men manage to escape to Perthes, where they will join the French tanks from 3<sup>e</sup> DCr counter-attacking there.

### **3.2 2 THE TUNNEL AT TAGNON**

At the tunnel (rail road?) of Tagnon there are various elements from I/127<sup>e</sup> RI and other troops having retreated from Rethel. They are heavily shelled by the German artillery, whose fire is directed by spotter planes. Most of the men will be captured while trying to avoid being encircled there.

### **3.2 3 TAGNON**

Lieutenant Colonel Terrier (commander of the 73<sup>e</sup> RI) organizes the defense at Tagnon. On June 9 already, the German artillery shelled Tagnon from 5:00 to 7:15. Around 19:00, elements from 33<sup>e</sup> RI moving back are regrouped in Tagnon and integrated in the defense plan. At 21:30, trucks deliver 600 AT mines, which are stockpiled next to the church. On June 10, at 5:00 the German artillery continues to fire on Tagnon, especially on the rail station area. At 6:00, Panzers appear around Tagnon and wait for infantry and motorcycles. At 6:45 a German side-car stops in front of the PA on the south-western part of the village. An officer climbs on the blockade, shouting to the French the order to surrender. He is immediately shot. At 7:30 Tagnon is completely encircled. The German tactic, like is Neuflize is to shell the town to put all the houses on fire. German planes are also bombing Tagnon. Nonetheless, each approaching Panzer is welcomed by the fire of French AT guns. At 9:30, liaison by telephone is cut but the radio continues to inform the division about the situation and requests ammunition supplies. At 12:00 the Germans are still not able to enter in Tagnon. At 13:00 the encirclement becomes tighter. At 14:15 the last radio message is sent to the HQ: "lacking ammunition, still holding". All codes and secret papers are burned. Lieutenant Deconinck (3<sup>rd</sup> weapons company) alone destroys 5 German tanks with AT mines during the afternoon. At 16:00, out of ammunition, Lieutenant Colonel Terrier decides to stop the combat. Isolated elements will continue skirmishes during 30-60



minutes. Thanks to the stiff resistance at Tagnon, the 127<sup>e</sup> RI will be able to hold Perthes, where it will be rescued by chasseurs portés and B1bis heavy tanks from 3<sup>e</sup> DCr.

### 3.2 4 PERTHES

The German artillery starts to shell the town at 4:00. At 7:00 it appears that radio signals are only possible with the rear because close German radio sets are more powerful. Skirmishes with German tanks are beginning. At 14:00, infantry waves supported by mortars and using sometimes French POWs as human shields are launched on the 4 sides of the town. At 16:00, the Germans are incoming very close to the first houses. The 16<sup>e</sup> Bataillon de Chasseurs Portés and tanks from 3<sup>e</sup> DCr are attacking to rescue the garrison in Perthes. This counter-attack is led by a young cavalry officer: 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. Colonel Gabriel (commander of the 127<sup>e</sup> RI) orders the defenders to regroup in the southern part of Perthes and to join the French mechanized troops. Only 7 officers, 3 NCOs and 35 men are still alive. Together with the 16<sup>e</sup> BCP they will defend the town until they received the order to pull back. Thanks to this attack the 14<sup>e</sup> DI (General De Lattre) can retreat in good conditions.

### 4. COUNTER-ATTACK LED BY "GROUPEMENT BUISSON"

During the whole battle, General Klopfenstein made reports of the situation to the Army Corps and insisted to obtain the promised counter-attack as soon as possible. The local reserves of the Army Corps are not available in the area of the 2<sup>e</sup> DI, since they have been engaged more west in support of the 42<sup>e</sup> DI and 10<sup>e</sup> DI. The "groupe Buisson" (3<sup>e</sup> DCr and 7<sup>e</sup> DLM) is the single unit able to lead a counter-attack.



Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine

The 3<sup>e</sup> DCr attacks north of the Retourne and has first to cross the River. The tanks reach their base line only at 14:00. At this moment the German bridgehead's size has already considerably increased. After refuelling, the unit is ready for action at 15:00 but the attack is only launched at 17:00. The 3<sup>e</sup> DCr is split in 3 groups:

- Northern attack on the Annelles/Perthes axis (groupe Buisson of Lieutenant-Colonel Maître): 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 rifle companies from 16<sup>e</sup> BCP (bataillon de chasseurs portés). The 9 B1bis tanks are:
  - 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)

Perthes is reached at late afternoon by already exhausted troops. The 3e DCr enables and covers the retreat of the 127<sup>e</sup> RI and 14<sup>e</sup> DI at night. Heavy losses are inflicted 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 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<sup>e</sup> 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" reaches the road, crushes some German soldiers and 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. Equipment 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 20:30 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.*

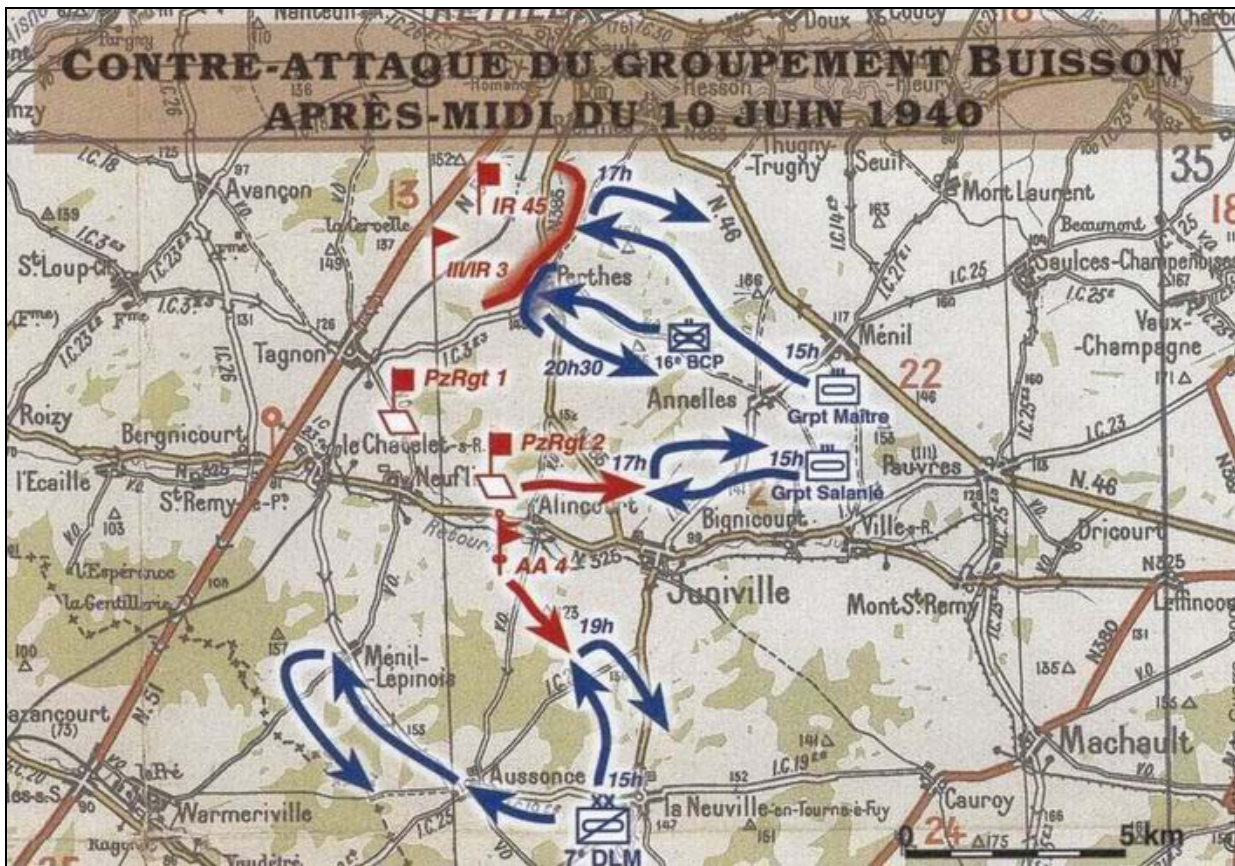
*The B1bis "Aisne" is still advancing in the German lines and destroys a German infantry squad hidden in a field. A violent shock on the hull is followed by a second one on the copula which destroys the binoculars. Lieutenant Homé is WIA and blind during several minutes. One fuel tank is also damaged and fuel is leaking on the floor. The "Aisne" pulls back in the French lines. It is more than 21:00, 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 armour. On the B1bis "Corbières" more than 100 gouges, as big as eggs, can be counted."*

- Southern attack on the Juniville/Tagnon axis (groupement of Lieutenant-Colonel Salanié) with: 25 Hotchkiss H39 (45<sup>e</sup> BCC), 10 Renault B1bis (1/41<sup>e</sup> BCC) and elements from 31<sup>e</sup> RDP (Régiment de Dragons Portés), the latter belonging to the 7<sup>e</sup> DLM. They meet elements from 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 May 15) are stopped next to Pommery farm. The company is encircled at 19:00 by tanks from Pz.Rgt.2, AT guns and field guns used in direct fire. The 1/41<sup>e</sup> BCC has to assault the German troops. Four Renault B1bis are put out of combat: "Silvaner", "Volnay", "Vauquois" and "Maury".
- A few B1bis tanks from the 3/41<sup>e</sup> BCC remain in Annelles as protection and take not part to the attack.





Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine

The 10° BCC (40 Renault R35) is attached to the 7° DLM (General Marteau). It counter-attacks earlier in the afternoon and south of the Retourne River, towards Menil-Lépinos and Juniville in order to block the German movement to the south. The armoured means include 96 tanks (40 Renault R35, 22 Hotchkiss H35, 20 Hotchkiss H39 and 14 AMR 33/35 light tanks) and 10 Panhard 178 armored cars. But only 65 tanks actually took part (including only 20 with the 37mm SA38 gun, the others have the weaker 37mm SA18 gun). It clashes with the 1.PzD and the following combat turns in favour of the Germans, but they are also exhausted and out of supply. The French troops can regroup and reorganize on the Menil-Lépinos – Aussonce – La Neuville line. At the end of June 10, several towns are still fighting on the Retourne River.



Source: "Histoire de Guerre" magazine



The French mechanized counter-attacks are launched without artillery or air support. The movements of the "groupement Buisson" are spotted by the Luftwaffe and will also be largely stopped by field and AA guns deployed in anti-tank role by the 21.ID.

The whole 2<sup>e</sup> DI is ordered to retreat because the road to Reims is threatened. The divisional artillery has largely been wiped out, often in close combats, during June 9-10. The VI/234<sup>e</sup> RALD will continue to fire on the Mommont woods on June 10, before scuttling and abandoning the last howitzers. Only 3x 155mm C M<sup>le</sup>1917 will remain with the division on June 11.

Behind the 2<sup>e</sup> DI, the 235<sup>e</sup> DLI (9<sup>e</sup> RI, 108<sup>e</sup> RI)\* is engaged as well to support the retreats and hold the front. The 9<sup>e</sup> RI is part of this weak division lacking men and weapons. Its operations are very detailed in the last reference listed in the sources but should probably be the subject of another summary. This regiment will have to defend a front of 9 km against a frontal attack from 2.PzD, 3.ID and 52.ID. The main combats will take place around Milan farm (against PzRgt 4), Epoye (against PzRgt 3, Schützen-Regiment 2 and 52.ID) and Saint-Masmes (52.ID). The line on the Suipe River is also organized by retreating troops. The very hard battle fought on June 9-10 up to close quarters and hand to hand combats led to very heavy casualties in all the units of the 2<sup>e</sup> DI. The Germans systematically put the towns on fire. On the other side, the Germans sustained heavy losses as well. Roughly 3,500 Germans were KIA on the Aisne River on June 9-10.

#### Sources:

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- "Le lion des Flandres à la guerre. La 2<sup>e</sup> Division d'Infanterie pendant la campagne de 1939-1940." (Colonel Robert Villat)
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