

IMAGES OF WAR

ARMoured WARFARE AND THE FALL OF FRANCE 1940

RARE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM WARTIME ARCHIVES



ANTHONY TUCKER-JONES



Triumphant panzertruppen seated on their Czech-built PzKpfw 38(t).

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Introduction

It was in the summer of 1940 that the myth of the invincibility of Adolf Hitler's Panzerwaffe and Luftwaffe was truly created. Nothing could withstand the combined power of the panzer and the Stuka dive-bomber – all fell before them in a state of sheer panic. In short succession Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium and then France fell under the Nazi jackboot. Swallowing up Germany's smaller neighbours was one thing, but France should have been a much more indigestible meal for the Nazi war machine. Protected by the Maginot Line, with a large reasonably well-equipped conscript army and backed by sizeable overseas colonial forces, the average French citizen felt secure in his bed through the anxious months of the Phoney War of 1939.

At 2100hr on 9 May 1940 Codeword Danzig was issued alerting Hitler's airborne troops that they were about to spearhead an attack on Belgium and the Netherlands. The following day the Nazi Blitzkrieg rolled forward striking the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) and the French 1st, 7th and 9th Armies in Belgium and the French 2nd Army in northern France at Sedan. Belgian, British, Dutch and French attempts to stem the Nazi tide proved futile and while the Allies enjoyed a minor success at Arras, once their reserves had been exhausted and their remaining forces cut off, Paris lay open.

It was all over by early June when the trapped British, Belgian and French troops were forced to evacuate Dunkirk, Calais and Boulogne. The Germans then battled their way south and by 10 June were across the Somme. At this point Italian dictator Benito Mussolini attacked southern France, and twelve days later the humiliated French Army agreed to an armistice leaving the country divided in two.

What is so remarkable about the Fall of France is that only a year earlier the French Army was considered to be the strongest in the world. In reality, as subsequent events proved, it was fatally flawed; first, since the bloodletting of the First World War it was very short of manpower; and secondly, the French looked to the success of their earlier defensive actions against the Germans to formulate their defence policy. The heroic defence of Verdun loomed large in the French psyche.

In the aftermath of the First World War the French and German Armies became a product of the economic, political and social upheavals of the 1930s. While the

dynamic German armed forces became an instrument of revenge with which to punish those who had imposed the Treaty of Versailles, the moribund French armed forces remained a static defensive weapon. The Nazis arose from the ashes of the feeble Weimar Republic determined to restore national pride and Germany's military power.

Meddling in the Spanish Civil War allowed Germany, and Russia for that matter, to test out their new tanks. These were not the lumbering support tanks of the First World War but something entirely new – an overtly offensive weapon that could pierce an enemy's defensive line then turn his flank. French military experts led by Charles de Gaulle knew that they must keep up with this new military theory or face the consequences. Warfare is not just about having the equipment to conduct war, it is knowing how to use it to its maximum effect. The Fall of France in 1940 proved a salutary lesson in this.

While France may have been reasonably ahead in the arms race it lost the concepts race. During the early 1930s, while Secretary General of the Council for National Defence, Charles de Gaulle developed his idea of an armoured division supported by a tactical air force. When he published his book *The Army of the Future* the French were not receptive but the Germans took a great interest in his theories. In 1935 the first panzer division was formed exactly along the lines de Gaulle envisaged.

It was not until late 1938 that the French War Council decided to equip two armoured divisions on the de Gaulle pattern. By then it was far too late, the Germans mustered twelve hard-hitting panzer divisions. Hitler had made his plans and so had his Italian accomplice Mussolini. General de Gaulle was commanding the tanks of the French 5th Army in Alsace when the panzers invaded Poland. He can only have despaired as his ideas came to pass in the hands of France's traditional enemy.

Britain was in a similar position. While the British military were keen enthusiasts of the tank following their experiences at Amiens in 1918, cost and the country's love affair with mounted cavalry greatly slowed progress. Like the French the British developed two kinds of armoured force: the fast-moving, all-arms groups that were the basis for future armoured divisions and tank battalions assigned an infantry support role.

In 1937 it was decided to equip a number of British cavalry regiments with tanks instead of expanding the existing Tank Corps. While tank enthusiasts such as Captain Liddell Hart and Generals Fuller and Hobart designed and trained tank units that were unique in concept and technical proficiency only a very few were experienced in mechanised warfare.

Hitler wanted to attack France as soon as possible to secure his western borders in the wake of defeating Poland in September 1939 before then turning east again to tackle Russia. However, he was informed that it would take months to refit his

panzers. Nearly every single vehicle needed an overhaul and depleted ammunition stocks were insufficient to ensure victory over the French Army.

After six months Hitler invaded Norway and Denmark on 9 April 1940. The outnumbered Danes offered virtually no resistance, but the Norwegians (with belated British and French military assistance) lasted until early June. France and the Low Countries (the Netherlands and Belgium) now braced themselves for the inevitable German attack.

Ironically from the very start on 10 May 1940 both the Germans and the Allies played out Hitler's envisaged campaign to perfection. The moment the German offensive commenced the Allies drove north to confront Army Group B, which in the event overran the Netherlands in the space of just five days. In Belgium other units of Army Group B shoved the Allies back after securing Belgium's much-vaunted strongpoint Fort Eben Emael. As all this played out Hitler and his generals rubbed their hands together. Now that the Allies were committed in the Low Countries and with the French Maginot garrison pinned down, Army Group A smashed through the Ardennes to reach the French coast in a mere ten days.

In the Low Countries there was a strong pro-German sentiment. In the Netherlands this extended well beyond the country's German-speaking minority. Likewise in Belgium the, dominant French-speaking Walloon population was constantly discriminated against by the Flemish population who had more sympathy for Germany than France. In 1936 King Leopold of Belgium cancelled his country's defence treaty with France to win favour with the Germans. On top of this the Dutch and Belgian Armies were weak and disorganised.

The Dutch, in as much as they had a defensive plan, intended to abandon the north-east of their country and form a bastion around the key cities of The Hague, Amsterdam and Rotterdam and wait for help. In the event this would consist of three French divisions; two of which were landed on the islands of Beveland and Walcheren at the mouth of the Scheldt from where they could do little to impede the Germans; another was sent to link up with the Dutch Army, but unable to get through turned back without firing a shot. The Dyle Line was never defended with the Allies barely reaching it before turning back to meet the threat of a panzer breakthrough in their rear. On 15 May the Dutch surrendered.

Defence talks between French and Belgian officers in late 1939 and early 1940 came to nothing. In fact in April 1940 the Belgians flatly refused to give the French permission to inspect the defensive line on the River Dyle just to the east of Brussels. When the Belgian King finally agreed to integrate the command of his Army with the British and the French on 12 May 1940 it was too late. The French were preoccupied with the threat to their own country and the Allies wanted Belgian troops to withdraw

to defend France. Belgian soldiers resisted until 27 May, when having been abandoned by their Allies they surrendered. Britain and France who had started the war together on 2 September 1939 found themselves once more alone, their reluctant allies having fallen by the way side.

The defeat of France at the hands of Nazi Germany was swift and humiliating. The very strong, but poorly led, French Army exhausted its reserves trying to stem Adolf Hitler's relentless armoured Blitzkrieg and was simply unable to defend Paris. In a desperate attempt to slice through Hitler's spearhead General Charles de Gaulle, with about three tank battalions, launched an unsuccessful counterattack at Montcornet. Despite this gallant effort it was only a matter of time before the inevitable French surrender.

Once it had turned north Army Group A was able to assist Army Group B drive the cornered Allies into a pocket around Lille on 24 May 1940. Three days later the left flank of the salient dissolved when the Belgian defenders surrendered and by 30 May the remaining Allied forces were hemmed in behind a 7-mile wide, last ditch perimeter around the port of Dunkirk. The British Army had little option but to escape back over the English Channel.

During late May and early June the British, French and Belgian defenders at Dunkirk held on while over ¼ million British and 112,000 French and Belgian troops were evacuated to Britain during Operation Dynamo. The success of the latter in part has to be attributed to the actions of 'Frankforce' at Arras, in the debacle that was the 1940 French Campaign this shines out as one of the few bright moments. Shortly after the Germans entered Paris without a fight and French morale collapsed completely. An armistice was signed on 22 June 1940 leaving a divided and humiliated France.

Photograph Sources

The purpose of this title is to present a visual account of the very swift and dramatic fall of France in May 1940, providing a graphic record of the destruction wrought by Hitler's successful Blitzkrieg through both the Low Countries and France.

To that end over 180 contemporary photographs have been carefully selected to illustrate how France fell in the space of just 6 weeks. While the main focus of the images is the tanks and other armoured fighting vehicles of both sides, the much wider aspects of the war are also covered, and this is reflected in the accompanying text.

The photos contained in this book have been drawn from the author's extensive military history picture library built up over the last three decades. He hopes the reader enjoys the following selection, which is designed to offer some insight into one of the highly decisive opening campaigns of the Second World War.

Chapter One

Finest Tanks in Europe

By 1940 France had mobilised one-third of its male population from the ages of 20 to 45, which gave the French armed forces a total manpower of 5 million men. Less than half this number served in northern France, but was boosted by well over 1½ million British troops by June 1940. The Dutch and Belgians were able to field 400,000 and 650,000 men respectively.

The French Army was organised into 117 divisions, the British Army contributed 13, the Belgians 22, Dutch 10 and exiled Poles 2 divisions. In total they were able to deploy about 14,000 artillery pieces, nearly double that of the Germans. The French Army was divided into three army groups in the north; the 2nd and 3rd Army Groups held the Maginot Line to the east, while the 1st Army Group in the west was to move forward to defend the Low Countries should the need arise.

France's key mobile forces were 1st Army's Cavalry Corps consisting of the 2nd and 3rd Light Mechanised Divisions plus four mechanised infantry divisions, 2nd Army's 2nd and 5th Light Cavalry Divisions, 7th Army's 1st Light Mechanised Division and two motorised infantry divisions plus the 9th Army's the 1st and 4th Light Cavalry Divisions.

Notably the French 7th Army, reinforced by one of the light mechanised divisions, was to move into the Netherlands via Antwerp. To the south was the BEF tasked with advancing to the Dyle Line to the right of the Belgian Army between Louvain to Wavre. The French 1st Army, with two light mechanised divisions and an armoured division in reserve, was to hold the Gembloux Gap between Wavre and Namur. The French 9th Army covering the entire Meuse sector between Namur and Sedan was also to support the move into Belgium.

The French High Command did not believe the panzers would attempt the dense Ardennes forest. Although both French and Belgian intelligence warned of a German build-up in this region, the weak French 2nd Army found itself acting as the hinge for the Allies' move-forward, defensive strategy. This army comprised just five divisions, two of which were over age reservist units and another was a West African division from Senegal. Disastrously, with its weak manpower and lack of anti-aircraft, anti-tank

weapons and air support, the French 2nd Army was right in the path of the panzers attack at Sedan.

At the beginning of the Second World War despite popular perceptions France had some of the finest tanks in the world, and French armour was certainly equal in quality and quantity to that of the Germans. France's military collapse in May 1940 occurred not because of poor tank resources but the inability to use them effectively in containing the Wehrmacht's Blitzkrieg tactics. During the First World War France had almost been the very first country to produce the tank and was only just beaten by Britain. Its early assault artillery, little more than guns in steel boxes, was at best crude but led to the highly successful Renault FT-17 light tank. A new production programme during the rearmament of the 1930s ensured France had far more sophisticated tanks than Britain or Germany and with better armament.

While the Allies, particularly the Belgians and the Dutch, had very little armour, the French had 3,254 tanks. This force was not only larger than that of the Germans but also of a better quality. On paper French tanks were superior to Hitler's Panzer Mk I and Mk II, both the French B1-bis and the Somua had better armour and their guns packed a bigger punch. By June 1940 just over 400 B1 and B1-bis and 430 Somua S-35s had been built. General Gamelin, commander of the French armed forces, admitted after the Second World War that the French tank force was vastly better equipped to deal with German tanks than the Germans were to deal with French ones. At the time it did them no good whatsoever.

Most notably the Char de Bataille Renault B1-bis armed with a 47mm turret gun, a powerful 75mm hull gun and two machine guns was on paper an impressive piece of kit. The 47mm was the best weapon of its kind at the time and the tank's steering system was ahead of anything the Germans had. The 1st Panzer Division discovered how ineffective its 20mm and 37mm guns were against the thickly armoured Char B1-bis around Juniville. A 2-hour tank battle resulted in heavy German casualties before they prevailed. Similarly a second French tank attack was driven off with difficulty. The B1s were able to give a good account of themselves, but generally they saw little action against the invading panzers.

At the outbreak of war France's tank forces consisted of two very different formations: the Chars de Combat (the Army's original tank formations) and the regiments of former horsed cavalry. Although Lieutenant Colonel Charles de Gaulle had argued for a professional mobile armoured force made up of career soldiers rather than conscripts, in 1934 the French government was not receptive to such radical ideas.

Such a concept ran counter to France's defensive policy and even when two armoured divisions were authorised they were not ready for battle until 1940.

Crucially this meant France's armoured strength was dissipated. Apart from the armoured divisions equipped with the Char B and the fast Hotchkiss H-39 light tank, most of the tank battalions were deployed on infantry support duties. When it came to French infantry tanks they were hampered by inadequate speed, communications, range and the size of the turret.

However, France pioneered the first armoured division with the Division Légère Mécanique (DLM – light mechanised division) combining tanks, armoured cars, motorised infantry and artillery. Like many of other countries in 1940, France's cavalry consisted of some units still mounted on horses while others were wholly mechanised. Notably in the mid-1930s France created two entirely motorised and armoured light divisions, which were equipped with the brand new Somua S-35. In reality while dubbed 'light', these well-equipped units were equivalent to a German panzer division, with 300 armoured vehicles including 190 tanks. A third DLM was created in early 1940 and a fourth ended up as part of the 'de Gaulle Force'.

In 1939 the French Army formed the Division Cuirassée (DCR), its first real tank division and by the following year had three DLMs and four DCRs. The Char B1 tank, supported by some of the older Char D2, constituted the main striking force of the DCR, while the H-35/39, R-35 and S-35 tanks equipped the DLM and the light battalions of the DCR.

While the French had some excellent tanks, the myriad of different types compared to Germany understandably proved a logistical headache. For example, French ordnance officers were faced with tanks ranging from the tiny Renault FT, through the modern Somua S-35 to the heavy Char B. Also the design of French tanks resulted in crews feeling isolated from each other.

Ultimately it was the French insistence on breaking up their tank force into penny packets that greatly aided the Germans. While France could field around 3,000 tanks, 500 were in units in the process of forming and others were in reserve. The light mechanised and new armoured divisions accounted for 1,292, the rest were split up among the infantry divisions.

French infantry divisions were supported by armoured battalions of around 100 tanks which were clearly too weak to provide any real punch. To make matters worse few French tanks had radios and those that did found that they were frustratingly unreliable. Coupled with this the general slowness of French tanks meant that the panzers would run circles round them.

The French mindset was to treat tanks as armoured cavalry using them for reconnaissance and screening work. Added to this was a lack of training and importantly tank radios. The failure to coordinate effectively with the rest of the French Army was to have one simple outcome. When war came France's armoured

units were too dispersed in defensive formations, air cover was non-existent (thousands of French aircraft remained at safe airfields) and French anti-tank guns remained in storage.

On 2 September 1939 Colonel de Gaulle was appointed to command the tanks of the French 5th Army. This force, sheltered by the Maginot Line, covered Alsace with its headquarters in Wangenbourg south of Saverne. Instead of an armoured division, which he had so long lobbied for, de Gaulle's units consisted of five scattered battalions equipped with R-35 tanks. On 12 September some of his tanks went into action for the first time when one or two companies launched a raid on Shweix, a German frontier post near the camp at Bitche in front of the Maginot Line.

It was not until just before the German invasion had commenced that de Gaulle was appointed to command and organise the new French 4th Armoured Division. Frustratingly for de Gaulle on 15 May 1940 he was only able to gather three tank battalions, less than a third of his armoured strength and less than half his officers. He was expected to launch a counterattack with this force and in the process lost a quarter of his tanks to mines, anti-tank weapons and Stukas. The heavy French B1- bis under major Bescond gave the 1st Panzer Division a nasty surprise but the intervention of 10th Panzer and the death of the major forced them to retreat.

In terms of infantry units, the 14th Infantry Division was purportedly one of the best in the French army. General de Lattre de Tassigny took command in January 1940 of this 'active' rather than reserve formation recruited mostly from Alsace. It consisted of two infantry regiments, a demi-brigade of Chasseurs, a reconnaissance group and divisional artillery. Like so many units, de Lattre found the division afflicted by the general malaise infecting the French Army, namely apathy, inadequate welfare services and allowing the Germans to take the initiative when it came to patrolling the front. Fortunately for the 14th Division de Lattre was a man of action and he set about shaking his command up. Like all infantry divisions, its anti-tank capabilities were not very good.

In 1940 the best anti-tank gun available to the Allies was the venerable French Puteaux '75', which was not designed as an anti-tank gun and was vulnerable to superior German field artillery. This was still the standard French field gun in 1940 and various upgrades had improved its range and cross-country mobility. The '75' was the first modern quick-firing field gun and its appearance in 1897 heralded a revolution in the design and capability of artillery (an on-carriage recoil system, one-piece round, shield and quick-action breech). By 1914 although the Puteaux was a superior direct fire weapon, tactically it was obsolete because its low trajectory was ineffective against targets concealed by folds in the ground or field works.

Most of France's medium and heavy guns were mainly late First World War or

immediate postwar models. In keeping with the French preference for positional warfare there was a notable lack of mobility with the larger calibre guns. In addition French gunners lacked tactical flexibility, target-spotting techniques and were slow to concentrate their fire. The French firms St Chamond and Schneider pioneered the development of self-propelled guns during the First World War and some of these such as the 194mm self-propelled gun saw combat during the battle for France. However, lacking armour and being slow they were easily outmanoeuvred by the panzers or knocked out by German dive-bombers.

In the air the Allies theoretically had numerical superiority in fighter aircraft but most were obsolete types and the Allies were in reality outnumbered in part because of the chronic serviceability of French aircraft. The French Armée de l'air could field 1,562 aircraft while RAF fighter command contributed 680 and RAF Bomber Command 392. The Germans were able to pit 836 Bf 109s against 764 French, 261 British and 81 Belgian fighters. Of these only the French Dewoitine D.520 and British Hawker Hurricane were capable of taking on the German Messerschmidt Bf 109.

The Dewoitine D.520, which first appeared in 1938, was easily the best French fighter at the time of the German invasion. Unfortunately from an overall order of 2,320, only 36 D.250s had been delivered by 10 May 1940. Production continued and the D.250 Groupes de Chasse of the Armée de l'air claimed 114 victories and 39 probables for the loss of 85 aircraft. In contrast the morane-Saulnier MS.406, which in terms of numbers was the most important French fighter in service, fared poorly in combat with the Bf 109. About 150 MS.406 were lost in action and up to 300 through other causes. America moved to assist the Armée de l'air during the Phoney war taking orders for 140 American Curtiss P-40 Kittyhawk fighters and 370 Douglas Boston DB-7 attack bombers, but they were not delivered in time and diverted to the RAF instead.



French Renault FT-17 light tanks on parade in the mid-1930s. During the First World War France helped pioneer armoured warfare with the Schneider and St Chamond assault tanks. The subsequent two-man FT-17 went into service with the French Army in 1918 and was widely exported and copied round the world. The standard production model was armed with a 37mm Puteaux gun and around 1,600 were still in use in 1940 making up half of the French tank fleet, although by then they were completely obsolete.



The Char B1 heavy tank, seen here in side profile and head-on, in contrast was a much better proposition as its thick armour could withstand everything except the German 88mm gun. Like the Italian M11/39 and the later American M3 Grant/Lee tanks, its main armament was hull-mounted, thereby greatly limiting its traverse. While the principal weapon was a 75mm gun, it also carried a 47mm gun in the turret, making it one of the most formidable tanks in service. About 365 of the final production model, known as the Char B1-bis, had been built by 1940, which were issued to the four French armoured divisions and independent tank companies.





Likewise the Char Somua S-35 medium tank was well armoured with good mobility and firepower. Its turret was identical to that of the B1-bis and D2 tanks armed with the 47mm SA 35 gun and a 7.5mm Model 31 coaxial machine gun. This meant it had the usual disadvantage in that the commander had to also act as the gunner and loader during combat. About 500 had been built by the time of the German invasion.