

Rommel's Second "Meusing"

Seventh Panzer Cross at Dinant & Houx, Belgium- May 1940 Part 2

Continued from the
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12th May

At 2 am on the morning of the 12th, Corap's cavalry received orders to retire behind the Meuse. This was achieved without too much difficulty, except for the nuisance caused by the ongoing Belgian demolitions. At Crupet, a railway bridge was accidentally blown while a squadron of the 31st Dragoons were passing, causing a number of injuries. The 4th DLC crossed the Meuse at several points in the II Corps area, while 1st DLC crossed at Dinant and regions south. Everything went according to plan, with the 1st Armored Car Regiment fighting a rearguard action to allow the rest of the 1st DLC to cross the river. The division commander, General Jaques d'Arras crossed the Meuse with his staff at Dinant at about 1 pm, and the 1st Armoured Car Regiment had finished crossing at 4 pm that afternoon.

Meanwhile, 7th Panzer had continued to forge ahead, with 5th Panzer's *Kampfgruppe* Werner keeping pace. *Kampfgruppe* Lubbe had fallen behind and its route was then loaned to the 7th Panzer. Due to the speed of



the advance and the need to capture the Meuse bridges intact, *Kampfgruppe* Werner was subordinated to Rommel's command until the Meuse was reached. Unfortunately, the Meuse River bridges were destroyed before Panzer elements could cross, the railway bridge at Houx being blown at 2:45 pm, the road bridge at Dinant at 4:20 pm, and the road bridge at Bouvigne less than ten minutes after that. In addition, General Martin of XI Corps had taken 2nd Battalion, 39th Regiment from 5th Motorised division from General Bouffet's II Corps and transferred it to the hill opposite Houx. Here the battalion would defend the hilltop village of Grange.

Things were now beginning to go wrong for the defenders. Corap had

assumed he would have at least 5 days to reorganise his defence, and in the event he had only two.

Communications were terrible, and morale was low. The 2nd/39th chose to remain encamped on the crest of the hill overlooking the Isle of Houx rather than defend the valley right down to the bank of the river. This would later prove to be a serious mistake. Additionally, the 18th Infantry division, tasked with holding the Meuse between Anhee and Hastiere (which included the Houx - Dinant region) had only some of its artillery as well as five of its nine infantry battalions in position. Those units that were in place were exhausted from a 55 mile march to the front. A number of the pillboxes at the waters edge were locked, and the keys passed to officers of 53rd Infantry division, who

were actually deployed to the south, and so a number of pillboxes remained unoccupied.

By contrast, Rommel's response to the situation was characteristically decisive. As Hans von Luck, of 37th Reconnaissance Battalion records: "Rommel appeared among us, as so often in the following weeks, in order to form personally a picture of the situation. He arrived in his armoured car, specially equipped with radio gear. "What's going on?" he asked. "Held up by artillery fire," we replied. "Show me. Where is the fire coming from?" Standing in his armoured car, he studied the opposite bank with his binoculars. He was calm and steady, giving no sign of uncertainty or nervousness. Within minutes he made his decision. "Stay put," he told us. "This is a job for the infantry."

13th May

During the early hours of the 13th May, Rommel's attack got under way, with 7th Panzergrenadier Regiment crossing at Dinant, and the 6th regiment crossing between Leffe and Houx. When Rommel arrived on the scene of the 6th Regiment's crossing he found the situation: "None too pleasant. Our boats were being destroyed one after the other by the French flanking fire and the crossing eventually came to a standstill. The enemy infantry were so well con-



cealed that they were impossible to locate even after a long search through glasses. A smoke screen in the Meuse valley would have prevented these infantry doing so much harm. But we had no smoke unit. So I now gave orders for a number of houses in the valley be set alight in order to supply the smoke we lacked."

Driving along the valley to 7th Regiment, Rommel found they had succeeded in getting a company across to the west bank, but the enemy fire had them become so heavy that their crossing equipment had been shot to pieces and the crossing had to be halted. Realising that without powerful artillery and tank support the crossing could not continue, Rommel then drove to division headquarters to talk with the army commander General von Kluge, and the corps commander General Hoth. After making the necessary arrangements, Rommel returned to Leffe and the 6th Regiment to find that:

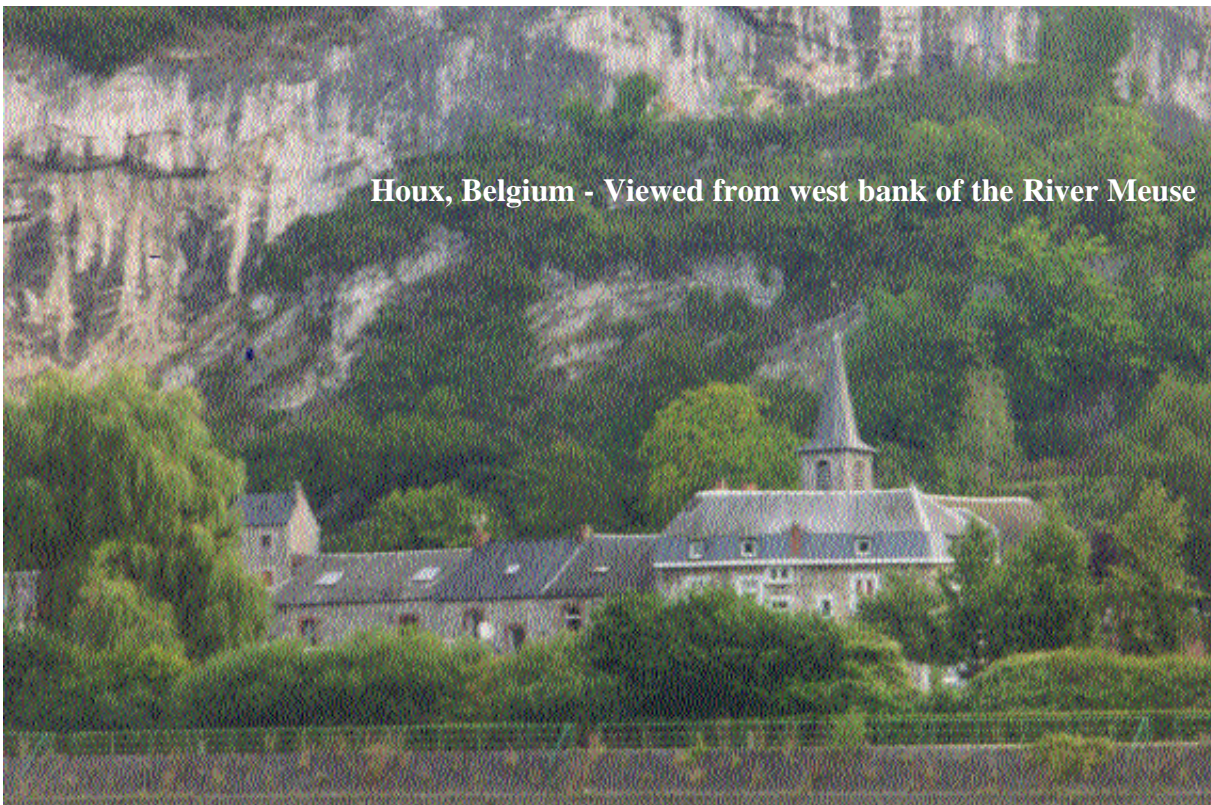
"...the crossing had come to a complete standstill, with the officers badly shaken by the casualties which their men had suffered."

Fortunately the tanks Rommel requested then arrived, along with two field howitzers from Battalion



Crassemann. All points capable of holding enemy riflemen were brought under fire. Soon the aimed fire of all weapons was pouring into rocks and buildings. Several well placed howitzer shells destroyed a pillbox on the Bouvigne bridge ramp. The tanks, with turrets traversed left, drove slowly north at 50 metres' spacing, closely watching the opposite slopes. "Under cover of this fire the crossing slowly got going again, and a cable ferry using several large pontoons was started. Rubber boats paddled backwards and forwards and brought back the wounded from the west bank." Returning to 7th Regiment, Rommel took personal command of 2nd Battalion and crossed with it to the aid of the company on the west bank. Moving north through a deep gorge, Rommel and his men came to the position of Company Enkefort. As they arrived, there came a warning of French tanks advancing to the front. Lacking antitank weapons, Rommel directed the company to pour small arms fire on the armoured vehicles, which then retired. By now it was the afternoon of the 13th and the crossing was a day old.

Meanwhile, during the night of



Houx, Belgium - Viewed from west bank of the River Meuse

including Rommel himself who was hit in the cheek by a small shell splinter.

15th May

The following day, the 15th, 7th Panzer penetrated as far as Philippeville, 15 miles beyond the Meuse. Rommel's panzers were now striking deep into the rear of the 9th Army. Near Flavion, 7th Panzer burst upon the tanks of the French 1st Tank division just as they were refuelling. A

12th/13th May, 5th Panzer had failed in their attempt to cross the Meuse by boat at Yvoir to the north. By contrast, motorcyclists of 5th Panzer's 8th Reconnaissance Battalion had succeeded in crossing the weir linking Houx with the Isle de Houx and the far bank. This infiltration quickly occupied the undefended river bank directly below the positions of the French 2nd/39th Motorised battalion. In addition to being a defensive blind spot, this position also lay on the boundary between General Jean Bouffet's II Corps and General Julien Martin's XI Corps. Oberst Werner quickly sent three battalions of panzer-grenadiers across to reinforce the bridgehead. The 7th Motorcycle Battalion of 7th Panzer division also crossed, and were able to capture Grange.

On the evening of 13th May Rommel ordered that tanks be ferried across into the bridgehead and by dawn 15 had been transported across. Additionally, the engineers had thrown a bridge across the river near Lefte, and a further 15 tanks had

crossed that way. These joined 20 antitank guns of the 42nd Antitank Battalion under the command of Colonel Mickl.

That night the 7th Motorcycle Battalion in Grange beat off a determined attack by French units, the German battalion commander being wounded and his adjutant killed.

14th May

By dawn on the 14th, the advance guard of 7th Panzer under the command of Colonel von Bismark had reached Onhaye, 2 miles west of Dinant. Triumphantly signalling that he had "arrived", von Bismark's message was miscoded and sent as "encircled". Rommel immediately sent all tanks available on the west bank of the river to von Bismark's aid. The attack was led by Colonel Rothenberg, commander of Panzer Regiment 25, with Rommel following close behind in a Panzer III. Onhaye quickly fell, with 25th Panzer Regiment suffering a few casualties,

sharp engagement ensued, with all German tank and antitank rounds simply bouncing off the French Char B tanks. As at the Meuse River crossing, it was howitzers, brought up and firing over open sights, which decided the day. Shortly after, 5th Panzer started their attack from the north, and the Char B tanks were quickly overrun. Although held up briefly, 7th Panzer were soon on their way again, catching and shattering the 4th African division at Philippeville.

17th May

By the morning of the 17th Rommel had progressed as far as Le Chateau and French soil, having performed a risky night march based on Rommel's judgement that the French formations could no longer offer any resistance. Meanwhile, the panzers of Guderian's XIX Corps were pacing Rommel's troops. When Guderian's 2nd Panzer division reached the English Channel at Noyelles-sur-Mer, around 8:00 pm on 20th May, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the fall of France were

inevitable.

By Christopher J Harrod

Acknowledgements

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