

Rommel's Second "Meusing"

Seventh Panzer Cross at Dinant & Houx, Belgium- May 1940 Part 1

On the 10th of May 1940, the German high command put into action *Fall Gelb*, Plan Yellow, the invasion of France and the low countries. Intended to punish France for her draconian terms in the Treaty of Versailles, the invasion had been originally conceived as a variant of the World War I Schlieffen Plan, a conventional sweep through the low country of Holland and Belgium. However, the plan finally adopted was that of von Manstein, that of an armoured assault through the difficult terrain of the Ardenne region of Belgium and Luxembourg, followed by a sweep to the English Channel behind the defending armies. The cutting edge of this "Sweep of the Sickle" (*Sichelschnitt*) was the seven panzer divisions of von Rundstedt's Army Group A. One of these divisions was the Seventh Panzer division commanded by Erwin Rommel.

Rommel had no direct experience of tank warfare prior to the day he took command of Seventh Panzer, in mid February 1940. However, within three months Rommel's division was taking part in *Fall Gelb*, and was the first unit to breach the Meuse River defences. Elements of Seventh Panzer crossed between Houx and Dinant on the night of 12th/13th May. This was half a day earlier than the Meuse crossing of Heinz Guderian's panzers near Sedan. However, this was not Rommel's first assault across the Meuse. In August 1914, immediately after the German declaration of hostilities, Lieutenant Erwin Rommel led his platoon into Belgium and by 31st of August, they had crossed the Meuse by pontoon bridge to Sassegy in the French Argonne.

The assault of Seventh Panzer division on May 12, 1940 was to be Rommel's second "Meusing."

One of the main natural obstacles to tank movement in Western Europe are rivers, and therefore river crossings deserve particular attention. In the region of Rommel's crossing, the Meuse River is 80 to 120 metres wide and flows through a steep sided limestone gorge some 150 metres below the level of the surrounding countryside. In addition to the natural obstacle presented by this river, on 12 May 1940 the crossing point was defended by elements of General Corap's Ninth Army. Despite these problems, Rommel's forces were able to cross quickly, consolidate and then rapidly pierce the French defences as far as the border of France. During this operation, Rommel made a risky night march with tanks, advancing 50 miles in 24 hours to Le Chateau. Such a daring act embodied Heinz Guderian's maxim for good panzer commanders: To ride forward with his lead elements; to press forward with all speed and fight a battle of mobility, thereby retaining the element of surprise.

So who was Rommel?

Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel was born in Heidenheim, Swabia on 15 November 1891, the son of a schoolmaster. Despite there being almost no military service in his family background, he joined the armed forces and served with distinction in World War I. Rommel's first experience of war was on August 22nd 1914 - a platoon level action in Bleid, Luxembourg. Here he efficiently cleared the village of French soldiers using the aggressive, innovative tactics which would become the hallmark of all his later battles. After the Argonne and a quiet period in the Vosges, Rommel went on to serve in the Carpathian Mountains in Rumania, and then in Italy. On October 26 1917, Rommel's battalion captured Mt Matajur, during the Battle of Caboretto. In the process, Rommel's force had captured 150 Italian officers, 9000 men and 81 guns. For this feat,

Rommel was awarded the *Pour de Merite*, Germany's highest award for valour. During these engagements, Rommel used his infantry as if they were mobile infantry, his tactics emphasising fire, movement and the momentum of the attack.

After the war, Rommel held a number of military posts including the position of instructor at the Infantry School at Dresden in 1929, command of a *Jaeger* battalion at Goslar in 1935 (where he met Hitler for the first time, as his battalion served as security for the Fuhrer during his visit there), and a brief period as an instructor of the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth). Rommel's book *Infanterie Greift An* (Infantry Attacks) was published in 1937, and in 1938 Rommel commanded the *Fuhrerbegleitbattalion* (The Hitler Escort Battalion, or Hitler's bodyguard) during the occupation of the Sudatenland and again during the invasion of Poland. By this time, Rommel had come to know Hitler quite well, and was able to ask for a fighting command of his own. Hitler had taken a liking to this brave soldier, and asked Rommel what he wanted. "Command of a panzer division" replied Rommel. By mid February 1940,



Hoth and Rommel

Rommel was at Godesburg, on the Rhine, ready to take over the command of the 7th Panzer division.

During the invasion of Poland, Germany had fielded something like 44 divisions, of which there were five panzer, four motorised and four light divisions. These latter divisions were armoured reconnaissance divisions similar to the French division *Légère de Cavalerie* (D.L.C, or Light Cavalry Division). The light divisions showed themselves lacking in armoured punch and were later reorganised as panzer divisions. The 2nd Light division crossed the Reich frontier into Poland near Gleiwitz, and took part in fighting to the south of Warsaw, until the fall of Poland 26 days later. However, from 9th September, the 2nd Light division was only used for mopping up operations. At the end of September, the 2nd Light division returned to Germany and were reorganised as the 7th Panzer division, also known as the "Ghost Division". By an order issued on 6th February 1940, Erwin Rommel was to take command of the 7th Panzer division, and he took up his post sometime between 10th and 15th May 1940. At the time of Rommel's assumption of command the 7th Panzer's organization was:

Armor

- 25th Panzer Regiment (of three tank bttns)
- 37th Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion

Motorised Infantry

- 6th Rifle Regiment
- 7th Rifle Regiment
- 7th Motor-cycle Battalion

Engineers

- 58th Pioneer Battalion

Artillery

- 78th Field Art. Rgt. (of three bttns, each of three four-gun batteries)
- 42nd Anti-tank Artillery Battalion

Within this organization, the complement of armoured fighting vehicles was as follows:

Pz. Regt. 25:

- 109 light and command tanks (PzKpfw I and II)
- 110 gun-armed tanks (more than half were PzKpfw 38(t), the remainder being PzKpfw III and IV)

Aufkl. Abt. 37:

- 50 Armored cars

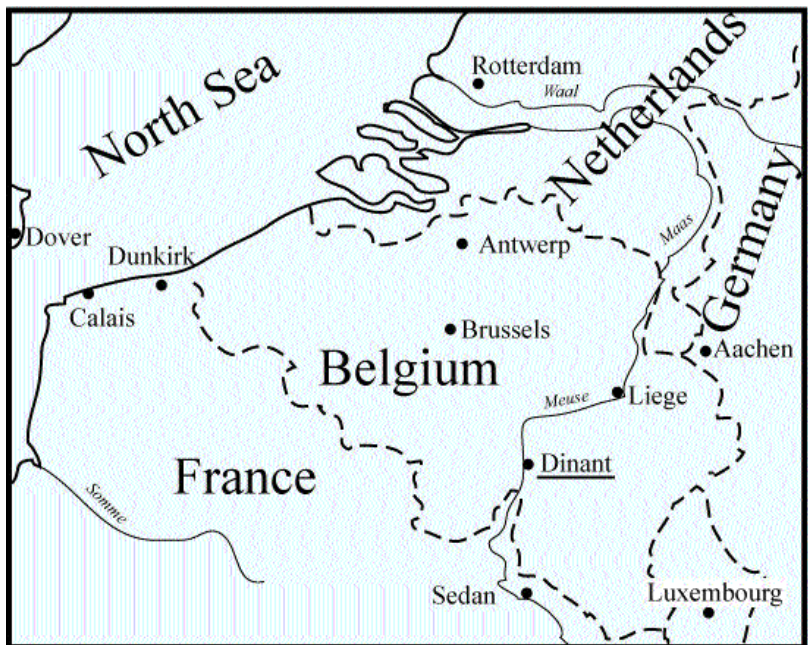
Pi. Btl. 58:

- 13 PzKpfw I and PzKpfw II

During the period of its reorganisation, the 7th Panzer division was trained in panzer tactics, and the correct use of panzer equipment.

Part of this training and equipment involved the delicate art of river crossings.

The same year Rommel published his book *Infanterie Greift An*, 1937, also saw the publication of another military classic, Heinz Guderian's *Achtung Panzer!* On the subject of river crossings, Guderian wrote: "When the two sides are in close contact and the terrain favours the attack, the tanks will attack simultaneously with the infantry; the infantry will have to attack under



boats, as well as sixteen man wooden assault boats (powered by 12 horsepower engines), pontoon bridges and even four experimental



artillery cover ahead of the tanks when we need to overcome initial obstacles - a stretch of river, for example, or barriers or minefields - before the tanks can intervene".

Getting troops across a body of water requires the correct equipment, and in this too, the 7th Panzer was well equipped. Pionier-Bataillon 58 had in its inventory the standard "pneumatic boats" - four man inflatable rubber





The Meuse River at Dinant, Belgium

bridge laying PzKpfw II. The pontoon bridges came in three major designs, the *Brückengerät B*, capable of eight tonne loads, the *Brückengerät C*, capable of five tonne loads and the *Brückengerät K*, capable of 16 tonne loads. In addition, if a *Brückengerät B* was assembled with twice the number of pontoons, it could also be used to bear 16 tonne loads.

The standard technique for crossing a river involved suppression of the far bank with artillery and direct fire from small arms and supporting tanks. A crossing of panzer grenadiers in rubber dinghies and wooden assault boats followed this, preferably under the cover of smoke or darkness. Engineers would also cross with equipment to destroy enemy strongpoints, while rubber boats could be used to bring across heavy equipment and motorcycles. Ferry systems consisting of boats pulled back and forth by ropes were also employed. Troops from the initial lodgement were to clear the river bank of all enemy soldiers, and then to press outward to expand the bridgehead. Pontoon sections were then assembled, floated across the river and used to construct a bridge. Each pontoon section usually carried a vehicle or heavy weapon, so that in the process of floating the bridge section over, a vital piece of equipment for the beachhead could also be rafted across. Panzers were to be brought over as quickly as possible, to allow a breakout and

exploitation from the river's edge, the target being a deep penetration of the enemy position.

Despite such preparation, such an operation remains a delicate affair, and a lot depends on the efficiency of the defence.

The French 9th Army of General André Corap occupied the Meuse river defences from Namur in the north to Pont-à-Bar, near Sedan, in the south. The defensive front was divided up into three corps areas, from north to south, the II Corps of General Jean Bouffet (5th Motorised division), the XI Corps of General Julien Martin (18th and 22nd Infantry divisions) and the XXXXI Corps of

General Libaud (61st Infantry and 102nd fortress divisions). In reserve were the 4th North African and the 53rd Infantry divisions. Additionally, tasked with scouting across the Meuse were the 1st and the 2nd Light Cavalry divisions (*Division Légère de Cavalerie* or D.L.C.), as well as three Spahi brigades. All of the infantry divisions were Series A or B units, which were effectively militia, with few regular officers.

Across the Meuse, the Ardennes were defended by the Belgian Groupement K, command-

ed by General Maurice Keyaerts, and consisting of the 1st *Division de Chasseurs Ardennais* and the 1st *Division de Cavalerie*.

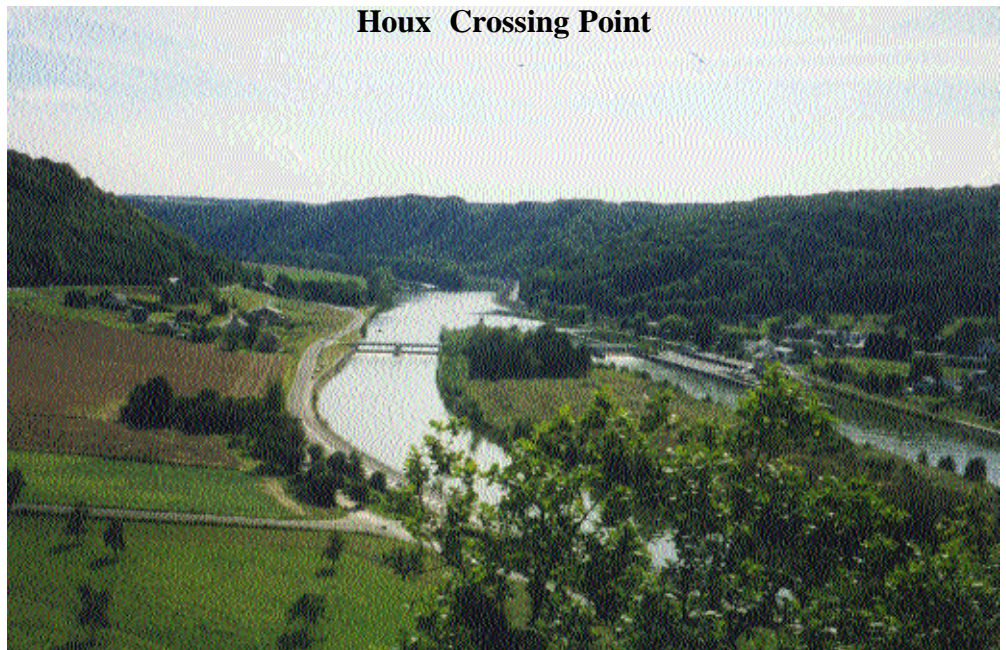
10th of May

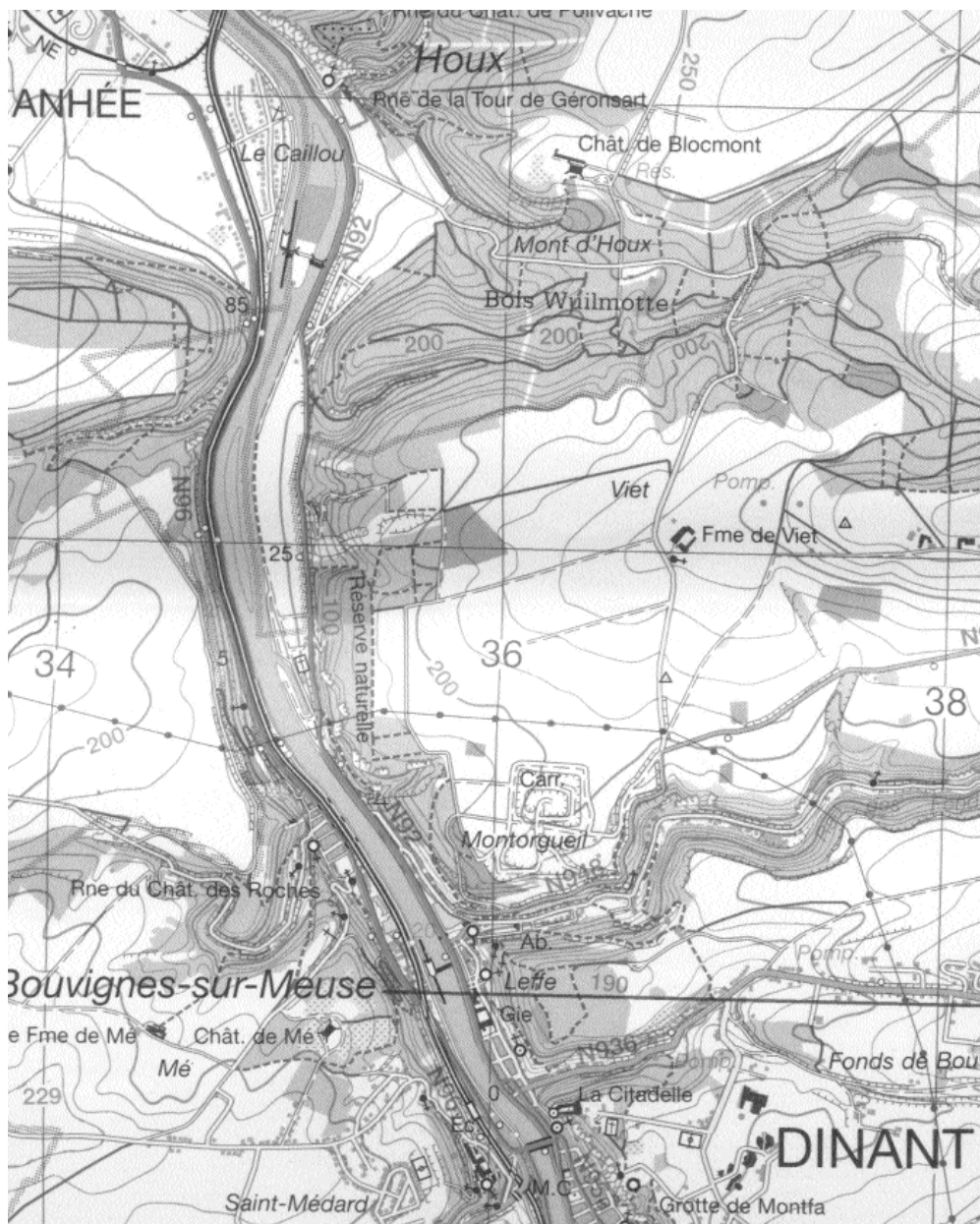
At 4:35 am on the morning of the 10th, the 7th Panzer rolled into the forests of the Belgian Ardennes. To their north was 5th Panzer division, under the command of General Hartlieb. Collectively, these two divisions made up XV Panzer Corps, under the command of General Hoth. South of Rommel's panzers was XXXXI Panzer Corps under the command of General Reinhardt, consisting of 6th and 8th Panzer. Further south again were the tanks of 2nd Panzer, 1st Panzer and 10th Panzer, collectively being XIX Panzer Corps under the control of General Heinz Guderian. Each Panzer Corps was the spearhead of an army - 4th Army under von Kluge in the north, 12th Army under List in the centre, and 16th Army in the south under Busch. Collectively this formation was Army Group A, under the command of von Runstedt.

Ahead of the panzers were various Brandenberger units, tasked with seizing vital crossroads and bridges, required for the efficient advance of the German formations. Overhead, ensuring the advance was protected from enemy reconnaissance planes flew Me109's of *Luftflotte 3*.

The advance was slowed only slightly by Belgian demolitions (though these were more of a problem for the French as will be seen shortly), because while these were

Houx Crossing Point





Topographic map of Houx & Dinant, Belgium

extensive, few of the obstacles were covered by defensive fire, and so engineers were able to quickly put things right. However, at Chaberez, 7th Panzer was held up by elements of the 3rd Regiment of the *Chasseurs Ardennais* and was not able to advance again until the Belgian forces surrendered at 9 pm that evening. Rommel was furious as his troops had gone to ground without returning fire. Rommel's own experience had been: "...that the day goes to the side that is the first to plaster its opponent with fire". Standard panzer tactics required a rapid advance to contact, and then the enemy was to be engaged from the halt. However, Rommel was a strong advocate of firing on the move and spraying possible enemy positions with machinegun fire.

Meanwhile, the infantry of General Corap's left wing were still marching to the line of the

Meuse, and his cavalry had crossed the Meuse and were probing toward the advancing Germans. The French cavalry and mechanised units were having difficulty getting forward, however, due to the extensive Belgian demolitions to their front, and sometimes even behind them! Tempers grew short, and in one Belgian command post at Laroche, a French captain, Edouard de Verdelon drew his pistol and threatened "If you blow the road, I will blow your head off!"

11th May

Despite Belgian opposition, 7th Panzer continued to advance, and by the morning of 11th May, they had crossed the Ourthe River at Beffe, Marcourt and Laroche. Shortly thereafter they found themselves engaging the 4th Armored Car Regiment (an element of the French 4th D.L.C.) at Marche. Later in the morning, the German high command ordered a halt for fear that the Allies would become suspicious, and stop their advance to the Dyle River in the north.

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