



French Armoured Forces - 1940

*Tested
under fire,
May-June
1940*

Philippe NAUD

The French tanks of 1940 symbolized the intellectual drought of the French Army. Despite the presence of 3100 modern tanks - mostly well armed and armored - the German panzers won a crushing victory thanks to rigid and ineffectual tactical doctrines the French had developed by since 1918.

While the German victory could be credited to the tactical and operational superiority of the *Panzer Divisionen*, these units did suffer several reverses at the hands of French armor. All in vain...

ORIGINS - ASSAULT ARTILLERY, 1915-1918

In 1918, the French Army was the most advanced in the world in the use of tanks. One of the first tank theoreticians, the French artillery colonel Estienne, wrote

Joffre in December 1915 that "I believe it possible to design a tracked mechanical vehicle that would transport, over obstacles and through enemy fire and at a speed superior to 6 km/h, infantry with their weapons and supplies, as well as artillery." The artilleryman Estienne was doubtlessly inspired by the tractors that were then moving artillery over rough and muddy terrain. Already he was envisioning the future tank, but also the protected transport of troops. He remained tied to this idea of combining the different arms under armored protection.

By 1918, the French Army was using the tank in innovative and extensive ways, following the ideas of Estienne who was, by then, a division general. The best example remains that of July 16, 1918. General Mangin attacked out of the forest of Villers-Cotteret, without artillery bombardment, but including an initial Renault FT-17 tank attack and close air support. Though they were meant

to support the infantry, the tank was still used independently at times. The FT-17 represented the prototype of the modern tank, far removed from the cubical British landships. The design of this small tank, in part the brainchild of Louis Renault himself, with its turret hosting the gun and the engine in the rear, is fundamentally the same design as today's M1 Abrams. The FT-17 was still limited to infantry support because of its slow speed and short operational range. Even if it could create panic in the German ranks, it was still vulnerable to artillery fire, anti-tank rifles, and, at the right angle, machine-guns firing K-type bullets. It was thus necessary to improve this new weapon of war.

Would the interwar period allow General Jean-Baptiste Eugene Estienne to realize his ambitious projects?

NO MAN IS A PROPHET... 1920-1936

In 1920, "assault artillery", as it was called, disappeared and was re-attached to infantry where it became "battle tanks". Estienne's push to create an autonomous tank arm was abandoned, as was inevitable in a French Army that was very conservative and steeped