





WHEN FRANCE DEFIED HITLER'S PANZERS

Its Char B1 tanks proved too much for the *Wehrmacht's* armor—but even they couldn't withstand irresolute Allied leadership
By John Koster

Though in many ways superior to Germany's vaunted panzers, the French Char B1 tank achieved only a glimmer of glory in 1940.



“We are on the edge of the abyss,” a desperate Brig. Gen. Charles de Gaulle wrote to French Prime Minister Paul Reynaud on June 3, 1940. “Our first defeat stems from the application by the enemy of my conceptions and the refusal of our command to apply the same conceptions.”

De Gaulle’s plea to Reynaud had come too late to stave off the debacle of May 1940, when German armored units raced across France to the English Channel within three weeks. The British put a bright face on an awful month by couching the June 4 evacuation at Dunkirk as a moral victory, while leaving their disgusted French allies to fight the Germans (and Italians after June 10) for two more weeks.

The British and French commanders had quietly hoped to avoid another Western Front. Diffuse strategies suggested attacks via the German-allied Soviet Union, through Finland and Norway, or into the Soviet oil fields at Baku, Azerbaijan, through French-occupied Syria. But the Germans struck first, conquered the Netherlands in five days and swung around France’s vaunted Maginot Line into the Ardennes forests. While the line held, third-rate French troops deployed in the “impassable” Ardennes broke and ran.

“Caught up as they fled by the enemy’s mechanized detachments, they had been ordered to throw away their arms and make off to the south so as not to clutter up the roads,” de Gaulle recalled in his war memoirs. “We haven’t time,’ [the Germans] cried, ‘to make you prisoners!’”

French troops relished a brief moment of glory before the country’s total collapse, when three armored divisions, notably those units equipped with relatively capable Char B1 tanks, thwarted—and in places even routed—Adolf Hitler’s panzers during a decisive week of intense fighting along the French-Belgian border.



FROM TOP: LULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES; ROGER VILLET/GETTY IMAGES

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At the outbreak of World War II the weapon of choice among French armored divisions was the Char B1 *bis*, the heaviest standard tank of its time. Designed by committee over the better part of two decades and manufactured by Renault and other firms, the vehicle carried a 75 mm howitzer and a 7.5 mm machine gun mounted in the hull, both aimed largely by steering the vehicle, as well as a 47 mm anti-tank cannon and second 7.5 mm machine gun in a one-man turret. The Char B1 *bis* boasted armor 60 mm thick on its front and turret, 55 mm on its sides. Each tank bore the name of either a French region or national hero. By June 1940 French factories had rolled out nearly 400 of them.

Char B1 *bis* crews first proved themselves during the German advance into Belgium, as British and French divisions covered the unprotected flank of the Maginot Line. On May 15, 1940, Captain Pierre Gilbert in *Adour* attacked a German armored formation north of Flavion and knocked out three enemy vehicles with his turret gun. Incoming tank rounds soon disabled *Adour*, leaving three of its six-man crew injured. The wounded Gilbert sent crewman Daniel Legac to inform Lieutenant Louis Bounaix, the commander of *Guynemer*, that he was now in charge of the three-tank formation.

Germans inspect an abandoned Char B1 bis (opposite, top). Though less formidable than the Char B1, German light tanks (above) were able to move rapidly across France. De Gaulle explains mechanized warfare to President Albert François Lebrun in 1939 (opposite, bottom).

Soon after seeking concealment in a thicket, Gilbert and Chief Sgt. Joseph Baur were killed by enemy fire. The surviving crewmen surrendered. Smoke billowed up from *Adour*, and through its open side hatch approaching Germans could just make out a painted message bestowed by actress and later resistance agent Jeanne Boitel on the day the tank was christened: MY WISHES ACCOMPANY THE *ADOUR*, CAPTAIN GILBERT AND HIS MEN.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Bounaix and crew in *Guynemer* and Lieutenant Pierre Lelong and crew in *Gard* fought on. Bounaix left a particularly vivid account of the fighting:

I looked over the terrain and spotted an immobile Char B. I was a little annoyed, as I thought the 28th BCC [Battalion de Chars de Combat] held the ridge, the first phase of combat was already over, and that we, the second wave, would have nothing to do.

At that moment we took a blow to our left side armor. I looked down the road, and a red flash lit up from a hedge at about 800 meters. Another blow to our armor!



Pierre Billotte



I hesitated to withdraw, as I thought a friend had made an error. I refused to believe the Boches could have arrived. Corporal Le Bris, the assistant driver, announced: 'Popped armor bolts, left side.' I then turned my turret toward the intermittent flashes and expended four of five explosive shells from the 47 mm. The enemy fire continued. I checked the range and asked Millard for explosive shells. Two projectiles, and the enemy fire ceased.

I resumed my course and accelerated to catch up with Adour and Gard, which had never slowed down. A hundred meters farther there was another red flash on my left. We fired the 75 this time, and the enemy fire stopped. Resuming course, I arrived at the woods between the second ridge and the edge of the plateau. These wooden tongues determined the fire corridors, and hits soon rang on the left side armor. Having steered the tank east and looked southeast, at first I couldn't spot the enemy. Then the driver cried out, 'A tank in front of us!' It was, indeed, a Boche—a Panzerkampfwagen IV. I felt great joy, mixed with a bit of anxiety, as when a hunter spots game, but what formidable game.



Tank Busters

Though heavily armored, French Char B1 tanks were susceptible to the 7.5 cm (75 mm) high-explosive (left) and armor-piercing (right) rounds fired by German Panzerkampfwagen IVs.

I adjusted the fire of the 75. 'Range 450—short!' 'Range 500—short!' "Range 550..." I can still hear the cry of the driver: 'I got it!' Two or three men jumped from the Boche tank, as an enormous red glow burst from the front of the enemy machine. I then noticed that our left flank was lined with large German tanks.... They were camouflaged and immobile, but red flashes lit up, and we took hits. The word 'hail' is far too weak to describe the noise inside the turret from all the projectiles. We took a hit on

the bottom of the side door, which unhinged it, leaving it half open. Millard jumped up, grabbed it and held it shut for the duration of the fight.

Edging up a bit, I noticed at the edge of the woods Gard, its turret open. At the side door was Sergeant Waslet, the radioman, pistol in hand. We could only guess what had happened. The door may have been smashed in, wounding tank commander Lieutenant Lelong. Was that it? Looking around, I spotted Ourcq and Isère, all that remained of our first section. They'd done wonders, struggling, shooting. With them at my side we formed a section.

Hits on the right increased in intensity, as our right flank was filled with Boche tanks, lined up as if on parade and firing at us. But their hits sounded weak, and they barely accepted combat, withdrawing into the woods as soon as taken to task.... I had the consolation of demolishing one.

At that point my right tread was snarling in a disquieting manner, my 47 had fired too much, and my brake fluid was leaking at the cylinder head. Only the 47 of Ourcq was still speaking. Radio orders came through—"Rally!" Ourcq and Isère obeyed by forging a path. I followed and in passing saw Hérault in flames. Arriving at our starting point, the three tanks were out of steam. Its motor ravaged, Ourcq stopped cold. Guynemer's right track broke, and Isère experienced the same accident a hundred meters farther on.

Exiting the tank, I made a tour of Guynemer.... Its hull had absorbed more than 50 hits. Yet on the front, miraculously intact, the banner of Sacré-Coeur still fluttered. I retrieved it.

Guynemer was credited with destroying three Panzerkampfwagen IVs and one Panzerkampfwagen III. Ourcq had destroyed four enemy tanks, Isère three. Gard, on the



other hand, had been destroyed with the loss of five crewmen, while *Hérault* had taken a disabling shell hit to its track drive sprocket, forcing the crew to scuttle it.

While the clash in Belgium proved the French Char B1s could give much better than they got, it also suggested their mechanical issues might negate at least a measure of their crews' fighting ability.

Captain Pierre Billotte, the 34-year-old son of French 1st Army commander General Gaston-Henri Billotte, was a standout commander in the May 16 seesaw tank battle between French and German forces over the tiny village of Stonne in northeast France. Colonel Michel Malaguti commanded the 41st BCC from the Char B1 *bis* *Vienne*, while Billotte represented the tip of the spear in *Eure*. Leading the French attack, Billotte had taken a sharp turn in the village when he came face to face with a column of tanks and other armored vehicles of the 10th Panzer Division. Billotte immediately ordered his driver, Sergeant Durupt, to fire *Eure*'s 75 mm hull gun at the lead tank in the German column, while he himself used the 47 mm turret gun to take out the trailing tank. With both enemy tanks disabled and ablaze, the others were trapped. Billotte and Durupt then rumbled through the village at will in their heavy tank, systematically knocking out 11 other German tanks and two anti-tank guns. The tanker and his crewmen later counted some 140 enemy hits on *Eure*'s hull.

The ability of the Char B1 *bis* to absorb punishment made a daunting impression on *Wehrmacht* tankers yet to be convinced of their own invincibility. When two French crewmen from Lieutenant Jacques Hachet's *Vertus* roamed the forest at Stonne looking for spare parts after the tank suffered an engine failure, they routed a nervous German patrol, captured a prisoner and discovered hundreds of enemy graves and discarded packs. They also recovered an abandoned, intact *Panzerkampfwagen* III.

Highly maneuverable despite its size and weight, the Char B1 *bis* was also able to withstand repeated punishment, though shell damage to its tracks (as in the photo above left) could stop it cold. Once French armor had been neutralized, German infantrymen (above) moved in to secure any gains.

Over three days of bitter fighting Stonne changed hands 17 times. The French deployed 130 tanks and lost 33, mostly to mechanical failure, while the Germans deployed 300 tanks and lost 24, primarily to battle damage. The Germans, however, suffered some 26,500 casualties to 7,500 for the French. Germans who fought both at Stonne and later at Stalingrad insisted Stonne was worse.

When the Germans ultimately secured Stonne, de Gaulle moved his forces east to the village of Montcornet, the target of General Heinz Guderian's next armored thrust. De Gaulle ordered his tanks to deploy on either side of the road between Montcornet and Laon, which ran through the forest of Samossy, thus providing the tanks cover from the air. Colonel Aimé Sudre's armored half-brigade, including a battalion with a number of Char B1s, came up as reinforcements for de Gaulle's 4th Armored Division, which was still forming. Major Jean-Yves-Marie Bescond, a foremost expert on big tanks, led the Char B1 battalion.

"You are the champion of the Char B," de Gaulle told Bescond. "Show what it is worth."

Bescond returned to his tank crews and made a dour prediction: "This will be my Reichshoffen." It was a reference to the Aug. 6, 1870, clash during the Franco-Prussian War in which some 700 of Napoléon III's elite mounted *cuirassiers* became bottlenecked near the Alsatian village of Reichshoffen and were cut to pieces by Prussian infantry firing from cover.

At 4:30 a.m. on May 19 de Gaulle's 4th Armored Division attacked with more than 100 tanks. Leading the charge from his Char B1 *bis* *Berry-au-Bac* was Bescond.



Adolf Hitler (at far left) listens as General Wilhelm Keitel reads surrender terms to French emissaries in a railway car at Compiègne on June 22, 1940.

Much to the Germans' astonishment, the Char B1's turrets and frontal armor proved impenetrable to standard anti-tank guns—a fact that enabled the French tanks to cross the Serre, capture Montcornet and threaten Guderian's lines of communication. The German commander later admitted the Char B1s had given him some very bad moments. But the French assault ultimately faltered under withering fire from emplaced German 88 mm guns.

Bescond, as he had feared, was among the casualties. *Berry-au-Bac* had broken down, and Bescond had transferred to *Sampiero Corso*. As he followed orders to withdraw, panzers semi-concealed in the forest opened fire, and an incoming round bounced harmlessly off *Sampiero Corso's* hull. Then a shell from a German 88 penetrated the Char B1's side door and detonated inside, killing Bescond and his crew. *Sampiero Corso* remained

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largely intact, and the Germans set up a marker so the French could later identify the bodies for proper burial.

During the fight for Montcornet 6-foot-5 de Gaulle strode around upright, ignoring bullets and shell bursts to inspire his men, who remained tenacious. Regardless, the French high command unilaterally halted the attack. The division managed to pull back in good order, suffering just 25 casualties, though it lost 23 of 85 tanks engaged to land mines and Ju 87 *Stuka* dive bombers. Still, though Montcornet went down as a tactical German victory, de Gaulle

had captured 130 enemy soldiers and inflicted four times as many casualties on the Germans.

Despite continuing stubborn resistance and the magnificent stand at Stonne—house-to-house fighting continued until May 25—the French cause was doomed.

The French, still in command of 100 divisions and some 6 million men in late May, had expected the 200,000 men of 10 British divisions then on the Continent to advance on Arras. The British instead opted to escape and evade. The French themselves were appalled when thousands of their reserve infantrymen broke under German air attack and tried to surrender without much of a fight—and without much interest from the onrushing Germans.

Britain and France blamed one another for their mutual collapse. Tanker Pierre Billotte's father, the decorated World War I veteran General Gaston-Henri Billotte, was written off as a hopeless coward by British General Edmund Ironside, chief of the Imperial General Staff. The elder Billotte did not long have to suffer the opprobrium of his British counterparts, however—he was fatally injured on May 21 when his car struck a military truck during a wild midnight ride to organize another counterattack. Ironside assumed command of the British, French and Belgian forces in the Battle of Belgium—and lost. Ironside also wrote off General Georges-Maurice-Jean Blanchard as another hopeless coward, though Blanchard was later decorated for his valorous rearguard action that enabled the British withdrawal from Dunkirk.

While the Char B1 *bises* acquitted themselves well, they continued to suffer mechanical problems, and when the French and British fought side by side at Abbeville starting on May 27, poor coordination led to needless losses. On June 4 a late-arriving column of Char B1s approaching town from the south stumbled into a minefield zeroed in by German artillery and anti-tank guns and took heavy losses. Of the 30 Char B1s engaged in combat that same day at Dunkirk—in the closing hours of the evacuation—only seven made it back to their jump-off positions. Some French units fought better after the British left, but the Char B1s could not compensate for poor communication and morale in second-echelon units elsewhere.

“We were the bosses, and we lost the battle, and this gave a good excuse for the British to be selfish,” French strategist and General André Beaufre later observed in an episode of the popular British documentary series *The World at War*. “Anyway, they were very selfish.” **MH**

A frequent contributor to Military History, John Koster is the author of Custer Survivor and the forthcoming Hitler's Nemesis: Hermann Ehrhardt. For further reading he recommends The General: Charles de Gaulle and the France He Saved, by Jonathan Fenby, and De Gaulle: The Rebel, 1890–1944, by Jean Lacouture.