

# GEMBOLOUX:

## NOTES ON A BATTLE FORGOTTEN

by Raymond J. Tapio

With the exception of the "miracle" evacuation at Dunkirk, 50 years after the actual event the world still associates the outcome of The Battle of France with unmitigated Allied defeat. A resurgent Nazi-apologist press still hails Manstein as a *genius*, while the Allied command is described in print, board-games and the computerized versions of various encyclopedias as bumbling their way into the execution of the ill fated *Dyle Plan*, the great strategy that resulted in the redeployment of the main French, Belgian and British armies moving, as on a hinge, to a line defined by the Dyle River in Belgium.

We all know how it ended up. The Allies take the bait, and our German 'heroes' Rommel and company swing behind them through the "impassable" Ardennes and the race for the Channel coast is on. A massive, total defeat resulted and the world has stood in awe of this feat of German arms ever since. Other results of course, include Hitler's ascension over the German General Staff as an infallible "genius" and the stain forced on the French people in the form of collaboration.

There is an untold story hidden from the view of most whom have given this battle a cursory glance. The collapse of the French army was due neither to poor equipment or a lack of bravery on the part of the *Pouilu* of 1940 despite what some *Germano-centric* writers would have us believe. In this writer's opinion, the defeat in France was simply, although not of course, *merely*, a strategic defeat. Once the Allied Armies found themselves outflanked, and cut off, by the unexpected enemy thrust through the Ardennes, their outdated and multi-national command structure did not enable them to respond to the crisis in sufficient time or with efficient, or sufficient force, to alter the course of events. As late as May 15, the French High Command failed to believe German tanks had broken through at Sedan. That evening, in a phone call, General Gamelin informed Daladier of the German advances in the south. At about the same time, after an abortive counter-attack had failed, General Georges at la Ferte received the first news of enemy panzers having reached Montcornet. By the following morning Reynaud cried out across the phone wires to Churchill, who was still lying abed: 'We have been defeated..we are beaten; we have lost the battle.' A trip to Paris by Churchill and much fighting lay ahead, including the long awaited French counter-attack from the south on May 27; the panzer corridor was not broken by the spasmodic thrusts of the 7th and 4th Colonial Infantry Divisions under General Grandsard; heroism during De Gaulle's 3rd action the following day, in combination with the British 51st Highland Division caused a bit of German anxiety around the German bridgehead at Abbeville. By the next day the news of the defeat of the Belgian Army spread and DeGaulle's attack was halted. Reynaud was proven prescient and the world was left with the strategic withdrawal at Dunkirk to point to as the only Allied success (albeit a critical one) during the execution of Hitler's *Fall Gelb*.

While history has written the story of The Battle of France in bold, broad strokes, those interested in a true *comparison* of the men and machines facing off in this battle of the generals and politicians must take magnifying glass in hand and focus their eyes closely over a little known part of the map of Belgium known as the Ottignes-Gembloux-Sainte Servais Line. It was here that the elite troops of General Rene Jacques Adolphe Prioux's Third Division, a cavalry corps consisting of two light mechanized divisions (2nd and 3rd DLM, equipped with the battle-worthy S.O.M.U.A. S-35 and Hotchkiss H-35 tanks) had been ordered to advance *beyond* the Dyle River to buy time for the main body in the form of the French First Army, to close up to their long planned positions across the Gembloux Gap. Prioux would soon discover first hand that the vaunted "*Coinet mobile tank obstacles*" known as the KW-Namur Line, or Dyle Defense Line (the line the "Dyle Plan" was intended to be anchored on) was nonexistent. Prioux's day worsened when he was informed, at the same time, of the German break-through at the Albert Canal. But we digress!

The intent for publishing GEMBOLOUX: THE FEINT (GtF) arose from a general desire to tell one story from The Battle of France in a microcosm. The ultra-detail of tactical level miniatures and board games like ASL cannot relay the strategic and political aspects of the campaign that have received the majority of the coverage of this major event of the 20th Century. What these games excel in is the comparison of man and machine, the 'Mens-Guns-Tanks' that make up the World War II subject matter that has long fascinated historians and gamers alike. Simply put, these games are an ideal and fertile ground for manpower, ordnance and AFV comparisons. The battle that took place at Gembloux is the ideal battle to recreate for the student of WW II AFVs. As was true of the early campaigns, the balance of forces was not unfavorable to the French. French tanks, as well as their German counter-parts, were plentiful, and saw much action on this battle-front. And we all know how gamers (and little boys) *love* tanks! Many French tanks were, in fact, better than their German contemporaries. It was the French predilections to piece-meal their armor across the battlefield that spelled their downfall. This fatal strategic error was not a factor at Gembloux: the Germans lost some 300 tanks compared to French losses of about 200 lost in the tactical French





victory at Gembloux. It is this reality, and the opportunity to bring out the facts of, and an account of, a battle described by legendary historian John Keegan as an "amnesic spot" in history that led to the decision by Critical Hit to accept designer Tim Robinson's submission of GtF for publication.

#### THE BATTLE:

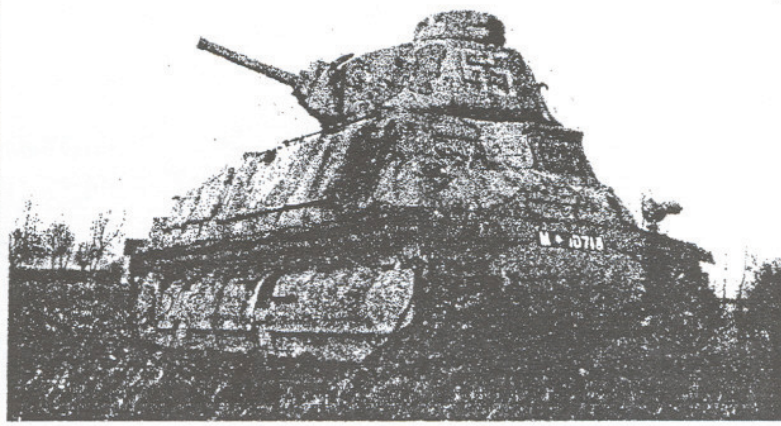
From the outset, the German seizure of the fortress at Eben Emael and the capture of the Albert Canal bridges doomed the plans of the French High Command to delay the enemy from reaching the Dyle Line before Allied forces could be brought forward. After token resistance, the knee-jerk reaction of the Belgians consisted of a hasty withdrawal back to the Dyle Line positions during the evening of 11 May.

What followed between 11-15 May was the fiercest tank battle of the Second World War to date, based on tank usage by both combatants. The 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions of General Erich Hoepner's XVI Panzer Corps pressed forward into the Gembloux Gap, facing off against General René Prioux's 1er Corps de Cavalerie, consisting of 2<sup>e</sup>me and 3<sup>e</sup>me Divisions Légères Mécaniques (2 & 3 DLM). Both sides claimed to be the victor...and both were to lose over 100 tanks each. History tells the tale of the relative insignificance of the French claims. The Germans held the battlefield, enabling their recovery teams to re-claim and repair many tanks formerly lost. They also continued their advance westward while the French withdrew. The battle also served to keep Allied attention focused on the avenue of expected enemy attack, on the Belgian front.

#### TANK VS. TANK:

First and foremost this was an important face off of armor technology and organization. Much is known about the by-then vaunted German *Panzertruppe*. This is not the forum to go over Guderian's bunch point by point. The main point to remember for our purposes is that each Panzer division was a balanced, self-sufficient force of all-arms which included motorized infantry (transported in trucks), motorized reconnaissance, motorized artillery, a full anti-tank battalion, engineers, and last, but not least Ju-88 'Stuka' dive-bombers on-call for close air support. It was not the tanks themselves that made the Panzer division a most dangerous foe, but the advances made in training, discipline and communications which had been battle-tested in Poland before being unleashed in France.

French tank tactics were another thing altogether. On paper,



the French DLM appears a powerful force. French armored units were subordinated to the infantry by the High Command and French armored commanders had little opportunity to train compared to their Panzer division counter-parts. This disparity trickled right down to the battlefield and the individual tank platoon. We have been made well aware of the German tank handling and deployment advantage represented by radios in each tank compared to their respective Polish, French and Russian adversaries still relying on orders and flag/hand signals during the heat of battle. French tank commanders with little experience and less initiative, radioless tanks and backward tactics: this is the litany of reasons presented *ad infinitum* by historians and their ilk since everyone's hero Rommel mugged for the camera at St Valéry-en-Caux with a less-than-happy looking Victor Fortune.

So that's it? Is the only explanation for the success at Gembloux that the French tanks had thick armor? Was it a preponderance in numbers? Do historians quote each other too often? Let's make a distinction here: Lumping commentary about the deployment of French tanks is inaccurate when discussing the Battle of Gembloux. In "Armor—A History of Mechanized Forces" author Richard M. Ogorkiewicz states on page 178: "Progress in equipment was not, however, matched by any marked progress in the employment of tanks. With the exception of the cavalry's D.L.M., the bulk of the tank units continued to be mentally and physically tied to the speed of the foot soldier." Author and expert Ogorkiewicz goes on to state: "In theory, the extension of any break-throughs was to be left to the *Division Légère Mécanique* and motorized infantry divisions."

The French DLM had received more training compared to their DCR comrades. Further, the mechanized cavalry were equipped with the H-35 and H-39 tanks which were faster than the replacement of the ancient FT-17, the R-35. All of the above tanks were equipped with thick armor for its day (40mm). The cavalry also received the S.O.M.U.A. S-35, a medium tank along the lines of the D-1 and generally viewed as the best tank in the world at the time. The S-35 was capable of speeds of up to 28 m.p.h. and had a long radius of action (80-161 miles) for its day. Armor thickness was 55mm at the

#### French Tank Details:

| Type                                 | Weight    | Armament     | Crew | Armor   | Speed   |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|------|---------|---------|
| Somua S-35<br>(Year Built: 1936)     | 20 tons   | 1x47mm, 1xMG | 3    | 20-55mm | 25mph   |
| Holchkiss H-35<br>(Year Built: 1935) | 11.4 tons | 1x37mm, 1xMG | 2    | 12-34mm | 17.5mph |
| Holchkiss H-39<br>(Year Built: 1935) | 12 tons   | 1x37mm, 1xMG | 2    | 12-45mm | 22.5mph |





thickest and the S-35 was armed with a potent 47mm gun and had advanced features such as electric power traverse and regenerative controlled differential steering. This last feature was several years ahead of any British or German tank and would not be equalled until the release of the Churchill and Tiger respectively! [This brings us around to a point relating to the representation of RST/IMT in ASL. The S-35, with its electric turret traverse mechanism, also shared by the B-1, may well deserve "T" status; however based on the IMT status of these tanks, we can only surmise the intent of the designer(s) of ASL were to represent same by penalizing the S-35 with "RST" status. We toyed with the idea of adding 'chrome' such as treating the S-35 as a "T" turret only when changing TCA to fire at an already acquired target, but shelved the idea. You may wish to further simulate this strength of the S-35 and B-1 using such an optional rule. At least the MP are 'black' to, hopefully, represent the S-35's advanced steering system...although this system was shared by the "red" MP B1].

#### THE BATTLE CONTINUED:

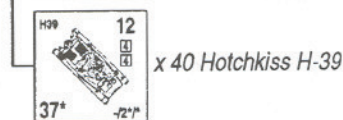
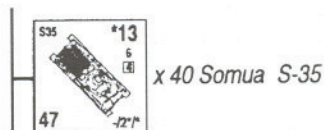
Now that we have identified our premise that the Allied stars at Gembloux were their best trained and best equipped armored units, we will move back in close to the battlefield and see what happened to cause all those tank hulks to be scattered over the Belgian countryside. The terrain the fighting took place in was described by George Forty, in *Tank Action: From the Great War to The Gulf* as: "...a broadly undulating landscape, with only scattered woods and villages well apart..." Forty goes on to quote one Lt. Robert Le Bel, the commander of a platoon of Hotchkiss H-39 tanks in 3 DLM as he stood in his turret on the outskirts of Jandrain: 'The massive gathering of this armored armada was an unforgettable sight...it appeared even more terrifying through the field glasses...' The gathering of armor from both sides in the Gembloux Gap pointedly reflects the comments of author John Paul Pallud in *Blitzkrieg in the West, Then and Now*, in which the author states: "armour was in its element". We are then not surprised that the first great tank vs. tank battle of World War II took place at this place. Well equipped and armed tank forces were wielded by both protagonists in a massive meeting engagement in good tank country during dry weather.

After only skirmishes between reconnaissance elements took place on 11 May [CAUGHT NAPPING] the leading elements of the 4th Panzer Division began pressing forward in earnest while Stuka dive-bombers began their routine softening up of French positions. By 12 May General Prioux's Cavalry Corps were situated with 3 DLM between Tirlémont-Hannut and 2 DLM between Hannut and Huy. Battle was soon raging outside of Hannut with tanks bursting into flame on both sides [BITTER DAY]. The battle continued on 12 May [RELUCTANT WITHDRAWAL] but by the end of the day Hannut had been taken by the Germans. The battlefield was described by Hauptmann Ernst von Jungenfeld, the commander of 2nd battalion, Pz Regiment 35, as 'a witches cauldron' and went on to give the opposing tankers credit by stating the Panzers '...had to work hard to get the better of the French tanks'. The French threatened the southern flank of 3 Panzer right into the evening of 12 May [THISNES AT DUSK]. On the right flank of 3 Panzer, Jauche was only taken after fierce house-to-house fighting ensued on 13 May [LOST SENTINELS]. The French had by no means given in, fighting every step of the way, often counter-attacking in the form of armored raids [WRONG BATTLE] and staunch defense of fixed positions.

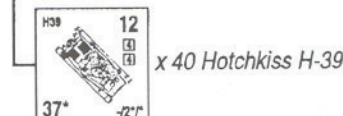
### 3 DLM

#### 5ème (Brigade Légères Mécaniques) BLM

##### 1er Cuirassiers



##### 2ème Cuirassiers

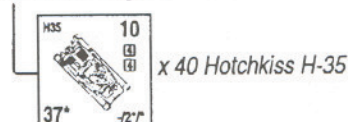


##### 2ème BLM

##### 12ème Cuirassiers



##### 11ème Dragons Portes



4, which was to go into effect at 8 a.m. on 14 May. His orders stated the French would hold the Gembloux front at all cost, "*sans esprit de recul*", even underlining these last words for emphasis. The Moroccans defending the position were short of 25mm AT-guns, only having 27 of the normal allocation of 48 guns. At dawn on the 14th, the Stukas attacked first. At 10 o'clock the first German panzers came into contact with the 7th Moroccan *Tirailleurs* at Ernage, north of Gembloux [WITHOUT THOUGHT OF RETREAT]. The Germans managed to take the small hamlet but a violent counter-attack dislodged them for a time [RECAPTURING ERNAGE].

The fighting became intense on the front of the 1st Moroccan Division. The German tanks had retreated toward the Baudecet Farm, a spot occupied by Napoleon's troops in 1815, leaving the infantry to fight it out, often in hand-to-hand clashes, for possession of *Chemin Creux* (Hollow Road) only 100 meters east of the railroad tracks where once only hours before some 300 panzers had massed. Captain Grudler's famous message, and orders to hold at the *Chemin Creux* are described in detail in GTF 8 [DEATH ON A HOLLOW ROAD]. Grudler gave his life at this place, later



ment of his death, Grudler's portrait, solidly nailed to the wall of his brother's living room, fell and crashed. This was considered a bad omen by his family. It would turn out to be a bad omen for all of France.

After holding the Germans in front of Gembloux for 72 hours the French and Moroccan soldiers were ordered to retreat. At 12:30 p.m. on 16 May the German 6 Armee notified von Bock that the French had left the Dyle Line.

#### Notes on our new scenario graphics and layout:

**New board and entry information** includes boxes with dotted lines to delineate the set-up area for each nationality (as denoted by appropriate symbol) and entry of reinforcements. The number in the arrows off-board indicate the turn of reinforcements; the location of the arrow indicates the general location of entry. Other data, such as shading of areas in play on the boards and overlays, remains unchanged.

*Example: In the figure to the right (from GTF 7, CAUGHT NAPPING) the illustration signifies German set-up on boards 33 and 16. German reinforcements enter on turn 1 along the north edge of board 16. French reinforcements enter along the south edge of board 4 on turns 1, 2 and 3.*



#### Notes for MINIATURES PLAYERS:

GTF is easily played using miniatures using a variety of tactical level rules systems. The following information is provided to clarify the Orders of Battle listed in the scenarios:

##### GTF 1:

**German OB:** 4 x Panzer III; one dismounted tank crew

**French OB:** 2 x AMD 35 (Panhard P-178); two armor leaders/commanders with increased performance capabilities.

##### GTF 2:

**German OB:** At Start: 5 x squads, 2 x NCO, LMG, MMG, 5 x Pz III; 3 x Opel Blitz Truck. Enter on Turn 2: 3 x Pz III; one armor leader/commander with increased performance capabilities. Turn 4: 4 x squads, NCO, MMG, 50mm mortar, 3 x Opel Blitz Truck.

**French OB:** 9 x squads, 4 x NCO, LMG, 2 x MMG, 8 x H-39;

##### GTF 3:

**German OB:** 8 x Panzer III; one armor leader/commander with increased performance capabilities, 5 x squads, 2 x NCO, 2 x LMG, MMG.

**French OB:** 3 x H-39, 2 x H-35, 4 x squads, 3 x NCO, HMG, 105mm Artillery (off-board) and phone, armor leader/commander with increased performance capabilities.

##### GTF 4:

**German OB:** At Start: 8 x squads, 3 x NCO, MMG, 2 x LMG, 105mm Artillery (off-board) and radio, 2 x Pz IB, 2 x Pz IIA, 2 x Pz IIF, Pz IVD. Enter on Turn 2: 8 x squads, 3 x NCO, HMG, MMG, LMG, 50mm mortar, ATR. Stuka dive-bomber support available.

**French OB:** At Start: 10 x squads, 3 x NCO, HMG, MMG, LMG, 37mm infantry gun, 3 x gun crew, 105mm Artillery (off-board) and phone, 25mm AT-gun. Enter on Turn 2: 3 x Somua S-35 tanks.

##### GTF 5:

**German OB:** 2 x Panzer III; armor leader/commander with increased performance capabilities, MMG, 5 x squads, 2 x gun crews, 2 x NCO, 37mm AT-gun, 47mm Czech AT-gun, Stuka dive-bomber support avail-

able.

**French OB:** 5 x Somua S-35, armor leaders/commanders with increased performance capabilities, 7 x squads, 2 x NCO, MMG, ATR, 7 x trucks.

##### GTF 6:

**German OB:** 6 x squads, 3 x NCO, MMG, 2 x LMG, 2 x Pz IB, 3 x Pz IIF, 2 x Pz IIIF, Stuka dive-bomber support available.

**French OB:** 10 x squads, 3 x gun crews, 2 x NCO, HMG, MMG, ATR, 3 x 25mm AT-gun.

##### GTF 7:

**German OB:** At Start: 6 x squads, 3 x NCO, HMG, MMG, LMG, ATR, gun crew, 75mm Light Infantry Gun, 2 x Pz IIA, armor leader/commander with increased performance capabilities. Enter on Turn 1: 2 x Panzer III. Stuka dive-bomber support available.

**French OB:** At Start: 4 x squads, NCO, LMG, ATR, 3 x R-35. Enter on Turn 2: 3 x squads, NCO, MMG, 60mm mortar, 2 x R-35. Enter on Turn 3: 4 x squads, NCO, MMG, 3 x R-35.

##### GTF 8:

**German OB:** 10 x squads, 3 x NCO, MMG, 2 x LMG, 50mm mortar, Stuka dive-bomber support available.

**French OB:** 5 x squads, 2 x NCO, HMG, LMG, 60mm mortar, units may start in foxholes/improved positions.

##### PL H:

German and French OB are listed in terms easily translated with each unit identified by type such as "squad" and type of vehicle or weapon.

**Terrain:** For the sake of variety it is suggested that miniatures players set up unique table terrain each time a particular scenario is played. A basic guideline in the form of the predominant terrain on the boards listed for the scenarios provided is found below:

| <u>Board Number</u>  | <u>Predominant Terrain &amp; Notes</u>   |
|----------------------|--|
| 22                   | City (at least 4 village stands)         |
| 24                   | Village in a depression (3 stands)       |
| 14, 16, 19 4         | Wooded, fairly open (patches of woods)   |
| 33                   | Farmland (large grain-fields)            |
| 13                   | marshy, raised road, streams             |
| 14*                  | Wooded, sunken road in center            |
| 42 w/village overlay | Small village (2 stands)                 |
| 17                   | Wooded, a few small buildings (1 stand)  |
| 11                   | Road running along two low hills         |
| 41                   | Village on small hills, gully (2 stands) |
| 43                   | Farmland, woods, St3 is a stream         |

#### GEMBLoux Credits:

Tim Robinson  
Original Scenario Designs

Pedro Ramis  
Campaign Game Design

Steven J. Pleva  
Development

Raymond J. Tapio  
Layout, Historical Article

Playtesting Stars

Vince Lewonski, Jim 'Gunner' Thompson, Robbie Weissbard, Nick Kabir, Mike Gribbroek, Mark 'Tank' Porterfield, the guys who put up with a try at the cons and local tournaments! Thank God for the Bomb! Bless the children...don't flame them!

#### Overlay Notes:

**The Village 42 overlay** has a Steeple (P5.2) in hex V5 at Level 1. The brown depictions in hexes S3/S4/S5-T2/T3/T4-U3/U4/U5-O7/O6-P7/P6 are "fences" and for Adv. Sq. Ldr. purposes are treated exactly the same as HEDGES (B9). Miniatures players use applicable rules for wooden fences. The depictions in overlay hex L5 is Orchard; W5 is Graveyard.

#### Clarification:

**Lost Sentinels** German I1 (Inf. Pltn) max. is P12 (i.e., not P1.2).