

THE SECOND BATTLE OF SEDAN MAY 1940

Captain Peter R. Mansoor, US Army



The advance of the German XIX Panzer Corps through the Ardennes forest in 1940 is a classic example of the blending of mobility, firepower and shock action—the hallmark of the armored force. The battle contains valuable lessons regarding many of the principles of war; lessons that are still applicable in this era of AirLand Battle doctrine.

One of Napoleon's marshals once brought him a plan of campaign in which the French Army was neatly and evenly lined up from one end of the frontier to the other. 'Are you trying to stop smuggling?' Napoleon asked heartlessly.

Theodore Draper¹

I contradicted him strongly and repeated that the essential was that we use all the available limited offensive power of our armor in one surprise blow at one decisive point; to drive a wedge so deep and wide that we need not worry about our flanks; and then immediately to exploit any successes gained without bothering to wait for the infantry corps.

General Heinz Guderian²

THE CITY of Sedan in northeastern France has been the scene of some of the most convincing victories in the history of warfare. Emperor Napoleon III and 100,000 of his troops surrendered to the Prussians there after the First Battle of Sedan in 1870. This ushered in the ascendancy of German arms on the Continent for the next 48 years. With the rise of the German nation from the ashes of World War I under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, Sedan would once again assume a prominent position in military affairs.

By 1940, however, the conditions of warfare had radically altered the methods of pursuing military operations. The German High Command took advantage of the changes wrought by mechanization and tactical doctrine and fought the Second Battle of Sedan on a totally new foundation of armored forces massed to penetrate into the depth of the enemy's defense. From 10–15 May 1940, the fate of Germany and France rested with the men who faced each other in the Ardennes forest and across the Meuse River.³ The battle they fought initiated a new era in armored warfare. The campaign

was a test of two vastly different military systems, doctrines and philosophies.

The Second Battle of Sedan marked the ascendancy of mobile warfare over positional warfare. The campaign validated the concept of independent operations by large armored formations and is a good example of the superiority of the combined arms team over an army that subordinated all other branches in support of the infantry.

The Attack

The spearhead of the assault through the Ardennes was the XIX Panzer Corps—the 1st, 2d and 10th Panzer Divisions and the separate *Grossdeutschland* Infantry Regiment—under the command of General Heinz Guderian. At 0530⁴ on 10 May 1940, the corps crossed the frontier into Luxembourg and began its march to the Meuse River (fig. 1). By 1000 the lead elements had traversed Luxembourg and crossed into Belgium.

The Belgians, lacking sufficient forces to defend their entire country, deployed a minimal force of *Chasseurs Ardennais* to cover the entire breadth of the Ardennes forest. Their orders, in the event of a major attack, were to destroy communications and withdraw to link up with the bulk of the Belgian army in the north.

The Belgians hoped the French would arrive in time to secure the Ardennes, but since 1936 there had been no direct military coordination between the two countries.⁵ The Belgians did not turn over the demolitions they had executed to the French, and the departure of the *Chasseurs* from the area left the obstacles uncovered. What might have happened had the obstacles been covered by fire is conjecture, but at Martelange two companies of *Chasseurs Ardennais* that had not received the order to withdraw held up the entire 1st Panzer Division for several hours.⁶ Martelange, however, was an isolated incident, and for the most part the ad-

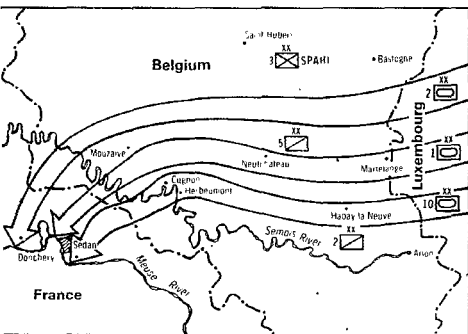


Figure 1 Advance of XIX Panzer Corps to the Meuse

vance of the XIX Panzer Corps went smoothly.

The major problem for the XIX Panzer Corps on 10 May was not the Belgian or French defenses, but the difficulties caused by routing an entire panzer corps through the Ardennes forest. The terrain along which the units moved was difficult. The roads were steep and winding, and the dense forest limited cross-country movement. If the immensity of the German thrust had not caught the Belgians and the French completely by surprise, they could easily have delayed the enemy long enough to establish an effective defense on the Meuse River.

As soon as he received word of the invasion, General Charles Huntziger, commander of the 2d French Army, ordered his cavalry screen out into the Ardennes. Late in the morning the advance guard of the French 2d D. L. C. (light cavalry division) made contact with the lead elements of the 10th Panzer Division near Habay-la-Neuve. In the meeting engagement that ensued, the panzers badly mauled the French cavalry. By nightfall the 2d D. L. C. was in full retreat back to the Semois River.⁷

On 11 May, the 1st Panzer Division, having extricated itself from the obstacles at

Martelange, attacked the positions of the 5th D. L. C. around Neufchâteau. The 5th D. L. C. fared no better than the 2d D. L. C. Huntziger gave the unit permission to withdraw to the Semois, but ordered it to hold the Semois "at all costs."⁸ To bolster the defense, Huntziger attached a battalion of infantry from the 55th Infantry Division, which was holding the sector of the Meuse at Sedan, to the 5th D. L. C. By the evening of 11 May, the French cavalry was behind the river.

The retreat of the 5th D. L. C. to the Semois was not well coordinated with the unit to its north. As the southern element of the covering force⁹ of the French 9th Army, part of the mission of the 3d Spahi Brigade was to ensure flank coordination with the cavalry of the 2d Army.¹⁰

Upon hearing of the retreat of the 5th D. L. C., however, the commander of the 3d Spahi Brigade, Colonel Marc, pulled his unit back behind the Meuse. His unit had not even made contact with German forces and yet he vacated the entire covering force area. The flank of the 5th D. L. C. on the Semois was now uncovered. The motorcycle reconnaissance battalion of the 1st Panzer Division soon discovered the open northern flank and, on the night of 11 May, established a bridgehead at Mouzaive.

Initial Lessons

There are several major lessons apparent in the first two days of the battle. The first is the importance of good reconnaissance. The French failed to identify positively any single panzer division in the Ardennes until 12 May. The 3d Spahi Brigade withdrew from its sector before it even made contact with the Germans. This left the French commanders unsure as to the enemy facing them.¹¹

The second lesson is the importance of coordination to the front, flanks and rear. The French would have been more successful in delaying the German advance had they

been able to man the obstacles created by the *Chasseurs*.¹² Obstacles not covered by fire are of minor nuisance to a determined attacker. The covering forces of the 2d and 9th French Armies also did not tie into each other, causing a breakdown in the defense of the Semois River.

The final lesson is the importance of air power to ground operations. Had the Allied air forces attacked, they would have wreaked havoc with the dense, crowded vehicle columns of the XIX Panzer Corps as they snaked their way through the Ardennes.

The French High Command was not devoid of knowledge of the panzers advancing through the Ardennes, but chose to underestimate the importance of the available intelligence. General François d'Astier of the French air force sent reconnaissance planes over the Ardennes where they discovered panzer columns moving west on 11 May.¹³ However, his superiors ordered him to employ his planes in Belgium, where they were convinced the main enemy thrust would come.¹⁴ On 12 May, d'Astier sent a warning to the French High Command (G. Q. H.):

"During the night and early morning, reconnaissance shows that the enemy is making an important drive westward in the Ardennes. The columns are carrying pontoon bridging material. Large motorized and armored forces are driving toward the Meuse at Dinant, Givet, and Bouillon, coming from Marche and Neufchâteau. One can therefore conclude that the enemy is carrying out a very serious movement toward the Meuse."¹⁵

The French High Command ignored the indicators pointing to a major attack through the Ardennes. General Grandsard, commander of the X Corps defending the Meuse on either side of Sedan, claims he never received the reports from aerial reconnaissance. This oversight, if true, was critical, since the *Schwerpunkt* would fall in the sector of X Corps.

On the morning of 12 May, the 1st Panzer Division attacked the French on the Semois at Mouzaive and Bouillon. The attack succeeded, and by noon engineers were working on a bridge. Artillery and air bombardment, however, hampered the construction throughout the day.¹⁶

The 10th Panzer succeeded in crossing the Semois between Cugnon and Herbeumont. The 2d Panzer was tied up with the units to its north and could not cross yet. Guderian, however, had two-thirds of his force across



German Panzer Mark II during invasion of France

the Semois and heading for the Meuse. By nightfall, the 1st and 10th Panzer Divisions seized the northern bank of the Meuse that the French evacuated without a fight.

The French High Command had estimated the covering force would delay the Germans for at least five days.¹⁷ The XIX Panzer Corps took just 2 1/2 days to throw the French cavalry across the Meuse River. Grandsard now evaluated the possibility of a German attack and its chances of success:

"What can the enemy do on the 13th? He can of course engage the defenses and close up to them. Will he attack? That depends on him. Will the attack succeed? The Corps Commander believes not, as the enemy has tanks and infantry to hurl against us, but he



Antitank gun crossing the Meuse on a raft

needs time to bring up his artillery, ammunition and suitable equipment for the type of country, all this while being harassed by our artillery. Moreover, their tanks have an impassable obstacle facing them, unless the infantry opens the way for them, and for this they require heavy fire support. What could give them this? Artillery? They have none yet! Tanks? Their guns are not good enough! Their air force? We have complete confidence in our fighters! Conclusion: On the evening of the 12th it seemed that the enemy was not in a position to attack on the 13th, provided that our air force did the same as on the 12th.¹⁸

The French were crediting the Germans with their own tactical thought. Since the

French would never conduct a river crossing without heavy artillery support, they reasoned that neither would the Germans.¹⁹ The French air force also had given a credible showing of itself over Bouillon on 12 May, but its success was illusory. Grandard's optimism would be short-lived.

The French command reacted to the mauling of the covering force in the Ardennes by sending the newly formed XXI Corps—composed of the 3d Armored Division and the 3d Motorized Division—toward Sedan on 12 May. In addition, Grandard inserted the 71st Infantry Division into the line between the 55th Infantry Division and the 3d North African Division. Still, the situation of X Corps on the night of 12 May was not one to inspire confidence.

The 55th and 71st Infantry Divisions were both "B" class divisions made up of elderly reservists and were of dubious quality.²⁰ The men of the 71st Division were still settling into their defensive positions on the 13th. The 55th Division was also adjusting its positions, having virtually lost the one battalion that it sent forward to support the 5th D. L. C.²¹ The 55th and 71st Divisions were short of antitank and antiaircraft guns. The one advantage the 55th Division did have was its artillery. The division had twice the normal complement of divisional artillery, plus a good slice of the corps' artillery—approximately 140 guns total.²²

After the successful battle upon the Semois, General Paul von Kleist, commander of the panzer group to which the XIX Panzer Corps belonged, summoned Guderian to his headquarters. Von Kleist ordered Guderian to cross the Meuse the next day at 1600. Guderian objected, reporting that the 2d Panzer Division would not be in position by that time. Von Kleist insisted, however, and Guderian agreed that the advantage of surprise was an important consideration.²³ The French would not expect a bold move so soon in the battle. Guderian had

very little time to develop an order, so he resorted to using the same order he had issued at the war games held at Koblenz on 7 February. Except for the dates and times, the order fit the situation perfectly.²⁴

Guderian's plan for 13 May was straightforward (fig. 2). The 2d Panzer in the north was to form the right flank of the assaulting force when it reached the Meuse near Donchery. The 1st Panzer, reinforced by the *Grossdeutschland*, a battalion of assault engineers, and divisional artillery of the 2d and 10th Panzer Divisions, was to make the main attack by crossing the Meuse just north of Sedan and seizing the Heights of la Marfée overlooking the city.²⁵ The 10th Panzer was to cross the Meuse south of Sedan and protect the southern flank of the corps. Throughout the day, large masses of troops and equipment assembled north of the Meuse in preparation for the river crossing.

The German units on the northern bank made a lucrative target. The French artillery was effective in suppressing the enemy during the morning, but it would have been much more devastating if used en masse. One French general later wrote:

"What a chance for the artillery to strike hammer blows, to put into practice the 'swinging concentrations' which are the crowning glory of the 500-page general instruction on artillery fire!"²⁶

The French artillery, however, was limited to a daily combat supply rate of 30 rounds per tube. Grandsard did not want to expend his ammunition prematurely, as he still believed the enemy would not be able to make a serious river crossing for another week.²⁷ What advantage the French artillery gave to the defenders on the Meuse was soon to disappear, however, underneath a carpet of bombs from the sky.

The *Luftwaffe* massed its airpower on 13 May to support the XIX Panzer Corps. The attacks began at 1200 and lasted for more than four hours. Wave after wave of Stuka

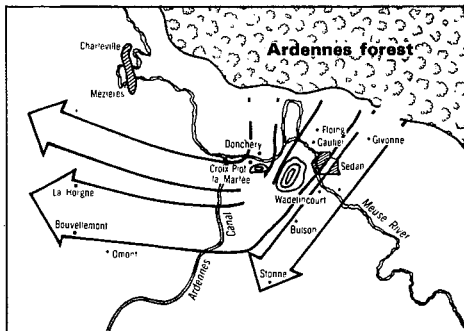


Figure 2 XIX Corps Meuse crossing and breakout

diver bombers and Dornier level bombers struck the exposed French positions on the southern bank of the Meuse.²⁸ The bombing all but silenced the French artillery. After the intense bombing, the French were in a state of shock and became incapable of putting up an effective defense of their positions.²⁹

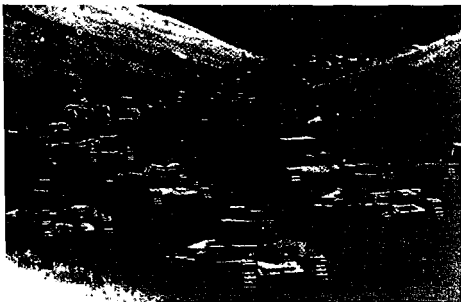
During the bombing the commander of the 55th Division, General Lafontaine, called Grandsard and told him he felt an attack was imminent. Grandsard decided to move his corps reserve of two infantry regiments and two tank battalions closer to Sedan—in a position for a counterattack should the need arise. The units did not begin their movement until nightfall, however, and would not be ready in time.³⁰

Across the River

Shortly before 1600, the German artillery fired a short but intense barrage on the French positions which helped to further suppress the already demoralized defenders. With the French artillery silenced, the Germans could now deal with the bunkers on the far side of the river. They moved flak guns and medium tanks into positions from which they could engage the French

defenses with direct fire. The remaining French defenders were now isolated.

Precisely at 1600, the German infantry and assault engineers rushed toward the water's edge with their rubber boats. Despite the intense preparatory bombardment, casualties in the first wave were heavy, with some estimates ranging as high as 50 percent.³¹ In the north, the French repulsed the 2d Panzer which had closed on the Meuse early enough on 13 May to participate in the crossing. The infantry and engineers persisted in their attempts to cross the river, and by 2000 the division had established a toehold on the far shore. In the



Armor and supply vehicles stacked north of the Meuse

south, the 10th Panzer also met with stiff resistance and gained only a small foothold on the heights above Wadelincourt.

In the area of the main attack in the center, however, where the Germans had concentrated their air and artillery bombardment, the attack was more successful. The men who crossed the Meuse near Gaulier silenced enough bunkers and pillboxes to allow succeeding waves to cross relatively unmolested.³² By sunset they had secured the commanding heights on the southern bank of the river. By 1830 the engineers were busy working on a pontoon bridge at Gaulier.

Meanwhile, the commander of the 1st Rifle Regiment, Lieutenant Colonel Hermann Balck, decided to continue the attack when darkness fell. His men were exhausted, but Balck pushed them to the limit. During the night, the unit advanced 6 miles to take Chémery without opposition.³³ The success of this attack loosened the French hold on the 2d Panzer near Donchery, and the defenders, afraid of being outflanked by the Germans to their south, withdrew. By 2200 the 2d Panzer had seized the heights of Croix-Piot on the southern bank of the river,³⁴ and the engineers finished the bridge at Gaulier during the night. Only decisive action by the French could save the situation at Sedan now.

With the exception of the bunkers along the riverfront, the 55th Infantry Division put up very little resistance to the German assault. The effects of the unit's lack of training and leadership were evident everywhere. Although the casualties sustained had not been too severe, the morale of the unit cracked. The artillerymen abandoned their guns. The soldiers panicked. By nightfall they were rushing to the rear in droves, shouting that enemy tanks were already in Bulson.³⁵ All sense of order was lost. In the hysteria that ensued, the 55th Infantry Division ceased to exist. Only a few isolated pockets of resistance remained to delay the Germans.

Missed Opportunities

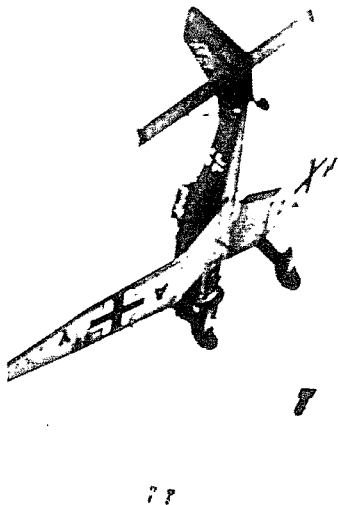
A spirited counterattack on the 13th would have caught the German infantry unsupported and would quite possibly have destroyed the bridgehead. However, the French commanders' reaction to the crossing was lethargic because most of them remained to the rear and did not have an accurate picture of what was happening. The information flowing into their headquarters was not sufficient to keep up with the rapid pace of the fighting.

The German commanders, on the other hand, operated well forward. Balck was with his troops during the crossing and the night attack that followed. Guderian crossed the Meuse on the first operational ferry. Subordinate commanders were able to consult him in person during critical periods in the battle. As a result, the XIX Panzer Corps reacted faster to the changing situation than its adversary. The French executed moves too late and with too little punch to alter the course of the battle.

Grandsard's corps reserve finally started for its new positions at nightfall, but it got caught up in the wave of refugees from the 55th Division.³⁶ Grandsard ordered a counterattack to begin at 0430, with the 213th Infantry Regiment and the 7th Tank Battalion attacking through Chémery, and the 205th Infantry Regiment and 4th Tank Battalion attacking through Bulson. This attack, if executed, would have caught the 1st Rifle Regiment exhausted and in a precarious, exposed position after its successful night advance on Chémery. None of the French units, however, were ready to attack on time. At 0700 the 213th Infantry Regiment and 7th Tank Battalion finally began their advance. Unfortunately for the French, the tanks of the 1st Panzer had begun crossing the Meuse at 0600 and, by 0700, were across in strength.³⁷

The French had lost the race. The 213th Infantry Regiment and 7th Tank Battalion advanced halfway to Chémery before the panzers of the 1st Brigade caught them in the flank. The French fought bravely, but the 7th Tank Battalion quickly lost half of its tanks.³⁸ The French withdrew in disorder. The attack by the 205th Infantry Regiment and 4th Tank Battalion never got started. By 0900 the attack was over.

After the failure of the counterattack, the commander of the 71st Division, General Baudet, decided to withdraw his unit's exposed left flank and move his command post



German air power replaced artillery during the assault

back. Seeing the withdrawal of the left wing and the command post, the rest of the division headed for the rear.³⁹ Guns were abandoned to the enemy, and whole units withdrew without orders. The 71st Division melted away like the 55th Division, another victim of combat stress caused by insufficient training, poor morale and inadequate leadership.

With the failure of the French counterattack and the collapse of the 55th and 71st Divisions, the XIX Panzer Corps was able to widen its bridgehead significantly. Guderian's orders to his units for 14 May were classic in their brevity: "The divisions will capture their objectives according to the map exercise."⁴⁰ Behind the bridge at Gaulier, vast lines of armored vehicles queued up, awaiting their turn to cross the river. The lone bridge was now the key to the entire battle.

The Allied air forces reacted to the crossing of the Meuse by throwing every operational bomber they had in France into an attempt to destroy the bridge at Gaulier on the afternoon of 14 May. The flak brigade of the XIX Panzer Corps, which Guderian judiciously disentangled from the columns moving through the Ardennes and had brought forward on 13 May, was waiting for them. Also waiting were waves of German fighters.⁴¹ The Allied pilots attacked bravely, but lacking proper fighter support they were decimated.⁴² The Allies now had only one force capable of restoring the situation at Sedan, but this, too, would be frittered away without striking a decisive blow.

The XXI Corps, which began moving toward Sedan on 12 May, finally arrived on the battlefield near Stonne on the morning of 14 May. General Flavigny, the corps commander, had orders to restore the French defensive line and attack to the north.⁴³ Flavigny ordered the attack to begin at 1600. The 3d Armored Division and 3d Motorized Division were to attack from the area around Stonne north toward Chémery and ultimately back to the Meuse at Sedan. For once, the French timing was correct.

By midday on 14 May, the 1st and 2d Panzer Divisions were ready to break out of the Sedan bridgehead. The 10th Panzer Division, however, was having trouble getting its tanks across the river and was not yet available to guard the southern flank.

Guderian visited the 1st Panzer Division and asked General Kirchner if he could turn the entire division to the west or if a flank guard should be left facing to the south. The division's first, general staff officer, Major Wenck, replied for his commander, "*Klotzen, nicht Kleckern*"—strike in a concentrated blow and not to disperse the effort. This was Guderian's own expression from his 1936 work *Achtung! Panzer!* and as he states, "That really answered my question."⁴⁴ Guderian ordered the 1st and 2d

Panzer Divisions to turn west and cross the Ardennes Canal, leaving only the *Grossdeutschland* around Stonne to guard the southern flank.

A swift blow by the 3d Armored Division into the flank of the XIX Panzer Corps as it swerved to the west would have caught it in exactly the position the German High Command feared most. The attack, at the very least, would have upset the German advance and, with any luck, might have resulted in a decisive French victory. Before the attack began, however, Flavigny rescinded his orders.

French doctrine was to restore the integrity of a defensive position by applying pressure around the enemy, as opposed to counterattacking into the enemy's flank to stop his penetration. Flavigny ordered the 3d Armored Division dispersed over a 12-mile front with its tanks deployed to cover every avenue between Omont and Stonne.⁴⁵ Parceled out, the division could no longer attack in force. Worse still, it would not attack at all.

The commander in chief of the Allied Northeast Theater, French General A. J. Georges, was furious at Huntziger for allowing the 3d Armored Division to be used in a static defensive role. He ordered Huntziger to counterattack with the 3d Armored Division and 3d Motorized Division as soon as possible on 15 May.⁴⁶

Flavigny did not get around to issuing his orders for the attack until 1130 on 15 May. His plan of attack was radically different from the day before. The 3d Armored Division, instead of leading the main attack, was to be under the operational control of the commander of the 3d Motorized Division. The operation was to be a methodical, set-piece attack with the infantry leading the way.⁴⁷ Even this limited attack could not be carried out, as the tanks, so well dispersed the night before, could not be assembled in time. Flavigny postponed the attack from

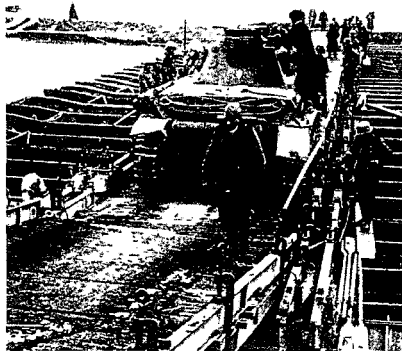
1500 to 1730 and then cancelled it altogether. Huntziger ordered his units to dig in where they were. The counterattack ended before it began.

Beginning of the End

If the French were not willing to take the initiative on 15 May, the Germans were more than willing to do so. The *Grossdeutschland* pushed south to seize the high ground around Stonne. There the regiment ran into parts of the French 3d Armored Division and 3d Motorized Division, elements of which were thrown in piecemeal to halt the German advance. Even though the French effort at Stonne was a comparatively modest one—involving one light tank battalion, one medium tank company and one infantry battalion—it caused the Germans great concern.⁴⁸ Imagine what a full-scale assault by the 3d Armored Division would have done to the nerves of the German commanders.

The fighting in Stonne was bitter, but the antitank company of the *Grossdeutschland* finally halted the French armor.⁴⁹ The 10th Panzer Division and advance elements of the XIV Motorized Corps soon arrived to strengthen the defense. The southern flank of the German advance was secured. What remained of French resistance now centered on elements of the 14th Infantry Division at Bouvellemont and the 3d Spahi Brigade at La Horgne.

Again the task of leading the attack fell to Balck's riflemen. They were hungry and exhausted, having had no real sleep for several days. The 1st Rifle Regiment was down to 50 percent strength.⁵⁰ The combat stress in the unit must have been tremendous, but Balck's soldiers were a well-trained and cohesive team. Through superb leadership he was able to rouse his troops to another great effort. They captured Bouvellemont on the night of 15 May and shattered the French defenders.⁵¹ In the north, the 2d Panzer Di-



German armor crossing the Meuse. The rubber rafts (upper left) were used during the assault crossing

vision sliced through the 53d Infantry Division.⁵² The Germans had broken the last French resistance. Between the XIX Panzer Corps and the English Channel there remained nothing but space.

When France fell, there was a good deal of uncertainty in the Allied nations as to the cause of its defeat.⁵³ After reflection, one fact becomes clear. Sheer numbers had little to do with the victory. The XIX Panzer Corps won the Second Battle of Sedan because it was better trained, organized and led than its French counterpart. Guderian based the operational maneuver of his corps on better, more modern doctrine than did the French, whose maneuver was based on the antiquated tactics of 1918. From private to general the XIX Panzer Corps fought with skill and determination. The soldiers of the unit had the will to win.

Principles of War

Let us reflect on some of the principles of war and their relation to the battle:

- Surprise: Strike the enemy at a time or place or both in a manner for which he is unprepared. The German's use of massed ar-

mor in the Ardennes and the early attack across the Meuse River caught the French unawares and unprepared to meet the threat. The use of massed air power to take the place of artillery in the river crossing also surprised the French.

- **Security:** Never permit the enemy to acquire an unexpected advantage. The French covering force did not perform even the limited function of identifying the enemy to its front. Even so, there were indications of major enemy activity in the Ardennes, but the French High Command chose to downplay the warnings.

- **Mass:** Concentrate combat power at the decisive place and time. Guderian weighted his main attack across the Meuse with all the air power, artillery, engineer support, infantry and air defense assets he could muster. The French failed to use their artillery properly when it was in a position to strike devastating blows on the enemy on 13 May. They also dispersed the 3d Armored Division, the one force that might have changed the outcome of the battle in their favor.

- **Offensive:** Seize, retain, and exploit the initiative. After throwing the French covering force out of the Ardennes, the XIX Panzer Corps immediately made an assault crossing of the Meuse River and kept the French defenders off balance. Once across, the XIX Panzer Corps never let the French regain their composure. Balck kept them off balance with his night advance to Chémery. Even the *Grossdeutschland* Infantry Regiment kept a superior French force at Stonne off balance by seizing the initiative and attacking it. The French forfeited the initiative they could have gained by dispersing the 3d Armored Division into a wide defensive screen instead of attacking the southern flank of the German advance.

- **Maneuver:** Place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power. Guderian con-

sistently maneuvered his units to gain local superiority over the French defenders. The French did little maneuvering to speak of and balked when they had the chance to do so. Most of the French units lacked the agility and flexibility to react to orders quickly.

- **Economy of Force:** Allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts. Guderian kept the 1st and 2d Panzer Divisions intact when he broke out of the Sedan bridgehead and left just the right amount of force behind to guard his flanks. This decision was a gamble that paid off.

Although not a complete listing, these principles stand out when examining the battle. I would like to add a 10th principle of war to the nine the US Army currently recognizes—the principle of combined arms. Throughout history, forces that combined their various assets into one cohesive scheme of maneuver have been more victorious than those forces that did not. Combined arms is one of the key lessons of the Second Battle of Sedan. I would define it as follows:

- **Combined Arms:** Use every available asset in a concerted effort to produce a stronger combat force. Guderian blended his units well. He supported his main effort of armor and infantry with engineers, air power, artillery and air defense assets. The French, on the other hand, fought a disconcerted and disconnected battle. Once the French artillery was silenced, the infantry was on its own. There were no air defense assets available to support the defenders when the Stukas attacked. The armor that was available in the corps reserve was not committed to a counterattack on 13 May, when the German infantry was still vulnerable in its tenuous bridgehead. The Allied air forces were nowhere to be found. There was never any real melding of the French arms into a cohesive scheme of maneuver.

Even with the operational surprise the Germans gained by their aggressive ma-

never through the Ardennes, the outcome of the Second Battle of Sedan was never a foregone conclusion. The French had many opportunities, but failed to exploit them. Soldiers win battles, and the XIX Panzer Corps won in large measure because its soldiers wanted to win. The French soldiers of the "B" class divisions—poorly trained,

thrown together in units with little heritage and poor leadership—were not prepared for the battle. "Only he is vanquished who accepts defeat" stated Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch during the heyday of French arms during World War I. Unfortunately, at Sedan in May 1940, too many French soldiers were all too willing to do so.

NOTES

1 Theodore Draper, *The Six Weeks War* (New York: The Viking Press, 1944), 41

2 Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1957), 69

3 For a good, unbiased, examination of the evolution of Plan Yellow, the German operational plan for the offensive against France, see Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), chap. 5

4 German time, which was one hour ahead of French and British time. All times given are German time.

5 Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 229

6 William L. Shirer, *Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), 631

7 Horne, 262—63

8 *Ibid.*, 272—73

9 The "covering force" is a doctrinal creation of the US Army. Although the cavalry screen of the French army in 1940 was not a "covering force" in the modern sense, the term probably serves better than any other to describe the role of the French cavalry in the battle

10 Horne, 273

11 In front of the 3d Spanish Brigade were elements of both the 2d Panzer Division and to its north, the 6th Panzer Division. These two divisions became entangled on the crowded road network, which delayed their appearance on the battlefield.

12 The absence of any coordinated plan to turn over the obstacles created by the Belgians to the French was another by-product of the Belgian retreat into neutrality in 1936 and the resulting lack of military coordination between the two nations.

13 These were columns of the 1st Panzer Division, as it turned out.

14 Shirer, 636

15 *Ibid.* Notice, however, the absence of a conclusion that the main attack was coming through the Ardennes.

16 Draper, 68—69. Guderian was caught in several air attacks on 12 May in the vicinity of Baullion, attesting to the effectiveness of the Allied air forces for at least a portion of the battle. See Guderian, 78.

17 B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd., 1948), 181

18 Colonel A. Goutard, *The Battle of France 1940* (New York: Ives Washburn, Inc., 1959), 129—30

19 The German artillery, in fact, was to be limited to 50 rounds per battery on 13 May due to the delay of the ammunition columns on the overloaded traffic network in the Ardennes. Von Kleist as quoted by Liddell Hart, 174.

20 Grandsard had the following to say about the men of these two divisions: "Discipline in these divisions was reduced by the slackness in the men and lack of leadership amongst most of the subalterns. Most of the troops were 'fat and flabby men in their thirties who had to re-train.' Grandsard as quoted by Goutard, 127.

21 Horne, 304—305

22 Goutard, 131

23 Guderian, 178—79

24 *Ibid.* 78—79

25 King Wilhelm of Prussia watched the First Battle of Sedan in 1870 from the Heights of la Marée.

26 General Menu as quoted by Goutard, 131

27 Horne, 325

28 II Air Corps alone put in 310 bomber and 200 dive bomber sorties on 13 May at Sedan. See Claus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1968), 118

29 General Menu as quoted by Goutard, 133

30 *Ibid.* 134

31 Draper, 177

32 *Ibid.*

33 Major General F. W. von Meienthun, *Panzer Battles* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), 19

34 Shirer, 648

35 Goutard, 136. In fact, no German armor had yet crossed the Meuse as the bridge at Gaultier was not completed until midnight.

36 *Ibid.* 137. The officers of these regiments kept them from following their compatriots into oblivion only with the greatest of difficulty.

37 Shirer, 651. See also Goutard, 139

38 Goutard, 139

39 *Ibid.* 140. See also Shirer, 652

40 Horne, 370

41 Bekker, 119. The German fighter effort over Sedan on 14 May totaled 814 sorties.

42 The Royal Air Force official history states: "No higher rate of loss in an operation of comparable size has ever been experienced by the Royal Air Force. The British lost 40 out of 71 attacking bombers. Denis Richards, *The Royal Air Force 1939-45* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1953), 120. The commander of the flak brigade, Colonel Hippel, was awarded the Knight's Cross for his unit's success in defending the bridge at Gaultier.

43 Horne, 385

44 Guderian, 83

45 Goutard, 144

46 *Ibid.*, 146

47 *Ibid.* See also Shirer, 657. The plan for the attack was based on the current French doctrine, which had progressed little since 1918.

48 Horne, 411. See also Guderian, 84—85

49 The 14th Antitank Company knocked out 33 French tanks at the cost of 13 dead, 16 wounded, and six out of its 12 guns destroyed. The commanding officer, Lieutenant Beck-Broschster, and one of the section leaders, Sergeant Hingelinger, were both awarded the Knight's Cross for their actions in Stonne on 15 May. Horne, 410.

50 *Ibid.* 414

51 See Guderian, 85. Balck was awarded the Knight's Cross on this day. He would later go on to command a panzer corps in Russia, a panzer army in Poland, and an army group in the West.

52 Another category: B division.

53 Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Sixty Days That Shook the West* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), 35

Captain Peter R. Mansoor is the S1 of the 3d Squadron, 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, Bad Hersfeld, Federal Republic of Germany. He is a graduate of the US Military Academy. He has served as tank and cavalry platoon leader, tank company executive officer and assistant regimental S3 with the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Bliss, Texas.