

## Dans la bataille, pour la patrie! de Gaulle's 4ème D.C.R.'s First Counterattack - 17 May 1940

**O**n May 15, 1940, Gen. Alphonse Georges summoned Colonel Charles de Gaulle, the newly appointed commander of the 4ème D.C.R. to his headquarters. Georges informed de Gaulle that Gen. Robert Touchon was establishing a new defensive line north of Paris in the Laon sector. To buy Gen. Touchon the time necessary to consolidate his forces, de Gaulle would counterattack the German armor now racing across northern France. Details of the attack were left to de Gaulle's discretion. As the visibly shaken Georges dismissed de Gaulle, he said, "There, de Gaulle! For you who have so long held the ideas which the enemy is putting into practice, here is the chance to act."

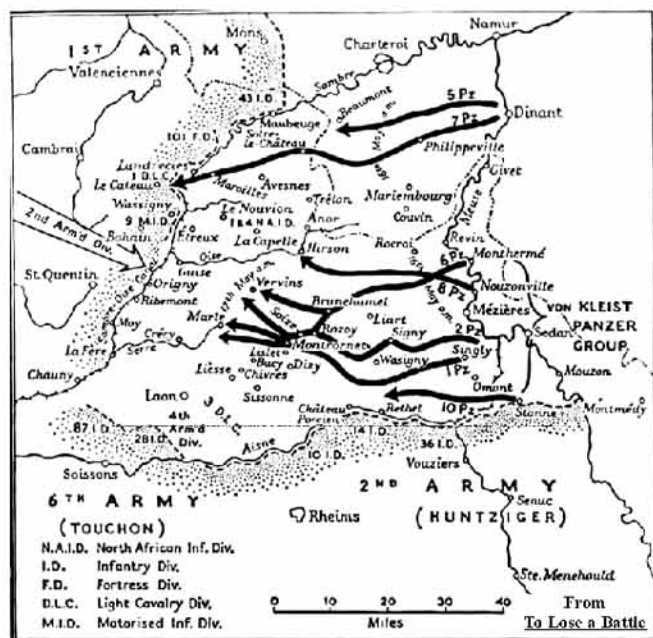
To act yes, but with what? The 4ème D.C.R. in de Gaulle's own words 'indeed did not exist.' The various elements were only now arriving from far flung assembly points. Of these units, some were only half-trained. The 46ème B.C.C., de Gaulle's only heavy tank battalion, had just recently swapped its light tanks for the powerful Char B1 bis. Training with the new mounts consisted solely of one test firing of the hull-mounted 75mm. Beyond the question of individual unit integrity, molding a collection of disparate elements into a homogeneous divisional structure required many months of training and drill.

The endeavor was a forlorn hope, but the high command did not seem to care. There was talk already of one final battle, a show of honor in front of Paris, before pitching in towel. Defeatism, however, was not the mindset of de Gaulle. In his own words, penned years after the fact, de Gaulle described himself as..."borne up by a limitless fury. 'Ah! It's too stupid! The war is beginning as badly as it could. Therefore it must go on. For this, the world is wide. If I live, I will fight, wherever I must, as long as I must, until the enemy is defeated and the national stain washed clean.'"

Wasting no time, de Gaulle drove to Laon, where he was joined by his staff and the remnants of General Petiet's 3rd Cavalry. While waiting for his troops, he conducted a personal reconnaissance of the attack route. As to Gen. Touchon's forces, from which he hoped to draw badly needed support, there were none. There were plenty of *poilus* about, but they were just rabble, marching south and choking the roads de Gaulle intended to use for his attack. When the soldiers were questioned, they said they marched in accordance to German orders! Lacking the time to process such a vast horde of prisoners, the Germans simply disarmed and paroled them. As a condition of parole, the French were ordered

south, clearing the German line of advance. Furious, de Gaulle turned back and established a command post at Bruyères. There he resolved to attack the important road junction at Montcornet, some twenty miles to the northeast, the next morning "with whatever forces might have reached me."

The first element arrived in the afternoon of May 16. It was the 345ème Compagnie de Chars from Versailles who had detrained at Soissons and Crouy that morning. They were followed that evening by the 24ème B.C.C., the 46ème B.C.C. and one company from the 2ème B.C.C. This amounted to 88 tanks, a fraction of 4ème D.C.R.'s divisional strength, but de Gaulle held firm to his timetable. Two other tank battalions, the 44ème B.C.C. and the 47ème B.C.C. were close at hand and expected to arrive in time to lend support. They did not make it however; neither did the four independent tank companies, nor the artillery, nor the two cavalry regiments, nor the regiment of supporting infantry. Only one infantry battalion, the 4ème B.C.P., arrived in time. Loaded into civilian buses at their railhead, the 4ème B.C.P. drove directly into the line, painfully negotiating roads choked with fleeing civilians and demoralized soldiers.



**Strategic Situation May 17, 1940**

The units assembled on the northern edge of the Samoussy Forest during the night and early morning of May 16-17. The 6ème Demi-Brigade, mustering 33 Char B1 bis of the 46ème B.C.C. and 14 Renault D2s of the 345ème *Compagnie de Chars*, would make the main thrust along the Laon-Montcornet road. The Char B1 bis would spearhead the attack, supported on the left by the Renault D2s. The first company would advance along either side the road, the second company following closely on the road itself. The battalion's third company had not yet arrived. The 8ème Demi-Brigade would support the right flank of the attack with about 40 Renault R-35s of the 2ème B.C.C. and 24ème B.C.C.

The tanks clanked off the start line at 0345 hours, May 17. Clad in a leather tanker's jacket and furiously chain smoking cigarettes, de Gaulle fancied himself a medieval armored champion, a gallant knight, in a classic meeting of champions between himself and Guderian. The attack progressed well until a half-dozen

Char B1 bis suddenly bogged in marshy ground south of Liesse. Recovery elements managed to extract all but one, but this took the entire day and the six heavies, a substantial subtraction, were thus lost to the attack. As the tanks neared Chivres, they surprised a German supply column crossing a bridge. The column, raked end to end, blazed in spectacular fashion, with loads of ammunition and gasoline lending

tremendous secondary explosions. Unfortunately, the blazing wrecks blocked the bridge for more than an hour before Commandant Jean Bescond, the commander of the 46ème B.C.C., advanced his Char B1 bis "Berry-au-Bac" to point blank and blasted the wrecks apart with several 75mm cannon shots. Bescond then plowed into the wreckage and forced his way through the flames. To make up for lost time, the lighter and faster Renault D2s took the lead from the ponderous Char Bs.

Advancing through Dizy-le-Gros, Captain J. C. Idée, commanding an independent company of Renault D2s tanks, observed with pride the way in which his fourteen tanks deployed. They had, however, outdistanced the slower Char B1 bis, because Idée could only see two of the heavies to his right. At Chivres, Idée's tanks overran a German reconnaissance detachment. In his words, Idée described the destruction, "Hell breaks loose. There are their motorcycles, their passengers inert, crumpled up in the sidecars or slumped over the

handlebars; a truck in flames; an armoured car knocked out by our 47s; infantrymen mown down while they were withdrawing behind a farm; yet another armoured car, shot up on the road to Machecourt. Chivres is cleaned up, we continue towards Bucy. A feeling of success."

At mid-morning the tanks stopped to refuel at Bucy. The support elements arrived as planned, but they had to fight their way through Chivres where some Germans, managing a hasty defense, attacked the Lorraine tractors with small-arms fire. The lack of French infantry support was already hurting de Gaulle. Although his tanks annihilated anything directly in their path, the surviving Germans simply closed ranks behind the tanks as they passed. Without proper infantry support, there was nothing de Gaulle could do to prevent this. Still, he pressed forward. A section of Renault D2s reached Montcornet and shelled German convoys moving on main roads to the south and west of the town. To the south the 8ème Demi-Brigade advanced without opposition through Sissonne and approached Montcornet.

In Montcornet, a staff officer from 1st Panzer, Hauptmann A. J. Graf von Kielmansegg, was driving through town enroute to his advanced divisional headquarters, some eight miles to the west. Graf von Kielmansegg, flagged to a stop by a squad of combat engineers, was told he was heading into a column of French tanks coming up the road. Graf von Kielmansegg, having no word of a French breakthrough, at first refused to believe it. A fellow staff officer climbing a nearby hill for a look-see, came racing back; the French tanks were right on his heels. Graf von

Kielmansegg ordered the engineers, who had already laid a hasty minefield on the road, to barricade the entrance to Montcornet.

The tanks were Renault R-35s of the 1ère Compagnie of the 24ème B.C.C.. As they turned into Montcornet at 1200 hours, the lead tanks stumbled into the minefield. Four tanks were either tracked by mines or holed by antitank fire. Meanwhile the battalion's second company reached Lislet while the second company of the 2ème B.C.C. was approaching Dizy-le-Gros.

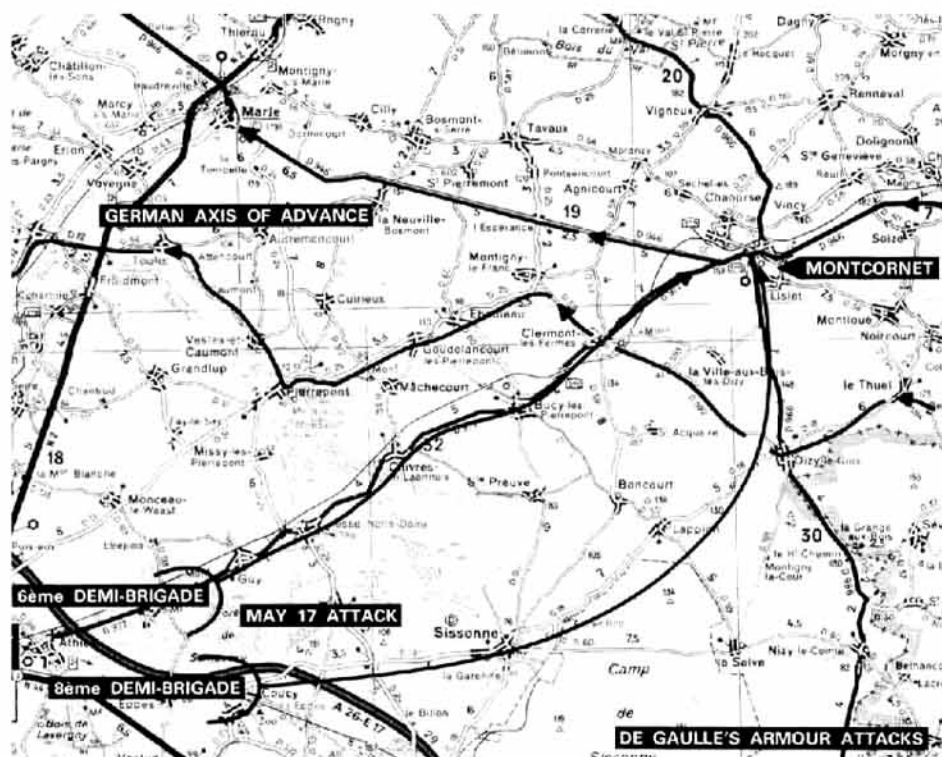
Lislet was filled with all kinds of German vehicles, including a 1st Panzer ammunition column. Having done all he could in Montcornet, Graf von Kielmansegg rushed at full speed back to Lislet to warn his drivers. He found them "lolling about in the sunshine," totally unaware of the disaster about to befall them. As Graf von Kielmansegg ordered them to turn about, a lookout shouted, "They're coming, Herr Hauptmann, they're coming!" As the last German truck reversed itself out of Lislet, Graf von Kielmansegg watched the first French tank rumble into the opposite side of town.

Leaving Lislet, Graf von Kielmansegg hastened to warn Guderian's headquarters at Soize. On the way he ran into a few German tanks fresh from the repair shops and heading towards the front. Kielmansegg directed them towards Lislet. Meanwhile, at 1500 hours, some German flak guns moved onto the heights behind Lislet and joined the fight. In the ensuing fire-fight, a few French tanks were knocked out at Lislet and Dizy-le-Gros. Commandant Besond's "Berry-au-Bac" suffered a mechanical failure.

Bescond commandeered another mount, the Char B1 bis, "Sampiero." Later, near Clermont, "Sampiero" took an anti-tank round and exploded, killing all inside. Later that afternoon, Graf von Kielmansegg returned to Lislet and found it, "burning from one end to another, two shot-up French tanks stood in the village itself and several others lay before Montcornet and Lislet. My H.Q. was somewhat battered." Later, towards dusk, the French attacked again, this time led by four heavy Char Bs. Graf von Kielmansegg ordered up the regimental headquarters' flak detachment. Although incapable of penetrating the Char B1 bis thick hide, the self-propelled 20mms sprayed them with an incessant hail of hits until the French retired. Graf von Kielmansegg attributed the retreat to a lack of nerve: "The lack of fighting spirit of the enemy became abundantly clear to us; German tanks against so weak a defense would certainly not have turned round." Captain Idée paints a

different picture, "1900 hours. Petrol is running low. The 'B' tanks have just turned about. They are leaving Lislet. The infantry had not been able to follow them, and what can we do without them? There must be some infiltration at our rear. The enemy platoon commanders have a terribly enterprising air about them".

Rather than breaking, Idée's tanks withdrew in good order, a difficult undertaking in any event, and an extraordinary achievement considering Idée's lack of training, fuel, and infantry support. Elsewhere, on the banks of the River Serre, another column of de Gaulle's tanks began taking fire from German self-propelled artillery. Out-gunned and out-ranged, the French retreated back through Montcornet, seeking the sanctuary of the Samoussy Forest, which was their starting point. Along the way the 4ème D.C.R. was set upon but waves of Stuka dive bombers. Without any air cover of their own or any anti-air-



Tactical Situation May 17, 1940

From  
Blitzkrieg in the West



craft guns, the French tankers simply had to button-up and absorb the punishment.

The cramped one-man turret of Captain Idée's Renault D2s was stifling. On the move, even in ideal situations, the interiors of French tanks were miserably hot. Whenever possible, French tanker commanders rode outside, sitting on the open turret hatches. As the Stukas drummed his tank with machine gun fire, Captain Idée recalled, "We shall not get out of this. I am blinded by sweat. I wipe myself with my sleeve and the medalion of Ste Thérèse which I carry on my wrist smiles at me. I kiss it." Idée survived, though his company lost one more tank to the air attack.

By that evening, 4ème D.C.R. was back on its starting point. The one day of combat had cost the French twelve Char B1bs, a handful of Renault D2s and about twenty Renault R-35s. This was balanced, however, by the fact that 4ème D.C.R. had given as good as it got, and managed to extract itself to fight another day, something no other French armored unit managed to accomplish during the entire campaign.

The question left to historians now is, "What did de Gaulle achieve?" In the hands of what Alistair Horne describes in his book To Lose a Battle, as "Gaullist mythomanes," this battle, and a second attack launched by de Gaulle several days later with similar results, created the second of the four pillars of the de Gaulle legacy. The other three being: (1) his reputation as an avant-garde military thinker of the inter-war period, (3) his career as leader of the Free French from 1940 onwards, and (4) his achievements in the post-war world as

President of France. De Gaulle himself described the action as having left, "several hundred German dead and plenty of burned-out lorries on the field. We had taken 130 prisoners. We had lost less than two hundred men." It is interesting to note, all of de Gaulle's comments about the action are drawn from his memoirs. He alone of all the French armored commanders of 1940, refused to testify before the Serre Commission, an official committee tasked in 1947 to investigate the failure of French armor in 1940.

It is a point of argument as to whether de Gaulle gained any breathing space for Gen. Touchon. It is certainly not true, as claimed by the "Gaullist mythomanes," the attack halted Guderian's advance. (The explanation for the German halt order of May 17, their major blunder of the campaign, requires an explanation beyond the scope of this article.) From Graf von Kielmansegg's account, there was momentary alarm at the point of attack within 1st Panzer, but the situation was dealt with on a local command level with locally available forces. Under the circumstances, with no infantry to hold ground won, de Gaulle's attack should be considered no more than an armored raid. To have mounted this alone was a considerable achievement and it is without question de Gaulle led his forces with great courage, but the facts hardly justify his boast made in London on March 1, 1941, "I know of a certain armoured division, improvised in the midst of combat, which inflicted on the Germans exactly the same treatment that their 11th Panzer-Division inflicted on us..."

by Edward Morris

## Gaming the Battle at Lislet

The 4ème DCR (*Division Cuirassées de Réserve*) was created on 15 May, yes, 2 days prior to this battle! None of de Gaulle's units were at full strength, but with the 37L-mounted infantrymen mostly out of this action (indeed, the 4ème *Chasseurs Portés* never got 37Ls, they rode trucks!), tanks will make up the bulk of your French forces.

GHQ's FR1 (Char B1 bis), and FR5 (R-35) will do well. The closest model currently available for the D2s would be FR2. Use an MCG5 halftrack for the battalion HQs.

On 17 May, 4ème DCR had:

- 6ÈME ARMORED DEMI-BRIGADE
  - 46ème BCC - 2 c<sup>comp</sup> of Char B1 bis
  - 345ème Cie.A - 1 x c<sup>comp</sup> D2
- 8TH ARMORED DEMI-BRIGADE
  - 2ème, 24ème, BCC - R35

The TO&E for a Char B company called for 10 tanks; R35 and D2 battalions were to have 3 companies of 13 tanks each. Few were anywhere near this strong.

The 4ème DCR received substantial units from the evening of 17 May on into early June. But at the time of the actions described here, none of the recon, heavy infantry, anti-tank gun and field artillery units had yet arrived in the Laon area for de Gaulle's desperate counterattack.

The German répostes can best be simulated by randomly selecting units that would have been available in the area. Major elements of the 1st Panzer Division would include:

- 1ST & 2ND PANZER-REGIMENT
  - EACH OF 2 x BTNS W/
    - HQ - 5 x Mcls, 5 x cars, 1 x Pz II, 2 x Bef Pz I, 1 x Bef Pz III, 2 x Pz I, 2 x Pz II, 3 @ sec. of 8 Mcl.
    - 2 x Lt. Tank C<sup>comp</sup> @ 8 x Pz II, 4 x Pz I, 7 x Pz III, 1 x Bef Pz I
    - 1 x Hvy. Tank C<sup>comp</sup> @ 6 x Pz II, 8 x Pz IV F, 1 x Bef Pz I
- 37TH PANZERABWEHR-ABTEILUNG
  - HQ - 5 x Mcls, 8 x cars, 2 x 261 AC
  - 3 x AT Gun P<sup>ls</sup> @ 4 x 37mm ATGs