

Rommel and the German 7th Panzer division in France 1940

The Initial Days of the Campaign

By Ove Pappila

The purpose of this paper is to give a detailed account of the first days of the German 7th Panzer Division's actions during the Campaign in France 1940. The purpose is also to analyse the impact the division commander, General Erwin Rommel, and his leadership, had on the division's actions.

Background

With this brief message *Figure 1* Erwin Rommel took command of the 7th Panzer Division on February 10, 1940. Until this moment Rommel's career was nothing much to boast about. As one of many veterans and heroes from the First World War, Rommel in the interwar period had a hard time making a mark for himself. His extraordinary accomplishments as an infantry leader during World War One left few marks among the German military

society until Rommel's book "Infantry Attacks" was released in 1937. Hitler himself read "Infantry Attacks" and made Rommel the leader of his own lifeguard during the campaign in Poland. After the campaign in Poland Rommel was asked of his further

**The man who lies low
and awaits developments
usually comes off second
best**

wishes and gave the answer that he wanted to command a Panzer Division. Rommel was given the command in the place of the both older and more experienced commanders.

E Rommel¹

Inevitably, any account of the German 7th Panzer Division's actions in France, 1940, to a large extent involves Erwin Rommel. Nevertheless, Rommel often showed audacity and never hesitated to take command of a situation no matter how big or small. He was a man of action, and it seems that he often reacted in a spontaneous and somewhat impulsive manner.

1 Hart Liddell, Basil: *The Rommel Papers*, Da Capo Press Inc, New York 1953, p 7.

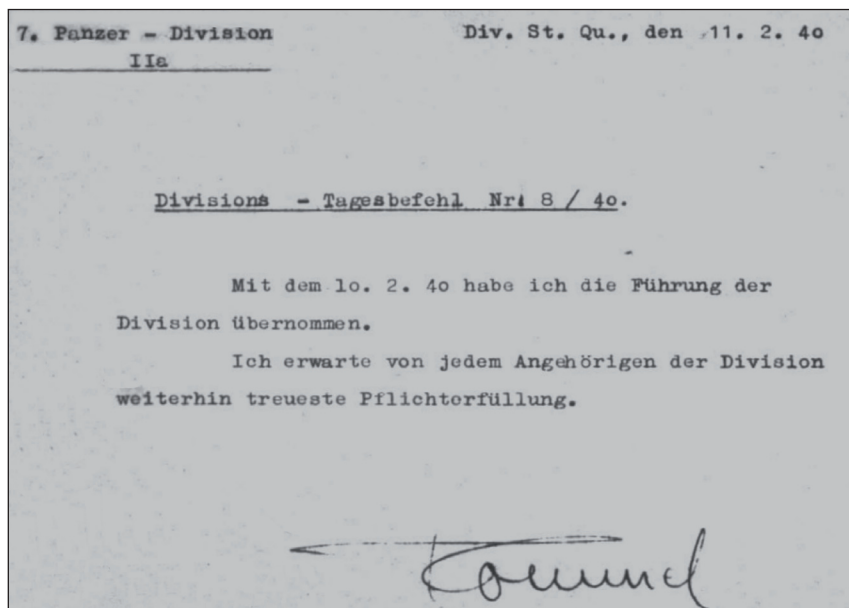


Figure 1: Message from Rommel to the 7th Panzer Division²

His style of command and personality characterized much of the actions of the division.

The opposing forces

At the time of the campaign in France, Germany did not possess an overwhelming military strength. The Germans had 135 divisions compared to 151 for the allied side. Germany had some 2500 tanks while the allies had more than 4000. The

German tanks were not technically superior to those of the allies. Only in the air did the Germans have superiority both in numbers of aircraft and in their technical performance.³

The German superiority, instead, lay in their tactics with narrow and deep penetrations. The Germans only had 10 Panzer Divisions,⁴ but they were used with a devastating effect when they were concentrated on a narrow front.

2 U.S. National Archives, Records of German Field Commands, Divisions. Roll T 315 400, frame 78.

3 The Germans concentrated their build-up of the air force on a few types of aircraft. The primary task was to fly in support of the army in the field. The build-up of the air force also meant that the German panzer forces were provided with long-range artillery, the Stukas. See: Horne, Alistair. *To Loose a Battle*. Macmillan Publishers Limited, London 1990, p 119–124.

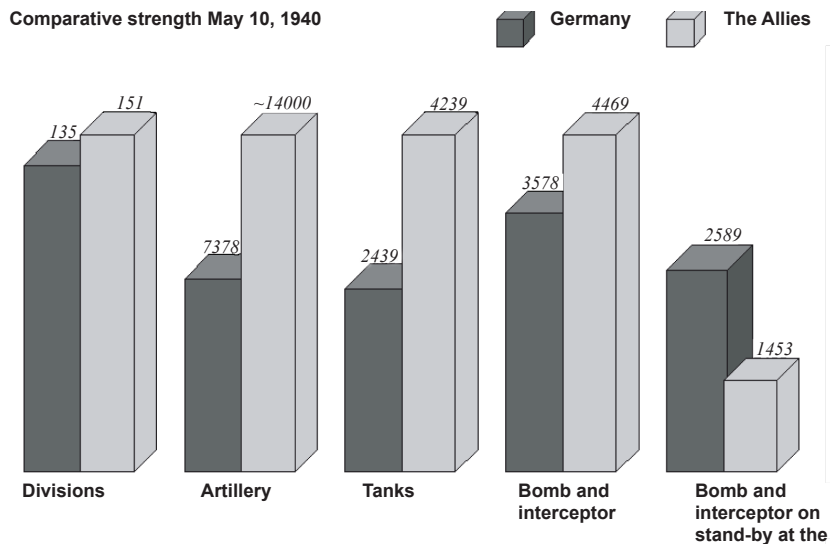


Figure 2: Comparative strength May 10, 1940⁵

Moreover, the German Army was of superior quality. Intense training and development in the interwar period and the recent experiences from the campaign in Poland had turned the German Army into a magnificent war-machine. Germany was prepared for a short decisive war and had for years directed her industrial and military resources to prepare for this.

The French Army of 1940 relied heavily on the experiences from World War One. The French side concluded that the defence

would save them from another attack by the Germans, and the Maginot Line was constructed. France had prepared for a careful, initially defensive war that would allow her to coax military contributions from former allies, particularly Britain.⁶

The morale in the French Army had never quite rehabilitated itself after the First World War. The enormous losses in manpower and the terrible experiences of the large annihilation battles had left the French soldiers with a “Constant vision of

4 For an account of the development of the German armoured force, see. Guderian, Heinz: *Panzer Leader*, Da Capo Press Inc, New York 1996, s 18–46. For an account of the development of the German Army in the interwar period see. Corum, James S: *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1992.

5 Frieser, Karl-Heinz: *Blitzkrieg Legende*, R. Oldenburg Verlag, München 1995, s 65.

6 Posen, Barry R: *The sources of military doctrine*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1984, s 81–82.

death that penetrated him (the French soldier) with a resignation which bordered on fatalism”⁷The soldiers of the First World War should have been an important part of the backbone of the French Army of 1940, but infected by the horrors of Verdun, they were morally bled white.⁸

The German Army never suffered quite so much from the horrors of Verdun. This can be due to the fewer Germans that participated in relation to the number of combatants. Germany also drew totally different conclusions from Verdun than the French did. The Germans concluded that the stalemate of the First World War could be solved with the panzer columns, while the French constructed large fortifications, such as the Maginot Line.

The plans

The plans on the strategic level and their history are well known.⁹ The basic idea with the move through the Ardennes was to surprise the French and gain a quick victory. The French considered the Ardennes impregnable. Marshal Pétain in March

1934 stated that the Ardennes were impregnable, provided that the French made some special dispositions. This was not a unique view of Pétain; it was the general view of the whole French Army.¹⁰

The French plan for the Ardennes involved two of their weakest armies, the 9th in the area of Dinant and the 2nd in the area of Sedan. In addition the Belgians had a division of Chasseurs Ardennais¹¹ that were supposed to delay the Germans in the Ardennes and then withdraw to the area of the upper Meuse and Namur and constitute a part of the main Belgian defence lines.¹²

Organization

The 7th Panzer Division was at the beginning of 1940 a comparatively new unit. The division was created out of the former 2nd Light Division that was converted to a Panzer Division in the winter of 1939 - 1940. The 7th Panzer Division was initially a part of the 2nd Army Corps, but was on May 10 at 1600 hours¹³, attached to the 15th Panzer Corps which was commanded

7 Marshal Pétain at the inauguration of the Ossuaire at Verdun in 1927. See: Horne, Alistair: *The Price of Glory*. Penguin Books, London 1993, s 341.

8 Ibid.

9 There are numerous books that describe the plans and all the thoughts behind the plans. See for example: Op cit footnote 5 or Op. cit footnote 3.

10 HOp. cit footnote 3, p 114.

11 The Chasseurs Ardennais units mainly consisted of light troops, but had some heavier weapons such as anti-tank guns and even some light tanks. The troops were a mixture of militiamen and volunteers. See Hautecler, Georges. *Rommel and Guderian against the Chasseurs Ardennais*. The Nafziger Collection Inc, West Chester, 2003, s 14.

12 Ibid, p 7.

13 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 314 550, frame 6.

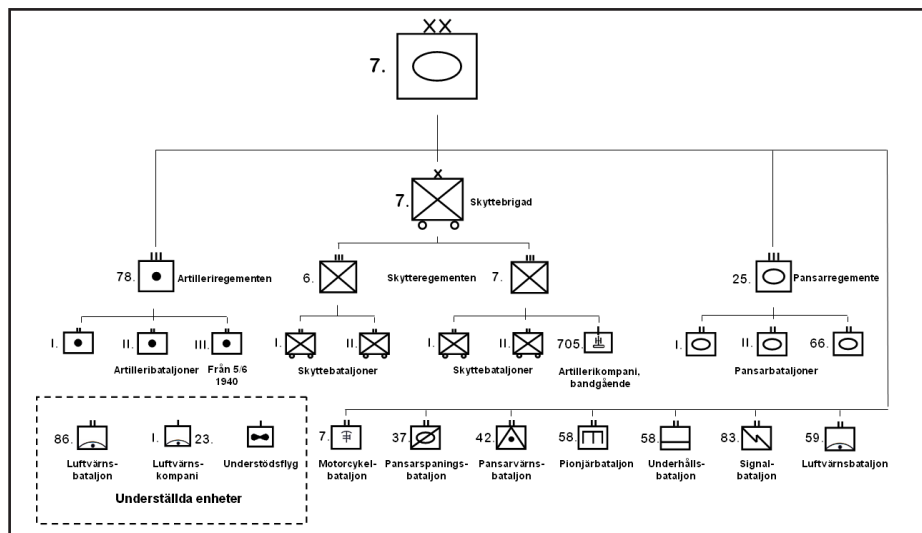


Figure 3: Organization, 7 Panzer Division.¹⁵

by General Hoth. Besides the 7th, the corps also consisted of the 5th Panzer Division.¹⁴ Compared to the "older" types of German Panzer Divisions, the converted divisions had fewer tanks and only one panzer regiment instead of two. The only panzer regiment, however, had more tanks than a regiment in the "older" divisions.

The staff of a German Panzer Division was small and the operations staff was particularly small. The division had no assis-

tant division commander and no executive officer in any component element. There was no chief of staff, but a 1st general staff officer who ran the internal affairs of the division and coordinated the parts. He also maintained contact with neighboring units. With a small operations staff, the division commander had a more direct relationship with his subordinates. This meant that the division commander had a greater opportunity to lead from the front of the division.¹⁶

¹⁴ Op. cit footnote 5, p 279.

¹⁵ Op. cit footnote 5, p 118.

¹⁶ Stolfi, Russel H.S: *A Bias for Action: The German 7th Panzer Division in France and Russia 1940 – 1941*. Marine Corps University 1991, s 14–15. The leadership conducted at the front of the division was typical of Rommel. Although Rommel did not have a real possibility to bring some of the older and more experienced officers with him on the battlefield, it is obvious that he liked to have an adviser and discussion partner with him on the battlefield. This is shown clearly in the parts of "The Rommel Papers" covering the campaign in Africa, where Rommel often had his chief of staff with him on the battlefield.

Preparations

When the news came about the new divisional commander, Hans von Luck¹⁷ describes how there were some initial doubts among the officers about Rommel's ability as a tank commander:

Much as we admired this man we wondered if an infantryman could be a commander of tanks¹⁸

They soon found out. Rommel had made himself thoroughly familiar with the tactics¹⁹ of tank warfare. After Rommel took command of the division a period of hard intense training began. The division was moved to the little village of Heimersheim on the northern fringe of the Rhoen Mountains. The training was made even more difficult by the severe winter weather. Field exercises were organized in all weathers, and also by night. Rommel made the same units always work together. In this way the tank people, artillerymen and infantrymen came to know each other and became coordinated.

The staff of the 2nd Corps provided the

intelligence available to the 7th Panzer Division.²⁰ The information provided outlined a number of enemy units inside the Ardennes. These units, according to the intelligence, were deployed in two main lines. The line closest to the German border was manned by the 1st Division of the Chasseurs Ardennais and stretched from Malmedy to Arlon.²¹ The intelligence also provided some details on the Belgian dispositions. The regiments of the 1st Division, according to the German intelligence were deployed:²²

- With the 1st Regiment in the line Bastogne – Arlon
- With the 2nd Regiment in the line Lamerscher – Bastogne
- With the 3rd Regiment in the line Salm – Trois Ponts – Bowies – Geilig – Lamerscher

The second line, according to the Germans, stretched along the river Ourthe from south of Durbuy to south of Libramont and was manned by parts of the 1st Belgian Cavalry Division. The possibilities of a

17 Hans von Luck was initially a company commander in the reconnaissance battalion. When the battalion commander was killed, Rommel ordered von Luck to take command of the whole battalion. See: von Luck, Hans: *Panzer Commander*; Dell Publishing, New York, 1989, p 42.

18 Ibid, p. 35.

19 Rommel was obviously interested in tactics. He worked as a teacher at the Military Academy in Potsdam. He also wrote two books on tactics. The most known is *Infantry Attacks*, but he also wrote an exercise book for small units: *Problems for Platoon and Company*, published in 1935.

20 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 399, frame 22.

21 Ibid. According to Hautecler the intelligence in this case was correct. See Hautecler, p. 9.

22 Ibid.



Figure 4: Map showing the area of the planned advance of the 7th Panzer Division on May 10.

strong delaying action by the Belgians, with support of the rich possibilities for demolitions, were also mentioned in the intelligence.²³

The orders for the attack are dated February 27, 1940. The first part of the corps order deals with the start of the attack. After the codeword "Danzig" was given, the 7th Panzer Division could start the attack over the border into Belgium. The next section of the order deals with the operational secrecy. It is a good example of the importance the Germans put on measures to prevent the attack from being discovered by the French in advance. The order

stressed that sound from engines; light sources and anything that could arouse any suspicion by the Belgians should be avoided.

Then the order outlined the marching routes to the Belgian border and the task for the division. The task for the first day of the attack was to break through the Belgian defence lines and advance to the heights near Samrée and also make a crossing over the Ourthe at La Roche.

In the last hours before the start of the attack Rommel wrote a brief letter to his wife.

²³ Ibid.

5.) 7.Pz.Div., dem II.A.K. mit der Durchgabe des Stichwortes *für den*
 A - Fall unterstellt, überschreitet am A - Tag die Grenze,
 durchbricht die fdl. Sperrbefestigungen beiderseits Geilig
 und gewinnt am 1.Angriffstage mit der Masse die Höhen um
 Samré, mit vorgeworfenen Teilen einen Übergang über die
 Ourthe in Gegend Laroche.
 Es kommt darauf an, durch rasches Vorstoßen nach Westen die
 planmäßige Durchführung der fdl. Sperrungen zu stören. Der
 Zeitpunkt des Überschreitens der Landesgrenze wird vom Korps
 befohlen. Zu diesem Zeitpunkt darf die Grenze, aber erst nach
 dem Eingang des Stichwortes "Danzig" (siehe Anlage 7 - Befehls-
 erteilung) überschritten werden. Ein früheres Überschreiten
der Grenze, auch durch einzelne Soldaten, wird hiermit ausdrück-
lich verboten.

Figure 5: The order with the task of the 7th Panzer Division on May 10.²⁵

9 May 1940

Dearest Lu,
 We're packing up at last. Let's hope not in vain.
 You'll get all of the news for the next days from
 the papers. Don't worry yourself. Everything will
 go all right.²⁴

May 10

On May 10 the border into Belgium was
 crossed at Hemmeres. In the sector of

the 7th Panzer Division's planned attack,
 the opponents in the months before the
 outbreak of the war had placed obstacles
 of all kinds and destroyed some of the
 roads.²⁶ Many of the demolitions were
 undefended and therefore Rommel's unit
 was only delayed in a few places. Many
 of the demolitions could be bypassed by
 taking another road or by a short move in
 the terrain beside the obstacle.

²⁴ This was a habit of Rommel. He tried to write to his wife every day during all of his campaigns. Some of the letters can be found in The Rommel Papers. Liddell-Hart, p 6.

²⁵ U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 399, frame 14.

²⁶ The demolition plan of the Chasseurs Ardennais can be found in: Hautecler, p 69-70.

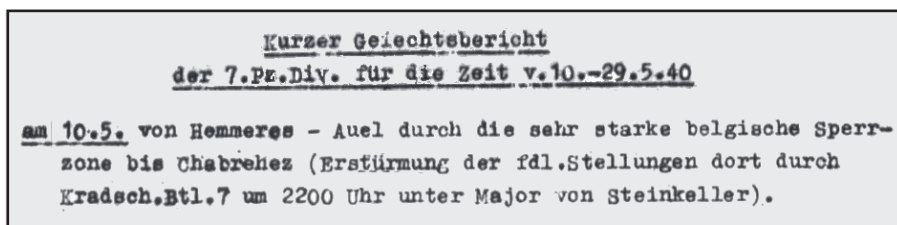


Figure 6: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 10.²⁸

The air support had a major impact. Two “Fliegerkorps” with some 1500 aircraft, had the task of preventing any disturbance of the panzer units on their way towards the Meuse. The achievements of the airmen meant that no serious disturbance from the air against the German ground forces was made.²⁷

The short activity report of the 7th Panzer Division for May 10 only tells of one engagement, but the complete story of the engagement shows what could have been accomplished from the Belgian side if the ideas that were shown in the example had been completed.

The combat mentioned in the war archives took place at Chabrehez. The brief writing hides the intensity of the combat that delayed the Germans for more than 4 hours. Here two platoons from the Belgian Chasseurs Ardennais had taken advantage of the terrain and prepared defensive positions with tank obstacles. The intention was to delay the Germans for as long as

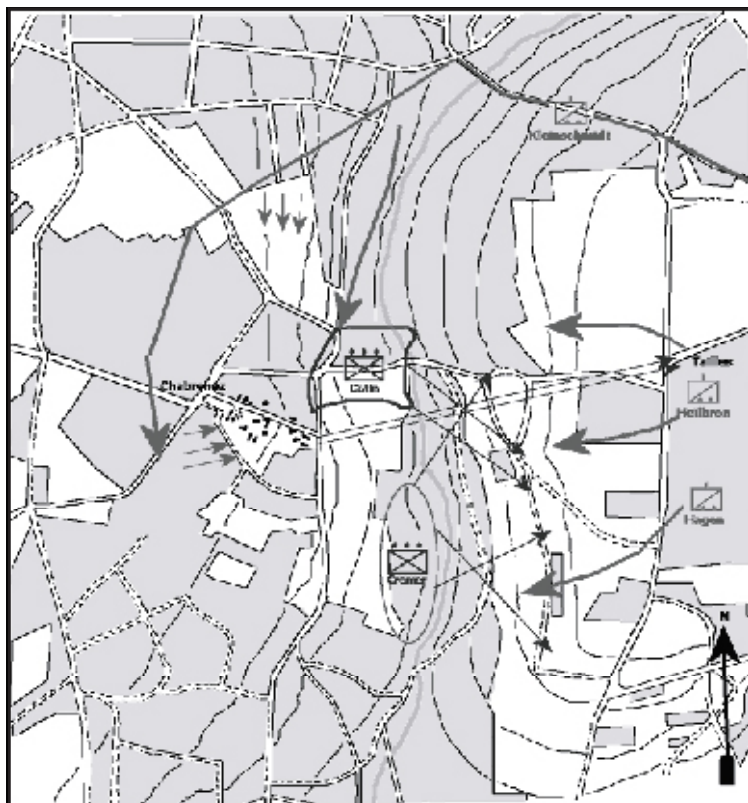
possible. At 1800 hours the leading elements of Rommel's division reached the valley east of Chabrehez. At the bottom of the valley the Germans from the 7th Motorcycle Battalion found an anti-tank ditch, and Belgian soldiers were spotted in the village of Chabrehez.²⁹

The Belgian soldiers discovered a tank and at first thought it was a Belgian light tank, but they soon discovered that the tank was German. More tanks appeared and one of them advanced into the valley to the barricaded bridge over the stream. A German soldier climbed out of the tank and examined the obstacle. Then the tank turned around and moved towards Les Tailles. Subsequently, the leading company of the 7th Motorcycle Battalion appeared over the crest and the Belgians opened fire with handguns and a machine-gun section. The German company deployed and responded. Under the German fire, one of the Belgian platoons was struck with panic and fled. Their platoon commander

27 Sheppard, Alan: *France 1940 Blitzkrieg in the West*. Oxford, Osprey 1990, p 39.

28 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 157.

29 Op cit footnote 11, p. 40.



Figur 7: Map over the fighting at Chabrehez³⁰

had to stop them with a revolver and got them back into their positions.

The initial fighting now broke out in a short and intense action. Under the Belgian fire the German company deployed and tried to take the valley. An effort to turn the southern flank was checked by one of

the Belgian platoons. The Belgian defence proved too strong and the commander of the 7th Motorcycle Battalion, Major Steinkeller, decided to await the arrival of reinforcements. Then the attack could be renewed at dawn on May 11.

When Rommel arrived at Steinkeller's

³⁰ The map is drawn by the author on the basis of the map in: Hautecler, op. cit. footnote 11, p. 76. The height information has been simplified to enhance the visibility of the Belgian dispositions and the German movements.

command post installed in Les Tailles, he immediately expressed that the Belgian resistance was to be broken as soon as possible and the advance towards the Ourthe resumed. Rommel ordered additional units to be sent forward and a short conference between Rommel, Steinkeller and Colonel Fürst, the commander of the 7th Rifle Brigade took place. Hauptmann Heilbron and Lieutenant Kleinschmidt, commander of the 1st and 2nd companies of the Motorcycle Battalion also took part.

Rommel's plan was to take Chabrehez by a large flanking movement. First the enemy was to be fixed frontally and distracted from the movement. Then Kleinschmidt's company was to make the flanking movement to the north of Chabrehez and attack the enemy from the rear.

After the conference, the heavy weapons company of the Motorcycle Battalion arrived, deployed and opened fire on the Belgians. Four light German tanks started to advance against the Belgian positions. The tanks had problems with the swampy fields at the bottom of the valley and two of the tanks were immobilized on the fields and one was blocked from further advance by some trees.³¹

More German reinforcements arrived and the situation for the Belgians started to grow worse. During this fighting, Kleinschmidt's company arrived at the edge of the woods at the height of the village of Chabrehez. The movement was totally unseen by the Belgi-

ans and two of the platoons were ordered to continue the advance to penetrate the village from the west. The remaining platoon was given the mission to attack the Belgian line in the flank and rear.

The attack could be carried out as intended and in the face of German superiority the Belgians had to give up, although some of them succeeded in withdrawing.

It was 2100 hours when Major Steinkeller reported the capture of Chabrehez and 50 Belgian prisoners to the division. In Chabrehez the situation was still confused with the Germans firing at each other, and Major Steinkeller decided to withdraw his troops to Les Tailles.

At 2200 hours Rommel left the battle and headed back in his column. The swampy roads together with lack of initiative had caused the rear units of the division to virtually come to a halt at a great depth from Chabrehez to the German frontier.

As a result of the fighting at Chabrehez and the traffic problems, the 7th Panzer Division was unable to solve its task for the day. The division lost a number of hours and was behind its timetable. During the days ahead, the division had to make up for the initial delays.

May 11

After the fighting at Chabrehez, the advance of the 7th Panzer Division continued on May 11. That day was a better one for the division. The initial advance from

31 Op cit footnote 11, p 44-45.

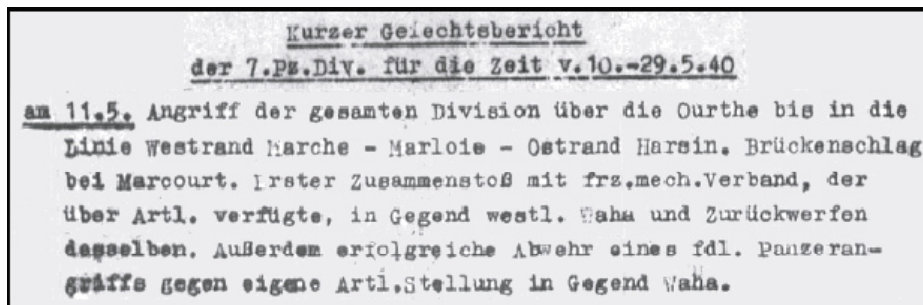


Figure 8: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 11.³²

Chabrehez to the north of La Roche went without much contact with the enemy. At this time the Belgian units had been ordered to withdraw to the north.³³

The division advanced on three different roads and crossed the Ourthe in three places. In the south the 7th Rifle Regiment passed the Ourthe at La Roche. In the centre the engineers built a bridge at Marcourt that was used by the 6th Rifle Regiment, and in the north, at Beffe, the 25th Panzer Regiment forded the river.

West of Waha the lead elements of the division for the first time had contact with French mechanized units from the 1st French Cavalry Division. This first encounter with the French units was brief and when Rommel's units plastered the opponent with fire, it led to a hasty retreat. On May 11 Rommel wrote his wife again.³⁴

May 11 1940

Dearest Lu,
I've come up for breath for the first time today and have a moment to write. Everything wonderful so far. I am way ahead of my neighbors. I'm completely hoarse from orders and shouting. Had a bare three hours sleep and an occasional meal. Otherwise I'm absolutely fine. Make do with this, please. I'm too tired for more

In the evening the division was deployed with the forward units at the area of Marche-en-Famenne and the remaining parts in the terrain between Marche-en-Famenne and La Roche.

³² U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 157.

³³ The order was given at 0650 hours on May 11, see: OP cit footnote 11, p. 54.

³⁴ Ibid.

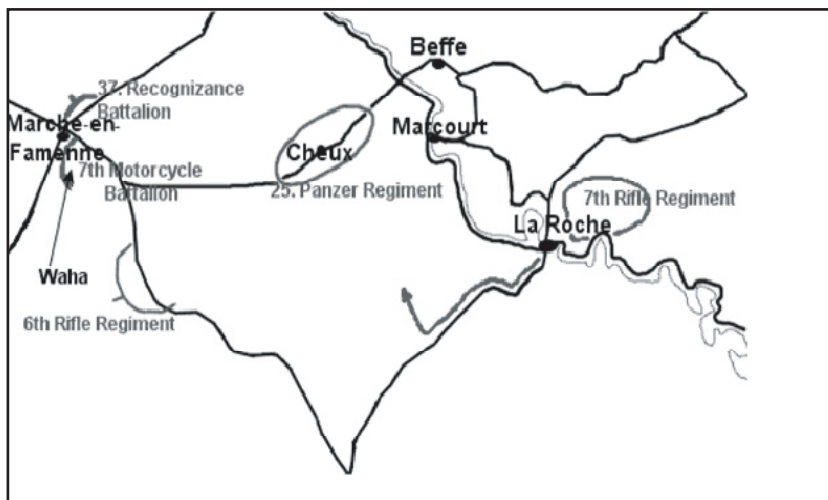


Figure 9: The situation of the 7th Panzer Division on the evening of May 11.³⁵

May 12

The advance continued on May 12 at 0700 hours from the line Marche-en-Famenne

– Harsin. At 0900 hours the northern part of Rommel's units, the 25th Panzer Regiment, collided with French units in the line Haversin – Forsée. A battle broke

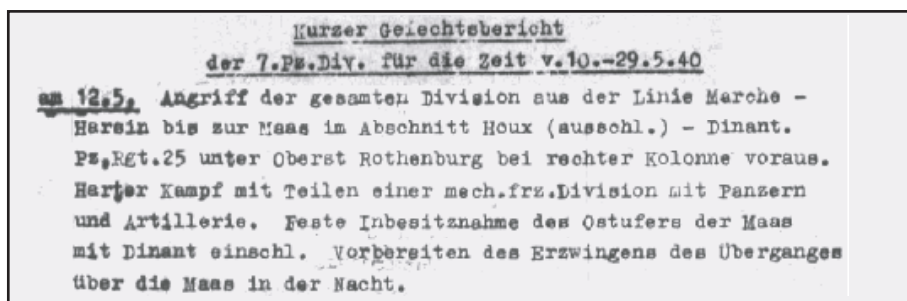


Figure 10: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 12.³⁶

35 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 401, frame 1223.

36 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 157.

out and at 1025 hours the Panzer Regiment broke through the French lines and reached the heights northwest of Leignon at 1230 hours. Further to the south the 7th Rifle Regiment broke through the enemy lines in the area of Ychippe – Northwest of Chevetogne at 1230. The last part of the advance to the Meuse was covered by the 7th Motorcycle Battalion in the north and parts of the 7th Rifle Regiment and parts of the 25th Panzer Regiment in the south. At 2200 hours the 7th Motorcycle Battalion had reached the Meuse in the terrain south of Houx. Further to the south the 1st battalion of the 7th Rifle Regiment together with one Panzer Company reached the Meuse in the area of Dinant at 1615 hours.³⁷

The commander of the 15th Corps, General Hoth, realized that he in Rommel had an opportunity for greater success and he therefore gave Rommel command of one of the panzer regiments of the 5th Panzer Division. The 31st Panzer Regiment was at the head of the 5th Panzer Division, north of Rommel's units. With this additional regiment, two Panzer Regiments spear-headed Rommel's advance.³⁸

At nightfall on May 12, Rommel's motorized Rifle Brigade had reached the Meuse and the 7th Panzer Division had a firm grip over the eastern side of the Meuse. With a fast move Rommel had hoped to take the bridges over the Meuse before they were blown up, but this did not succeed.

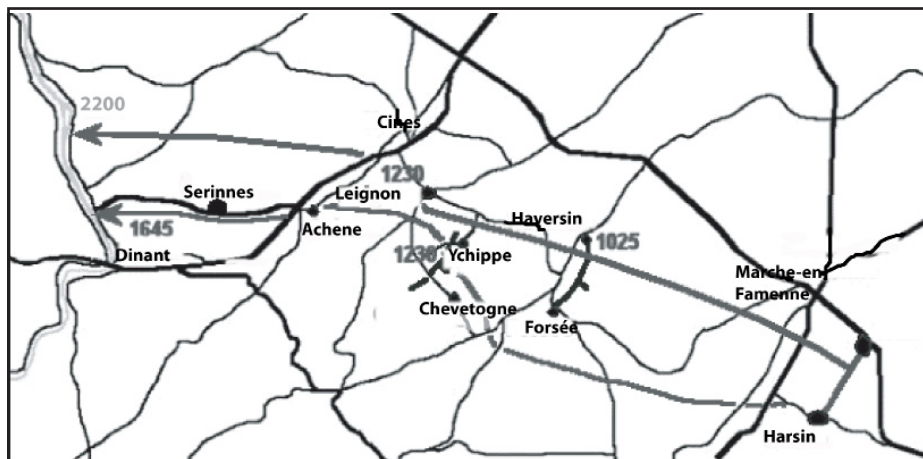


Figure 11: The area where the 7th Panzer Division advanced on May 12.

37 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 401, frame 757-762.

38 The exact time when the 31st Panzer Regiment was placed under Rommel is not mentioned in the war archives. According to the archives this took place at noon. See: U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 401, frame 757.

The 7th Panzer Division now stood before its hardest task so far – crossing the Meuse.

North of the units belonging to the 7th Panzer Division, the spearhead of the 5th Panzer Division reached the Meuse in the area of Yvoir – Houx at 1725 hours.³⁹ These units were under Rommel's command at the time. Between 2200 and 2300 hours a motorcycle company from the 5th Panzer Division discovered an old weir and a lock that connected an island to both sides of the river by the village of Houx.⁴⁰ The men

from the motorcycle company used the weir and lock and crossed the river. The enemy discovered what was happening and the Germans soon took heavy casualties.

When Rommel estimated the situation in the evening, he realized that the situation was worse than expected. No real foothold on the western side of the river had been taken and the enemy was firing at everything that moved on the eastern side.⁴¹

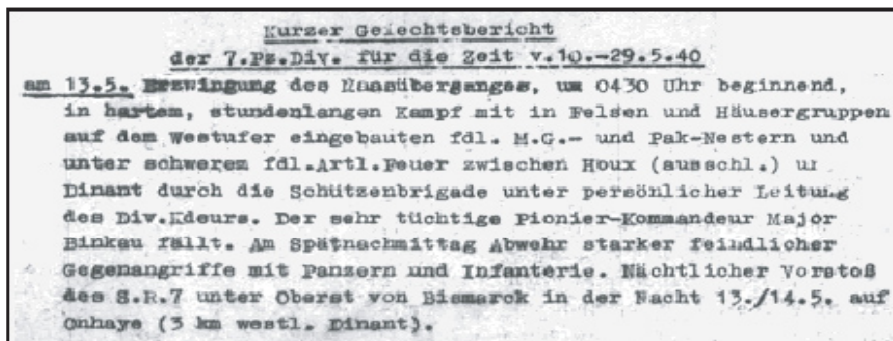


Figure 12: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 13.⁴²

³⁹ Op cit footnote 5, p. 281.

⁴⁰ This seems to be the basis for a common misunderstanding on the events of the Meuse crossing in the area of Dinant. The first unit of the 15th Panzer Corps to cross the Meuse was the 3rd Motorcycle Company of the Panzer Aufklärungsabteilung from the 5th Panzer Division. See: Op cit footnote 5, p. 281. In many accounts the 7th Motorcycle Battalion of the 7th Panzer Division is mentioned as the first unit of the 15th Corps to cross the Meuse in the area of Dinant. See for example: Sheppard, 43. Even Alistair Horne seems to have gotten this wrong. He doesn't mention that the first units that crossed the Meuse belonged to the 5th Panzer Division. See Horne, *To Lose a Battle*, 308 – 310. The German war archives do not mention any part of the 7th Motorcycle Battalion having crossed the Meuse on the evening of May 12. Instead, according to the archives, the 7th Motorcycle Battalion, reinforced with the 1st Pioneer Company, attacked across the river in the terrain 800 meters south of Houx at 0430 hours on May 13. See: U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 401, frame 763.

⁴¹ Op cit footnote 3, p. 308.

⁴² U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 157

May 13

Rommel gave the order for the Meuse crossing on the evening May 12. It was, in typical German style, very brief, only some two typed pages.⁴³

His intentions were to cross the river in two places:

- The 6th Rifle Regiment and the 7th Motorcycle Battalion were supposed to cross the river at the terrain south of the weir at Houx.
- The 7th Rifle Regiment and the Panzer Regiment were supposed to cross the river at the northern parts of Dinant west of Leffe.

First, the riflemen were supposed to cross the river in rubber boats in several places and seize a bridgehead on the west side of the river. Then the engineers would build bridges and ferries to get the panzers over to the western side.

On the western side of the river, French units had prepared their defence. The rapid advance of the Germans had not given the French the time needed to reach the positions at the Meuse. The defence line was therefore thin. In the north, the 5th Motorized Division had reached its positions, but its neighbour in the south, the 18th Infantry Division, had only managed

to get six of its battalions into position. The French defence line was thin, and in the Houx area it got thinner after one of the battalions of the 5th Motorized was moved to the south to strengthen the line of the 18th Division.⁴⁴

On May 13, Rommel was on his feet early. At 0300 hours he was at Houx north of Dinant, where he left his armoured car and headed for the river. Down by the river the 6th Rifle Regiment tried to cross in rubber boats, but they were held back by intense fire from the other side. At this point Rommel got the idea to set some buildings on fire. He calculated that the smoke would then give the German infantrymen badly needed cover to make the crossing.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the 7th Motorcycle Battalion had succeeded in taking the village of Grange (west of Houx). But the riverbank had not been cleared the way Rommel had intended. He therefore gave the order to clear the rocks on the west bank.

Rommel then drove to Dinant. Arriving there, he found that the 7th Rifle Regiment had succeeded in getting one rifle company across the river, but under the intense enemy fire the crossing equipment had been shot to pieces and the crossing had to be halted. Rommel realized that he could not get any more men over at this

43 Frieser, Karl Heinz: *Dinant – Avesnes – Arras. Der Angriff der 7. Panzerdivision unter Rommel in Westfeldzug dargestellt an drei Beispielen*, s 43-44.

44 Op cit footnote 3, p. 310 – 312.

45 Op cit footnote 1, p. 8.

time. He intended to arrange tank and artillery support and drove off to the division headquarters. After making the necessary arrangements he drove off to Leffe, just north of Dinant. Here the crossing had been stopped, but the tanks and field howitzers Rommel had ordered forward soon arrived and with the covering fire, the crossing got going again.⁴⁶ Rommel took command of the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Rifle Regiment and personally directed the operations for some time and also crossed the river in one of the first boats.

On the western side of the river Rommel defended himself against a French counterattack together with one of the rifle companies before he returned to the eastern side of the river.⁴⁷ Rommel then drove to the northern crossing point. On the western side of the river, Rommel could see some additional success by the 6th Infantry Regiment. In the afternoon things were looking better for the 7th Panzer Division. In the north the crossing was in full motion and some 20 badly needed anti-tank guns had crossed the river. A company of engineers

had also started the construction of an 8-ton bridge. Rommel stopped the construction and instead ordered the construction of a 16-ton bridge. Rommel's aim was to get parts of the Panzer regiment across as soon as possible. During the construction of the bridge the pontoons were hit a number of times by enemy fire and at least one of the pontoons sank together with a tank. The construction was delayed and at nightfall the first tanks crossed the river. By the next morning only 15 tanks had crossed.⁴⁸

The corps commander, General Hoth, in the evening gave the order that the two bridgeheads

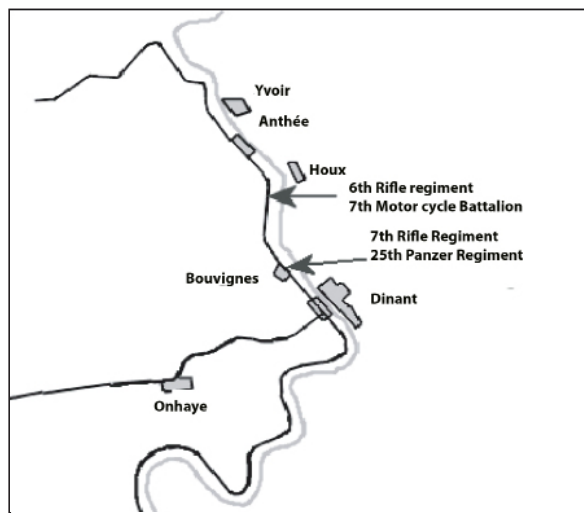


Figure 13: The places where the 7th Panzer Division crossed the river.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 9–10.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p 11.

⁴⁹ Op cit footnote 5, p 283.

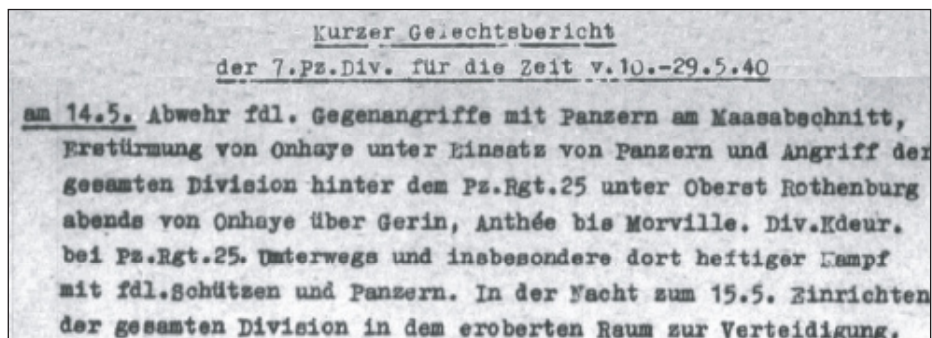


Figure 14: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 14.⁵⁰

were to be connected the next day, and, through this, the French artillery would be prevented from affecting the crossing-points on the river. Rommel did not wait until the next day. He ordered the 7th Infantry Regiment to attack during the night.

May 14

During the night, Colonel Bismarck with the 7th Rifle Regiment had taken the terrain on the outskirts of the village of Onhay, west of Dinant. The regiment had wrapped up some enemy positions in the area surrounding Onhay.

Down by the river, Rommel worked to get his forces across the river when suddenly, at 0745 hours, he got a message from Bismarck saying that the enemy had surrounded him. At the same time, radio communications broke down.

Rommel immediately decided to relieve Bismarck with every available tank.

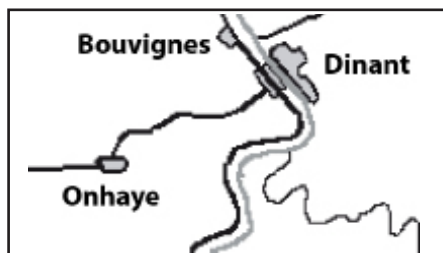


Figure 15: Map showing the area of Dinant and Onhay.

At 0800 hours, the 25th Panzer Regiment, commanded by Colonel Rothenburg had gathered some 25 tanks on the western side of the river. The tank-force quickly moved up behind Bismarck. With five tanks as support, Rothenburg made an enveloping movement to attack Onhay from the rear. After some confusion, and with radio communications working again, it showed that there had been a misunderstanding. Probably "eingetroffen" had been understood as "eingeschlossen". During

⁵⁰ U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 158.

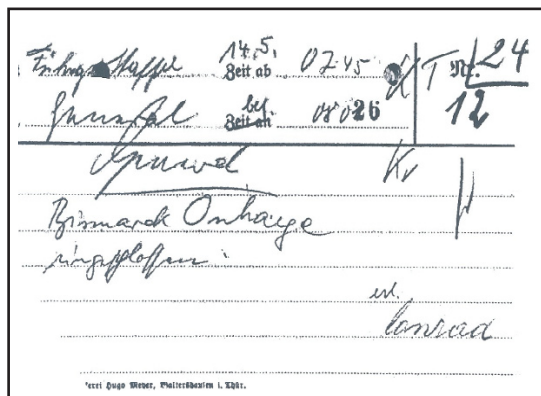


Figure 16: The message from Colonel Bismarck to Rommel.⁵¹

the rest of the day, intense fighting took place in Onhaye and finally Rommel had to call in close air support by “Stukas” to get rid of the stubbornly fighting enemy.

On the evening of May 14, Onhaye was cleared of the enemy and a breakthrough in the enemy lines was made. The morale of the enemy gave way, and Rommel could continue his attack. In the evening, the area of Anthée was reached and the enemy had retired to a line running through Florennes.

May 15

Rommel’s order for May 15 was to advance in one single long step to Cerfontaine.

Rommel himself rode in one of the leading tanks. As flank protection in the north Rommel had ordered the 31st Panzer Regiment from the 5th Panzer

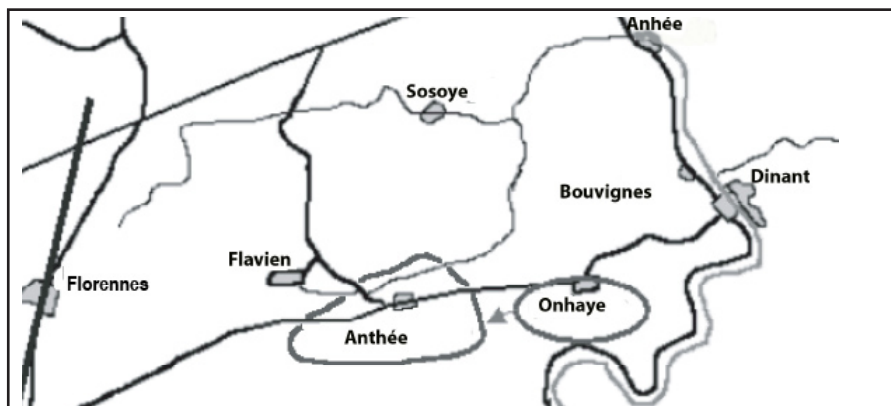


Figure 17: Map showing the area of anthée and Onhaye and the area where the 7th Panzer Division was deployed on the evening of May 14.⁵²

51 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 402 frame 227.

52 U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 401, frame 769.

am 15.5. Angriff der gesamten Division über Philippeville, Gerfontaine bis Proidchapelle, dicht südl. vorbei an Flavion. Div.Kdeur. mit Pz.Rgt.25 unter Oberst Rothenburg voraus. Abwehr und Zerschlagung fdl.Panzerangriffe aus Gegend Flavion und den Waldstücken nordwestl.Flavion durch Pz.Rgt.25 und Artk.der Division sowie nachmittags südl. und südostw. Philippeville durch 1 Komp. des Pz.Rgts.25. Besetzung des eroberten Raumes durch die Aufkl.Abt., das M.G.Btl.8 und die Schtz.Brig.7 und Einrichten zur Verteidigung in der Nacht zum 16.5.

Figure 18: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 15.⁵³

Division. At 0800 hours Rommel got a message saying that he would have Stukas for close air support during the day. Rommel ordered the Stukas into action immediately, just ahead of his tanks.⁵⁴

When the leading elements of the division reached the village of Flavion, enemy

tanks were spotted in the terrain north of the road. The enemy unit was the French 1st Armoured Division. This division had been advancing from the area of Charleroi since 1600 hours on May 14 for a counterattack. At 2100 hours the French 1st had made a halt in the terrain to wait for the

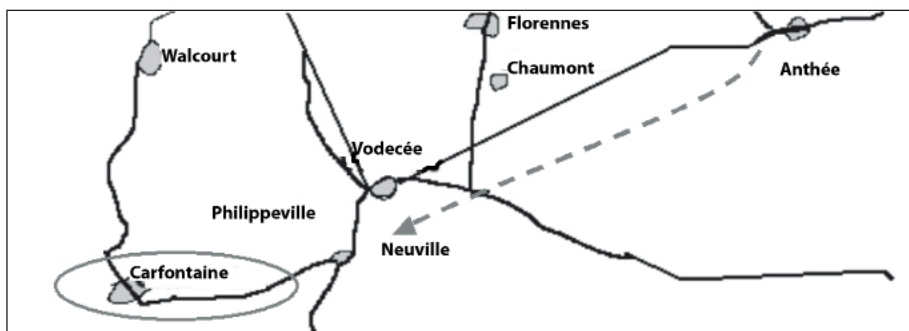


Figure 19: map showing the area of the 7th Panzer Division's intentions for the advance on May 15.

⁵³ U.S. Archives, German Records, roll T 315 400, frame 158.

⁵⁴ Op cit footnote 3, p. 407–408.

refuelling vehicles that had been delayed due to a mistake by the division commander. He had ordered the refuelling vehicles to advance in the rear of the division's column. Stukas attacked some of them on their way to refuel the French tanks, and a few of them arrived at Flavion at about 0900 hours the next day, May 15.

The tanks in the French units could have been formidable opponents. The heaviest one, the Char B1, was very hard to penetrate with the German tank guns. This time though, many of the French tanks were immobilized from lack of fuel. Another setback of the French tanks was the lack of radio communications. While the Germans had radios in every tank, only a few French ones were equipped with sets. Moreover, the French tank crews were not as thoroughly trained as the German ones.⁵⁵

In the terrain north of Flavion a tank battle broke out at about 1000 hours. The Germans quickly deployed against the French tanks and fierce fighting broke out. Rommel's armour did great damage to the French division and when the leading tanks of the 31st Panzer Regiment from the 5th Panzer Division emerged, Rommel broke off and left the remaining French tanks to the newly arrived regiment.⁵⁶

Finally, the French division commander,

General Bruneau, gave the order to retreat. Of his original 170 tanks, 36 headed for the French border. The next morning the number was reduced even further to 16.⁵⁷

The 7th Panzer Division continued its advance and in the evening reached Cerfontaine. During the day Rommel's units had destroyed or captured seventy-five tanks, taken 450 prisoners and advanced seventeen miles. It was a decisive blow against the French forces.⁵⁸

May 16

The 7th Panzer Division's mission for the day was to break through the extended Maginot Line.⁵⁹ The actual Maginot Line ended at Longwy and the extension was no way near the real thing. It consisted of minor fortifications and anti-tank ditches that had been built during the past winter. The sector where the 7th Panzer Division was supposed to attack through the line was one of the weakest. The French had plans for bigger and stronger fortifications, but these plans had never been carried out, and in the way of the 7th Panzer Division there were only a few minor obstacles.

When Rommel was giving his orders for the coming actions, the army commander von Kluge arrived. He was pleased with what he heard, and soon approved of the plans. Rommel's intentions were to cross

55 For a discussion on the French thinking on tanks and doctrine, see: Horne, *To Loose a Battle*, s 78–80.

56 Op. cit footnote 5, p. 295.

57 Op cit footnote 3, p. 410.

58 Ibid, p 412.

59 Op cit footnote 1, p 17.

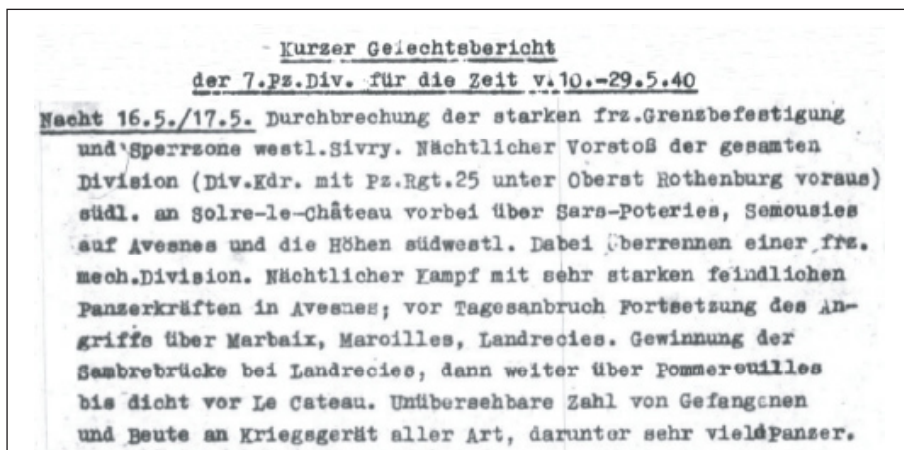


Figure 21: The short account in the war archives of the 7th Panzer Division's actions on May 16⁶¹

the French border at Sivry. The reconnaissance battalion would advance in a broad formation and the artillery would follow to Sivry. The panzer regiment would then advance to terrain from where it could cover the fortified line with fire. Finally, the infantry brigade would take the fortified line and remove obstacles, after which the panzer regiment would continue its advance.⁶²

When the attack started Rommel was in the same tank as the commander of the forward battalion. They passed Sivry and

advanced slowly against Clairfayts, which was avoided as the road was mined. Suddenly a French pillbox was spotted 50 – 100 m ahead. Beside the pillbox a number of French soldiers were standing and when the Germans started firing at them they ran into the pillbox.⁶³ At the same time, the anti-tank ditch was spotted and it was also discovered that prefabricated steel obstacles blocked the road from Clairfayts.⁶⁴

As darkness started to fall, Rommel ordered the advance through the line with the intention of reaching Avesnes. At the

60 Map drawn by the author on the basis of the information in: Frieser, Karl-Heinz. *Blitzkrieg Legende*, s 293.

61 U.S. Archives, German Records, Divisions, roll T 315 400, frame 158.

62 Op cit footnote 1, p 17.

63 Jean Hannecart, who runs a small museum covering the events at Clairfayts, has confirmed these initial events to the author. The museum is situated in the road crossing some 100 meters from the pillbox-line. Hannecart was present as a young boy when the events took place.

64 Op cit footnote 1, p 18.

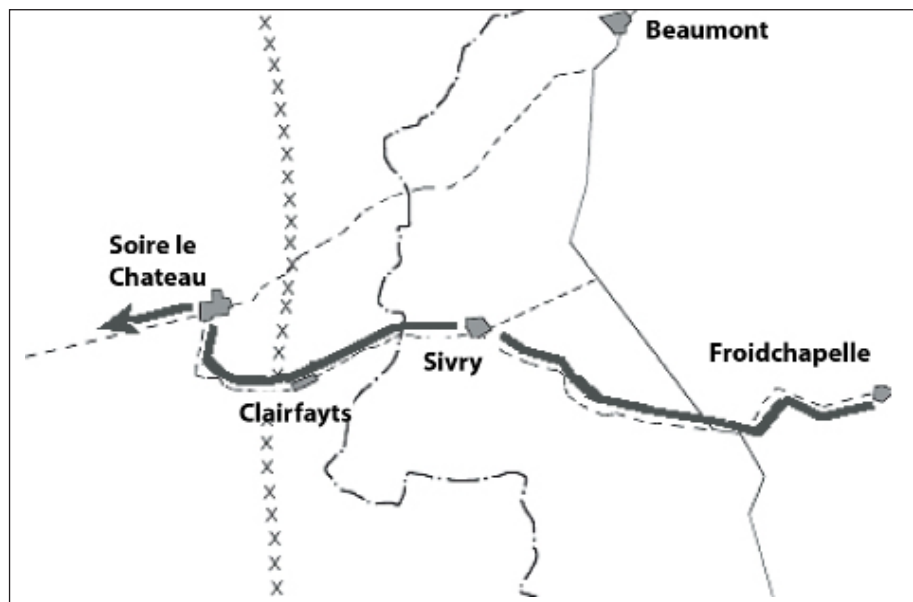


Figure 22: The advance of the 7th Panzer Division through the extended Maginot Line on May 16.

front, the tanks fired on the terrain ahead and the divisional artillery fired at roads and villages further ahead. Rommel's intention with this was to prevent the French from laying mines and placing obstacles on the roads.

In the sharp moonlight Rommel ordered the advance of the tanks and the French were taken by surprise by the ease with which Rommel was able to break through the fortified line. They were also surprised by the fact that Rommel, contrary to all rules, launched an attack in the dark.⁶⁵

When the 7th Panzer Division got close to Avesnes the advance was slowed as Rommel suspected that strong French units could defend the city. Finally, he again ordered the advance to continue at the highest speed. In Avesnes some remaining parts of the French 1st Division were caught by surprise and fighting broke out. The French succeeded in breaking into the German columns and several German tanks were destroyed. Finally, a German Mark IV tank arrived and destroyed the remaining French tanks.⁶⁶

After Avesnes was cleared of the enemy

⁶⁵ The final attack through the line started at 2300 hours. See: U.S. Archives, German Records, Divisions, roll T 315 401, frame 775.

⁶⁶ Op cit footnote 1, p. 20–21.

Rommel tried to contact the corps staff for further orders, but got no answer. He then decided to continue his advance with the objective of reaching the bridge over the Sambre in Landrecies. The 7th Panzer Division started to run short of ammunition and the advance continued with silenced guns. When Landrecies was reached the bridge was taken intact.⁶⁷

Epilogue

The 7th Panzer Division continued its successful participation in the campaign. Some hard fighting remained, but the worst part of the war in France was concluded.

The campaign ended on June 22.⁶⁸ after just six weeks of war. The German Panzer units had played a decisive role in defeating France.

After the campaign in France the 7th Panzer Division saw action on the Eastern front. Rommel was replaced as division commander, and the division fought all the way to the end of the war in 1945. Rommel's further career continued with the command of the Afrika Korps in Libya where, after he had taken Tobruk, he was promoted to Field Marshal. The war in Africa also made Rommel one of the most famous German commanders of all times. Rommel's command of the German forces in Africa ended when he got sick and had to leave to recover. His next command was to deal with the Italian situation in 1943.

Rommel's last command was over Army Group B in France with the task of preventing an expected allied invasion in Normandy. Before the allied invasion Rommel was wounded and became hospitalized when aircraft attacked the car he was travelling in. Rommel's life ended on October 14, 1944. He was accused of being a part of the conspiracy against Hitler, and was forced to commit suicide by swallowing a poison capsule.

Rommel as a commander

Rommel was a particularly aggressive commander and led many of the actions of the division from the front. His experiences from World War One had taught Rommel that the best way to avoid the chaos of combat was to stay in the place of the main effort and keep the initiative. Thereby, the uncertainty of war could be reduced. Even when studying Rommel there is often the impression that many of his decisions were instinctive and impulsive, Rommel was able to carefully plan his actions if he had the time. He also thought of his decisions on the battlefield. There are many examples of this in "Infantry Attacks". One of many examples can be found on page 9 where Rommel carefully considered his decision:

Should I wait until other forces came up or storm the entrance of Bleid with my platoon? The latter course of action seemed

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 22.

⁶⁸ The armistice was signed 2150 hours on June 22. The shooting would officially end at 35 minutes past midnight on June 25. See: Op cit footnote 3, p. 665.

proper. The strongest enemy force was in the building on the far side of the road. Therefore we had to take this building first. My attack plan was to open fire on the enemy on the ground floor and garret of the building with the 2nd section and go around the building to the right with the first section and take it by assault.⁶⁹

The quotation shows that Rommel in fact considered his decisions on the battlefield. Later information on Rommel's planning and decision-making can be found in numerous places in "The Rommel Papers".⁷⁰ In fact, large parts of the book cover Rommel's thinking about operational and tactical issues. In addition, some of Rommel's own sketches are included.⁷¹ The maps are good examples of Rommel's way of planning before a battle.

In the first days of the campaign in France, Rommel on a number of occasions intervened successfully in the actions of the division. The first occasion was the fighting at Chabrehez where Rommel made good use of his expertise in infantry warfare. The division had come to a halt, hesitating on how to deal with the Belgian defenders, when Rommel arrived and gave orders for how the attack should be car-

ried out. Rommel's intervention probably saved a number of hours for the division. The delay would have been longer without the swift and decisive attack by the 7th Motorcycle Battalion ordered by Rommel. Rommel's anger over the disorder in the division column at the time of the fighting at Chabrehez⁷² also meant that the officers of the division became aware of the demands of Rommel's leadership. After this initial setback, less hesitation and more aggressiveness was shown from the division.

The next occasion where Rommel intervened directly in the actions of the division was on May 13 when the division was about to cross the Meuse. Rommel intervened in several places. The first one was when the 6th Rifle Regiment was held back by enemy fire. Rommel showed his tactical brilliance and set some houses on fire to create a smoke screen. The next occasion was when the 7th Rifle Regiment was stopped trying to cross the Meuse. Rommel personally intervened by arranging fire support and taking command of the 2nd Battalion and the crossing was resumed. Next, Rommel got the crossing north of Dinant going again and he personally crossed the river and took part in

69 Rommel, Erwin: *Infantry Attacks*. Greenhill books, London, 1995, p 9.

70 See, for example, Rommel's writing on the plan for the battle of Tobruk starting on page 225 in *The Rommel papers*.

71 See for example, the sketch of Rommel's intentions if he were to break through at Alamein on page 259 in the *Rommel papers*.

72 Rommel scolded some of the officers and his orders at Chabrehez were in direct opposition to the initial orders by the commander of the 7th Motorcycle Battalion. See: Hautecler, s 44.

defending against a French counterattack on the western side of the Meuse.

After this, Rommel intervened in the construction of the bridge north of Dinant. As a result, the division could get across some badly needed tanks during the coming night. After the crossing Rommel again showed his aggressiveness when he got the message that Colonel Bismarck was surrounded. The message was wrong, but Rommel again showed his drive when he immediately gathered all available tanks and advanced to rescue Bismarck.

Considering all the occasions of the first days of the campaign when Rommel intervened in the actions of the division, it feels safe to conclude that he was a decisive factor in the success of the division. In all the mentioned examples the situation was bad or had come to a standstill, when Rommel got things moving again. With a less aggressive division commander the

7th Panzer Division could have lost 12 hours more at Chabrehez.

At the Meuse, the division could have been stopped for a long period without the decisive intervention from Rommel. At Flavion Rommel showed the ability to think in an operational dimension when he left the battle and continued his advance and thereby cut off the French support lines and created havoc in the rear French units.

To achieve what Rommel did without any former experience of armoured units was an extraordinary accomplishment and showed his military genius. Rommel's extraordinary ability to respond to the tide of battle events and his rapid and assured actions unveiled a master of manoeuvre that is unmatched even today.

The author is a Lieutenant Colonel and is serving är the Swedish National Defence College.

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