

Panzer IV vs. Char B1 Bis France 1940

by Andrew Birkbeck

Despite the use of “tanks” in the First World War, and their use in the opening stages of the Second World War in Poland, September 1939, it was in the Battle of France in May 1940 that these weapons were used for the first time on any large scale. The battles around the French towns of Stonne, Hannant, and Gembloux for the first time in history saw massive clashes, involving hundreds of tanks on both the French and German sides. And it was during these battles that actual “armored divisions” from both sides were involved. This book covers the two major armored vehicles of the Battle of France, the Wehrmacht’s Panzer IV, and the French Army’s massive Char B1 Bis. The author, Steven Zaloga, is a well known military historian of the Second World War, and also a keen modeler. He is also a very good writer, and the prose of this book flows very well.

The book is divided into seven major chapters, and flows in an intelligent chronological order. The text is augmented by black and white period photos, some color photos from museums, and color artwork, together with charts and battle maps. A brief history of tank warfare is given from the First World War through the post war period, and up to the start of World War Two. This includes the military thinking on both the French and German sides as to the utility of tanks, and how they should best be employed on the battle field. The book then moves on to show how these ideas (different on each side) went on to influence the type of tanks the German and French armaments industries produced. A quick look at pictures of the Panzer IV and the Char B1 Bis show

them to be very different vehicles, and the author expertly briefs the reader as to why they turned out the way they did: the Char B1 Bis heavily armored, yet relatively slow, while the Panzer IV was more lightly armored, and as a result lighter, and thus faster.

Under the heading “The Combatants”, the author describes the crews of the two tanks, their training (or lack of it), the various mechanical devices installed in the tanks (episcopes etc), and how these helped or hindered the effectiveness of the two tanks. Also covered is the makeup of the two tank organizations, on the French side the DCR (Division Cuirasee) and on the German, the Panzer Division. The author then concludes with a vivid description of the major engagement of the two armored formations in the Battle of France: The Duel at Stonne.

At the opening stages of the Battle of France, the Germans had more “tanks” than the French by a small margin, but many of these German tanks were lightly armed Panzer I and Panzer II vehicles. In terms of more capable tanks, such as the Char B1 Bis, Hotchkiss H35/39, Renault R-35 and Somua S-35, vs. the Panzer III and Panzer IV of the German units, the French had numerical superiority. Yet why were the Germans able to destroy the French Armies in such a short period of time? From the tank vs. tank perspective, this book reveals all. I found it easy to read, easy to understand, and very enlightening. I recommend it highly to anyone interested in this aspect of military history.



I also recommend it as a spur to building models: “back in the day”, Airfix produced “Dog Fight Doubles”, wherein the firm packaged two aircraft models in the same box, aircraft that had opposed one another in military combat. I read the brief “history” in the kit instructions, and this spurred me to go out and do more reading on the aircraft, their pilots, and the battles in which they fought. This Osprey book does the same, but in reverse: I read this book covering the men and machines in the Battle of France, and now I have gone out and purchased and started building models of the two tanks covered within its pages: Tamiya’s superb Char B1 Bis kit, and one of Dragon Models excellent Panzer IV Ausf. B/C/D kits!

My sincere thanks to Osprey Publishing and IPMS/USA for supplying the review sample.