



TIME FOR A RETHINK?

Stephen Robinson considers the resilience and fall of France in WW2, rethinking its tactical performance in 1940

Stereotypical views of the French Army are still powerful factors in accounts of the French campaign in 1940. Their defeat is often depicted as resulting from a backward firepower doctrine echoing back to 1918 that failed to withstand the fast pace of blitzkrieg. For example, BH Liddell Hart claimed: “The French, trained in the slow-motion methods of World War I, were mentally unfit to cope with the new tempo, and it caused a spreading paralysis among them”. Robert Forczyk similarly expressed: “French defeat has often been regarded as the result of incompetent military leadership and battlefield cowardice by unmotivated troops,

engendered by moral decay”. These historically inaccurate perceptions are preventing us from understanding the campaign. However, a sober look demonstrates admirable French tactical élan and remarkable resilience undermined by poor strategy and lack of operational synchronisation.

The Wehrmacht initiated ‘Case Yellow’ by invading the Low Countries on 10 May, which resulted in the elimination of the Allied main effort in Belgium and the evacuation from Dunkirk. However, the French initially had a sound strategy that was undone by a late modification. While the Maginot Line defended the Franco-German border, the main effort would advance into Belgium to defend the Antwerp-Dyle-Namur line before the Germans

When the French managed to manoeuvre in accordance with their doctrine, they did better than match their adversaries

reached French soil. General Maurice Gamelin originally planned to send ten French and five British divisions to this line. However, in March, concerned with defending the Netherlands, he increased that to 30 divisions, including his best mechanised units. The 7th Army, instead of being a reserve deployed near Reims, would now advance to Breda to assist the Dutch. Gamelin incorrectly assumed the Germans would repeat the Schlieffen Plan with their main effort in Northern Belgium. However, the German ‘sickle cut’ through the Ardennes and their breakout at Sedan took Gamelin by surprise. However, he could not develop a contingency plan since his reserves were *inside* the trap of Belgium and would soon be surrounded.

As the French high command realised the true situation, it did not become overwhelmed by paralysis. On 15 May, Gamelin reported to the French war minister Edouard Daladier that panzers had broken through and were near Rethel and Laon. Daladier responded: “Then you must counterattack at once, like 1918!” but Gamelin announced: “With what? I don’t have the reserves”. The French were not shocked into operational paralysis but rather their force levels were insufficient in the Sedan sector, preventing an effective counter-attack. As Gamelin’s gamble committed the French strategic reserve *before* the German main effort had been confirmed, it violated French doctrine. “Such a manoeuvre,” as Don W Alexander explained: “was not the result of an outdated tactical doctrine”. Larchet similarly concluded: “Gamelin’s eagerness to seize the initiative led him, against his own doctrine and basic principles of war, to commit all his strategic reserves into Belgium”.

The Battle of Sedan (12-15 May) was the most critical engagement of the campaign because the German breakout there enabled the Wehrmacht to encircle the Allied main effort. In other words, German tactical success at Sedan translated into operational success. After the Germans crossed the Meuse River and broke through the weakly held lines, there were insufficient Allied forces to stop them from reaching the English Channel and completing the encirclement. General Maxime Weygand recalled the scale of this disaster: “Three-quarters, if not four-fifths, of our most modern equipment was captured. Our units in the North were the best armed. *They were our spear-head. The best of the French army was captured.*”

Sedan was not a meaningful test of German and French doctrines. The French defence depended upon two series B divisions – the 55th and 71st Divisions – that were poorly led and equipped. The men were mostly older reservists who had been conscripts in the Twenties, suffering from poor élan and training. These demoralised soldiers were unsurprisingly routed when they faced the full might of *Panzergruppe Kleist* backed by mass *Luftwaffe* support. However, this outcome was not indicative of collective French performance as Don W Alexander stressed: “The operations on the Meuse have received so much attention that one is tempted to believe that the performance of Series B and fortress units was typical of the entire French Army. No assumption could be more unfounded.” Martin S Alexander similarly concurred that these divisions: “have unjustly become synonymous with the entire French army of 1940”.

French doctrine required one element to perform the *colmatage* [sealing] to contain the breach and another to concentrate force for the counter-attack. However, at Sedan the French had insufficient forces to simultaneously contain and repel the bulge. If Gamelin had retained his

strategic reserve, the French would likely have had sufficient force to conduct a *colmatage* and an effective counter-attack. There was nothing inherently wrong with French doctrine – the Red Army at Stalingrad and Kursk successfully executed a *colmatage* and a counter-attack, as did the American Army during the Battle of the Bulge. “The German victory on the Meuse,” as Don W Alexander concluded: “was not attributable to outdated French tactics but rather to an erroneous strategy”. The spirit of French methodical battle with its firepower emphasis provided by artillery was later validated. As Franz-Stefan Gady explained: “by 1943 both the Soviets and the Western allies had developed superior artillery tactics that were more than a match for German offensive operations spearheaded by mechanised formations”.

Although Sedan was not an appropriate battle to test the merits of competing doctrine, the Battle of Gembloux (14-15 May) provided an adequate contest as Jeffery A Gunsburg concluded: “this battle is a legitimate test of the tactical capability of the French army of May 1940 to withstand the Blitzkrieg”. General Georges Blanchard moved the First Army to Gembloux in central Belgium where he planned to smash the panzer

THE FRENCH INITIALLY HAD A SOUND STRATEGY THAT WAS UNDONE BY A LATE MODIFICATION

spearhead by creating strongpoints. General Erich Hoepner’s 16th Panzer Corps led by the 3rd and 4th Panzer Divisions prematurely attacked the French line rather than wait for two infantry divisions to arrive. As the French artillery shattered the German assault, it became clear that Hoepner should have waited for the infantry to conduct a methodical attack. At Gembloux, the French artillery and infantry prevailed over German panzer troops and, as Gunsburg explained: “the French force demonstrated its superiority, in contradiction to the ‘accepted wisdom’, which claims that the Blitzkrieg of spring 1940 carried all before it”. Larchet concluded regarding Gembloux: “When the French managed to manoeuvre in accordance with their doctrine, they did better than match their adversaries”. Unfortunately, Gembloux did not translate into operational success as the breakout further South at Sedan completely undermined the French campaign plan.

After Dunkirk, the balance of power decisively shifted in Germany’s favour. However, the war was not over as 60 French and four British Divisions stubbornly defended the Somme-Oise-Ailette-Aisne Line. The Wehrmacht launched ‘Case Red’ – the second phase of the campaign – on 5 June, fielding 142 divisions. Although the Germans had numerical superiority, they endured a much harder fight compared with ‘Case Yellow’ due to French resilience. As Martin S Alexander explained: “The French army and its morale rallied impressively after the May disasters on the Meuse, in Belgium and in the Netherlands. French units fought tooth and claw in early-mid-June”. These events are not well-known because, as Forczyk reminds us: “Case Red and the second half of the Battle of France have been largely missing from existing historiography”.

General Weygand planned a system of deep strongpoints based upon village redoubts – ‘Weygand hedgehogs’ – with all-round defence to slow and choke panzer spearheads. General Aubert Frère’s 7th Army successfully applied the new tactics as the Germans made costly assaults against well-fortified strongpoints. For example, on 5 June Hoepner’s 16th Panzer Corps attacked the 29th Alpine Division and lost 80 of the 500 armoured vehicles from its first wave. In June, the French Army successfully coordinated infantry, artillery, anti-tank guns and mobile reconnaissance to inflict high losses on the Germans. The French also adapted by using 75mm field guns as anti-tank weapons to counter German armoured tactics. The Germans committed most of their reserves to generate overwhelming force in order to win. Unfortunately, the tactical resilience of the French divisions was not matched at the operational level. French corps commanders were typically overwhelmed and they failed to synchronize the actions of their units. Consequently, the division commanders fought uncoordinated battles. As Martin S. Alexander concluded: “Failure in 1940 was not, then, down to the divisional and regimental commanders and field officers. And rarely was it down to the men.” Forczyk similarly expressed: “During *Fall Rot*, the French Army demonstrated that it knew how to stop tanks on the Weygand Line, but the choice of where to make a stand was faulty. The bravery of French soldiers and airmen to sacrifice for France was constantly on display throughout the campaign, in some places right up to the last hours before the armistice.”

The central lesson of French tactical performance is the power of resilience. “The French army,” as Martin S. Alexander concluded: “was like a boxer dazed by an unexpectedly heavy punch at the start of a bout – a boxer who sways, but then clears his head, raises his guard and fights on”. The Fall of France resulted from the operational implications that flowed from Sedan. Normally, a single debacle will not doom an entire campaign. However, the strategic reserve was prematurely committed to the wrong sector and, consequently, was unavailable to contain the German breakout. Ultimately, poor strategy allowed a single rout to become a disaster that negated impressive French performance elsewhere.

The French resilience against the *blitzkrieg* demonstrates that we over-value the strategic paralysis theories of Liddell Hart and Fuller and their myths of mentally deficient French soldiers being overwhelmed by superior German tempo. Those views underestimate resilience by falsely assuming that humans will succumb to paralysis far more than is justifiable. That is not to say that there was no paralysis in French units or that German tempo was not critical to their success at Sedan. Rather, it is to say that the complexity of the French campaign cannot be explained exclusively through the narrow prism of paralysis and tempo given the importance of other considerations. If we fail to recognise the true lessons of the French campaign, we risk sleepwalking into disaster by underestimating the resilience of future adversaries. Fortunately, the *Wehrmacht* failed to learn from French resilience as it succumbed to victory disease and this hubris eventually led to disaster for the Germans on the Eastern Front ●

Stephen Robinson

is an officer in the Australian Army Reserve currently serving in the Australian Army History Unit. He is the author of *False Flags: Disguised German Raiders of World War II* (2016), *Panzer Commander Hermann Balck: Germany’s Master Tactician* (2019), *The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War* (2021) and *Eight Hundred Heroes: China’s Lost Battalion And The Fall Of Shanghai* (2022).

The French Army demonstrated it knew how to stop tanks on the Weygand Line, but the choice of where to make a stand was faulty

