

Crossing the Meuse at Dinant 12 to 14 May 1940

The 7th Panzer Division, commanded by then little-known Generalmajor Erwin Rommel, exited the forested area in Germany known as the Eifel and crossed the German – Belgian border early on 10 May 1940. The unit encountered heavy resistance around the Belgian town of St Vith, where a second historic battle was to occur in 1944 during the ill-fated German Ardennes Offensive. Columns of Rommel’s vehicles struggled through the narrow passages of the Ardennes Forest mostly unopposed. The Ardennes held a reputation as impenetrable by modern military movements thus it was defended by only Belgian Chasseurs and two divisions of French cavalry.



The next morning a stubborn stand by Group K of the 3rd Regiment of Belgian Chasseurs Ardennais delayed Rommel’s progress for 15 hours. However, forward elements reached the Ourthe River at Hotton around noon to encounter the arriving French 4th Light Cavalry Division (général Paul Barbe¹). The French blew the bridge but did not defend the crossing area permitting German engineers to build a new bridge and continue their advance toward Marche-en-Famenne engaging several light tanks along the way. By 12 May, Rommel’s forces had been augmented by transfer of Panzer Regiment 31 (Oberst Paul Hermann Werner²) from the delayed 5th Panzer Division. During the afternoon Werner’s regiment achieved the river near Yvoir.

Objective	To traverse the Forêt d’Ardennes, cross the Meuse River, and cut across the rear of the allied armies as they advanced into Belgium.
Forces	
Belgian:	Group ‘K’ 1st and 3rd Regiments Chasseurs Ardennais and 1st Cavalry Division (Lieutenant-General Maurice Keyaerts)
French:	18th Division (général de brigade Camille-Léon Duffet)
German:	7th Panzer Division (Generalmajor Erwin Rommel)
Result	German armored columns crossed the river and sliced across northern France to the English Channel.
Casualties	
Allies:	Unknown
German:	136 killed and at least 222 wounded

1 Général Paul Barbe was killed by German fire during the fighting at Dinant.

2 Paul Hermann Werner was killed on 30 June 1940 near Brest, France.

Location

Namur is 310 km northeast of Paris; Yvoir is 23 km south of Namur



Figure 1. German tanks on Belgian Border NARA



Figure 3. Yvoir Bridge NARA



Figure 2. Field Marshal Rommel NARA

Although he played only a secondary role to Guderian's assault upon Sedan, Rommel understood that the success of his country's invasion of France depended upon their ability to cross the Meuse River swiftly. The steep ridge lines along the river formed a formidable block to tank movements but were the last remaining

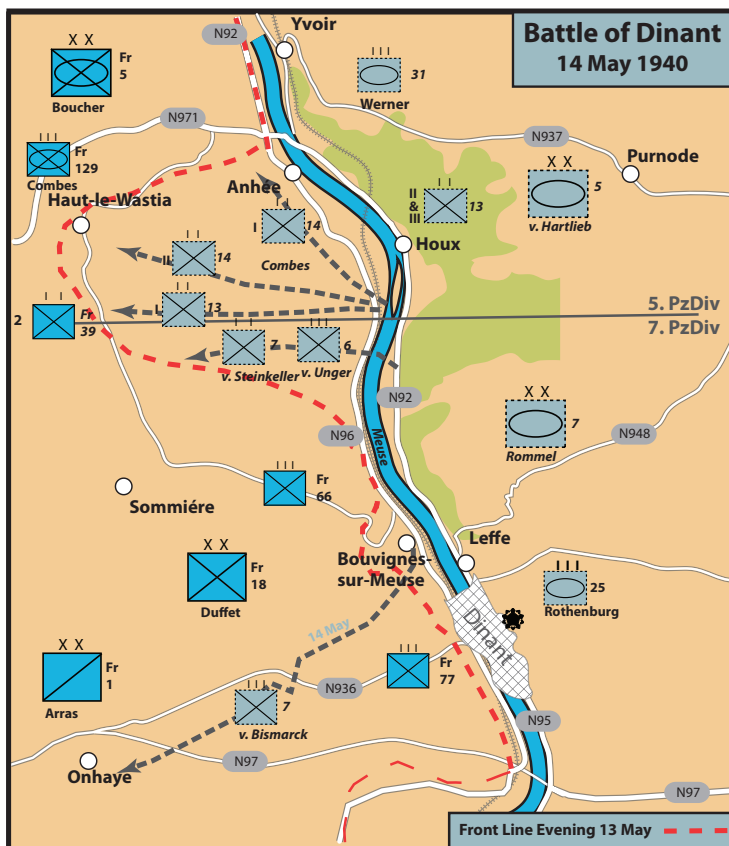
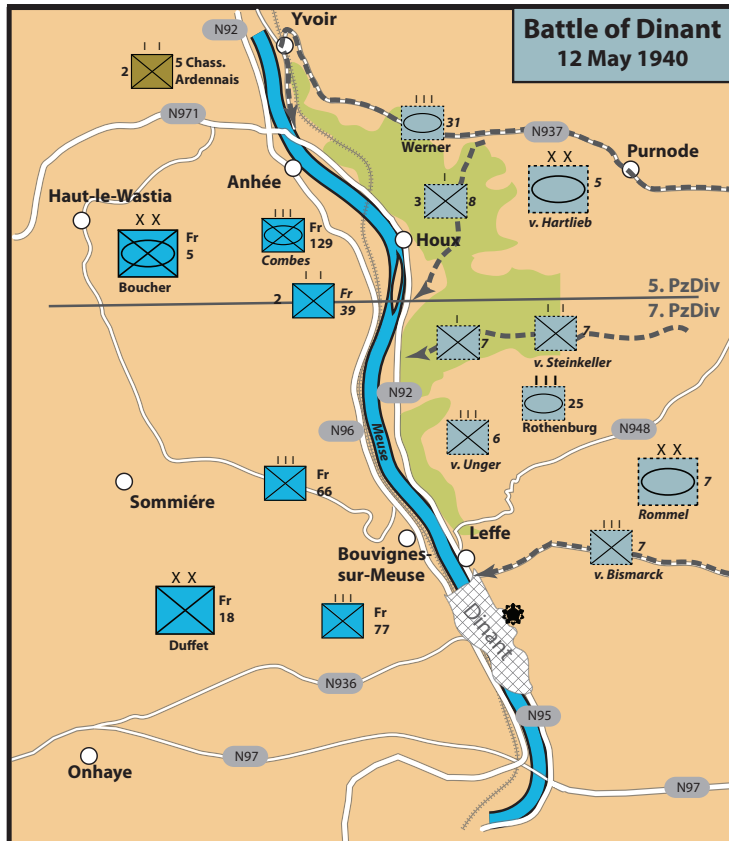
major natural defensive feature between him and the excellent tank terrain that ran across northern France to the English Channel. The river valley, however, offered few exits. Well-placed antitank guns, supported by artillery and determined infantry, could provide an effective blocking force. Rommel had to win the race, or Germany's great gamble would be a failure.

Lack of coordination between Belgian and French units hindered the allied response. Belgian engineers destroyed 330 bridges and cut roads passing through the narrow river valleys in their mission to destroy communications. While the slower-moving French infantry moved toward positions along the Meuse River, the French cavalry clashed with the leading German forces until ordered to retire. French military planning relied upon having five days to establish positions along the Meuse; the Germans arrived in two. The reduced French 5th Infantry Division (motorized) defended the Meuse from Dave — south of Namur — to Anhée. The French 18th Infantry Division, assigned the sector from Anhée to Hastière, was at half strength and faced two German armored divisions.

Battle

The advance guard of Panzer Regiment 31 was the first German unit to reach the Meuse arriving at 16:30 on 12 May. The bridge at Yvoir exploded as the first armored car attempted to cross. Ten minutes earlier, the bridge at Dinant dropped into the river; shortly thereafter the concrete road bridge at Bouvignes-sur-Meuse was similarly destroyed. The evening air was punctuated by the explosions from other bridges to north and south. After rapidly passing through the difficult terrain of the Ardennes, the Germans were stopped only a few kilometers from the open plains beyond by the Meuse River.

During the night of 12/13 May, a motorcycle battalion discovered an undefended crossing point at Île de Houx and established a small bridgehead on the opposite bank. At 04:00 on 13 May, Rommel arrived at the Meuse River. The town of Dinant was under fire from French artillery, and the streets were littered with dead and wounded men. Although some German troops had crossed the river while shielded by the early morning mist, efforts to reinforce the Dinant bridgehead were stopped by Belgian machine-gun fire from the west bank and by French artillery batteries in the hills beyond. Rommel watched a fierce battle



as the German Rifle Regiment 6 (Oberst Erich von Unger³) was blocked. Rommel later wrote, ‘The situation was not very pleasant. Our boats were being destroyed one after the other by the French flanking fire and the crossing eventually came to a standstill.’ To provide a smoke screen, Rommel ordered the houses in the valley to be set on fire.

True to his credo of ‘command from the front,’ Rommel spent 13 May moving up and down the highway between Houx and Dinant, exposing himself to enemy fire — which wounded his adjutant — while scanning the opposite shore to get a perspective of the situation or identify targets. Only riflemen had been able to cross the river and remained without support from tanks or antitank weapons. Rommel crossed in one of the first boats and took command of II Battalion, Rifle Regiment 7. He personally led its defense against a tank attack, one of many such actions that he conducted. Although German forces west of the Meuse were weak and without their armored support, French attempts to repulse them were poorly coordinated and slow in execution.

During night of 13 May, Pioneer Battalion 58 engineers ferried vehicles across the river, despite continued French fire that killed its commander. Eventually the resistance was overcome, and by 09:00 on 14 May, Panzer Regiment 25 had thirty tanks moving toward the strategic village of Onhayé, west of Dinant.

Several sharp engagements ensued in the villages and woods west of the Meuse. Rommel crisscrossed the battlefield, at one point barely escaping capture when his command tank came under fire and was disabled. By 15 May,

³ Oberst Erich von Unger was died of wounds while commanding a motorized rifle brigade on the Eastern Front in August 1941.

the French Ninth Army was routed, and the Meuse defensive line was lost.

Battlefield Tour

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In the region north of Dinant, the swiftly flowing Meuse is 75 to 100 meters wide between limestone shoulders. The approach from the east is slightly more gradual, as the roads leave the wooded terrain of the Ardennes and enter the river valley. On the opposite shore, railroad tracks run parallel to the river, along a narrow strip of ground below ragged cliffs.

The tour proceeds from the first attempted crossing at Yvoir before moving to the west bank to identify crossing locations as it proceeds south toward Dinant.

Depart Namur toward Dinant along the east bank highway (N937). Approximately 900 meters after leaving Yvoir stop at a small turn-off on the right. (50.319237, 4.877413)

In the late afternoon of 12 May, Belgian engineers were assigned the task of blowing the Meuse bridges. Panzer Regiment 31, after pushing through the rear guard of the French 4th DLC (light cavalry division), was making a mad dash to capture the nearest bridge between Sedan and Namur. While the bridge was being prepared for demolition, German vehicles started to cross. A 47-mm antitank gun disabled the first armored car with one shot, followed by the second car. Lieutenant Renaat de Wispelaere, commander



of the engineers, pushed the electric detonator to blow up the bridge, but it malfunctioned. In the face of enemy fire, he activated the manual igniter. At that moment he was shot and killed, but the bridge exploded, sending the two disabled vehicles into the river.⁴ The mad dash to capture the bridge had failed.

Only the cobblestone approach to the 1940 steel girder bridge remains, located at a small turn-off north of the modern highway bridge between Anhée and Yvoir. A stone displaying the wild boar emblem of the **Chasseurs Ardennais** on the riverfront wall commemorates the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment assigned to protect the engineers assigned to destroy all the river crossings between

⁴ Lieutenant Renaat (or René) de Wispelaere is buried in the communal cemetery in Yvoir. He was 37 years old.

Namur and Givet. Remaining stones from the pillbox used by the chasseurs to defend the crossing stand directly opposite on the western shore near an abandoned gas station. Adjacent, a stone block stele surrounded by a half circle of stone columns forms a memorial to the sacrifice and heroism of Lieutenant de Wispelaere and his men.



Figure 4. Yvoir Bridge Monument © French Battlefields



Figure 5. Wispelaere Monument © French Battlefields

Continue south (N937) approximately 2.8 km and turn right onto the road toward Purnode (Route de Blocqmont). Immediately turn right into a small rest area. (50.299892, 4.899901)

The narrow, brush-covered Île de Houx divides the waters of the Meuse into two channels. The railway bridge at the northern end of the Île de Houx had been destroyed earlier in the afternoon. While the Yvoir bridge was being blown, a German patrol discovered weir #5 near the south end of the island, its broken stonewalls giving perilous access to the mid-river island. From the island a lock gate spanned the channel to the west bank. The first attempt to cross was repulsed by a company from the French 66th Regiment. Later in the afternoon, however, that company was relieved by 2nd Battalion, French 39th Regiment. Contrary to orders, the replacements did not bring the defense down to the water's edge. They remained on the high ground, protected from German fire but unable to cover the Île de Houx adequately. During the night of 12/13 May, using the now undefended weir and flood control gate, several companies of 8th Motorcycle Battalion, 5th Panzer Division were able to cross to the opposite shore. By 01:00, the first German troops were west of the Meuse. At 03:00, the cyclists rushed the high ground, surprising and scattering the men of the 39th Regiment. By the next morning the advance guard of Panzer Regiment 31 reinforced the small unit and captured the village of Grange, extending the slim bridgehead to 2 kilometers in depth but leaving their rear exposed to isolated pockets of enemy troops. The current highway is postwar, but the turn-off pavement is the 1940 roadway. From the riverfront walkway, what appears to be the opposite shore of a narrow channel is the is-



Figure 6. Ile de Houx Crossing © French Battlefields

able to cross to the opposite shore. By 01:00, the first German troops were west of the Meuse. At 03:00, the cyclists rushed the high ground, surprising and scattering the men of the 39th Regiment. By the next morning the advance guard of Panzer Regiment 31 reinforced the small unit and captured the village of Grange, extending the slim bridgehead to 2 kilometers in depth but leaving their rear exposed to isolated pockets of enemy troops. The current highway is postwar, but the turn-off pavement is the 1940 roadway. From the riverfront walkway, what appears to be the opposite shore of a narrow channel is the is-

land. The old weir used by the Germans was later dynamited; several weirs now visible in the river are of postwar construction and are not at the original site.

At the highway intersection with the Route de Blocqmont, Rommel stood on the grass verge observing the efforts to reinforce the motorcycle battalion across the river. The Route de Blocqmont traverses open fields in which Rommel's vehicles were exposed to enemy antitank guns as they exited the forest. During preparations for the crossing, tanks, armored cars, and trucks lined this road and others, possibly for 75 kilometers — almost to the Belgian – German border.

Reverse direction for 2.3 km and cross to the west bank via Pont d'Anhée. Proceed south on highway N96 for 2 km and stop at the large stone roadside building. (50.290341, 4.892005)



Figure 7. 1940 Meuse crossing at Auberge NARA

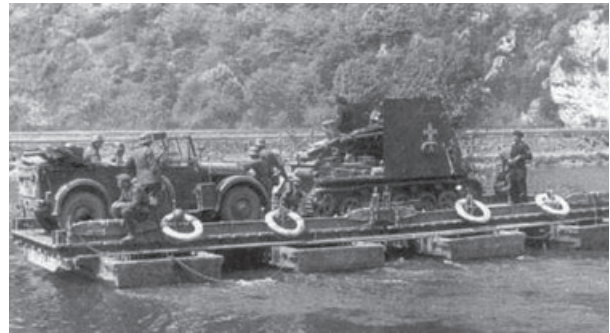


Figure 8. 1940 Meuse crossing by ferry at Bouvigne NARA

South of Île de Houx, the large, cream-colored stucco **Auberge de Bouvignes** standing below the exposed white rock cliffs marked the center of the 7th Panzer Division's area of operations. Although vehicles were ferried across at this locale, the main effort was not located here because the harsh rock face behind the auberge did not allow passage to the west. The auberge, rail line, and roadway appear as they did in 1940.

After Rommel's arrival at Dinant, he moved opposite Bouvignes, where he witnessed Oberst Georg von Bismarck's⁵ Rifle Regiment 7 stopped by concentrated fire from the French 66th Infantry Regiment. Rommel described the scene, 'enemy fire had then become so heavy that their crossing equipment had been shot to pieces and the crossing had to be halted. Large numbers of wounded were receiving treatment in a house close beside the demolished bridge. ... There was nothing to be seen of the enemy who were preventing the crossing.' Rommel decided that he needed heavier weapons to dislodge the hidden defenders and left to confer with his superiors.

Continue south on Highway N96 for 2.0 km and turning eight onto rue Henri Bles upon entering Bouvignes-sur-Meuse. Merge onto rue Cardinal Mercier and follow for 1.2 km. Bear right onto Route de Sommiere for 400 meters, then sharp right in enter Chateau parking area 800 meters ahead. (50.272830, 4.893566)

The ruins of the **Château de Crèvecoeur**, believed to have been constructed in the 9th century to protect communications along the river, tower above the river north of Bouvignes-sur-Meuse. The ruins provided shelter for French artillery observers of the river crossing points. Under the watchful eyes in

5 George von Bismarck was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for his leadership of the regiment. Promoted to Generalmajor he joined the Africa Korps as commander of the 21st Panzer Division. He was killed by a mine in August 1942, aged 51.

the château, Bismarck's regiment struggled to establish a crossing point where the three-arch, concrete footbridge had stood on the previous day. His infantry and engineers were shelled and fired upon from the numerous pillboxes that lined the opposite shore. Returning fire with their artillery regiment's 105-mm howitzers, the Germans set Bouvignes ablaze.

Reverse direction back into Bouvignes-sur-Meuse. Turn right onto highway N96 (rue Fetis). After 240 meters turn left toward the rail line underpass (Avenue Colonel Cadoux). (50.273363, 4.898995)



Figure 9. Bouvignes & Chateau Crevecoeur from Leffe
© French Battlefields

Bouvignes was rebuilt and appears much as it did in 1940. The church still dominates the small village, which has colorful buildings lining the riverbank. The bridge was never rebuilt, but careful inspection will reveal its abutment on the western side of the river.

After a hurried conference at Army headquarters, Rommel returned to the Meuse near the Dinant suburb of Leffe — famed for the beer brewed by its monks and whose church appears on the bottle label — finding more wounded and the crossing at a standstill. Rommel ordered forward several Mark III and Mark IV tanks. With their turrets traversed left, they drove at 50-meter intervals along the river road, throwing shell after shell into the structures on the

opposite shore. Under continuous fire from 37-mm and 75-mm guns, the defensive fire weakened, and the crossing resumed.

Slightly to the south of the church in Bouvignes-sur-Meuse, a road tunnel goes under the rail embankment. A pontoon bridge was completed by 14 May in direct alignment with that tunnel, allowing movement of the infantry divisions that followed behind the armored columns. The river valley at Bouvignes provided the necessary exit along a highway toward Philippeville, Rommel's next objective. No trace of the pontoon bridge remains. Road tunnel remains.

Return to highway N96 and proceed south 1.6 km to the roundabout west of the Pont Charles de Gaulle. (50.260289, 4.910750)

Belgian engineers destroyed the Dinant city bridge at 14:30 on 12 May. Since access to the riverfront was difficult in the crowded city, German engineers constructed a pontoon bridge at Leffe and it became the division's main crossing point. Long since rebuilt, the Dinant Bridge's western end bears a plaque commemorating the wounding of Lieutenant Charles de Gaulle on 15 August 1914, when he defended the city against invading Germans during the First World War.

Cross the bridge and follow highway N936 & N92a (rue Adolphe Sax) as it turns north in Dinant. Beware of the one-way streets. After approximately 450 meters, turn right onto rue Saint-Jacques (still N936). After 1.1 km turn right onto Pont d'Amour; proceed 650 meters to turn right onto Chem de la Citadelle and follow for 500 meters to the Citadelle parking area. (50.261261, 4.915008) The walk to the citadelle entrance is approximately 120 meters.

Citadel of Dinant

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Open daily 1 April to 30 September from 10:00 to 18:00; and from 10:00 to 17:30 October to 11 November; 12 November to March from 10:00 to 16:30 closed Fridays; open weekends and school holidays only in January. No admission fee.

The city of Dinant is dominated by its **Citadel**, which towers 100 meters above the onion-domed, 13th century **Collégiale Notre Dame de Dinant**. Views of the church and citadel are spectacular, especially from the opposite bank. The *Teleferique* cable car goes up the side of the cliff from the south side of the cathedral, an ascent preferable to walking the 408 steps. Tours of the castle are guided, so arrivals must be timed accordingly. The parking area atop the hillside houses a Bofors 40-mm anti-aircraft gun. The open area in the courtyard does not provide the views of the Meuse valley that one might expect. The top of the citadel is dominated by a German 20-mm Flak anti-aircraft gun.



Figure 10. Destroyed Dinant Bridge ©NARA



Figure 11. Dinant and its Citadelle ©French Battlefields

The **Citadelle Military Cemetery** contains 1,117 French Army war graves, of which most are from the first war. Graves of 47 French soldiers and 25 Commonwealth airmen from the Second World War are included. (50.261216, 4.915464)

Nearby Sites:

Musée du Souvenir Mai 1940 à Haut-le-Wastia

Place des Français

B-5537 Haut-le-Wastia

Belgium

Web: <http://www.museedusouvenirmai40.be/>

Open from May to mid-October: Saturday, Sunday and public holidays from 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Open all year by appointment for groups. The visit lasts 1h30-2h. Fee. (50.305321, 4.8426747)

The village's elevation dominated the river crossings at Houx and from 12 to 14 May the village of Haut-le-Wastia and its surroundings were at the center of battle which nearly destroyed the village. Captured by Germans, on 14 May two companies of the 129th Regiment of Infantry and the 2nd Battalion, 14th

Mechanized Infantry Regiment (Dragons Portés) struck the II Battalion, Rifle Regiment 14. The village was retaken only after violent house-to-house combat with the capture of fifty Germans and heavy losses. The last pocket of French resistance fell to an attack of eight enemy tanks.

A memorial to Capitaine Patrick Fockedey of the French 129th Regiment of Infantry and the museum perpetuate the defender's memory. The stone house museum holds eight themed rooms covering subjects such as historic objects, dummies, dioramas, a mediation room, the war in the air, the tank fighting in Flavion, the forts of Namur and more.

The **Haut-le-Wastia Memorial** stands south of the village along Rue de Sommiere. The large stone structure bears inscriptions to the French officers and men of the 4th Light Cavalry Division and the 5th Motorized Infantry Division. The memorial site locates the final resistance by Capitaine Fockedey, commanding the 5th Company, 129th Regiment, whose unit became surrounded by armored vehicles. Fockedey refused surrender demands and continued fighting until fatally wounded. Capitaine Fockedey died on 14 May, aged 30. A smaller plaque on the left remembers Sous-Lieutenant Riss and all Allied aviators shot down that May.⁶ (50.300287, 4.83885576)



Figure 12. Haut-le-Wastia Monument to its French Defenders © French Battlefields

⁶ Lieutenant Joseph Riss's fighter aircraft was shot down near this location. He escaped capture to rejoin French lines. He survived the war, attained the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and died in 2016, aged 100.