

## Crossing the Meuse at Sedan

### 13 May 1940

The French defensive fortifications of the Maginot Line ended 20 kilometers east of Sedan at La Ferté. Efforts to extend the fortification line focused upon the area east of Sedan known as the Stenay Gap. The gap was not protected by natural obstacles. The Sedan sector was ignored by French military planners because it was thought to be protected by the impenetrable Ardennes Forest – until it was penetrated.

A whistle blown at 05:35 on 10 May began the main German thrust, with over twelve hundred tanks and thirty-nine thousand vehicles of Panzer Group Kleist, which included General der Panzertruppen Heinz Guderian's XIX and General Leutnant Georg-Hans Reinhardt's XLI Panzer Corps, along four march routes. Movement plans quickly fell apart, and the resulting congestion created a traffic jam which was 250 kilometers long and extended all the way back into Germany. The vehicles were perfect targets for allied aircraft, but despite reports from nighttime reconnaissance flights, the French High Command continued to believe that the Ardennes was not tank country. To protect the columns from air attack, the Luftwaffe provided an air umbrella which was never challenged.

The retiring Belgian Army destroyed bridges and cut down trees to delay the panzers' progress. A stiff resistance by a company of 1st Regiment, Belgian Chasseurs Ardennais at Bodange delayed the leading 1st Panzer Division for eight hours; however, most Belgian units retired toward Namur as planned. Working through the night of 10 May, German engineers hurriedly removed the barriers and filled demolition craters.

Upon notification of the German incursion, four cavalry divisions of the French Second and Ninth Armies crossed the French border into Belgium to act as a screen while French infantry divisions took up their positions. The lightly armed cavalry were no match for the German tanks, and after suffering heavy losses, they withdrew back across the Meuse.

<b>Objective</b>	To capture crossing points over the Meuse River at Sedan
<b>Forces</b> <b>French:</b> <b>German:</b>	55th and 71st Divisions of French Second Army (général d'armée Charles Huntziger) 1st, 2nd, and 10th Panzer Divisions, XIX Panzer Corps (General der Panzertruppen Heinz Guderian)
<b>Result</b>	The French defenses were overcome, and the river was crossed.
<b>Casualties</b> <b>French:</b> <b>German:</b>	At least 500 dead, thousands taken prisoner. 120 dead and 400 wounded
<b>Location</b>	Sedan is 250 km northeast of Paris

### Battle

After fifty-seven hours of uninterrupted advance, Rifle Regiment 1 commanded by Oberstleutnant Hermann Balck<sup>1</sup> reached the Meuse west of Sedan between Floing and Glaire, at 18:15 on 12 May.

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Balck later commanded the 11th Panzer Division on the Eastern Front. Balck was made one of only twenty-seven officers in the entire war who received the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. Balck gained promotion of General der Panzertruppen. He was captured in May 1945 and held as a PoW until 1947. He was tried for summary execution of a subordinate who was drunk while in command and for war crimes by France. He was never extradicted in the later case. Balck died in 1982, aged 88.



The German army had achieved a total strategic surprise in one of the greatest logistical operations of the war. The French had no intention of defending the city, preferring instead to retire behind the 70-meter-wide Meuse River and occupy blockhouses built on high ground. During the evening the French successfully demolished the highway and rail bridges as they left.

The French 55th and 71st Divisions, part of général Charles Huntziger's<sup>2</sup> French Second Army, were assigned responsibility for the Meuse line near Sedan. Since the French High Command believed that the Ardennes could not be penetrated by tanks, they thought that first class infantry units would be better used elsewhere. These two reserve divisions of poorly trained, older men, who suffered a shortage of antitank guns, mines, and anti-aircraft weapons, defended the weakest sector in the entire French line.

Beginning at 11:00 on 13 May, over nine hundred bombers, fighters, and dive-bombers attacked French positions around Sedan in

waves destroying command posts and communications lines, isolating units from their headquarters and cutting links to their artillery support. For five hours the howling sirens of Stukas added to the terror of exploding shells from Dorniers and Henkels and the crack of machine-gun strafing from Messerschmidts. Despite the intense German aerial bombardment, the bunkers forming the riverside defense line remained intact; however, the psychological effect was crippling and contributed to the later rout. Deputy Chief of Staff of the French Second Army général de brigade Edmond Ruby described the effect: 'The gunners stopped shooting and hit the dirt; the infantrymen dove into the trenches and remained there motionless; they were deafened by the crushing of bombs and screeching of the dive bomber sirens. ... hours of this nightmare sufficed to shatter their nerves; they were no longer able to react to the approaching infantry.'

The 1st Panzer Division, augmented in its efforts by the elite Grossdeutschland Infantry Regiment and Assault Engineering Battalion 43, attacked to establish the first bridgeheads across the Meuse. The first wave of twenty-four hundred men attacked under a covering smoke screen against the thinly held sector between Glaire and Torcy (now a Sedan suburb), west of the destroyed Pont Neuf Bridge. To the east, op-

<sup>2</sup> Charles Huntziger became the Vichy government's commander-in-chief of land forces and later Minister of Defence. He died aged 61 on 11 November 1941, when his aircraft crashed while on an inspection tour of North Africa. Huntziger is buried in Passy Cemetery, Paris.

posite Wadelincourt the Grossdeutschland Regiment faced Bunker 211, where a 25-mm antitank gun commanded the bridge and held firm until Guderian's gunners used antitank and antiaircraft guns to fire into the pillbox's gun embrasures. At 16:00, with the bunker silenced, the men crossed the river, paddling furiously in their inflatable assault boats.

Simultaneously at Gaulier, Balck's Rifle Regiment 1 assault troops enjoyed a virtually uncontested crossing of the river and fought along the canal and river toward Château Bellevue, taking French pillboxes and machine-gun emplacements in succession. As night fell, they passed to the west of Frénois and proceeded to Hill 301, Graf Moltke's observation point during the 1870 Battle of Sedan. By midnight, engineers completed a pontoon bridge capable of handling tanks.

The French 55th Division crumbled under the pressure of the combined air and land assault, many of the inexperienced reservists fleeing. Their arrival in rear areas spread fear and confusion paralyzed French attempts to counterattack. The imminent tank attack frightened away French heavy artillery at Bulson, robbing the defenders of their most effective weapon against the amphibious river crossing.

Farther west, the 2nd Panzer Division was halted in front of Donchéry because its approach was under the guns of casemates to the east and the batteries of the French 55th and adjacent 102nd Infantry Divisions. Help arrived in the form of an engineering assault team from German Rifle Regiment 1, who eliminated a line of bunkers that were blasting German tanks and assault boats when they approached the river. With the bunkers along the Donchéry road disabled, the division infantry was able to cross at approximately 20:00.

The 10th Panzer Division suffered from a lack of artillery support because Guderian committed it to the main effort at Glaire. French artillery demolished most of the Panzergrenadier Regiment 69's assault boats before they reached the water's edge. Their attack from Bazeilles toward Pont-Maugis thus failed. Panzergrenadier Regiment 86, which faced intact bunkers across the river and numerous artillery positions on the heights beyond, was only slightly more successful. Through the efforts of one platoon of engineers, they were able to seize seven bunkers, which allowed the division to establish a small bridgehead at approximately 19:30 at Wadelincourt.

The critical choke point for the entire German effort was the single-span bridge at Gaulier. The Allies finally recognized the threat, and starting at dawn on 14 May, they sent one hundred seventy bombers with two hundred fifty fighter sorties as escorts against the bridge which Guderian now protected with seven flak battalions. One hundred sixty-five of the allied planes were shot down or severely damaged by the intense fire, and not one bomb hit the bridge. The losses were so severe that additional air attacks were cancelled. Sixty thousand men and eight hundred fifty tanks surged into the rapidly expanding bridgehead. The riskiest maneuver of the war was accomplished.

### Aftermath

Général Huntziger ordered the remainder of his left flank formations to withdraw to the south. A 70-km gap consequently opened between the French Ninth and Second Armies at exactly the point of Guderian's axis of attack to the west. At 14:00 on 14 May, Guderian, in a daring move that defied direct orders, did not wait for the mechanized infantry support that was still crossing the Ardennes. Instead, he ordered his 1st and 2nd Panzer Divisions to turn west toward the English Channel. On 15 May, elite units of the French 3rd Spahi Brigade fought the panzers to a standstill at La Horgne, 20 kilometers southwest of Sedan,

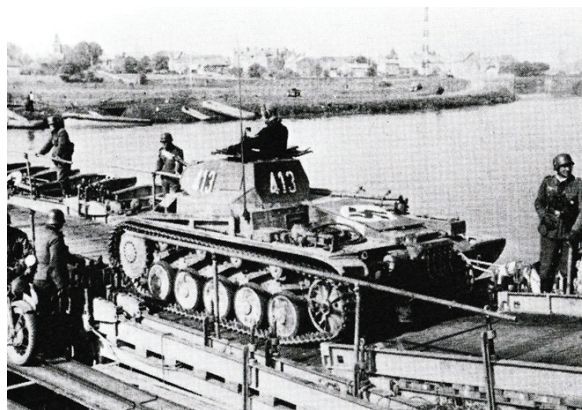


Figure 1. PzKmpfw II of #4 Company, Panzer Regiment 1 crosses the Meuse at Glaire. NARA

but they were exhausted and retired, leaving the way open for Guderian's tanks. By day's end Guderian's and Hoth's Panzer corps columns were 60 kilometers past the Meuse, with open territory before them. The assault destroyed the French Ninth Army, whose commander, général d'armée André Corap<sup>3</sup>, was relieved of his command; his replacement, général Henri Honoré Giraud<sup>4</sup>, was also unable to contain the situation. Giraud was captured on 19 May.

Initial reports to the French High Command failed to recognize Guderian's daring implementation of Manstein's *Sichelschnitt* plan. Despite superior quantities of men and tanks, the slowness and confusion within the French command structure squandered opportunities to contain and destroy the German bridgehead. The Germans were too aggressive and too focused on their strategic objective. Guderian's evaluation of the French defeat concluded, 'the defense of France being systematically based on fortifications and carried out according to a rigid doctrine ... learned from the First World War, their experience of positional warfare, of the high value they attached to firepower, and of their underestimation of movement.' The fate of France was sealed; French, British, and Belgian armies totaling 1.7 million men had walked into a trap.

### Battlefield Tour

Sedan occupies a critical location along the Meuse River and proximity to Belgian Ardennes Forest. As such, it figured prominently in three modern wars: Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, the First World War in 1914 and again in 1918, and the Second World War in 1940. The battlefield tour has been arranged to offer an opportunity to understand the battlefields of all three wars with emphasis, of course, on the actions of 1940.

The Franco-Prussian War focused mainly on sites to the north of Sedan; the 1940 site's emphasis is south of the city and river. A major east-west Autoroute traverses the 1940 battlefield and little remains to mark the German victory. No museums or monuments exist – only French and German cemeteries with headstones that line the crest and southern slopes of Marfée Heights. Numerous concrete bunkers remain at Château Bellevue and along the D6 highway between Wadelincourt and Pont-Maugis. In 1940, the enemy attacked out of the wooded hills from the north and focused their forces upon a narrow '*schwerpunkt*' 'heavy point,' Guderian's term for the point of main effort in the five kilometers between Donchéry and Wadelincourt.

Starting our tour in the Belgian city of Bouillon helps to understand Guderian's attack and later logistical problems exiting the Ardennes.

The scenic city of **Bouillon** is dominated by its citadel built in 1050 and once owned by the First Crusade's Godfrey de Bouillon. German planners considered Bouillon to be the major obstacle to the advance upon Sedan. The river formed a tight bend around a tall rock projection topped by the citadel.



Figure 2. Château Bouillon on the banks of the Semois River  
©French Battlefields

3 André Corap was blamed for the defeat at the Meuse — some thought unfairly a scapegoat for wavering politicians — and retired into the reserves in July 1940. Corap never served again and died in 1953, aged 75.

4 Henri Giraud was taken to a high-security PoW prison in Königstein Castle near Dresden. Almost two years later, Giraud used a prison-made rope to lower himself down the cliff of the mountain fortress and escaped to Vichy, France. Giraud became noted for his anti-German statements. Members of his family were arrested, but he surreptitiously worked with the Allies finally escaping to North Africa where he co-operated in Mediterranean operations. Postwar he was elected to the French Constituent Assembly. He died in 1949, aged 70.

Disrupted by the 1st Panzer Division at Neufchâteau, Belgium on 10 May, the French 5th Cavalry Division rushed to re-establish a defensive line behind the Semois. The I Battalion mounted a probing attack against the two Semois bridges in Bouillon and struck the confused retreat of enemy cavalry. By 18:30 3rd Company (Hauptmann Johann-Matthias Graf von der Schulenburg) found only the southern bridge intact before it too detonated.

The determination of the German attack was not lost upon the French defenders. They overestimated the attack's strength and at 21:30 evacuated the city. However, it took most of the day for German engineers to build a military bridge across the river.

Bouillon stands in a loop of the Semois River 16 km northeast of Sedan. Approach the city from the north on highway N828. Exit onto Rue de la Belle Etoile and proceed to Rue de la Bichetour. Turn left and continue to the Belvédère. (49.800328, 5.065231)



Figure 3. General Guderian in Bouillon Photo: 242-GAP-4-B-8 NARA

### **Belvédère de Bouillon**

Open 24 hours; no admission free.

The metal frame observation watchtower is 31 meters high (100 feet) and offers impressive 360-degree panoramic views of the city, the broad curve of the Semois river, and the citadelle. The distant view includes the forested roadways used by the Panzer Korps in its drive toward Sedan. The top is achieved by climbing 161 steps.

### **Hotel Panorama**

Au-dessus de la Ville 25, Bouillon  
6830 Belgium

The Hotel Panorama stands on the hillside above Bouillon, which has been modernized since 1940 but the location offers views of the city. The hotel also bears the story of the near early demise of General Guderian, who used the hotel as his headquarters. On the afternoon of 12 May, British bombers raided the city hitting a German engineering convoy laden with explosives traveling the roadway in front of the hotel. The detonation shook the hotel dislodging a large boar's-head decoration from the wall of Guderian's office. The head nearly struck the German general as it fell. (49.794696, 5.072260)

Leave the city from the south bank of the river toward Sugny (N810) and follow for 12 km to junction with highway D6 crossing the border into France. The two-lane, curving road, with steep drops along the shoulders displays the risk of delay taken by German armored units to potential attack inflicted by well-placed defenders. Turn left (D6, south) and continue 3.5 km to Maison Forte de Saint-Menges parking area on the right. (49.765193, 4.943135)

Elements of the 1st Panzer Brigade (Oberst Karl Keltsch) encountered the Saint Menges blockhouse around 10:00 on 12 May. A large demolition crater blocked the nearby road junction. Facing the advancing enemy, Lieutenant Boulenger and four troops of the 10th Antitank Battalion, 78th Regiment

of Artillery fired at the first German tanks to appear at the outskirts of the forest. All five men were killed defending their position.



Figure 4. Maison Forte de Saint Menges under attack. NARA Figure 5. Maison Forte de Saint Menges today

**Maison Forte de Saint-Menges** is an example of the fortified houses that were constructed or occupied shortly before the outbreak of hostilities. Typically, the troops lived in the upper story, which was built upon a bunker sited to block the road exiting the Ardennes toward Sedan. The structure clearly shows the brick upper floor with a blasted hole on the south side sitting upon the reinforced concrete bunker below. The bunker presents multiple gun embrasures for all-around defense. Several additional Maison Forte locations are indicated on the Sedan approach map.

Continue south on highway D6 for 4.6 km until it merges with highway D5 and follow toward Sedan. After 8 km enter a large roundabout; take the third exit onto Rue de la Rochefoucauld. After 10 m, turn right and proceed to the Citadelle de Sedan parking area on the left. (Parking area: 49.703076, 4.950082)

Sedan is a provincial town with numerous old abandoned houses. Modern homes are up the surrounding hillsides. The advantage is that it is much quicker to navigate and smaller geographically than one might expect. It lies along the Meuse River providing easy access to various sights having to do with the battle of 1940.

### Château Fort de Sedan

Cour du castle

08200 – Sedan

Tel: +33 (0) 3 24 29 98 80

Web: <https://www.chateau-fort-sedan.fr/>

Hours vary by season and day, so it is best to consult the Office of Tourisme. Fee. Not handicap accessible. Guided tours available

Built in approximately 1424, the **Château Fort de Sedan** is the largest feudal castle in Europe. Due to its strategic position on the eastern border of France, it was frequently extended, reinforced, and modernized by the powerful dukes of Bouillon. Sedan did not come permanently under the rule of France until 1642. By 1870, the structure had lost its military value other than as a storage depot. The château was used in the First World War by the Germans as a prison and noted as a place of execution for



Figure 6. Château Fort de Sedan ©French Battlefields

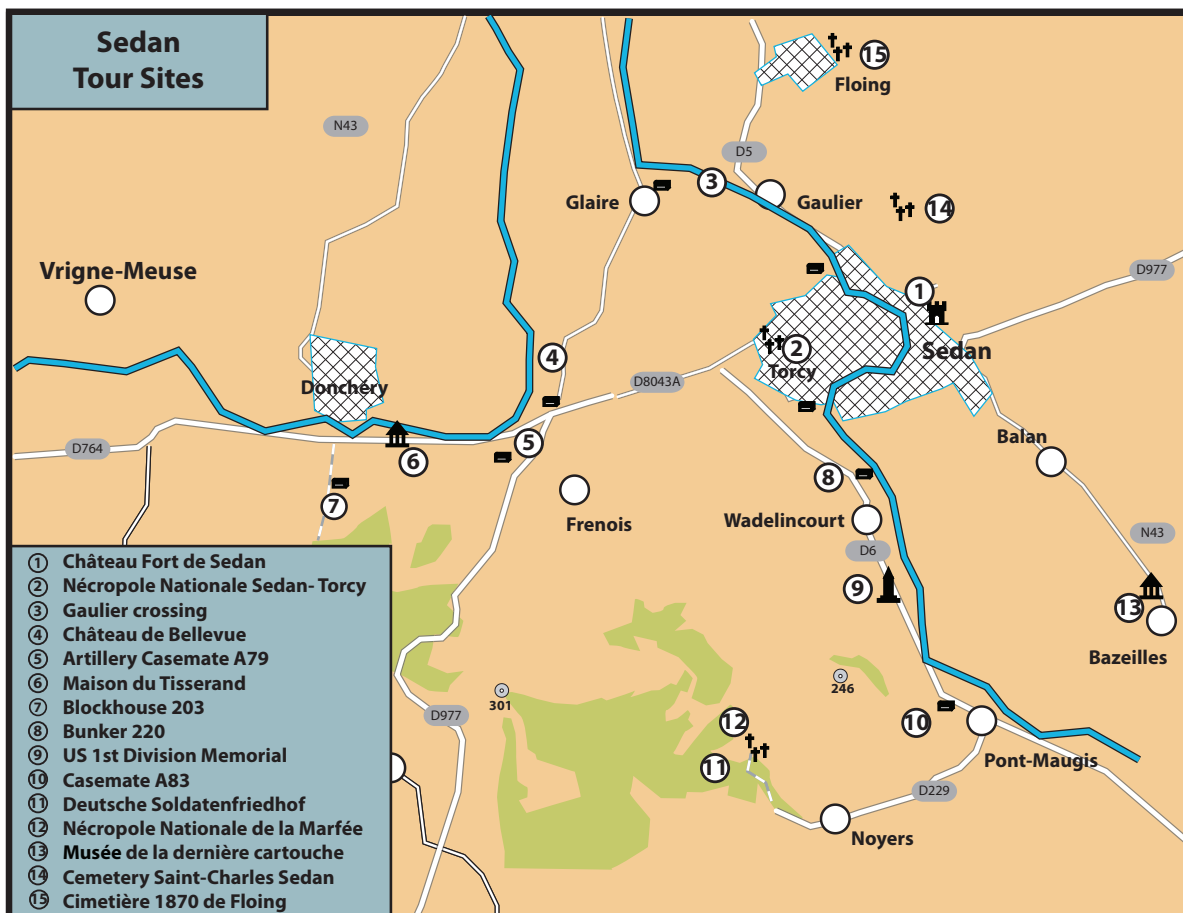
suspected spies.

It is also a noted location for a critical meeting during the Second World War between Supreme Allied Commander Dwight Eisenhower and his staff. The various unit commanders were brought together to consider the allied reaction to the German Ardennes Offensive of December 1944. During the meeting, General George Patton, commander US Third Army, made the boastful claim to be able to pull three divisions from a line facing the enemy, and transverse 160 km (100 miles) to relieve the surrounded US 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne in three days. Although Eisenhower was sceptical, Patton and his men did just that.

A self-guided tour with audio headsets presents the citadel's history in three languages. An eleven-meter Panorama de Sedan by Louis Braun depicts the battle. The building has numerous stairs – some stone, others not – but many are not suitable for those who have difficulty with uneven stairsteps. From the citadel's walls, one can look over the old quarter of Sedan with its many period houses.

Return to highway D5 heading north. After 600 m, turn left onto Rue Cadeau and cross the Pont Neuf over the Meuse River (becomes Bd Chanzy). Turn right onto Rue Vesseron Lejay and continue to the cemetery entrance. (49.70355, 4.92714)

**Nécropole Nationale Sedan- Torcy** holds 844 wars graves from the First World War and seven from the Second World War. The unusual shape of some grave stones reflect the Algerian origin of the soldiers buried beneath. A single memorial stone remembers fourteen British PoWs who died in 1918 and whose individual graves are untraceable. Commonwealth grave stones identify the location of British Commonwealth burials; thirty-four from the first war and six from the second.



From the cemetery entrance, continue north 1.4 km (now Rue de Glaire, becomes Rue de Sedan, then Rue du Marechal Foch) to turn right on Pl de la Mairie until the pavement ends. Continue to the river's edge on foot approximately 350 m. (49.712963, 4.919163)

The North Branch of the Canal de l'Est, which cuts across a loop in the Meuse, joins the river at this point. Across the river is the Sedan suburb of Gaulier. In 1914 at the onset of the First World War, the German Fourth Army crossed the Meuse at Gaulier. Despite intricate French plans for defensive works providing overlapping fire, not a single bunker was planned at the most dangerous point, the northern-most bend in the Meuse River. This weakly defended sector was chosen by the Germans as the first crossing site.

German reconnaissance identified a 1.5-kilometer gap across a wide meadow between bunker 305, along the canal at Glaire, and bunker 211, which covered the Pont Neuf in Torcy. The two gun emplacements were defended by three hundred men of the 147th Fortress Infantry Regiment and one company of the 295th Infantry Regiment. Rifle Regiment 1, 1st Panzer Division was assigned the lead in forging across the Meuse. Guderian crossed in the first boat of the second wave, regimental commander Oberstleutnant Hermann Balck greeted him with the words, 'Joy riding in canoes on the Meuse is forbidden' – the same words Guderian had used during an earlier river crossing exercise. The rifle regiment continued through Glaire, took bunker 103 as afore mentioned, and advanced to the Donchéry-Sedan Road intersection, where the large roundabout now lies.

Despite approaching nightfall and the exhaustion of his Rifle Regiment 1, Balck ordered the attack upon Hill 301 to continue. Balck personally led his II Battalion to take the strongpoint. By midnight, Balck's regiment had progressed eight kilometers through three fortification lines.

Also by midnight of 13 May, engineers were constructing a pontoon bridge at Gaulier so that heavy vehicles could cross the river to strengthen and expand the bridgehead. The division's tanks were still in the Ardennes traffic, and the first armored vehicles did not cross until 07:20 the next day.

Very little remains to show the effects of the attack or defense. The river banks are straight and approximately three meters above the water level. The area's current appearance is one of quiet abandonment. The German pontoon bridge, over which three panzer divisions crossed, was built from the yard of the now Espérance Textile Works 150 meters east of the canal-river junction at Gaulier, at almost the exact same spot where the Germans had built one on 26 August 1914.

Reverse direction and turn left on rue de maréchal Foch (becomes rue de Sedan). In approximately 500 meters, turn left onto an unpaved street (chemin de Prairie) and pass the grassy, flat flood plain. Continue as far as possible before parking and proceed to an unattractive track along the Meuse riverbank. Walk carefully. (49.71166, 4.92378)



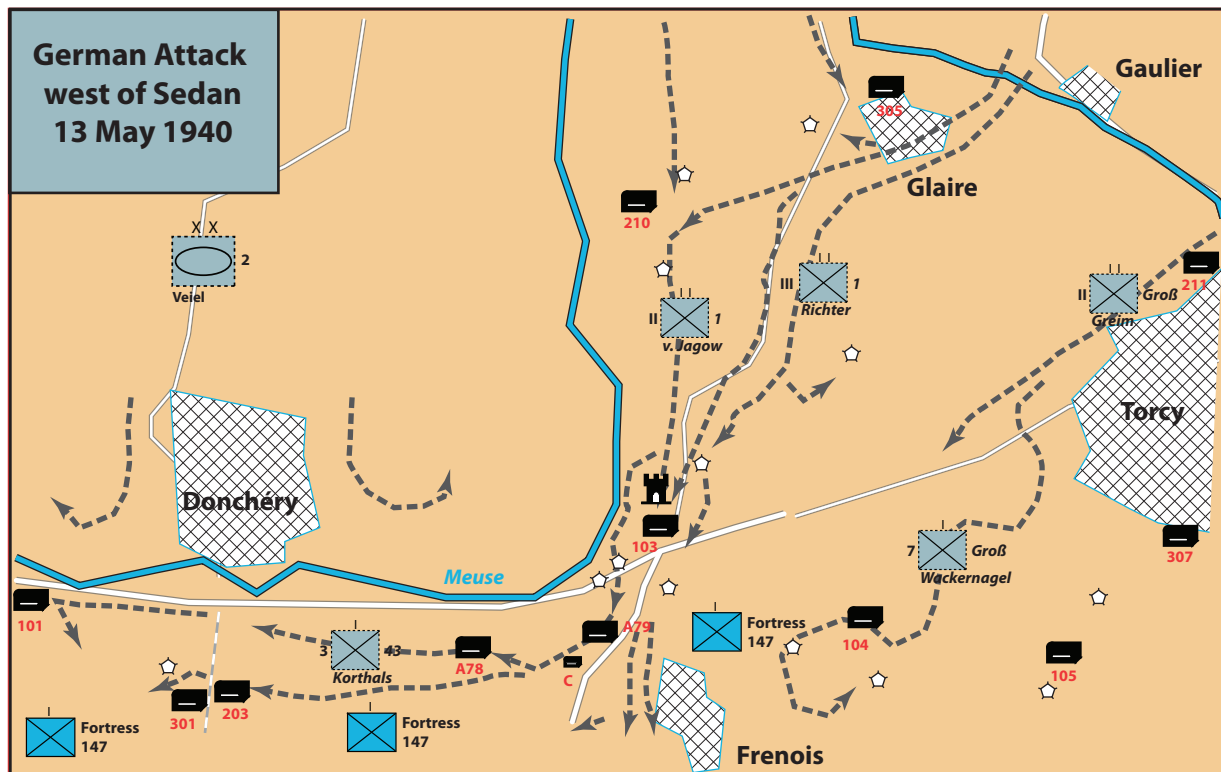
Figure 7. First Crossing of the Meuse ©French Battlefields

Heavy fire from bunker 211 to the east and from a well-sited machine-gun bunker defeated all attempts by the *Grossdeutschland* Regiment to cross the river. Both positions were eliminated by fire from an 88-mm Flak gun. At 16:00 on 13 May, under cover of smoke shells, the #7 Company (Oberleutnant Eberhard Wackernagel<sup>5</sup>), II Battalion, was the first unit to cross the river and quickly eliminated field fortifications at Pont Neuf and Sedan-Torcy National Cemetery. The company continued southwest across the flood plain, over the

<sup>5</sup> Eberhard Wackernagel spent the war in the Grossdeutschland Division until relieved for ill health in April 1945. He died in 2003 aged 86.



D106 roadway, and the railway tracks, advancing against the reduced French 295th Infantry Regiment. I and II Battalions quickly followed, engaging the French defenders in house-to-house fighting in Torcy and advancing toward Frénois. At approximately 20:00, the action culminated in a hand-to-hand battle for em-



placements on the slopes of Hill 247. The German bridgehead was now almost 3 kilometers deep.

Return to the center of Glaire and turn left onto highway D29 (route de Bellevue) and follow 2 km to pass the chateau on the left. (49.695809, 4.902401)

### Château de Bellevue

Route De Bellevue

08200 Glaire-et-Villette, France,

Behind a tall hedge and among trees on a curve to the left stands the **Château de Bellevue**. With its boarded windows, the structure retains none of its original bourgeois style. Forlorn and appearing abandoned, the building looks down upon the Autoroute (A203). As if in a final insult, a very large Second World War bunker occupies a corner of the château grounds. The building is privately owned and has recently become a Bed & Breakfast.



Figure 8. Château de Bellevue ©French Battlefields

**Bunker 103** is in the château's park, south of Château Bellevue and 200 meters north of the Donchéry-Sedan Road roundabout (intersection of D764, D29, and D977). Invisible through the private park's vegetation, from the roadway it appears as a dark brooding hulk. Its fields of fire were to the east, covering the Donchéry-Torcy Road with its 75-mm guns, and – more devastatingly – to the west, into the flank of

the advancing 2nd Panzer Division. Along with the artillery located in a casemate southwest of the large roundabout, its fire prevented the 2nd Panzer Division's inflatable boats from crossing the river. Bunker 103 was attacked by advanced units of Rifle Regiment 1. The occupants surrendered only after intense hand-to-hand fighting.

Continue on Rue de Bellevue into the large roundabout and turn right onto highway D764. Continue 280 m to the stone bridge.

**Artillery Casemate A79** at Frénois was part of Maginot Line Secteur Fortifié de Montmédy. Seventy men of Assault Engineer Battalion 43 (Oberleutnant Günther Korthals) crossed the Donchéry Road at 18:30 to attack Artillery casemate A79. The casemate's significant position controlled crossings of the river from the flat terrain around Donchéry. Using the terrain for advancement and the bunkers' blindspots to creep up upon them with flamethrowers and satchel charges, Korthals destroyed position after position.

Although temporarily stunned by a panzer hit upon one gun port of casemate A79, commander Lieutenant Nonat ordered his troops to continue fire with the remaining gun. Threatened with encirclement by the assault team, the French artillerymen evacuated the bunker. Panzer fire and the approach of Korthal's men similarly forced out troops manning Blockhouse C located farther up the slope. Korthals did not lose a man in the assault.

Casemate A79 located up the hillside (at 49.691651, 4.898577) is best viewed from this highway location. The structure displays little damage from viewpoints along the roadway. In fact, close inspection of the gun embrasures show the effect of German shells and machine gun fire. Blockhouse C also remains but it is not visible from any roadway and entering fields is not encouraged without owner's permission. Views over the river display the strategic position of the casemate as it covered the flat open terrain on the north bank approaches to the river.

**Artillery Casemate 78** stands up the gradual hillside approximately 600 meters farther west. Unfortunately, the structure is on private land and there is not a convenient stopping point along the highway. (49.690754, 4.889022)



Figure 9. Artillery Casemate A79 ©French Battlefields



Figure 10. Artillery Casemate A78 ©French Battlefields

Continue west toward Donchéry. After 1.6 km turn left on Rue de Moscou. The blockhouse 203 is 0.4 km ahead on the left. (49.688907, 4.874401)

Highway D764 passes the **Maison du Tisserand** (House of the Weaver), a small museum that recalls events of 2 September 1870. After the Franco-Prussian War's Battle of Sedan, Surrender negotiations proceeded at the Chateau de Bellevue. Fearful that pleas from French king Napoleon III might sway the Prussian King William I, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck distracted Napoleon in this abandoned cottage. Finding the interior destroyed, they took two chairs and sat in front of the building discussing events. At 08:00, Prussian General Helmuth von Moltke joined the two men and dictated the terms of unconditional surrender. Napoleon agreed to abdicate and he spent the rest of his life in exile never to return to France.

(49.691296, 4.881910)

Positioned along the roadway overlooking Donchéry from the south, **Blockhouse 203** held antitank cannon as part of the Secteur Fortifié de Montmédy. Its proximity to the road and lack of fencing allow easy access and inspection.

Reverse direction and return to highway D764 heading east. Follow for 2.5 km through the large traffic circle and under the autoroute where the roadway becomes D8043A. Follow for 2.6 km until highway D6 on the right, then turn sharply left onto highway D6E and stop almost immediately at bunker 220 on the right. (49.68894, 4.93907)



Figure 11. Maison du Tisserand ©French Battlefields

Two rifle regiments of the 10th Panzer Division crossed the Meuse in the sector left of the 1st Panzer Division. Rifle Regiment 86 moved across open fields west of Balan against Wadelincourt and Rifle Regiment 69 would cross the Meuse at Pont-Maugis. The defenders in the sector had been spared from the Luftwaffe bombing and strafing. French artillery fire destroyed most of Regiment 69's rubber boats before they hit the water eliminating the unit from the battle.

Under fire from defensive positions, Regiment 86 struggled to move its overloaded boats across the open, swampy fields to the river's edge. A six-man assault team (Feldwebel Walter Rubarth<sup>6</sup>) of the Panzer Engineering Battalion 49 and six infantrymen reached the opposite shore south of the destroyed Philippoteaux Bridge and attacked a series of earthen bunkers using handgrenades and satchel charges. Rubarth opened a breach of about 300 meters. After crossing the roadway, the small assault team continued elimination bunkers to the south near Wadelincourt.

An assault wave by #2 Kompanie, (Leutnant Heinrich Hanbauer<sup>7</sup>) Rifle Regiment 86 crossed near the destroyed avenue Philippoteaux (D764) Bridge and silenced several log based machine gun position in the area. They then attacked **bunker 220** from behind.

The square block of reinforced concrete appears in remarkably good condition on the side facing the roadway. The flat fields between the rail line and the river provided excellent fields of fire for the bunker's 25-mm antitank gun and heavy machine guns. The river-facing side, however, shows the blast hole and tangled iron bars created by the force of the German assault – a demonstration of the 88-mm gun's bunker-busting ability. A flower-covered granite plaque facing the road honors ten members of the 2nd Battalion, 147th Fortress Infantry Regiment and commemorates 'the defenders of Bloc 220, command-

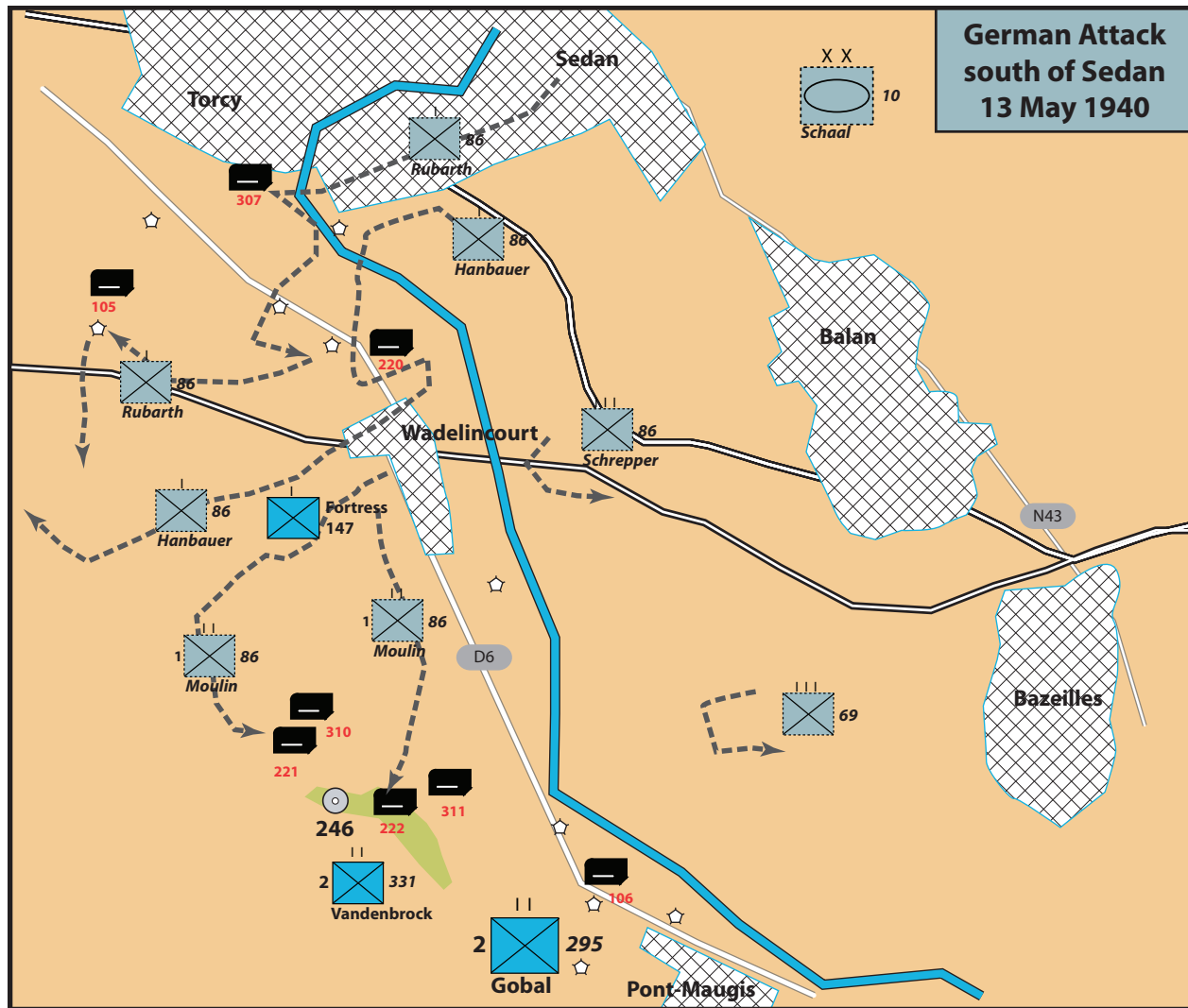


Figure 12. Bunker 220 ©French Battlefields

<sup>6</sup> Walter Rubarth was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for heroism. He died on the Eastern Front in October 1941, aged 28.

<sup>7</sup> Heinrich Hanbauer was killed in 1941, aged 24 and is buried in the German War Cemetery Schatkowo, Belarus.

ed by sous-lieutenant P. Leret, who were captured and shot by the Germans.’ German records claim the PoW attempted an escape, making them legal targets.



Reverse direction and recross the railroad tracks and continue south on Grande Rue (D6). Continue through Wadelincourt to the First World War US 1st Division Memorial along the road on the right. (49.67733, 4.94525)

With the elimination of bunker 220, I Battalion was able to cross the river and storm Hill 246, located directly behind the American memorial around 21:00, thereby accomplishing the division's main objective.

During the First World War the American Meuse-Argonne Offensive targeted the German railroad transportation network at Sedan. Loss of this choke point would separate the German armies in the north from those in the south and would make supply or withdrawal of German forces in Flanders nearly impossible. Initiated on 26 September 1918, by 7 November, the division liberated Noyers-Pont-Maugis and occupied the heights above the river and threatened Sedan and the ultimate objective of cutting the German rail lines around that city. The unit suffered 80 dead and 503 wounded during the final battle of the war. The fighting ended with the Armistice of 11 November.



Figure 13. US 1st Division Memorial in Wadelincourt

and Villemonty [Located on either side of Mouzon – up river from Sedan]. The division during the night of 6-7 November continued this attack and occupied the heights overlooking Sedan from St Aignan [south of Donchéry] to this point.

Continue to the entrance to Pont-Maugis. (49.67158, 4.94937)



Figure 14. Artillery Casemate A83 ©French Battlefields

Numerous French concrete bunkers still guard the Meuse River crossings as they did in 1940. Pont-Maugis marks the eastern limit of the German zone of attack. **Casemate A83** stands at the western limit of Pont-Maugis opposite a bend in the river allowed covering fire along the river to the north, northeast, and northwest. Bunker 12 is 0.2 kilometer ahead on the left, between the road and the river, and several more bunkers are visible to the east although generally obscured by vegetation. A particularly evident blockhouse stands along highway D6 shoulder 1.5 kilometers east of Pont-Maugis. (49.663322, 4.972950) Rifle Regiment 69 failed in its efforts to cross the river

against these positions. The marshy and open ground on the opposite shore slowed their advance and exposed them to the bunker's fire and accurate French artillery.

In Pont-Maugis, turn left toward Noyers (D229a). In Noyers, follow the signs to the Chaumont / Deutsche Soldatenfriedhof 1939 – 1945 up the 12% grade (49.66183, 4.92894)

Marfée Heights dominated the Sedan sector and the Meuse River. Gun positions on its steeply sloped shoulders offered excellent opportunities for gun emplacements – a situation not lost to French military planners. The construction of numerous bunkers appeared on German reconnaissance photographs, but further analysis showed that they were merely incomplete shells.

Traveling through Noyers, signs provide direc-



Figure 15. Deutsche Soldatenfriedhof Noyers-Pont-Maugis ©French Battlefields

tion to the military cemeteries that are on Marfée Heights, which at 340 meters dominate the Meuse valley. The access road's left fork approaches the **Deutsche Soldatenfriedhof Noyers-Pont-Maugis**. The massive cemetery holds 14,055 dead from the First World War with 4659 unidentified, many from the August 1914 invasion and later engagements in Champaign, all under thick stone crosses many bearing three names. Second World War dead total 12,785, most killed during 1940. The various sectors are identified by the different crosses.

Reverse direction and after 500 m turn left on Rte de la Marfee. Continue 750 m to the Nécropole Nationale de la Marfée. (49.66488, 4.92699)

Down the right fork is the **Nécropole Nationale de la Marfée**, holding the dead from World War One, including 1,200 bodies in a mass grave. Near the cemetery, an informal overlook presents French and German information boards describing the major military actions that occurred near Sedan in 1870, 1914,



Figure 16. Nécropole Nationale de la Marfée ©French Battlefields



Figure 17. Meuse overlook from Marfee heights ©French Battlefields

and 1940. These heights, whose slopes were occupied in 1870 by German IV Corps artillery, reward the steep, twelve percent grade drive with an overview of the Sedan battlefield including Sedan, its citadel, and the wooded hills north of the city. From the overlook, one obtains a view of a modern battlefield that is seldom possible. Tables of orientation provide a wonderful map of the entire area identifying the woods, indicate the location of monuments, and describe events in the Franco-Prussian War, WWI, WWII, in French and in German. The entire terrain is spread before one's eyes all the way to the wooded slopes of the Belgian Ardennes.

#### Other Sites of Interest:

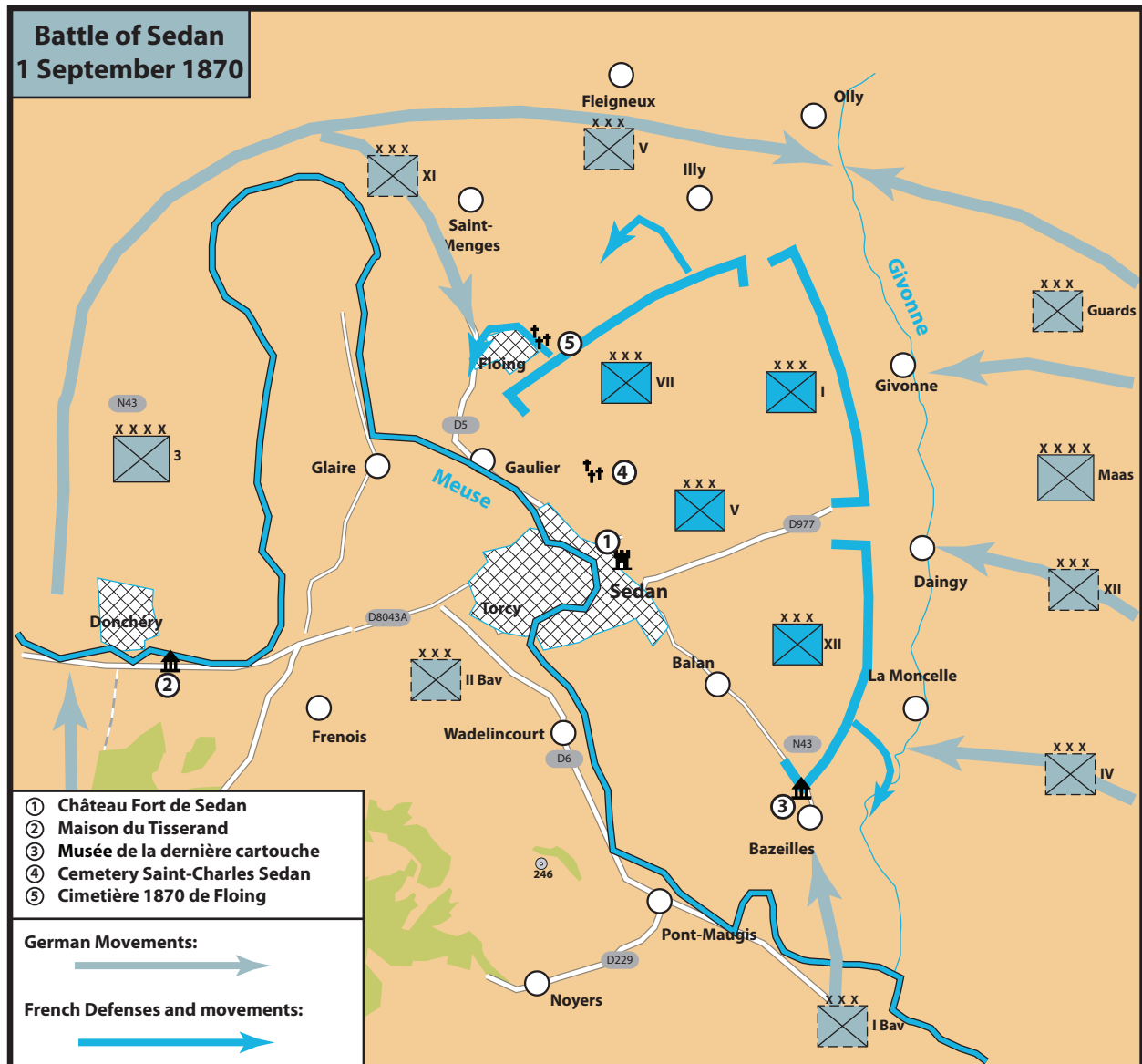
### Franco-Prussia War Battle of Sedan 1 September 1870

After the French Army defeat at Metz, the only remaining force available to Napoleon III for halting the Prussian invasion of his country was the Army of Châlons, commanded by maréchal Patrice MacMahon. Three corps of the Prussian Fourth Army commanded by Crown Prince Friedrich Augustus of Saxony and the Prussian Third Army moved on different axes in pursuit of MacMahon.

#### Battle

I Bavarian Corps moved north in the early morning of 1 September, crossing the swampy lowlands south of Bazeilles at 04:30. While parts of three French corps fought ferociously to hold Bazeilles, maréchal MacMahon rushed to the scene of the action and was seriously wounded by a shell fragment. Général Auguste Ducrot was given command, and he ordered a vast retreat into the Bois de la Garenne north of Sedan.

Shortly thereafter général Emmanuel de Wimpffen, appeared with a letter from French Minister of War Count Palikao, appointing him commander should MacMahon fall. Wimpffen countermanded Ducrot's retreat order; the two conflicting directives within such a short period of time threw the French Army into confusion.



During the previous night, the German XI Corps had moved north on the left bank of the Meuse, cutting French escape routes to the west. V Corps continued marching farther to the north to complete the encirclement. As was happening in the east, artillery positions were being established along the crest of the Floing-Illy ravine.

The French Army of Châlons was encircled, the heights around the city ringed with over 400 German guns. After the sharp infantry engagement at Bazeilles, the artillery put the issue to rest. A circle of thunder surrounded the French, their camps becoming craters. The slaughter was occurring everywhere and all at once. The French had no weapons with the range to answer.

A final effort to escape the trap was led by de Wimpffen against the Bavarians at Balan. After a rapid but short advance, artillery fire proved too dense for further French progress. The troops sought shelter in

Sedan's centuries old citadel. At 14:15, a white flag appeared briefly above the fortress' walls. Less than two hours later it reappeared at the order of the emperor, who was anxious to stop the bloodletting. Emissaries brought a personal note from Napoleon to King Wilhelm, offering his surrender and regretting his inability to die at the head of his army.

Early the next morning, an exhausted, ill, and war-weary Napoleon III took leave of his soldiers and left Sedan by way of Donchéry. He was met by Bismarck near Frénois, and there, in a famous scene, the politically naive emperor and the conniving chancellor sat upon a log bench outside a weaver's cottage to discuss the events of the past months. Bismarck was purposely delaying Napoleon from a meeting with King Wilhelm until the surrender was completed. At the Château de Bellevue, Wimpffen signed the surrender that had been dictated by Moltke. Napoleon had his meeting with Wilhelm and then left for exile at Schloss Wilhelmshöhe in Prussia the next morning in a driving rain, never to see his army or his country again.

### Battlefield Tour

The sites from the Franco-Prussian War tour are best visited after completing the 1940 Battle of Sedan sites. Unfortunately, cemeteries offer some of the few remnants of great battles and there are several from this massive and deadly battle.

From the intersection of highways D229 and D6 in Pont-Maugis, proceed east on highway D6 for 2.5 km. Turn left onto highway D129, cross the Meuse River and continue into Bazeilles. After 2.4 km turn left into Pl de l'Infanterie de Marine. (49.675541, 4.977740)

The town, only 5 km southeast of Sedan, was defended by French 12th Corps and a detachment of French marines who had taken up positions inside the town's stone houses. A ferocious fight erupted, with the Bavarians being fired upon from every angle by French infantry, marines, and civilians. Both sides torched houses to flush out the enemy and exploding Bavarian artillery shells added to the confusion.

In the center of Bazeilles a yellow stone obelisk in place de **l'Infanterie de Marine** commemorates the naval unit's sacrifice as part of général Lebrun's 12th Corps d'Armée. The opposite side lists the 27 names of civilian victims of the 31 August to 1 September 1870 fighting. Embedded in the stone pavement is the anchor emblem of the marines.

Exit the Pl de l'Infanterie de Marine on Rue Gambetta to the ossuary entrance in 450 m. If the gate is locked, inquire in the neighboring house. (49.679093, 4.975736)

The **French/German Ossuary** is down Av de la Dernière Cartouche, a tree-lined, 300-meter path west of the village center. The opening is easy to miss, closely situated between two houses, but identified by its iron gate, and simple 'Ossuaire 1870' sign on the stone wall. Pass through the communal cemetery to the structure at the rear. Approximately three thousand French and Bavarian dead from the fighting in Bazeilles and Balan were interred below the brick and yellow stone structure.

Continue 300 m on Rue Gambetta to the avenue de la Derrière Cartouche (D8043A). (49.6817780, 4.975303)

As the Germans pressed forward in the fight for Bazeilles, approximately thirty officers and French marines led by commandant Arsène Lambert defended an inn on the outskirts of Bazeilles, whose position blocked passage from Bazeilles toward Sedan. Completely encircled by elements of the 15th Bavarian Regiment, the men fought for four hours until their ammunition was exhausted, and the survivors were forced to surrender. The Bavarians, enraged at the delay and the civilian support given to the defenders, took vengeance on the town by burning most of its houses and executing forty civilians who they claimed participated in the defense.



## Musée de la maison de la dernière cartouche

Bazeilles-Ardennes

08140 France

Tel: +33 (0)3.24.27.15.86

Website: <http://www.maisondeladerniere-cartouche.com>

Open 1 April to 30 September from 13:30 to 19:00; 1 October to 31 March from 13:30 to 17:00 (Closed Mondays). Fee. If the door is locked, ring the bell for the proprietor to come from the adjacent residence.

The inn has remained as **Musée de la maison de la dernière cartouche** (The Museum of the House of the Last Cartridge) for over one hundred years. The door, hallway, ceilings, and window frames retain bullet holes from the fight. An unexploded canister is still visible in the facade to the left of the upper floor windows. The first floor is dedicated to commandant Lambert and displays describe the contribution of the French Navy in the war. Pictures of French generals, swords, emblems, and shells are in glass cases for preservation. The flags in glass frames on the walls were from the battlefield. Unfortunately, nothing is labeled in English, and many items are not that well labeled in French either, but the three rooms are little changed since 1870.



Figure 18. Musée de la maison de la dernière cartouche ©French Battlefields

In the center of Floing, from the rue Charles de Gaulle (D5), turn toward the Mairie (D205). Turn toward the church (Grandrue), then turn left in front of the church. Go around the church by making a right turn up a short but very steep Rue de l'Harmonie. At the 'T' intersection, make another right (rue des Braves Gens) and follow to 43 Rue des Braves Gens. (49.719175, 4.9305552)

Below the road and in precarious condition is the **Cimetière 1870 de Floing** where sixteen regimental mass graves are marked by simple tombstones and metal crosses. The listing of units reads like a death notice of mounted troops, including regiments of Cuirassiers au Cheval, Lanciers, and Hussars. In less than two hours on the afternoon of 1 September 1870, mindless cavalry charges saw more than a thousand struck down by the intense fire of enemy skirmishers. An information panel in multiple languages near the entrance describes the events.



Figure 19. Cimetière 1870 de Floing ©French Battlefields

Farther ahead is the larger **Necropolis Nationale de Floing** holding 2,237 French soldiers from the two world wars collected from municipal cemeteries in Ardenne. British and French fliers made desperate attempts to bomb the pontoon bridges crossing the Meuse. In the afternoon of 14 May, four Amiot 143 aircraft attempted a low-altitude attack. One craft carried the commander of the 34th Escadre (Bombard-

ment Wing). The plane was taken down by the intense German antiaircraft fire and the commander and two crew members were killed. All three are buried in a common grave.<sup>8</sup> Two crewmen parachuted to become PoWs. (49.717147, 4.933344)

Return to highway D5 and continue south passing through the square with the statue of général Margueritte. After 2.3 km, turn left onto Rue du Cimetière and follow to the end. (Park at the end of Rue du Cimetière: 49.710424, 4.940145)

Pass through the yellow stone gate posts to enter the **Communal Cemetery Saint-Charles Sedan** which contains war graves from all three wars. Numerous memorials are scattered along the walkways on the left including to Jewish victims, firefighters of Sedan, and an obelisk commemorating the Franco–Prussian War’s Battle of Sedan. Ahead, an impressive columned portico locates the mass grave of German soldiers killed during the capture of the city from 25 to 26 August 1914. The graves continued to expand during the war as German war casualties were brought to Sedan’s hospitals for treatment. (Monument Allemand: 49.711336, 4.942395)

An Allied grave plot is approximately halfway along the right side holding the dead from Belgium, Romania, and Russia all marked with simple stone crosses. The plot also contains the graves of fifty-one British soldiers all but one from the First World War. The single Second World War casualty is Bombardier Robert Melville, Royal Artillery died on 18 March 1945.

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<sup>8</sup> Commandant Dieudonné de Laubier, aged 42, his wife remained a widow for 55 years, now has an French airbase in Alsace named in his honor. observer Lieutenant Jean Vauzelle, and pilot Staff-Sergeant Georges Occis, aged 27.