

Battle of Stonne 15 to 17 May 1940

Stonne's position atop a ridgeline put German crossings of the Meuse at Sedan within French artillery range. Control of this small village may have decided the entire battle. On 14 May, the day after crossing the Meuse River, Guderian headed for Abbeville and the English Channel leaving his 10th Panzer Division and the Großdeutschland Infantry Regiment to guard his left flank.

The 1st Panzer Division pushed on toward Bulson and Chéméry while Großdeutschland on its left flank moved south toward Stonne. The 'B' grade French 55th Division d'Infanterie (général Henri-Jean Lafontaine¹) supported by two battalions of tanks moved against the 1st Panzer Division at 07:00. However, its regiments were sent into battle piecemeal and the 7th Tank Battalion was equipped with the lightweight FCM model 36 mounting only an obsolete 37-mm gun. The French 213 Régiment d'Infanterie

(Lieutenant Colonel Pierre Labarthe²) caught the enemy refueling near Chéhéry and quickly knocked out the first two panzers. However, the tide was quickly turned by a Sturmpanzer Battalion (Lieutenant Colonel Mahler)³ whose men threw charges between the French tanks' tracks and under their motors. German AT guns held off the French while 1st Panzer Division struck a hard blow near Connage eliminating twenty-nine of the 7th Tank Battalion's thirty-nine FCMs. German armor turned left into the flank of the 213th Regiment and it broke streaming back to the division's second line in the Bois du Mont-Dieu where général Grandsard's X Corps prepared for a counterattack against the Sedan bridgehead. The intermixing of forces convinced général Jean Flavigny, commander XXI Corps d'Armée, that he had to switch from offense to defense, despite the superiority of the French Char B1 tanks. Their thick armor plating could withstand the German 37-mm antitank gun shell. Their heavier 75-mm howitzer and 47-mm secondary gun possessed the power to penetrate German PzKpfw II and III tanks.

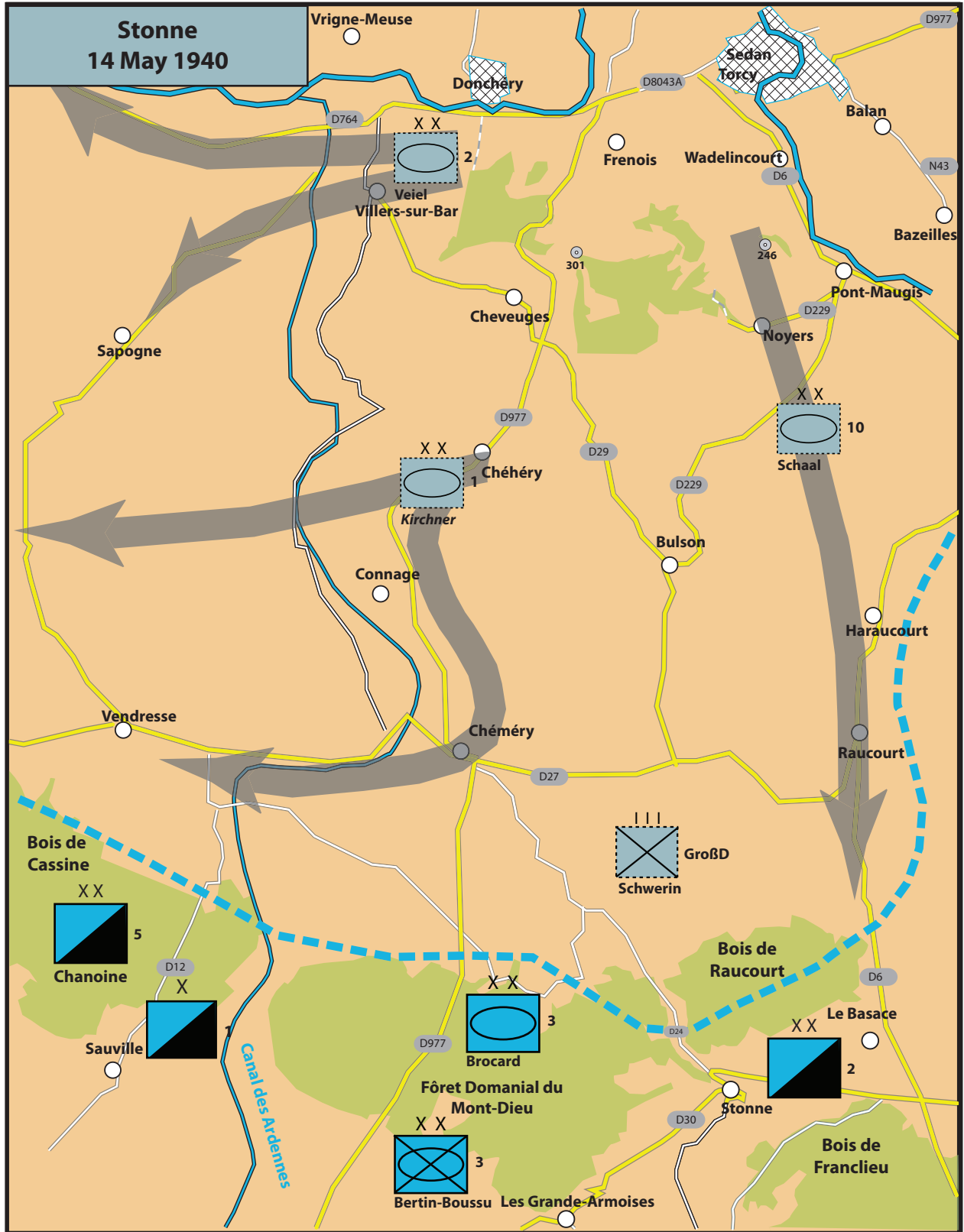
The newly formed 3rd Division Cuirassée (Armored Division) was dispatched from its training area north of Reims on 12 May. The division's progress, especially its tanks, was hampered by Luftwaffe bomb craters in the roadways, shortages of bridging equipment, and refugees and retreating military clogging the highways. The division arrived at Stonne at 06:00 on 14 May. The armored units were broken up into small detachments. The opportunity to strike a hard blow against Guderian was thrown away by bad generalship.

Objective	To capture high ground threatening bridges across the Meuse River at Sedan
Forces	
French:	3rd Division Cuirassée (général Georges Brocard) and 3rd Division d'Infanterie (général Bertin-Boussu)
German:	Großdeutschland Regiment (Lieutenant Colonel Gerhard Graf von Schwerin)
Result	After one of the fiercest tank battles of the Second World War, the German infantry held the town
Casualties	
French:	33 tanks
German:	103 killed, 442 wounded, 25 missing, and 24 tanks
Location	Stonne is 22 km south of Sedan

¹ Henri Lafontaine was removed from command that night and later abruptly retired. He died in 1966, aged 84.

² Pierre Labarthe was wounded and taken prisoner but quickly released. He served several government roles within the Vichy government. After the war he was dismissed without pension, but his rights were restored by decree in 1946.

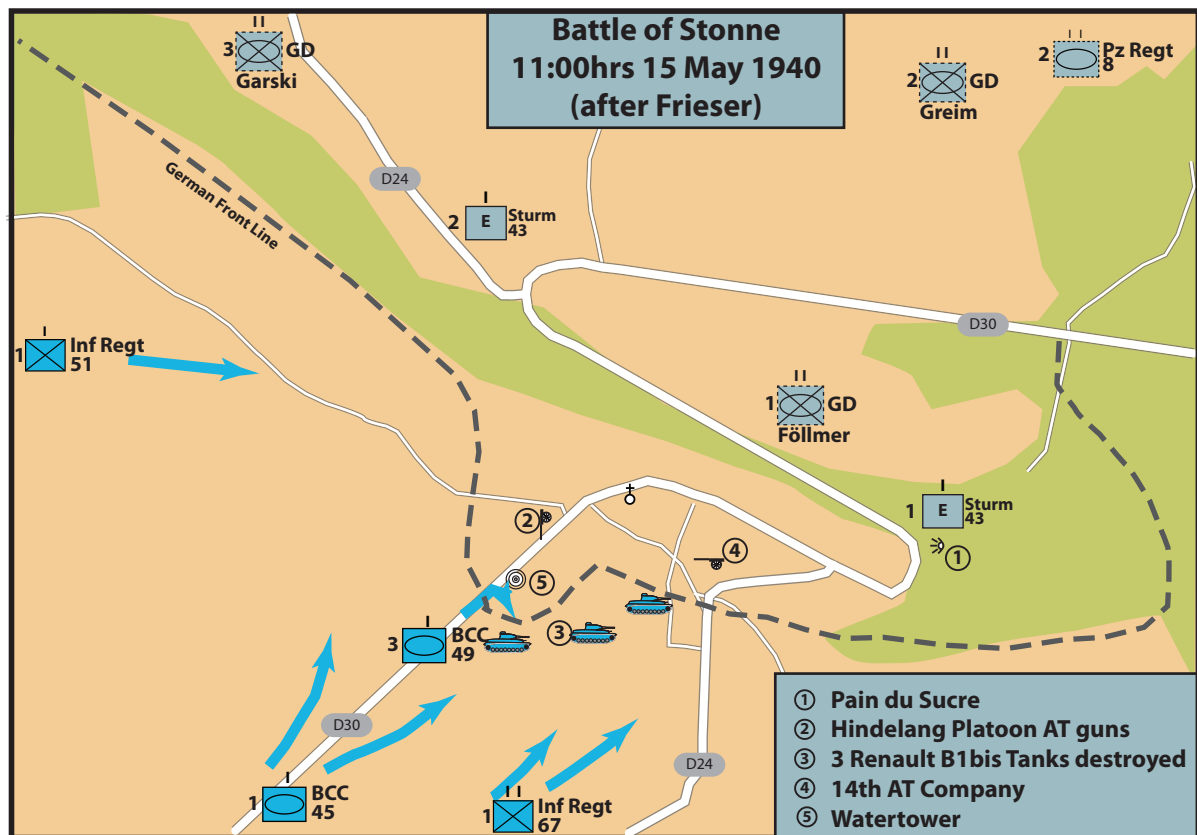
³ Mahler was killed in the action.



Battle

The battle started on 15 May when I Battalion (Hauptmann Föllmer), Großdeutschland Regiment supported by II Battalion (Oberstleutnant Haarde), Panzer Regiment 8 (Oberst Botho Elster) staged a probing attack. Maneuvering the approach road up the steep slope, two hairpin turns exposed the panzers to fire from Char B1 tanks of the 3rd Company of 49e BCC (commandant Préclair) resulting in the German loss of eight armored vehicles. This was a job for the infantry which pushed forward up the ground on both sides of the village. By 08:00 Großdeutschland infantry had cleared the village and established a defensive line around it.

The French response was confused. The entire 3rd Division Cuirassée had been ordered to occupy the village at noon, but formal orders were not issued until 11:00 for an attack at 15:00. However, the dispersed tanks had to regroup. The attack was postponed to 17:30. The German movement into the village forced général Flavigny to commit piecemeal elements of his offensive force to recapture the town.



Around 11:00, three companies of French tanks from three different battalions held Char B1s, Hotchkiss H-39s, and FCMs – and a company of infantry from the 51e RI (Lieutenant Colonel Guy) assembled for another assault. Again, the infantry was slow in pressing the attack. Stonne by this time was held by only I Battalion, Großdeutschland Regiment with nine antitank (AT) guns of the regiment's #14 Antitank Company (Leutnant Helmut Beck-Broichsitter). A duel started between three guns and three French tanks. Several tanks were knocked out but German fire slackened just as more tanks arrived forcing German infantry to move back. However, the feeling of invincibility felt by the French tankers was broken and the remaining tanks escaped to the south.

An hour later, a massive French assault retook the village, but the tanks were withdrawn to regroup for an ordered attack upon Sedan. Once again, an instance when French commanders – Flavigny this time – pulled defeat out of the hands of victory.

All through 15 May the village changed hands. French tanks fell ferociously upon Großdeutsch-

land infantry. French snipers and machine guns held the water tower dominating the street where German grenadiers ran looking for targets. The 10th Panzer Division sent I Battalion, Infantry Regiment 69 in support of Großdeutschland and they retook the village by 17:30, but troops of the French 67th RI dug in 400 meters southeast of Stonne.

Fighting continued through the next day but the result was no longer in question even though the village changed hands numerous times. A column of thirteen German tanks were destroyed by attack of two French tank companies. The French momentarily held Stonne but were subjected to a violent German artillery and aircraft bombardment. Four heavy field 150-mm guns fired; Stuka dive bombers applied their firepower against any strongpoint.

That night fresh German infantry troops finally arrived west of the Meuse River and the 16th, 24th, and 26th Infantry Divisions relieved the 10th Panzer Division and Großdeutschland Regiment and on 18 May took final control of the village.

In all, Stonne changed hands seventeen times from 15 to 17 May and saw the bitterest fighting of the campaign in the West. Thirty-three French and twenty-four German burned out tanks littered the scene. The fighting at Stonne has earned it the epithet ‘The Verdun of 1940.’

On 23 and 24 May German infantry, supported by large scale reinforcements and an unprecedented concentration of artillery, launched an all-out offensive and advanced in the direction of les Grand-Armoises. Combat continued east of Stonne for positions in Mont-Dieu until the 3e DIM and its supporting units were withdrawn during the night of 24 May. While inconclusive, the second stage of the battle proved that first line French units were a match for German infantry.

A pause in the attacks lasted from 25 May to 9 June, broken by a massive German assault supported by armor. French troops held with the support of heavy artillery bombardments. Finally, the threat of becoming surrounded from the south led to the decision to withdraw. The Germans had advanced only three kilometers in four weeks of fighting – reminiscent of the First World War.

Aftermath

During the four days from 12 to 16 May, Panzergruppe Kleist and XV Panzer Corps destroyed eight divisions of the Ninth and Twelfth Armies and opened a 130-kilometer breach in the French First Army’s front.

Général Huntziger completely misunderstood the German direction of attack, perhaps recalling the enemy actions of 1914. He pivoted his army southward to defend the Maginot Line from attack around its flank. The movement abandoned Meuse fortifications south of Sedan and opened a 30-kilometer gap in the French defenses. Guderian’s attack south against Stonne convinced French command that the intended target was Paris, not west toward the English Channel – the real target.

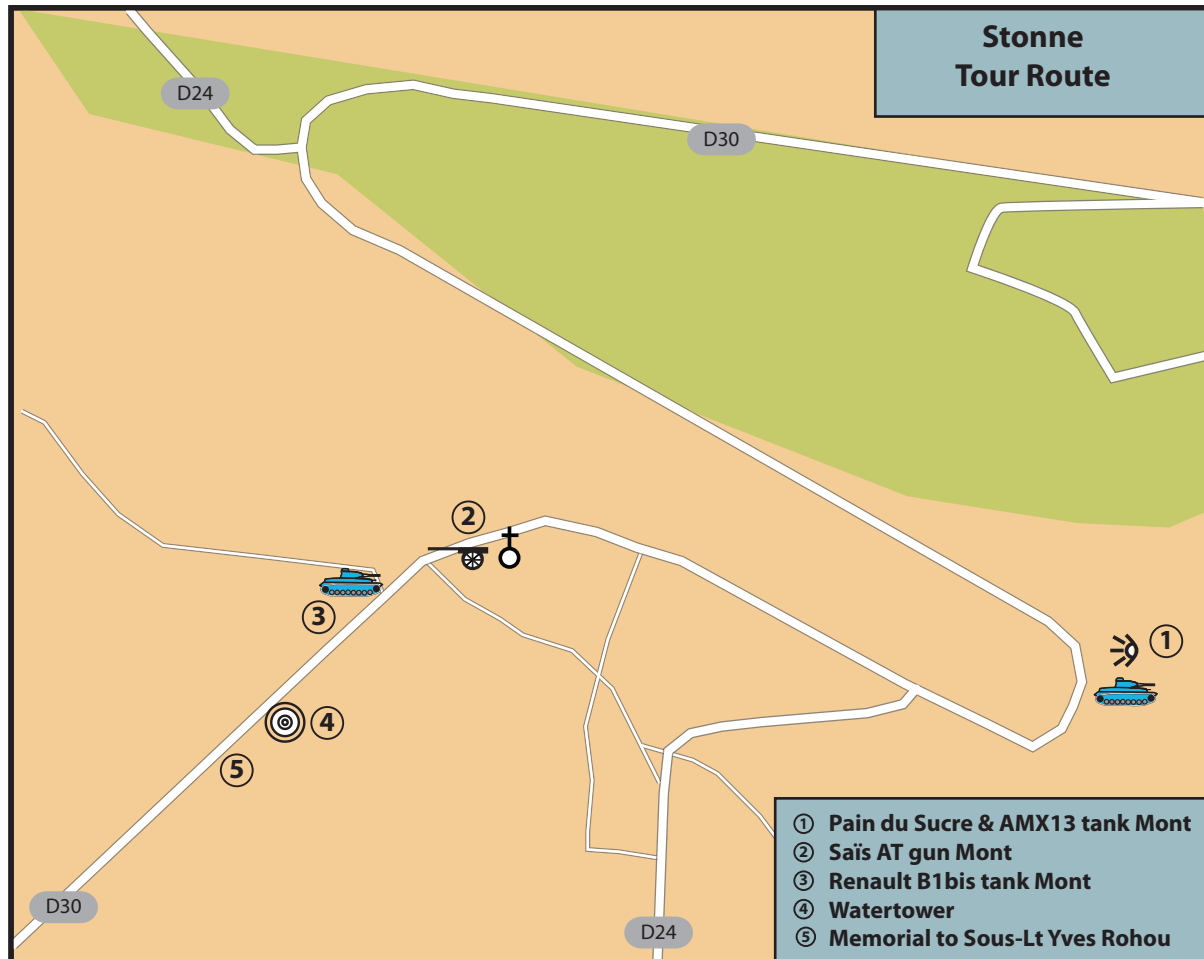
Battlefield Tour

The heavily wooded ridgeline of Mont-Dieu forms a natural fortress 15 kilometers south of Sedan. The small village held a dozen farms on the northeastern highest and steepest point on the ridge. The conical Pain de Sucre is at the eastern end of the ridgeline. The northern edge of the hillside was fortified with pillboxes.



Figure 1. German PzKpfw IV knocked out fighting on 16 May in Stonne ©NARA

The starting point for the review of Stonne battlefield is the ending of the Sedan tour. Leave Pont-Maugis southwest of highway D27 passing through sites of the German advance in May 1940 – Bulson and Chémery-Chéhéry. In the later village turn left onto highway D24. Turn right onto Highway D30 (Rue du 15 Mai 1940) and follow it southeast as it curves below the massif then climbs up the hillside toward Stonne. Stop at the small parking area at the base of the Butte de Stonne (Pain de Sucre) an ancient tumulus. (49.549444, 4.932031)



The back of the small parking area presents a **French AMX 13 tank**, a post Second World War vintage light armored vehicle which was largely exported by France during the Cold War. This model is a C90 carrying a 90-mm gun and one machine gun.

The **Pain du Sucre**, achieved by the wooden steps leading up the slope, provides a viewpoint over the ridge and town. The impressive perspectives over the surrounding countryside demonstrate the military importance of this position and of the village of Stonne.



Figure 2. View over Stonne from Pain du Sucre ©French Battlefields

Proceed into Stonne and pause at any convenient spot.

On 16 May, after a 45-minute artillery barrage, fourteen Char B1 tanks again appeared with Capitaine Billotte commanding 1st Company, 41st Tank Battalion on the left of an inverted ‘V’ formation. On his right was 3rd Company (Capitaine Delepierre) with his seven tanks. A company of Hotchkiss H-39s from 45th BCC and two companies of 51st RI followed. Capitaine Billotte outflanked Stonne to the northwest to enter the village and finds himself nose-to-nose with a column of thirteen German tanks of Panzer Regiment 8. Utilizing the Char B1’s 75-mm hull gun simultaneously with its 47-mm turret gun, Billotte destroyed the first and last enemy tank in the column trapping the remainder of the column. Billotte literally drove through the German positions destroying a column of thirteen panzers and two German 37-mm anti-tank guns — one stationed below the Pain du Sucre and the second further down the ridge line. Under infantry fire from the north, Billotte returned to Stonne. Although Billotte’s vehicle was repeatedly struck by German shells – reportedly up to 140 impacts – none of the projectiles penetrated the Char B1’s armor.



Figure 3. Capitaine Billotte’s Char B1bis ‘Eure’

Continue on Rue du 15 Mai 1940 stopping at the Église Notre-Dame de Stonne on the left. (49.550629, 4.926070)

On 17 May around 17:00, the commander of the 49th Tank Battalion, Lieutenant Doumecq (or Domercq), attacked from the northwest. Some 800 meters from Stonne he encountered a column of German infantry which returned Domercq’s fire with their light infantry weapons. Domercq literally drove over parts of the German column before continuing into the village. Seeing the ghastly remains, the German Rifle Regiment 64 panicked and fled leaving the village unoccupied for the night.

A **French antitank gun** stands at the west end of the church. The gun commemorates the death of Quartermaster Andre Saïs of the 42nd Regiment of Artillery who was fatally wounded on 25 May in further fighting nearby. The church wall bears a black stone plaque remembering the sacrifices of the **French 3rd Infantry Division and the 3rd Armored Division** which fought in this area from 14 to 25 May. A brass plaque under the roof by the church entrance door pays homage to the **6th GRDI** (divisional reconnaissance group).

The exterior wall of the cemetery bears several memorials to the village’s losses during the First and Second World Wars. A polished granite stele remembers the heroics of the **67th Regiment d’Infan-**



Figure 4. Église Notre-Dame de Stonne and cemetery wall bearing memorials to French units. ©French Battlefields

terie. Another stone counts the cost to the 51st Regiment: 475 killed, 805 wounded, 110 missing.

Continue 70 m to the French tank and memorial. (49.550465, 4.924874)

The tank, frequently referred to as a Char B, is a **Char B1bis model** of the type used during the battle. The turret and hull mount cannon make this particular model unusual. Note the shell impressions on the tank turret. The large pink granite stone nearby again commemorates the two divisions which defended the town by listing the names of the officers and men killed during the area fighting.



Figure 5. Char B1bis on display in Stonne. ©French Battlefields



Figure 6. Commemoration wall across the road from the tank memorial. ©French Battlefields

Across the side road a stone wall bears a plaque detailing the **three phases of the area fighting**: 14-18 May German frontal attacks; 23-24 May Encirclement offensives; 26 May – 10 Juin Positional warfare. A separate map indicates the engagement sites and the Circuit Historique, the driving route which tours these additional locations. A circular, pedestal-mounted table of orientation identifies the villages and wooded areas of the extended battlefield.

Continue on highway D30 to the water tower southwest of the village. (49.549420, 4.923802)

In the late morning of 15 May, Oberfeldwebel Hans Hindelang⁴ positioned his section of three AT guns facing three Char B1 tanks approaching through an orchard. One tank reduced the righthand AT gun to a pile of rubble and left two survivors sheltering behind a house. The tank's armor repelled the AT guns' shells. The left gun leader discovered a small, ribbed surface on the right side of the 32-ton Char B1s. The ribbed metal covered the behemoth's radiator. The two remaining guns placed all their fire upon the weak spot. The left gun was also hit but Hindelang's section left the three Char B1s in flames before withdrawing into the village.



Figure 7. Char B1 'Gaillac', the second of the three tanks wiped out by Hindelang, is examined by German troops after the battle.

Continue on highway D30 past the water tower to the monument on the left. (49.549190, 4.923244)

⁴ Both Helmut Beck-Broichsitter and Hans Hindelang received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for saving the battle that day.

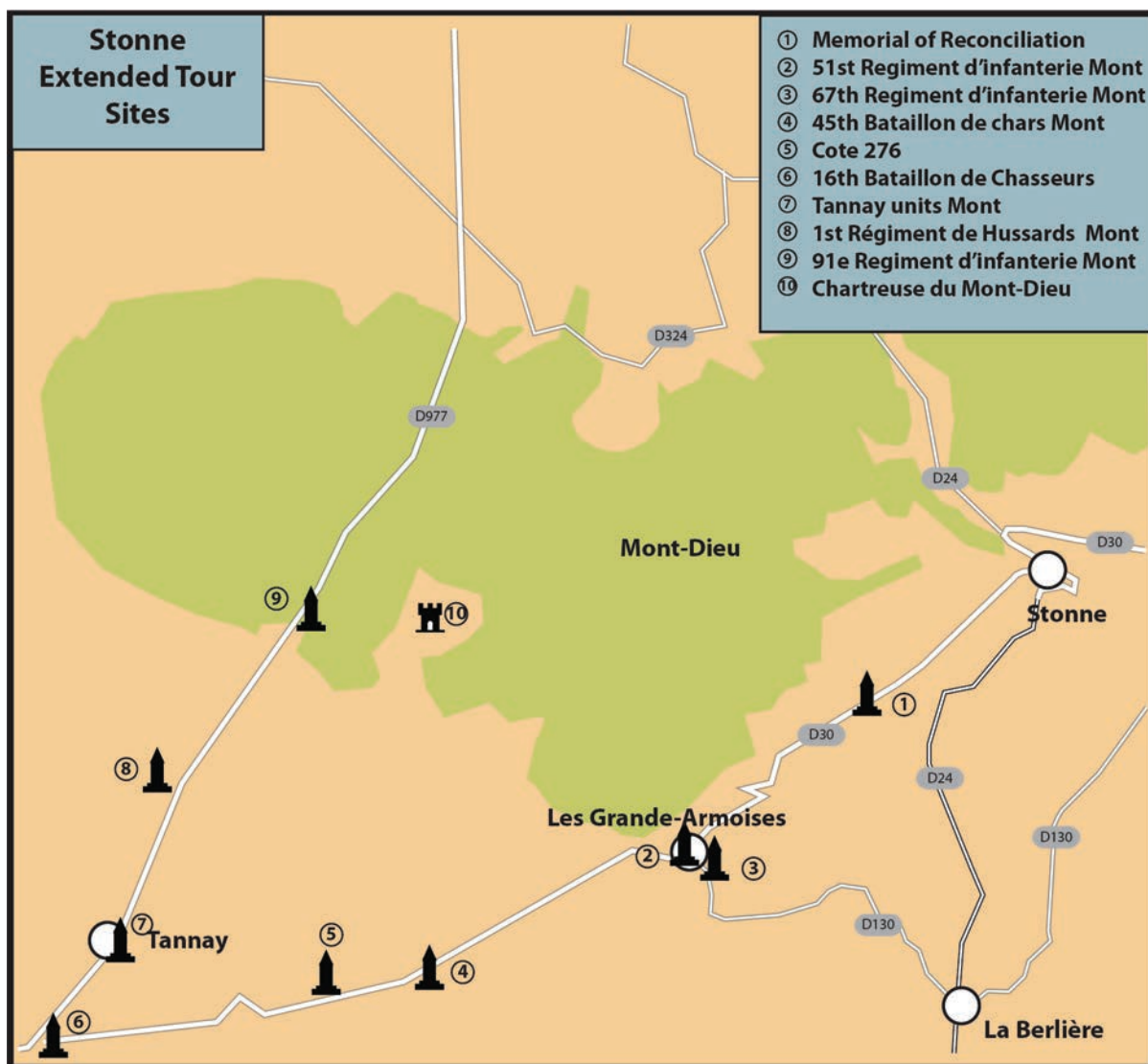
The solitary stone stele bearing the knight's helmet and cross barrels commemorates the destruction of **Char B1 tank 'Chinon' of the 49th BCC** destroyed near this spot, one of the three hits by shells from Oberfeldwebel Hindelang's AT gun. The entire four-man crew was killed including the commander Sous-lieutenant Yves Rohou. Note the interesting base in the form of tank tracks.

Continue of highway d30 for 1.3 km to the stone memorial on the right. (49.541773, 4.910308)

A **memorial of reconciliation** between the two warring countries stands further along highway D30 and outside of the Stonne battlefield. Erected in 1962 by veterans of the German 16th Infantry Division, the stone displays simply two hands greeting each other.

Nearby Sites:

Continue 1.8 km into Les Grandes Armoises. (49.532471, 4.892473)



A **footpath** which starts just past a stone garage runs alongside memorials of the battles of May 1940 leading to the command post of the 67th and the 51st Regiments, a crashed Stuka, the ravine of death,

a Messerschmitt aircraft engine, and a field hospital.

Proceed a mere 50 m to a memorial at the fork in the road. (49.531988, 4.892247)

A simple stone stele commemorates the soldiers of the **51st Regiment d'infanterie**.

Take the left fork (D130) to the small church 110 m on the left. (49.531531, 4.893186)

The white stone plaque mounted upon the church wall to the right of the entrance commemorates the 362 officers and men of the **67th Regiment d'infanterie**.

Return to highway D30 and proceed 2.2 km to a group of memorials on the left. (49.524122, 4.86557)

This beautifully landscape and arrange plot bears a larger stone commemorating the **45th Bataillon de chars de la gendarmerie**. The base of the upright stone bears the names of the men killed in the regional action. The unit title includes 'de la gendarmerie' because the unit was originally formed as part of the national gendarmerie, later incorporated into the army upon the outbreak of the war.

A farm track on the right is 750 m ahead. Down that track 100 m a Circuit Historique sign indicates the local height of **Cote 276**. Heavy fight between French and German infantry took place here during May and June 1940.

Continue on highway D30 for 3.1 km to a memorial immediately before the intersection with highway D977. (49.519269, 4.824478)

The large red stone structure in the form of a castle turret remembers the 16th Bataillon de Chasseurs which fought in Tannay from 16 to 25 May. Three bas relief across the top represent the fighting men of France.

Turn right onto highway D977 and continue 1.1 km into Tannay to the small memorial just before the church. (49.52595, 4.833747)

This rather stark stone column recalls the units which fought in the Tannay and Cote 276 sector. Its surface plaques identify the 6e, 60e, 76e, and 93e GRDI, 36e RI, 14e GRCA, 16e BCP, 1er Hussards, 8e Chasseurs, and 7e BCL, 42e, 45e, 41e and 49e Bataillons de Chars. The clear indication is the number of units involved and the size of the battle. French infantry, armor, and artillery held the German infantry units in check.

Proceed 2.7 km north on highway D977 to the memorial on the left. (49.547336, 4.851018)

On 22 May the 1st Hussards assumed control of the sector between Tannay and the wooded ridge while the German prepared a large-scale offensive to take the whole range of wooded hilltops. On 23 May, bringing huge resources to bear, they pierced the central position of the 1st Hussards, seizing the farmland



Figure 8. 1st Hussards Memorial ©French Battlefields

reaching Cote 276 which overlooks Tannay. A tank attack forced them back west to the Bar River, but on 24 May the enemy went on the offensive once again, overran Tannay and threatened to encircle Mont Dieu from the south. During the night of 24 to 35 May, the 3rd Motorized Infantry Division was relieved, and a new defense line established. The Germans then occupied the forest of Mont Dieu.

A large upright rough stone block, attractive in its simplicity, bears a stone plaque commemorating the 180 soldiers of 1st Régiment de Hussards who were killed stopping the enemy from 22 to 25 May 1940.

Continue 1.2 km to the minor roadway on the right (D230A). The memorial is 100m down the roadway on the left. (49.555841, 4.860901)

The stacked stones are in memory of the 91e Regiment d'infanterie. The site is immediately at the entrance to Bois du Mont-Dieu, an extensive forested area which holds the Chartreuse du Mont-Dieu, originally a 12th century Carthusian monastery. Rebuilt in the 17th century, the buildings and grounds are now private, but sections have been classified historical monuments. The Battle for Stonne raged through these woods and several of the buildings retain marks made by shrapnel.

Highway D230A can be followed to view the Chartreuse; near the entrance turn left onto La Grande au Mont and continue through the forest for a pleasant winding drive back to highway D30 west of Les Grandes-Armoises. Return distance: 5 km.



Figure 9. Chartreuse du Mont-Dieu ©French Battlefields