



Some Ruminations on Seeking a Mine in the Maginot Line

By Andy Grainger

(with apologies to G Formby)

If you remained awake whilst reading the May Newsletter you may recall that I was puzzled about General von Mellenthin's assertion in his book Panzer Battles that the Germans broke through the Maginot Line by direct assault in June 1940. Surely the Maginot Line was surrounded by the German Operation Red which commenced after the allied collapse at Dunkirk and simply surrendered under the terms of the armistice a few weeks later?

A direct assault would have been pointless; presumably von Mellenthin was talking up an attack on a line of pillboxes, maybe similar to the ill-fated Gort Line in the north-west.

A recent visit to the fortification studded region of Alsace prompted me to try and examine this point. I found it an interesting journey, partly for what I found and partly for the way I made it since I never set foot in a public library to research it. In Panzer Battles von Mellenthin claims that his formation broke through near Puttlach, nowadays Puttelange-les-Bains. A search on the internet under "Maginot Line Puttelange" produced a mass of sites relating to the US Army formations that fought there in WW2 and also some useful links provided by the Luxembourg branch of the Western Front Association.

<http://www.le-site-web.com/onac57/site-mf/LigneMagAqua.html> referred to "*the terrible battle of 14 June 1940; the only French victory of the early war period which cost 700 French dead as against 1200 of the enemy*". The site also referred to the bravery of the defenders "la Ligne Maginot aquatique", a concept which, I have to say, produced visions of Troy Tempest and Stingray fighting it out with the deadly Terrorpins.

Whatever my views on this evidence, it was an indicator that a battle might have taken place even though both von Mellenthin and the author of the French website might differ as to the result. I continued my researches on the internet and discovered an excellent site, nominally about the Fort de Schoenenbourg near Haguenau but actually a study of the entire Ligne (see Sources list below).

At this point I decided to consult Mike Taylor and his rather more conventional library which included a number of works about the Line (see Sources below). I found that by far the most useful and readable book was the almost completely forgotten work by Rowe. Subsequent books, such as Kauffmann, have updated it a little but Rowe looks at the pre-war French policy, the construction of the Line and the war of 1939/40 as a whole. As a resident in France he clearly interviewed many of the former French commanders although it is unfortunate that he does not document his sources very fully. The three volume set by Mary & Hohnadel offers a comprehensive coverage of the technical and organisational detail of the Line, its builders and its defenders.

So – did Mellenthin break through at Puttelange and what was the nature of its aquatic combat?



Briefly, whilst the bulk of the German forces were pouring through France in mid-June (Operation Red), the troops of Army Group C facing the Line were ordered to attack the Maginot. The reasons for this are not entirely clear but German intelligence on the Line was extremely good and it may be that they felt confident enough to take out some of the forts for propaganda purposes. Further, they would have known that the Line was not of a uniform strength but in some areas, such as the Rhine bank and elsewhere was just a line of casemates.

Probing attacks took place from about 9th to 13th June with a big attack on the 14th. Unfortunately the French decided on 13th June to withdraw all but a skeleton garrison from the Line and use the troops elsewhere. Because the German advance was so swift, however, these orders could not be carried out fully. Nevertheless, between 14th and 25th June a number of German attacks were launched at the Line virtually along its entire length. The Puttrelange area features a large number of lakes and so the defences there were based on water obstacles. Unfortunately the summer was so dry that they were not fully effective. French XX Corps delivered at least one successful counterattack to recover lost ground in the sector but, as it was stretched very thin on the ground, the Germans did break through. They also broke through on the Rhine bank, an area to which the French assessed the threat as low but where the works turned out to be badly sited and very vulnerable to 88mm guns in the direct fire role.

In Lorraine German fortunes were more mixed. Generally, wherever the artillery of the great fortresses – such as Hackenberg, Simserhof, Hochwald, Schoenenbourg – could cover the ground they found it impossible to break through although they could infiltrate small groups through the thinly held French lines. But where there was no artillery umbrella they could overwhelm the smaller works within a few hours, particularly in the broken and forested terrain that covers much of the area.

My trip to Alsace thus had the effect of opening up a campaign of which I had been entirely unaware. Against a debate as to the effectiveness of the Maginot Line it was fascinating to look at the Line in action.

Finally, with reference to the title of this piece, I discovered that minefields had not been invented in 1940 or, at least the Maginot Line made no use of them. Mr Formby probably sat on what we would now call a reserve demolition – although I suppose that would not scan.

Sources

Allcorn, W [The Maginot Line 1928-45](#); Osprey 2003 ISBN: 1 84176 646 1

Kaufmann, JE and Kaufmann HW [The Maginot Line, None Shall Pass](#); Praeger 1997
ISBN: 0-275-95719-5

Kemp, A [The Maginot Line, Myth and Reality](#); Frederick Warne, London 1981
ISBN: 0 7232 2712 8

Mary, Jean-Yves & Hohnadel, Alain [Hommes et Ouvrages de la Ligne Maginot](#) (3
Tomes, mainly Tome 3); Histoire et Collections, Paris 2003 ISBN: 2-913903-88-6

Rowe, Vivian [The Great Wall of France, the Triumph of the Maginot Line](#); Putnam,
London 1959



The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)

Page 3 / 3

Websites

Alsace La Ligne Maginot – Fort de Schoenenbourg,
<http://www.lignemaginot.com/menu10/indexen.htm>

Maginot Line near Puttelange les Bains:
<http://www.le-site-web.com/onac57/site-mf/LigneMagAqua.html>

This article first appeared in Newsletter 11, Autumn 2004.