



**Battlefield Tour 2004  
Sedan and the Ardennes  
15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> April 2004**

Ors, 4 <sup>th</sup> November 1918	Michael Orr
Ochamps 22 <sup>nd</sup> August 1914	Michael Orr
Bastogne December 1944	Diane Smith
Fort de Fermont 1940	Jack "Capt Concrete" Livesey
Sedan August 1870	Michael Orr
Sedan November 1918	Stuart Sampson
Sedan May 1940	Michael Orr / Mike Taylor
Stonne May 1940	Michael Orr
Rocroi May 1643	Michael Orr
Fontenoy May 1745	Gordon Corrigan

The list of well-known battles above will explain why the BCMH has long considered a trip to the area of Sedan. Distance has put us off in the past but, in fact, the driving time was little greater than that to our usual haunts in Arras or Amiens.

All of us on the trip owe a great debt to Michael Orr not just because of the frequency with which his name appears against the list of stands but also because he and his wife Jane organised the logistics as well. Not only was the hotel pleasant and friendly but we also benefited from their particularly excellent picnic lunches. We missed Steve Badsey and Mungo Melvin who unfortunately had to cancel at short notice and so all the more credit to Michael for standing in for them, assisted by other members of the trip.

The overwhelming impression from this trip was not the history but the geography. Far away from the flat, open fields of Picardy, the Ardennes is an area of wooded plateaux separated by steep valleys. Whether in 1643 or 1944 and at all points between, the great problem of army staffs was to organise their columns along the narrow roads through the forests and find space to deploy them into the clearings on the plateaux.

Visiting the area enables one to appreciate this point far more than from a map or book. At Ochamps in August 1914 the artillery of a French division was caught on a road and unable to deploy or even turn round whilst its infantry were fighting in clearings at either end. Even though the French infantry held its own the loss of most of their artillery was decisive.

It was the difficulty of deploying in the Ardennes that led the French, rightly, to believe that the Germans would not place a substantial effort there in 1940. Any attack could certainly have been delayed, if not stalled entirely, by a relatively small number of troops. That is why the German offensive in December 1944 was blunted. Outnumbered and exhausted though they were, the Americans were able to hang on by securing the key crossroads, Bastogne being the most important, since off-road movement for any distance was so difficult for vehicles.

Both in 1940 and 1944, therefore, victory went to the swift. The French believed that the Germans would take ten days to get through the Ardennes and deploy for the assault crossing over the Meuse; they actually did it in four. Four years later the Americans were able to delay



the Panzers long enough for the biggest redeployment of troops in American military history to occur – by road. The Germans were at a serious disadvantage in having to fight off the line of march whereas in 1940 they had managed to cross the obstacle of the Ardennes with relatively little opposition and then deploy.

The measures the Germans took to plan their march in May 1940 were thorough and imaginative but they had not been able to practise them to any great extent. The Polish campaign had revealed significant deficiencies in the German army, particularly in training and vehicle maintenance. These had to be put right just as the army was expanding further, whilst the severity of the winter precluded virtually any outdoor military activity and Hitler's frequent warning orders disrupted such as there was. Special forces in plain clothes and in light aircraft were intended to pre-empt the defensive measures by the forces of Luxembourg and Belgium but these had very mixed success and generally the obstacles were cleared by combat engineers with explosives. Despite the many thousands of vehicles which had to crawl along narrow roads the decisive factor in the German approach to the Meuse was not the skill of the *Feldgendarmerie* but the fact that the Belgian forces were too light to do very much damage. And as the Ardennes were of no strategic value to the Belgians such forces as were deployed there were not tasked to fight a robust delaying battle. By the time the French cavalry divisions arrived the Germans were almost through the forests and busy crossing the S emois, the last river before the Meuse, by virtue of motorisation, far better communications and the deployment of maximum resources at the *Schwerpunkt*.

Recent scholarship has revealed far more about the operations of the French Army than in the days when Alastair Horne's "To Lose a Battle" was the standard text. And the local history section of the bookshop in Charleville displayed a wide selection of books and pamphlets from and about the Combattants de '40. Whilst the production values of some of the titles left something to be desired many of them displayed exhaustive research with maps and contemporary aerial photos offering the same benefit to the battlefield tourist of today as they had to those participating in the events being studied.

We visited three battlefields to study the French way of war in 1940; the Fort de Fermont, the German crossing points at Sedan in May 1940 and the village of Stonne, scene of fighting for a fortnight after the panzers had passed.

I visited the Fort de Fermont some years ago and so it is a little hard for me now to recall the freshness of some very vivid memories. The Fort is the northernmost tip of the Maginot line and so the Germans were able to outflank it and attack it from behind. It therefore offers us an opportunity to see the Line in action. A group of volunteers has restored the underground railway which carries you two miles from the entrance to a group of six bunkers with their periscopes, command posts, gun turrets and magazines all landscaped into a slope so perfectly that one would not know they were there. To applause and cries of encore, a turret retracted and rotated at the press of a button. All had withstood hits from the very heaviest German artillery. Only one man was killed in the fort and the Germans never got in. The fort only capitulated at the armistice. All this said, however, General von Mellenthin presents a different picture in his book "Panzer Battles". Then serving as Chief of Staff to 197 Infantry Division he claims that German infantry broke through the line near Saarbrucken on 14 June making extensive use of smoke and attacking the bunkers with flamethrowers and grenades. The incident certainly calls for further study and, as ever, one recalls Alan Brooke's prescient



diary entry for 20 December 1939 “... a battleship built on land, a masterpiece in its way... and yet it gave me but little feeling of security and I consider the French would have done better to invest the money in the shape of mobile defences such as more and better aircraft and more heavy armoured divisions than to sink all this money into the ground”.

Equipped with Mungo Melvin’s maps we were then able to study one of those heavy armoured divisions in action at Stonne. Our visit was brief but from our vantage point amongst a sea of billowing forested hills one could not but appreciate the boldness of the Germans into committing their armour into such unfriendly tank country. At Stonne some of France’s finest troops, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Heavy Armoured Division (DCR), the 3<sup>rd</sup> Motorised Division and the 33<sup>rd</sup> Infantry fought skilfully and bravely. One of Mungo’s maps revealed that 3<sup>rd</sup> DCR were ready to counterattack at Stonne within 48 hours of receiving the order to move from their concentration area near Reims. But the attack was called off. I wonder if his thesis was that the French could move quickly – but their commanders lacked confidence or ability? A pity he was not able to join us.

Finally, we looked at the site of the Meuse Crossing by 1, 2 and 10 Panzer Divisions. It is well known that the line here was held by two poor quality French divisions. What I had not appreciated was that 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer had to cross, eventually, *chez* 1 Panzer and that 10 Panzer had great difficulty at their crossing point. The French had brought up artillery, as planned, but the concentration of German airpower – and flak against allied air efforts – meant that their victory was inevitable. Numbers told against a very thin line of French pillboxes and here – a *tour de force* from Michael Orr – we were able to visit several of them. Certainly they commanded wide fields of fire but, to me, they looked terribly vulnerable on that forward slope and, as ever with fortified lines, there never seem to be enough weapons.

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate some of the benefits of seeing the ground where the action took place and the stimulation to the little grey cells that a visit inspires. Time and space preclude my dealing similarly with Sedan 1870 and 1918, Rocroi and Fontenoy. I will merely say that congratulations are due to Michael Orr and Gordon Corrigan at the last two for locating Vauban era dugouts and the Bar des Irlandais respectively to protect us from the torrential rain. We may have been disappointed to hear that “*Messieurs les anglais, please fire first*” was a myth but Michael’s purchase of the first rounds of drinks at the Bar was a very welcome reality!

And, from the map, I discovered that Fontenoy would have been a German forming up point for their attack on the BEF’s defences along the Escaut which we had studied at Gary Sheffield’s conference earlier in the year on the Ox & Bucks in 1940. But that’s another story...

Andy Grainger

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