

A German tank attack in 1918

Introduction



German tank commander in front of a Sturm-Panzerkraftwagen A7V, October 1918.

From Nigel Thomas & Ramiro Bujeiro: *The German Army in World War I* (3), Osprey Publishing, 2004

Chakoten has come into possession of a folio book with 25 pages of handwritten translations of documents from the First World War. The book also includes some maps and overviews.

Part of the documents deal with a German tank attack in the summer of 1918.

The first page is a general order on the cooperation between infantry and tanks issued by General Ludendorff in May 1918.

This is followed by a detailed attack order for the 13th Bavarian Tank Detachment (ty. Bayerische Sturmpanzerkraftwagen Abteilung 13) for the attack northwest of Fort de la Pompelle on 1 June 1918. The attack order includes a detailed map at a scale of 1:25,000.

The book also contains a (unfortunately undated and unsigned) description of the French principles of defense in positional warfare. The main principles are depth, flanking fire and immediate counterattacks.

The principles in both Ludendorff's general orders were applied to the attack on Fort de la Pompelle, e.g. the crew at some point leaves their tank and joins the attack as infantry. And the application of the French defense principles with a thinly manned first line and immediate counter-attacks is the explanation that the Germans succeeded in capturing the fort and being beaten back again in just 5 hours.

The majority of the German tank detachments were equipped with captured British Mark IVs. The Germans started production of tanks late, and developed only one tank model (A7V) before the armistice. German tank production suffered severely from a lack of raw materials, which had to be used in other war-important industry. Therefore, the number of German-made tanks never exceeded 20. By the end of the war, the Allies had produced approx. 4,500 tanks against the Germans' total of just under 100 tanks; of which 20 A7Vs and approx. 75 captured tanks.

The attack on Fort de la Pompelle 1 June 1918



German beutepanzers (captured tanks) of the 14th detachment being refueled on their way to the front line From <http://forum.axishistory.com/>

The attack on Fort de la Pompelle was part of the 3rd German Offensive on the Western Front in 1918. The offensive started on 27 May and is also called the 3rd Aisne Battle or the Blücher-York Offensive.

3 tank detachments took part in the attack, each consisting of 5 heavy tanks. The detachments were No. 1 equipped with the German tank A7V, and No. 13 and 14 equipped with captured British tanks; the so-called beutepanzers.

Attack plan

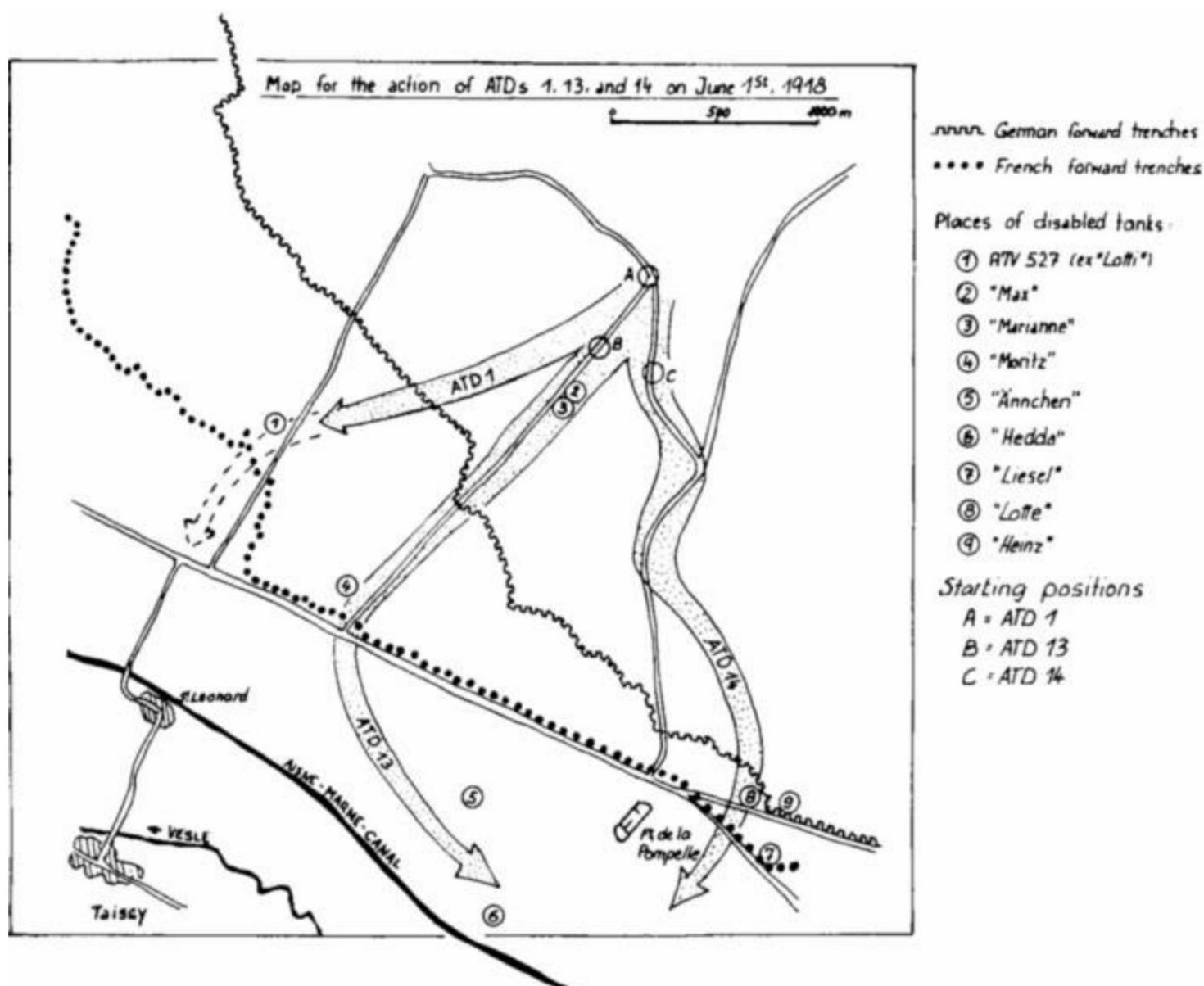
The attack on the fort itself is carried out by the 14th tank detachment in cooperation with the 465th infantry regiment. In the middle, the 13th detachment supports the infantry of the 463rd regiment. The two detachments clash in the direction of Fort de la Pompelle, which is held by the French 21st Colonial Infantry Regiment (RIC) supported on its left flank by the 23rd Colonial Infantry Regiment. Further to the right, the 1st Detachment makes a parallel attack in the direction of Vrigny held by the Italians and British.

The objective is to break through the barbed wire and suppress the resistance in the enemy's first line. Through the gaps thus created, the infantry must advance, while the tanks turn and roll up the enemy trenches in the direction of Fort de la Pompelle. The attack must start on June 1 at 04.40.

13th detachment

At 03.10 the 13th detachment leaves its starting point in the direction of the French trenches, which they must reach precisely at 04.40. 13. Detachment loses two tanks in a short time. Tank 112 *Marianne* (Korb) slides sideways into a trench and tank 201 *Max* (Ludwig) has gear problems. The remaining three tanks are delayed by an overturned truck lying across the road of advance and a stack of poison gas grenades lying next to this vehicle. Heavy traffic on the road also slows the advance, so it is not until 05.15, that the tanks reach the French lines. However, the infantry are also delayed so they can now follow the tanks.

Tank 206 *Moritz* (Fuchsbauer) does not come much further. After driving back and forth at the attack point for approx. 15 minutes in, the engine overheats and is unable to pull the tank out of a deep shell crater. The tank commander Lieutenant Fuchsbauer waits 30 minutes for the engine to cool down, but now the infantry is retreating. Fuchsbauer decides to retreat to later make another push with the infantry. On the way back, the engine stops completely. Obviously the pistons have stuck and the engine is dangerously hot again. Lieutenant Fuchsbauer therefore decides to blow up his tank.



Direction of attack and location of lost tanks.
ATD = Assault Tank Detachment.

Tank 107 *Ännchen* (Burkhart) crosses the enemy line at 05.30 and then turns in the direction of Fort de la Pompelle to roll up the enemy trench, as described in the attack order. About 500 meters west of the fort, the tank comes under heavy fire from French artillery, which is directed from an aeroplane.

Burkhart lets the tank evacuate temporarily.

At approx. 10.45 the crew is ready to continue the advance again, but now the French launch a local counter-attack. Burkhart is contacted by a company commander asking to help repel the French attack with the machine guns. The crew quickly reformed into an assault unit and now fights alongside the infantry.

The French counterattack gains in strength and the Germans have to retreat. Burkhart, who is wounded by shrapnel from a hand grenade, and the rest of the crew are thereby separated from the tank, and finally pushed all the way back to no man's land.

Tank Hedda (Romkopf) loses time trying to pull 112 Marianne (Korb) out of the trench without success. Finally, the advance is continued. Close to the French line, the footbrake jams and catches fire. It takes 20 minutes to solve the problem, and the rest of the time it has to be controlled with the handbrake alone. At 05.30 Hedda breaks through the first French line, enabling the infantry to follow. Hedda now also turns towards Fort de la Pompelle and knocks down the enemy's resistance in the 2nd line. After some time, Hedda gets in touch with the 465th regiment and thereby learns that the fort has already been captured. Romkopf therefore decides to move towards the Aisne-Marne canal and the river Vesle. 150 meters north of the canal, Hedda is hit by a collision on the right lane. Romkopf orders the tank abandoned. The armament is dismantled and the crew withdraws in the direction of the German lines.

French counterattack

The 1st and 14th detachments also suffer losses during the attack. The terrain is unsuitable for tank attacks and several tanks are stuck. Of the three remaining tanks in the 1st detachment, two are stuck. Tank 527 is stuck and is destroyed by a direct shot from the enemy artillery. Tank 526 is also stuck and is saved in such a condition that it cannot be used later.

In the middle, the Germans are forced back after the two tanks from the 13th detachment turn towards the fort. On the left flank, the 465th regiment succeeds in capturing the fort at 6 with the help of the six tanks. However, the intense enemy artillery fire forces the remaining German tanks back towards their own lines. During the attack, the 14th detachment loses three tanks.



The German Beutepanzer Hedda of the 13th detachment after the attack on Fort de la Pompelle

Meanwhile, 7 sections of the 21st RIC attack at 12, the battle for the fort is over. Of the 15 German tanks, 6 remain; the rest are incapacitated due to the battle, the terrain or technical problems.

The reason for the intense French artillery fire is that the visibility allows for aerial observation. The French 200th squadron directs the fire precisely, and an airplane even makes an attack on Hedda itself after one belt is shot off.

During the afternoon, the Germans are driven back to their own lines. Both 107 Ännchen (Burkhart) and Hedda (Romkopf) are captured by the French, whose counter-attack completely restores the positions.

Sources

There is scattered information on the Internet, which contains details and photos:

<http://www.panzertruppe.de/>

<http://www.panzerlexikon.de>

<http://betheny1418.free.fr/>

A book worth recommending with a comprehensive description of equipment, personnel and operations is:

Maxwell Hundleby & Hans Strasheim: The German A7V Tank and the Captured British Mark IV of World War I, Haynes Publishing, 1990

A concise book which is primarily about the A7V. The same information can also be found in more detail on the web:

Wolfgang

Schneider & Hans Strasheim: German Tanks in World War I, Schieffer Publishing, 1990