

The Renault FT Light Tank

Osprey Vanguard series No. 46 (1988)

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Review by Rob Morgan

Not a battle, a campaign or, indeed, an army this time, but the world's first modern tank! The Renault FT, usually the *modele 17* is added, was the first tank with rotating turret, engine at the back and tracks either side. Compared with the dinosaurs of the British Mk I to V and the amazing French Schneider and disastrous St. Chamond, not to mention the immense semi-mobile blockhouse that was the German A7V, this was a gem of engineering and design. This volume sums up the tank if not in a nutshell, then in 48 well written and very well illustrated pages.



Renault FT 17 light tank, with post-1931 7.5mm mg in cast turret, at the Saumur Military Museum in Metropolitan France. Restored WWII camouflage but a non-runner, I'm told. The photo was taken by my old friend and colleague Jaime de Miguel of Madrid's 'Dragones' wargames club on his holidays. Many thanks for his help.

The background and design concept opens the text. It was swift off the drawing board, and supported by Joffre, who wanted 1,000 of them; but there was serious in-fighting before the idea of masses of small AFVs like bees swarming around the German defences and

machine gun positions was arrived at. It was a success, and the role of the little FTs in French and in American service up to the Armistice is neatly described. Zaloga suggests that it was the effect of the FTs in supporting infantry and overwhelming German positions time after time that rejuvenated the entire French army after its morale was broken in the Spring of 1917. Perhaps he's not far from the mark!



Three examples of the Matchbox Renault FT 17, in 1/72nd, an old kit these days, and rather complex in terms of assembly. These three represent Italian captures and have a range of different machine guns mounted in the turrets. The a/a mg on the cupola is conjectural. That item comes from ESCI's M13/40 model.

Now, for the wargamer, even one considering the current WWI centenary, the use of the Renault FTs in Flanders and Picardy is of limited value; in 50 years of wargaming I don't ever recall seeing a late World War I tank action of the sort these little vehicles could provide reproduced on the table top. But, on page 33 of the text, the role of the FT between 1919 and 1939 is examined, and *that's* exactly where the wargaming potential of the book kicks off. As soon as the war ended, French tank units found themselves 'peace-keeping' (to utilise the modern term) in central Europe and the Balkans. They also served in small numbers against rebels and insurgents across Africa and Asia. Zaloga describes this, and fairly, as the high-tech weapon of its day, easily transportable, low weight (only a little over 14,000 lbs., about 6,500 kg or six tons, the tank was known to U.S. forces as the 'six ton'). It was, as the writer describes it, a prestige weapon post-WWI.

Now as to the campaigns and the armies in which the Renault Ft 17 served. It was active in Russia in French hands, one tank being captured by the Red forces to become the first of many Soviet tanks; more were captured or salvaged later. Some served with Denikin's White forces, and also fell into Red hands. The Poles used them in substantial numbers over long periods of combat; some were still in service in 1939. It saw service with Finland, the Baltic republics, with the Czechs and Jugoslavs (who used them against the Germans and Italians in World War II). The Belgians used them, but not in 1940. The Swiss had a handful, and in

South America, the Brazilians bought about 40. Zaloga describes neatly I must add, the many small conflicts and encounters in which the Renault light tanks were used – some are amazingly obscure. The Manchurians used them in the confused wars of that region, at least one Chinese warlord had a unit of FTs, and the Chinese Nationalists and, interestingly, the Japanese army also acquired and used FTs in combat. Zaloga deals with the rather limited but valuable use of the Renaults owned by Spain on both sides in the Civil War from 1936-39. He ends with the Renault in the WWII, and it saw action in one form or another between September 1939 and August 1945. In the former year, of course, it remained the largest single AFV ever to have served in American hands, and the Greeks, Romanians, Finns and Germans all used it. The U.S. Army provided over 500 of them to Britain and Canada as training vehicles, but the Nazi use of the elderly FT 17 was astonishingly broad, as pill boxes, for airfield defence, etc. This is a very good account of an immense yet tiny tank! Members of the Society of Twentieth Century Wargamers will know that one of the more bizarre owners of a handful of Renaults was the Afghans, and two in mint condition were found there and reported in an illustrated article in *The Journal* of the Society.

The book's plates and photographs are very sound indeed, and the plates are useful for the wargamer from Flanders to Normandy and the Mediterranean. Of course, the variants, the 37mm cannon, the 8mm mg, and the signal tank (and sometimes called a "commandö tank") are discussed. I would like to have read much more about the 1918 version of the Renault with a 75mm gun however, as I don't know of a model in wargames scale of this tank. Can anyone help?



The HaT model with the machine gun and the welded turret. At two for about five pounds, an excellent value. This is what I always wanted a model kit to be, seven parts and five minutes' work to assemble. The turret, gun and hatch need careful cutting from the sprue though. A second pack has the cast turret and a 37mm Puteaux gun.

My own use of the FT 17 goes back to the delightful days when Matchbox issued a dual purpose gun/mg with the early welded turret. It was a bit on the small side, but mine still serve. There are plenty of options in 15mm, in 20/25mm and in smaller scales these days, but a favourite of mine is the remarkably simple to assemble seven-piece kit 1/72nd scale HAT model of the AFV. Pack 8113 provides two with cast turrets and 37mm Puteaux gun, while pack 8114 is of two earlier welded turret Hotchkiss mg-armed tanks. The signal tank in my possession comes from the one-man backstreet Madrid company ARDVIN. Made in resin, it has a superstructure which fitted neatly on to one of my old Matchbox models and released the turret for use on the Atlantic Wall. Talking of which, about 35 years ago, I tested some of the older members of my family who had served in Normandy using my 1/72nd AFV collection. They all recognised the Tiger and Panther, though none could remember seeing one intact. The Sherman and Churchill were more readily accounted for in tales, but what surprised me was that all four of them had seen an FT, in turret *panzerstellung* form or in local defence or on airfields.

Older wargamers will remember the much earlier publication on the Renault FT, in the Armour in Profile series. It was number 13 back in 1967. I forget the price, but it was a French translation, I do recall! It's cropped up in so many other publications and descriptions over the years that the fact that this is the tank of the 20th century, useful and ubiquitous, is an obvious statement.

Steve Zaloga's Osprey on the subject is a valuable aid to the modern wargamer, and must be highly recommended.

