

# Duel 33 : Panzer IV vs Char B1 Bis (France 1940)

Steven J. Zaloga, Illustrations by Richard Chasemore

Osprey Books (2011), £12.99 / \$17.95

## Review by Jonathan Aird



### Contents

Introduction

Chronology

Design and Development

Technical Specifications

The Strategic Situation

Combat: Duel at Stonne

Statistics and Analysis

Further Reading

Osprey Books are, of course, a well-respected source for a concise history of a battle, details of an aeroplane or ship, or all the fine detail of a uniform. They are not always a gripping read though. This title by Steven Zaloga pulls off that rare feat of making one reconsider one's assumptions, and by doing so persuades the reader to abandon old notions and see things anew. It also reminds the reader that military history does not have to be just dryly factual - this is a gripping page turner.

The Duel series takes two opposing weapon systems and compares their performances when engaged in combat (in this case, we're heading for a part of the Blitzkrieg in France). The first thought is that this will be a story of mis-matched opponents - the modern looking and efficient Panzer IV and the heading-for-obsolence hulking Char B1 Bis. And already we're at a disadvantage - at this point in its development the Panzer IV was primarily a support tank for

the main Panzer III battle force, providing a heavier HE capability. The short 75mm gun it sported was not really optimal for the anti-tank role. The Char B1 Bis shows it's WWI heritage – it was not unlike a British tank of that earlier conflict with a turret dropped on top. However, it had in that turret an effective 47mm gun quite capable of countering the Panzer IV's armour, whilst its own 60mm of front and side armour made it all but invulnerable to German anti-tank guns. On paper then, the Char B1 Bis should have wiped the floor with the German tanks.

Various “well known facts” are then demolished – the fuel consumption and ranges of both tanks were not so different, the French tanks did not fully lack radio communications (although the Germans' were superior). Mechanical reliability was not so very different either. In fact, the main advantage the Panzer IV had in the invasion of France was that it was where it was meant to be, whilst the French tanks were not, having been taken by surprise by the German advance through the Ardennes. This led to any number of issues associated with redeployment for the French tank forces.

Steven Zaloga then takes us through a story of logistical mistakes (the Char B1 Bis requires aviation fuel for its engine), crew overburdening (the Char B1 Bis had a crew of four, two of whom were overburdened with work) and the superiority of a three man turret over a one man turret. Strategic thinking and training is not overlooked either. On the German side, the tank crews were well trained and were full-time soldiers or reservists who had two years of recent service. The French reservists had but one year of experience and, since the Char B1 Bis was newly in service, none of that on the tank they were supposed to crew. In the long run though, the Panzer IV was the way to the future – it had an immense capability to be upgunned and up-armoured, whereas the Char B1 Bis (had France survived beyond 1940) had little room for improvements to be added.

The actual combat example focuses on the fighting at Stonne – which sees the village change hands seventeen times in two days. It's a short but gripping retelling with enough information and detail to inspire any number of table top scenarios.

This is a truly inspiring volume from Osprey – it's good to have assumptions and received wisdom brushed away. The analysis that the real difference between the two tanks was in logistics, training, and operational doctrine is more to the point than a simple 'slightly faster, slightly less likely to break down' assessment. Recommended highly.