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Tanks at the Chemin des Dames 1917

by Tino Prins

During the infamous [Nivelle offensive](#) at the Chemin des Dames in April 1917, the French Schneider and Saint Chamond tanks were used for the first time during the First World War. This first tank battle was a failure due to technical and tactical shortcomings in which large losses were incurred. In October of the same year, tanks were again deployed at the Chemin des Dames during the battle at La Malmaison. Despite German countermeasures against the use of the tanks, this offensive became a complete victory, partly due to the use of the French tank weapon.

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▲ **The origin of the Char d'Assaut Schneider**

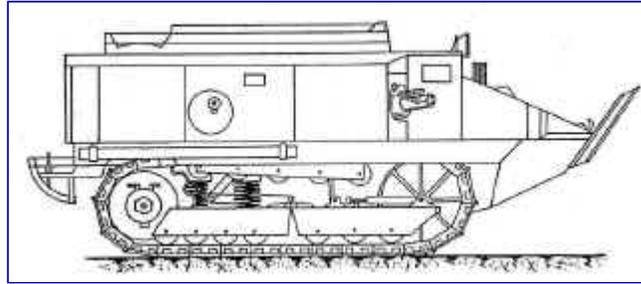
The French tank had been the idea of the colonel of artillery Jean Baptiste Estienne. As early as 1915, he became convinced that motorized tractors could overcome the impasse of the trench warfare. He was able to charm his superiors of his ideas and was placed at the head of the Artillerie d'Assaut or Artillerie Spéciale (AS) department.

He conceived the Char d'Assaut Schneider (CA-1) based on the American Holt tractor, in close collaboration with the French company Schneider. When Joffre saw the

design, he immediately wanted to order 400 in January 1916. The Ministry of War thought that was premature and wanted to see a working prototype first. On February 21, 1916, the first prototypes were demonstrated; they were approved and the order for the first 400 copies was forgiven.



Colonel Estienne



Drawing side view of the French Schneider tank

The design was as simple as effective. It was not much more than a square box on the base of a Holt tractor. He had a pointed nose and a barbed wire cutter / guide, which was intended to destroy the barbed wire or to have the barrel underneath the tank. A short 75 mm gun protruded from the right flank of the tank and on both sides, slightly more to the rear, there were two Hotchkiss machine guns. The six-man crew entered the vehicle through two large rear doors. And very nice and very progressive was the fact that the running gear was equipped with suspension. All in all, the tank was [char d'assaut] a bit heavy: 13.5 tons. Equipped with a Schneider engine, which delivered 70 hp, the tank reached a speed of 7 km per hour and had a range of 50 km. On board were 90 grenades for the cannon and 3,840 cartridges for the machine guns.

▲ The creation of the Char d'Assaut Saint Chamond

The material committee of the French army was not pleased that one or other colonel could penetrate within four weeks to commander Joffre and also outside the committee could just order an order of 400 copies. The commission therefore also went to work itself and developed, apart from Colonel Estienne, another tank that would go down in history as the Saint Chamond tank.

On paper, the St. Chamond was better than the Schneider. It had a normal 75 mm, the French success number, cannon that stuck straight from the bow of the 'landschip' and the St. Chamond was equipped with 4 machine guns. He had longer tracks and an electric instead of a mechanical transmission that made driving a lot easier. The 23

tonnes weighing the sample did not do well on soft soil. In addition, the 'bow' was far ahead of the caterpillar tracks, so that the trench crossing ability was worthless. He also suffered from a higher susceptibility to interference than the Schneider and the production did not go faster than that of the competition. On the eve of the first French tank action there were only 16 St. Chamonds at the front, four of which participated in the attack, albeit as unarmed delivery and evacuation vehicles.



From left to right: Schneider tank rear view - side view
Photo right: St. Chamont tank: front view

When the tanks came out of the factory they were transported by train to the training camps. The first tank camp was in Marly, near Paris. Soon there was a second camp in Cecottes, near Orléans. Closer to the front, in Champlieu, was also a tank camp that also became the headquarters of Colonel Estienne. The first 'tank group' was formed in Marly and, according to the Estienne organization, consisted of 16 tanks. By the end of March 1917, 13 groups of Schneiders and two groups of St. Chamonds were in Champlieu.

The officers came from all weapons and service areas of the army and even from the navy. The majority of the troops came from the various cavalry regiments, whose reserve squadrons were lifted due to lack of work. Everyone had had a general military training, but no technical and that is why most had to learn from scratch how to drive the tanks, to shoot, to keep the engine running etc. After two or three months at Champlieu the French army command thought that they were ready.

▲ **The first French tank attack at Berry-au-Bac on April 16, 1917** On April 16, 1917, the French tanks will be used for the first time during the Nivelle offensive. The back of the old school who, as the only motto, throws 'l'attaque à l'outrance', throws, not hindered by any tactical experience with the new weapon, the tanks in battle. On April 11, the available tanks in Champlieu, under the smoke of Compiègne, go on the train. Not camouflaged or covered, the tanks go to Maizy on the banks of the Aisne. There they can be beautifully watched by the Germans in their observation balloons.

The train journey takes more than two days and then another troubled night follows with a lot of false alarm and little sleep. Finally the squadrons can then leave for the assembly point for their baptism of fire. The starting point of what will be a death ride is slightly east of Cury-les-Chaubardes. It is not with this 12 kilometer ride. It is snowing and later it becomes a snowstorm. It is pitch dark and the drivers can keep their vehicles on the road with the greatest difficulty due to the fallen snow. People are being sent out to show the drivers the way ahead of the tanks. After 10 difficult hours the first tank arrives at the starting point. The rest follows, like an accordion, hours later Here the men wait at time T, the beginning of the attack. They kill the time by re-lubricating and oiling the machines; others write a letter, perhaps their last.

On 15 April 1917 at 8.30 pm the group of tanks consisting of Artillery Spéciale AS-3, AS-7 and AS-8, under the command of Major Chaubès, goes to its waiting position west of the river Miette. The group arrives at 6 am on April 16, minus 8 tanks of AS-8. Engine trouble, driven into a pit or otherwise disfigured, they will not participate in the battle. During the ride of Chaubès, the other group, under the command of Major Bossut, had the opportunity to read the mass by midnight. For an altar, improvised on a few thick planks behind a tank, chaplain Mathon de Mass celebrates Massut, with Bossut serving as an altar boy.

At 6:20 am, when Major Chaubès starts to leave his starting point, two German planes are circling above his tanks and dropping a few flares. Even before the tanks have passed the front French trench they are already under murderous artillery fire. At 07.15 the front tank is stopped by the 1st German trench. The Germans learned from the British tank action on September 15, 1916 and their front trench is a true tankfall of 4 meters wide and 3 meters deep! The tanks try to persevere, but the infantry fire is murderous and also comes artillery fire, led by observers from the plateau of Craonne. This fire lasts until 17:00.

At 2 am the group consisting of AS-2, AS-6, AS-5, AS-9 and AS-4 left under the command of Major Bossut to its starting position, the farm 'Du Choléra'. He arrives there at about 8 am and it takes quite some effort to keep the whole together, the tanks and infantrymen of the 76th Infantry Regiment and infantrymen of the 42nd and 69th Infantry Divisions. One smokes another cigarette and at 09.00 the engines are started and the tanks move. Everyone agrees with the set-up, as in an exercise, everyone

knows their place in the attack line. Bossut checks, on foot, whether everything is going well and the beginning is exemplary. On the left flank, AS-2 jerks in the direction of Juvincourt, followed by AS-6 with AS-5 at her side.



One of the tanks of
Major Bossut



Map of the tank battle
at Barry-au-Bac



A Schneider tank
with crew

The infantry feels supported by the tanks and makes itself meritorious by drawing fire from the enemy machine gun positions. The tanks then switch off the machine guns and thus they reach maximum speed on the 2nd German line. There, at about 11.00 am the tank of Bossut is hit by a grenade coming from above. The grenade strikes through the roof of the tank and explodes on the inside. Everyone is killed. Major Bossut is found in the evening by his brother Pierre.

At 14.30 there are 13 tanks from the two front squadrons. The battle loses its momentum and there is little else left than to retire at 5 PM. On the right flank it is a lot happier with AS-5. Firing out all the pieces they pull on their target, the forest of Prouvais. Arriving at the railway Amifontaine-Guignicourt, completely earthen the earth, the ground is covered with men in Feldgrau.

The enemy has withdrawn from the positions, but the French infantry has not been able to follow and is two kilometers behind the tanks. It is 1.30 pm and withdrawal is necessary as the German 77 mm guns, which cover the retreat of the infantry, now led by observers from the Chemin des Dames, fire the tanks.

AS-9, followed by AS-4 on its right-hand side, go over very bad terrain and also come to the railroad. With too little fuel to continue, they have to withdraw after the loss of three tanks. Just before the fall of darkness, Captain Chanoine of AS-6 gives the order for the retreat. It gets quiet on the battlefield. The next day, mechanic Saget goes back to what once was the German 2nd line, repairs a broken tank under enemy fire and drives back to its own lines.

The balance

▲ **The losses**

The losses were heavy: 180 dead, missing and wounded. Here are 33 officers and 28 sub-officers on a strength of 730 officers and men. Despite everything, tanks turned out to be machines that saved people's lives. After all, the losses at the AS amounted to 25% and in the infantry 40%.



Overview of the tank-graveyard after the battle

And the tanks? 28 out of combat by bad luck, which is called 'good' by the French for such new machines. The material proved to be reliable. 52 tanks had been shut down by artillery, 32 had caught fire, 31 of them in the Bossut group. 37 tanks were switched off by indirect fire (23 in the Chaubès group and 14 in the Bossut group). So it was a disaster: 44 of the 80 tanks had not returned from the Bossut group

▲ **The deployment of French tanks at La Malmaison on October 23, 1917**

After the disastrous offensive of Nivelle and the ensuing unrest and even mutinies in the French army, the government felt compelled to 'limogate' General Nivelle: to promote to a bureau function in Limoge, where many high-ranking soldiers were sent after military failures.

General Pétain was appointed as the new commander of the army. This immediately began to jack up the morale of the French army by simply listening to the needs of the ordinary soldiers. Departures were better arranged, the diet was greatly improved and the often senseless attacks to 'improve the position' or 'to keep the men combative' were limited to the most necessary. These measures led to a higher confidence in the officers and the top of the army. What was also very necessary was a resounding victory over the enemy so that everyone would get the feeling that not everything failed and that the army was able to give the enemy a decent bite. The self-confidence had to return to the soldiers and also to the officers.

Pétain invented an offensive on the plateau of La Malmaison on the west side of the Chemin des Dames. With the plateau in possession, the French army would be able to

bring flanking fire to the rest of the German troops of the Chemin des Dames and those positions were unsustainable for the enemy. Thus it happened.

The preparations were arranged on his Pétain's. True to his principle that you should not let people fight against machines, but better to have the machines switched off by other machines, Pétain brought a huge power of artillery to his feet. In the attack sector of the 13th Infantry Division, one cannon per five meters front! And not only cannons, but also ammunition was well taken care of. A million grenades had been laid ready for this offensive, all of which also had to be faded according to carefully laid-out patterns. Furthermore, the air force was called in such a way that the French pilots on this front had the total dominion in the air. Last but not least, Pétain also used the tank weapon.



From left to right: a St Chamond tank loaded on a train - a St Chamond tank on its way to the front - a St. Chamond tank is being repaired.

Pétain decides to use 58 tanks during the attack, 38 Schneiders and 20 St. Chamonds. For the latter it will mean the baptism of fire, because in April they were not used yet. For the tanks to work well with the infantry, Champlieu is practiced by the infantry next to the tanks, so it will soon no longer be a surprise to anyone and they know what they have together. From the month of July all units that will attack with and next to the tanks are trained at Champlieu. The 13th, 27th 28th, 38th, and 43rd Infantry Division practice with the tanks and sniff the exhaust fumes of the steel samples, become familiar with them and will no longer look at the new weapon with their eyes on stalks like their colleagues in April.

The battle order is determined and looks like this:

Sector castle La Motte, Laffaux, Fruty:

28th Infantry Division with AS-33 (Saint Chamond)

27th Infantry Division with AS-31 (Saint Chamond)

Sector Vaudesson, Chavignon, plateau de La Malmaison
13th Infantry Division with AS-11 (Schneider)
43rd Infantry Division with AS-8 (Schneider)
38th Infantry Division with AS-12 (Schneider)

Sector Pargny
66th Infantry Division without tanks

The terrain of the attack is not entirely unfavorable for the tanks, because especially for the attack on the plateau of Malmaison, most heights are already occupied by the French and the starting positions of the tanks are close to the first lines, so that there is no first kilometers must be driven in sight of the enemy. The artillery preparation takes into account the tanks, ie the shells are used in such a way that the tanks do not have to plow through a lunar landscape of pits and funnels. Furthermore, a certain part of the artillery is intended for use against the antitank guns of the Germans. This artillery will not be used until after the Germans have fired the tanks with these guns, so that their position can be determined.

▲ German countermeasures

The Germans did not sit idle and learned from the attack in April at Berry-au-Bac and the earlier British attack with tanks on the Somme. Moreover, the gathering of information through interrogation of prisoners, spies and aerial reconnaissance has continued. The Germans are aware of the fact that tanks will be deployed during the next attack. The French have also leaked, through special agents, that the tanks will be used on the front of Vauxaillon. Because of this disinformation one hopes to put the enemy on the wrong foot.

The Germans therefore take into account the tanks and from the pen of Ludendorff a piece that contains the tactical defense against tanks. In short, it means that all artillery must fire on the tanks as soon as they are in sight. Most tanks will then be destroyed or put out of action before they reach the German trenches. The individual who still succeeds by infantry guns of resp. 3.5 and 5 cm must be put out of action. These pieces have a special grenade made for this purpose. So the first anti-tank grenade. Furthermore, the Germans have equipped machine gun nests which are specifically intended for anti-tank work. These machine guns have special ammunition which is indicated by the letters SMK (Spitz-Munition mit Kern). These machine gun nests are located in both the first lines and further to the rear in the so-

called 'Riegel Stellungen'. On October 13, 1917, ten days before the French attack, General von Friedeburg of the 2nd Guards Division once again pointed out his danger to the tanks and gave precise orders to combat this weapon. He also tried to put the troops at ease by pointing to the superiority of German anti-tank weapons.

▲ The offensive of October 23, 1917

The attack started in a dense fog that did not put the German observers on the map. The fire baptism of the St. Chamond tanks did not meet all expectations. This was already clear from the low mobility of the tank, which made the progress very slow. AS-31 made a reasonable contribution east of the caves of Fruty, AS-33 was plagued by failures and its services to the infantry were labeled "dark".

The Schneiders did better. In particular AS-11 and AS-8 on the front of the 13th Division played a crucial role on the plateau that controls Vaudesson. Especially AS-11 distinguished itself by practically taking the plateau and even purifying it from opposition without the loss of a single tank by enemy fire or breakdown. The tank that was equipped with a radio also exceeded expectations. Messages were received and sent throughout the action.

Also AS-8, on the front of the 43rd Infantry Division, did a fantastic job. Her task was to take the hill east of the village of Chauvignon, which was three kilometers from the German lines. This happened as planned and several machine gun turns were turned off. The road for the infantry was easily paved.



From left to right: a Schneider tank on a tank low loader - an overview of the battlefield at La Malmaison - Schneider tanks lined up for the attack

The last group of Schneider tanks, AS-12, had the task of encircling the caves of Bohéry and the old fort of La Malmaison. These two German resistance nests are taken by two squadrons of tanks and accompanying infantry. Several tanks have suffered a breakdown after this action so they can no longer take part in the attack on

the second goal, the farm Orne.

No tanks were used on the front of the 66th Infantry Division. The advance here is considerably slower than at the points where the tanks are active. This shows the effectiveness of the new weapon. The success of the day is complete and the losses of the Artillery Spéciale are light: 20 killed and 62 wounded.

▲ **A complete victory**

Well prepared, with realistic goals and no idiotic ambitions as in April, the La Malmaison offensive is a complete success. The Germans lose 50,000 men, of whom 15,000 are prisoners, 200 guns, 700 machine guns and are forced to evacuate the Chemin des Dames. The French lost 2,241 victims, 1,602 missing, 8,162 wounded and treated. This means 4.10% of the soldiers and 4.25% of the officers who participated in the attack. These figures are extremely low compared to other attacks. A total of 12 French divisions took part in this offensive and they took advantage of 70% of the machine guns and mortars and 45% of the guns compared to the loot of the five French and British armies between 9 April and the end of May 1917!

Later they asked Pétain why he had not immediately marched to Laon. His answer to this was that that was not the purpose of the operation. The purpose of the operation was to restore the morale of French troops. This was excellent because after the Battle of La Malmaison no case of disobedience has occurred in the French army.

The tanks had proven their effectiveness. On 14 November 1917 Pétain wrote to the Ministry of Armaments: "The use of the tanks on 23 October led to the success of the action and gave the troops confidence in the use of these machines."

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(with thanks to Aris de Bruijn - [WFA Netherlands](#))

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