

Orders at Sedan 1940

by Brendan B. McBreen

On 10 May 1940, the German Army invaded France. The lead German divisions punctured the French frontier defenses at **Sedan** and then raced to the English Channel. In ten days, the Germans surrounded the French and British armies in Belgium. British units evacuated the continent at Dunkirk and the French Army surrendered on 22 June.

In combat, German orders were short, and often verbal, because map exercises and unit rehearsals had embedded in all ranks a shared understanding of the mission. Rapid orders made German units more flexible and responsive than their French opponents.

One-hundred-thirty-five German divisions invaded France. In the center, Army Group A was the main effort with 45 divisions, including seven of the new *Panzer* Divisions. The Panzer Division was not a pure tank division, but a balanced combined-arms formation of four tank battalions and four infantry battalions, supported by artillery, anti-tank, engineer, and reconnaissance battalions, with every unit motorized for rapid movement across all terrain. The Germans had only ten Panzer Divisions in 1940. The remainder of the Army, except for eight other motorized divisions, used horse-drawn transport. Over one hundred divisions *walked* into France.

The German Army was weaker than its opponents. The French and British had 151 divisions to the German's 135. The French had 4000 tanks to the German's 2500, plus more, and better quality, artillery and aircraft. The advantage the German Army did have was tactics—a flexible combined-arms doctrine executed by well-trained commanders.

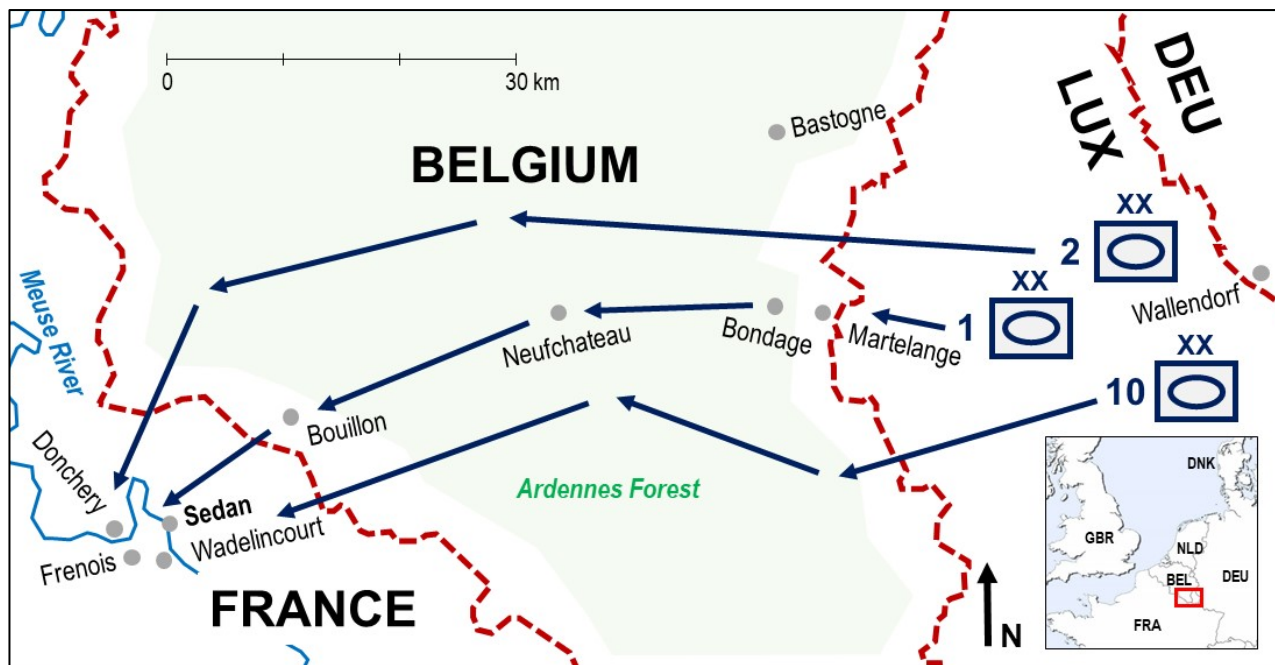


Figure 1. XIX Panzer Corps' advance into France, 10–13 May 1940.

The tip of the spear, the armored main effort of the German invasion force, was the 1st, 2d, and 10th Panzer Divisions of General Heinz Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps. See Figure 1. These divisions cut through the densely wooded Ardennes forest—navigating narrow roads and crossing multiple rivers—to converge on Sedan at the French border.

10 May 1940. At 0530¹, the **1st Panzer Division**, the main effort of XIX Corps, attacked into Luxembourg from Wallendorf, Germany. Five hours later, after crossing Luxembourg, they invaded Belgium and fought through Belgian defenders at both Martelange and Bondage. On the first day of operations, they moved for 23 hours.

11 May. Between noon and 1500 on the second day, the 1st Panzer Division attacked Neufchateau, Belgium. At 1700, the Division routed the French defenders at Bouillon, Belgium. In two days, the division had moved 100 km to the French border.

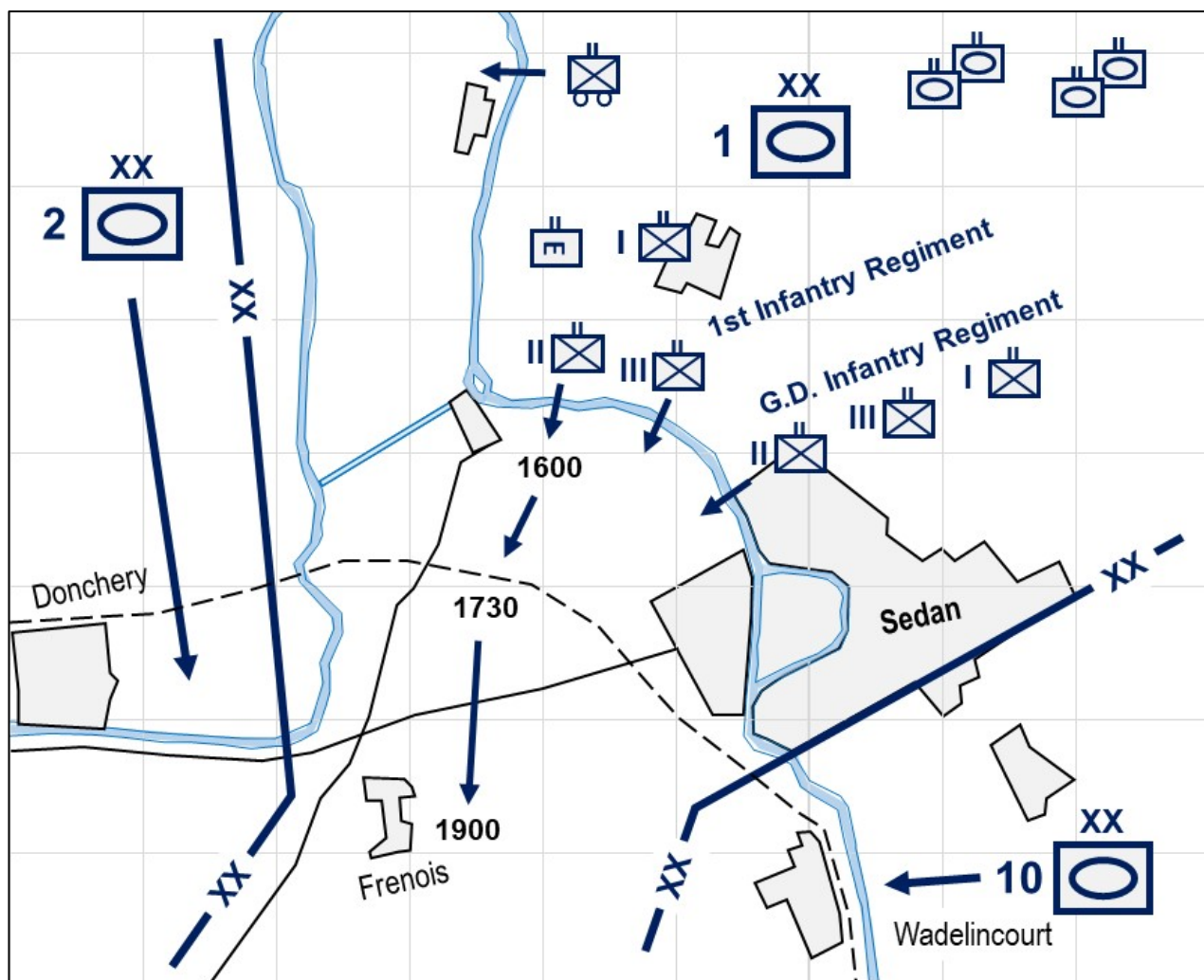


Figure 2. Main effort: II Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment (of the 1st Panzer Division) crosses the Meuse, 13 May 1940.

12 May. The 1st Panzer Division crossed the French border and advanced toward Sedan. At the Meuse River, a strong natural obstacle reinforced by a fortified line of cement bunkers, they found that the French had destroyed the bridges. The river was 55

meters wide and unfordable. On the far side, the *French 55th Division* opened fire. General Guderian ordered a three-division river crossing to start at 1600 the next day.

13 May. In the morning hours, while under French fire, the 1st Panzer Division staged equipment and assault units, and positioned late-arriving artillery battalions. From 1000–1600, an extended series of German air strikes suppressed the French artillery and damaged the morale of the French soldiers in their bunkers. Approaching H-Hour, a German artillery barrage enabled the engineers and infantry to advance to the river's edge with their boats. LtCol Hermann Balck's 1st Infantry Regiment, the Division main effort, had been assigned a crossing site northwest of Sedan. See Figure 2.

1600. While tanks and heavy weapons on the near shore suppressed the far side, and air and artillery rained down on the deeper French positions, combat engineers ferried the infantry of II Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment² across the Meuse River. III Battalion crossed at a parallel location. To the east, the II Battalion of the Gross Deutschland Infantry Regiment rowed across the river under fire. Over 100 rubber boats and small craft were used to move soldiers, weapons, motorcycles, anti-tank guns, and supplies.

1730. On the far side, LtCol Balck's infantry aggressively assaulted individual bunkers while the French fought back with machineguns and indirect fire. German air strikes supported infantry attacks. Some bunkers were bypassed in order to maintain the momentum of the attack and the railroad line was secured at 1730 (McGrath, 2013, p. 60). North, at the bend in the river, the Division's motorcycle infantry battalion used a separate site to move their soldiers and motorbikes across the river.

1900. LtCol Balck's infantry units seized the village of Frenois and linked up with units of the Gross Deutschland Infantry Regiment, creating a three-kilometer gap in the French defenses between Frenois and Wadelincourt. Their focus now was on expanding and deepening this penetration before the French could counterattack.

By **2030**, five infantry battalions and one motorcycle battalion of the 1st Panzer Division—but no tanks or vehicles—were across the Meuse River (Doughty, 1990, p. 151). This successful penetration enabled both the 2d and 10th Panzer Divisions on each flank to finally cross the river. Daylight crossings at Donchery had been repulsed by French artillery and bunker fire, and the Wadelincourt crossings suffered near-catastrophic failure with 81 of 96 boats disabled by French fire (Gerges, 2013, p. 135).

Engineers established raft ferries at 2020 and 2040 to bring artillery and vehicles across the river. Shortly after midnight, a 16-ton pontoon bridge was completed, which enabled tanks and heavy reconnaissance vehicles to cross. (Doughty, 1990, p. 152). See Figure 3.

14 May. The next morning, a series of poorly-coordinated French counterattacks were repulsed. With 300 armored vehicles and one artillery battalion on the south side of the

Meuse, the Panzer Divisions now expanded their bridgehead and pushed west and south. The XIX Panzer Corps had punched a hole in the “impenetrable” French defensive line and follow-on German forces began to surge into France.



Figure 3. The Meuse, May 1940. German infantry cross in rubber boats, while tanks and vehicles use a pontoon bridge.

Timing of Orders

The night before the river crossing, **XIX Corps** issued a warning order at **1750**. It was short—five paragraphs and 200 words—and essentially said: “Execute crossing according to map exercise” (McGrath, 2013, p. 59).

At a map exercise on 7 February, and another on 14 February, General Guderian had evaluated multiple courses of action to cross the Meuse River (Doughty, 1990, p. 78). On 21 March, at a wargame at Koblenz, the Corps had written a practice order directing three divisions to cross the Meuse at three sites—Donchery, Sedan, and Wadelincourt. Each division had also written a river-crossing order (Doughty, 1990, pp. 39, 137). In addition to defining tasks, crossing sites, assembly areas, and support-by-fire positions, these orders established pre-planned targets for air and artillery coordination.

The **1st Panzer Division** issued a terse warning order less than one hour later, at **1845** (McGrath, 2013, p. 59). Units were told to execute the order used in the map exercise, with the same tasks and targets, but with an updated schedule.

The **1st Infantry Regiment** issued their warning order later that night, but it was not received by II Battalion, their leading unit, until **0230** (Doughty, 1990, p. 137). Delays were caused by the confusion of units moving towards their assembly areas in the dark.

The next morning, the 13th, the day of the assault, a written **XIX Corps** operation order was issued at **0815** (Doughty, 1990, p. 138). It was two and a half pages long (McGrath, 2013, p. 59), or nine pages with the fire support annex (Gerges, 2013, p. 142). Most of the details again referenced “the wargame and rehearsals.” One division, the 10th, did not receive this order until **1200** (Doughty, 1990, p. 153).

The **1st Panzer division** issued its crossing order at **1200**. It was five pages including the artillery plan and timetable (McGrath, 2013, p. 59). H-Hour was **1600**, four hours away.

During the next four hours, the verbal orders of the regimental and battalion commanders, and then the orders of the companies, platoons, and squads, were short and to the point. Each echelon had less than one hour. Orders depended on trained leaders with well-understood unit SOPs, thorough preparation, and prior rehearsals.

Orders at Sedan 1940: Lessons Learned

- 1. Task-organize first.** Commanders organize their forces differently for each specific mission. Before the order, define the task organization, which in turn, dictates the command relationships and the communications plan.

In the spring of 1940, the German invasion plan went through multiple versions. Each change was essentially a shift in the task organization of the entire Army.

German divisions re-organized daily, creating ad hoc combined-arms battle groups, *kampfgruppen*, to meet the requirements of that day's mission. Units were trained to task-organize on the fly based on oral orders—assembling a new battle group, switching radio nets, and then immediately going into combat. The French Army, with methodical orders processes and doctrinal organizations, was far less flexible.

- 2. Weight the main effort.** Commanders ruthlessly concentrate combat power in the main effort. *Punch, don't slap*. Reinforce the unit that will accomplish the mission and sacrifice everywhere else. Economy of force decisions are difficult because you are allocating less assets and more risk to most of your subordinates. See Figure 4.

The German invasion plan massed seven of ten panzer divisions and three motorized divisions in Army Group A, the main effort, and aimed them at a weak point in the French defenses in the Ardennes. Guderian's XIX Corps had *three* panzer divisions.

The 1st Panzer Division was a strong unit. See Figures 5 and 6. To ensure the success of this main effort, Guderian attached the Gross Deutschland Infantry Regiment to the Division. More importantly, he massed additional artillery, directing the heavy artillery battalions of both the 2d and 10th Panzer Divisions, as well as five battalions of Corps artillery, to shoot in support of the 1st Panzer Division. See Figure 7.

The 1st Infantry Regiment, the lead assault unit, was reinforced with heavy weapons for suppression—an anti-tank battery, an assault gun battery, and a tank company.

The importance of weighting the main effort can be seen by the results. Of the six regimental-sized crossing sites, only two succeeded—the two crossings of the main effort 1st Panzer Division. The 2d Panzer Division was repulsed at two sites and the 10th Panzer Division failed at their two sites, except for a small group of engineers.

The reinforced 1st Panzer Division attacked a critical vulnerability in the enemy's fortified line. The *French 55th Division* was a reserve division with older soldiers, little training, and poor morale. Under tremendous pressure, they panicked and collapsed.



Figure 4. Main effort. The force of the hammer, dispersed, versus the same force, concentrated at a single point.

3. **Rehearse.** Commanders rehearse. *A good rehearsal is better than a good operation order.* Conduct map exercises and unit rehearsals to guarantee understanding among your leaders. This builds SOPs, increases momentum, and shortens the orders process.

Guderian's XIX Corps used wargames to examine multiple courses of action in the months leading up to the invasion. The 1st Panzer Division wrote a practice order to cross the Meuse during a map exercise. Every unit understood the concept of operations and knew their specific tasks: infantry, artillery, engineer, and support-by-fire weapons units. Coordination with air support—and numbered lists of pre-planned targets—had been rehearsed and adjusted. At the river, these preparations enabled very short orders: “Just like the rehearsal!”

4. **Limit control measures.** Commanders emphasize tactical simplicity. Establish fewer control measures to reduce confusion and avoid mistakes. Fewer control measures increases the speed of the orders process. Excessive intermediate objectives cause units to pause, regroup, report, and restart.

German divisions assigned sectors instead of terrain-based objectives which were thought to slow momentum and inhibit initiative. Specific route objectives were understood to be aiming points, not end-states. Importantly, sectors would be violated when a local commander through that the combat situation required it.

5. **Focus on the task at hand.** Commanders issue orders for the current mission. Avoid issuing long orders that attempt to script a series of future events in detail.

Because they knew that no plan survives contact with the enemy and because they were comfortable issuing rapid orders whenever needed, the Germans issued short orders focused on the immediate task.

The 1st Panzer Division's order for the first day of the invasion covered only their movement through Luxembourg and Belgium. After that, they knew, the enemy would affect their decisions and direction. There were no phases, just new orders. "The operation was envisaged as one continuous move. Unlike the French method, the phases were not separate and distinct moves" (Doughty, 1990, p. 163).

The Division order for the river crossing was issued within sight of the river so that the order would correspond to the current situation. After the river crossing, General Guderian did not issue the order for the breakout until he could evaluate how the enemy had responded to the penetration.

- 6. Speed the orders process.** Commanders understand how their orders affect the orders process from top to bottom. Do not issue elaborate orders that take too much time to produce and disseminate, and rob your subordinates of their own planning time. Fast orders increase momentum at each echelon and deny the enemy time to respond. To shorten your orders process, issue concise orders, rehearse, limit control measures, and focus only on the task at hand. Four echelons of headquarters planning four phases of operations takes days—days of deadly delay.

On 13 May 1940, the 1st Panzer Division issued their river-crossing order four hours prior to H-Hour. Verbal orders were then passed from regiment to battalion, company, platoon, and squad, in less than one hour each.

German orders were short and direct, and mostly verbal. Leaders understood that the order was only one part of the process. Unlike the French Army's ponderous written orders process, German orders were acted upon in minutes, having been conceived and issued in minutes.

The Germans ordered *less*. They provided maximum freedom of action to their subordinates. Mission-oriented tasks enabled forward subordinates make decisions on-scene according to circumstances. "French officers obeyed their superiors to a far greater degree than did the Germans" (Doughty, 1990, p. 327). The Germans expected independent officers, like Guderian and Balck, to speed through the orders process and then lead by example to direct and drive their men under fire.

Notes

- ¹ All times are German time, which was one hour later than the local French time. Some historical accounts—Bjorge, Mansoor, McGrath, Shanahan—use German time, while others—Doughty, Gerges—use French.
- ² The Germans used Roman numerals for battalions, so 'II.1 IR' is '2d Battalion, 1st Infantry Regiment.'

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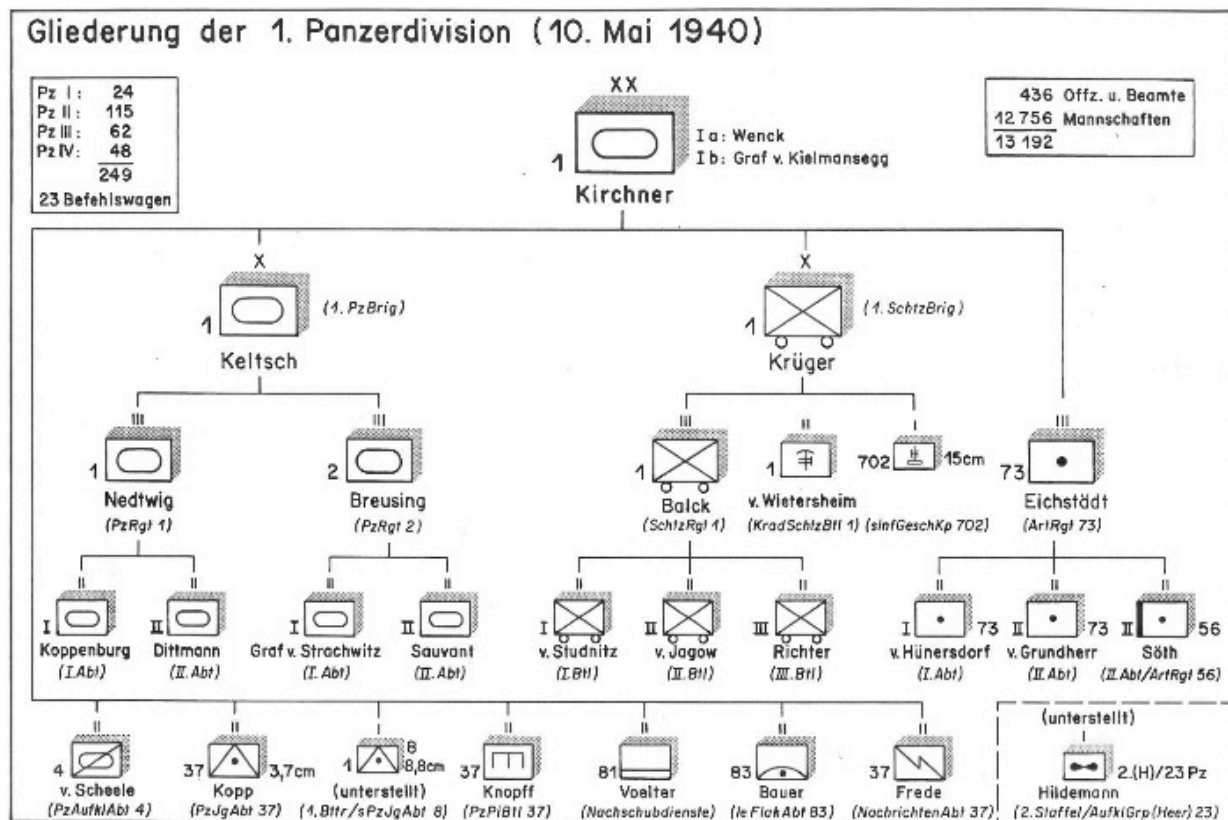


Figure 5. Organization of the 1st Panzer Division, 10 May 1940. Source: Rothbrust (1990).

1st Panzer Division
 SEDAN, FRA
 13 1200A MAY 1940

ANNEX A: Task Organization

1st Panzer Division (REIN)

BrigGen Friedrich KIRCHNER

4th Panzer Reconnaissance Bn
 37th Anti-Tank Bn (3.7 cm)
 37th Engineer Bn
 37th Signal Bn
 83rd Anti-Aircraft Bn
 81st Supply Bn

Maj von SCHEELE
 LtCol Arthur KOPP
 LtCol Fritz KNOPFF
 Maj August FREDE
 BAUER
 VOELTER

1st Infantry Brigade

Col Walter KRUGER

1st Infantry Regiment (REIN)

I.1 IR (I Bn, 1st Infantry Regiment)
 II.1 IR (II Bn, 1st Infantry Regiment)
 III.1 IR (III Bn, 1st Infantry Regiment)

LtCol Hermann BALCK
 von STUDNITZ
 Maj von JAGOW
 RICHTER

+ 8th Co, II Bn, 1st PzR (Mk IV 75 mm)
 + 1st Battery, 8th Heavy AT Bn (8.8 cm)
 + 660th Assault Gun Battery (75 mm)

702nd Heavy Infantry Weapons Co (105mm)
 1st Motorcycle Bn

Maj Wend von WIETERSHEIM (WIA)

+ Gross Deutschland Infantry Regiment

LtCol Graf von SCHWERIN

1st Panzer Brigade

Col Karl KELTSCH (WIA)

1st Panzer Regiment (26 Pz I, 49 Pz II, 28 Pz III, 20 Pz IV, 4 PzBef)

I.1 PzR (I Bn, 1st Panzer Regiment)
 II.1 PzR (II Bn, 1st Panzer Regiment) (-)

LtCol Johannes NEDTWIG
 LtCol KOPPENBURG
 LtCol Bruno DITTMANN

2nd Panzer Regiment (26 Pz I, 49 Pz II, 30 Pz III, 20 Pz IV, 4 PzBef)

I.2 PzR (I Bn, 2d Panzer Regiment)
 II.2 PzR (II Bn, 2d Panzer Regiment)

LtCol Hero BREUSING
 Graf von STRACHWITZ
 SAUVANT

73rd Artillery Regiment (REIN)

I.73d Artillery (12 x 105 mm)
 II.73d Artillery (12 x 105 mm)
 II.56th Heavy Artillery (III.73 AR) (12 x 150 mm)

Col Max EICHSTADT
 von HUNERSDORF
 von GRUNDHERR
 SOTH

+ II.45th Heavy Artillery (III.74 AR), 2d Pz Div (8 x 150 mm, 4 x 100 mm)
 + I.105th Heavy Artillery (III.90 AR), 10th Pz Div (8 x 150 mm, 4 x 100 mm)

+ **49th Artillery Regiment**, Pz Gp Kleist

I.49th Artillery (12 x 105 mm)
 II.49th Artillery (12 x 105 mm)
 II.69th Heavy Artillery (12 x 150 mm)

+ 616th Heavy Artillery Bn, XIX Corps (8 x 210 mm Mortars)
 + Rocket Bn, Panzer Group Kleist (108 x 210 mm Rockets)

+ 43d Assault Engineer Bn, XIX Corps
 + 505th Engineer Bn (Bridge), XIX Corps

Figure 6. Organization of the 1st Panzer Division, 13 May 1940.

Weighting the Main Effort

OKH
BERLIN
01 1600A MAY 1940

ANNEX A: Task Organization to Operation YELLOW

OKH: High Command of the Armed Army

Gen Walter von BRAUCHITSCH

ME: Army Group A: 45 Divisions—7 Panzer, 3 Motorized, 35 Infantry

ColGen K.R. Gerd von RUNDSTEDT

ME: 12th Army: 17 Divisions—5 Panzer, 3 Motorized, 9 Infantry

Gen Sigmund Wilhelm von LIST

ME: Panzer Group Kleist: 8 Divisions—5 Panzer, 3 Motorized

ColGen Ewald von KLEIST

ME: XIX Panzer Corps: 3 Divisions

Gen Heinz GUDERIAN

ME: 1st Panzer Division (REIN)

BrigGen Friedrich KIRCHNER

ME: 1st Infantry Brigade

Col Walter KRUGER

ME: 1st Infantry Regiment (REIN)

LtCol Hermann BALCK

I, II, III + Tank Co + AT Battery + AG Battery

702d Heavy Infantry Weapons Co (105mm)

1st Motorcycle Bn

+ **Gross Deutschland Infantry Regiment, XIX Corps**

LtCol Graf von SCHWERIN

I, II, III, Weapons

1st Panzer Brigade

1st Panzer Regiment: I, II

2nd Panzer Regiment: I, II

Col Karl KELTSCH

LtCol Johannes NEDTWIG

LtCol Hero BREUSING

73rd Artillery Regiment (REIN)

I, II, III + Bn 2d Pz Div + Bn 10th Pz Div

Col Max EICHSTADT

+ **49th Artillery Regiment, XIX Corps**

I, II, III + Bn XIX Corps + Rocket Bn

2d Panzer Division (-)

10th Panzer Division (-)

MajGen Rudolf VEIEL

MajGen Ferdinand SCHAAL

XLI Panzer Corps: 3 Divisions

XIV Motorized Corps: 2 Divisions

Gen Georg-Hans REINHARDT

Gen Gustav von WIETERSHEIM

XVIII Corps: 3 Divisions

III Corps: 3 Divisions

VI Corps: 3 Divisions

Gen Eugen BEYER

Gen Curt HAASE

Gen Otto FOERSTER

4th Army: 4 Corps

16th Army: 3 Corps

Gen Guenther Hans von KLUGE

Gen Ernst BUSCH

Army Group B: 29 Divisions—3 Panzer, 2 Motorized, 1 Cavalry, 23 Infantry

18th Army: 3 Corps

6th Army: 6 Corps

Gen Fedor von BOCK

Gen Georg von KUCHLER

Gen Walter von REICHENAU

Army Group C: 19 Divisions

1st Army: 4 Corps

7th Army: 2 Corps

Gen Wilhelm Ritter von LEEB

Gen WITZLEBEN

Gen DOLLMANN

Reserve Army: 42 Divisions

9th Army

2nd Army

Gen Johannes BLASKOWITZ

Gen Maximilian von WEICHS

On 13 May 1940 on the Meuse River, **LtCol Balck** led the ME of the Division that formed the ME of the Corps that formed the ME of the Panzer Group that was the ME of the Army that was the ME of the Army Group that was the ME of the German Army in France.

1st Panzer Division, reinforced by artillery from its two sister divisions, and the independent artillery of XIX Corps, **controlled 236 artillery pieces** from ten artillery battalions, *ten times* the amount of its two sister divisions at 24 tubes each (Rothbrust, 1990).

Figure 7. Weighting the main effort of the German invasion force, France, 1940.