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Panzer III Vs Somua S 35: Belgium 1940 (Duel)



Synopsis

This fully illustrated study pits Germany's PzKpfw III tank against France's Somua S 35 in the vast armored battles that opened the campaign. The armor clashes in May 1940 were the biggest the world had yet seen, as the German advances of that period came to epitomize Blitzkrieg. Nonetheless the Wehrmacht's Panzer III was well matched by the French Somua S35; the two representing very different design philosophies and yet ranking among the best designs in the world at the time.

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Customer Reviews

Steven J. Zaloga received his BA in History from Union College and his MA from Columbia University. He has worked as an analyst in the aerospace industry for over two decades, covering missile systems and the international arms trade, and has served with the Institute for Defense Analyses, a federal think tank. He is the author of numerous books on military technology and military history, focusing on the US Army in World War II as well as Russia and the former Soviet Union. The author lives in Abingdon, MD.

Osprey's Duel #63, Panzer III vs Somua S35 by Steven Zaloga, promises to be an excellent title on armored matchups in the early WWII period. It comes with all the Osprey color plates and period photos we come to expect from them. Author Zaloga Begins with the design and development of each machine as well as the doctrinal assumptions each vehicle was built under. He then moves on

to the technical specifications of each vehicle as well as crew layout and tasks. It's pretty obvious that the Somua is the better tank in terms of armor and firepower, but the Panzer III is designed with a three-man turret with the commander having no task but to observe and order actions by his subordinate. The Somua commander in the one-and-one-half turret loses the ability to command once the action starts because he's also loader and gunner. The book then looks at the combatants by profiling Heinrich Eberbach, commander of PzRgt 35 of 4th Panzer Div. and Jean Touzet Du Vigier, commander of 2e Cuirassiers. The book lays out the different units, panzer vs French mechanized cavalry as well as their composition and doctrine. The author then gets to the "meat of the action" by starting with a brief description of the strategic situation and then moves to first contact, several days of battle, French retreats and German advances. Zaloga then looks at the results and makes his conclusions. The author points out that both units accomplished their missions. The French mechanized cavalry was expected to screen the powerful armies coming up behind them while the German in Army Group B were to attack the Low Countries to lure the Allies northward into Belgium so Army Group A coming through the Ardennes could advance and cut the Allies off from France behind them. There's precious little Panzer III vs Somua S35 action in this book. It's there but pretty brief. Even so, the author gives a good idea of these initial combats between German and French machines. It's a good book on French vs German armor but I have to remove a star for the dearth of combat between the featured antagonists. A solid four stars.

This title compares the Panzer III F, the best medium tank on the German side in May 1940, against its closest counterpart among the French, the SOMUA S 35. The basic statistics strongly favored the S-35, with its thicker armor and more powerful 47 mm gun. The S-35 could easily penetrate the Panzer III's frontal armor at battle ranges, whereas the Panzer III had to maneuver for a flank shot with its inadequate 37mm gun. The two tanks were comparable in speed. Even in radio communication - a weakness among other French tanks - there was little to choose; both types were equipped with receivers on most tanks, while only platoon/company command tanks had transmitters. The main weakness of the S-35 was, in the author's words, "wretched ergonomic design of the turret." The tank commander had to aim and fire the gun, aided only partly by a loader who had to duck to avoid taking an expelled cartridge in the face when the gun was fired. This analysis is penetrating and informative, especially the sections on design and development and the combatants. Did you know there was an assault gun version of the S-35 planned with a 75-mm gun, roughly comparable to the German Sturmgeschütz III? Or that the French DLM (light mechanized division) was better at tank/infantry cooperation than a panzer division, both in organization and

practice, at this stage of the war? It leaves the reader room for speculation about how armored warfare might have developed on the western front had the astonishingly sudden Allied disaster of May-June, 1940 been averted. This title gives a decent summary of the fighting in the so-called "Gembloux Gap" of eastern Belgium, where the French successfully delayed the German advance, an accomplishment tarnished somewhat since the main German effort was really a few miles south in the Ardennes. As the author notes, both sides could claim victory. The French fought firmly; there was none of the "tank panic" in eastern Belgium as happened near Sedan. The author fails, however, to give the kind of minute-by-minute detailed analysis of a face-to-face engagement between the opponents that is normally the best feature of the "duel" series. In places the Gembloux fighting descends into a dull recitation of events with little of the detail and insight so richly provided earlier in the text. Still, this is well-illustrated, well-diagrammed, and informative with insights not available in other sources; a short and readable page-turner for tank addicts.

Once again Osprey Publishing comes thru. Despite the small size, the book contains enough information to satisfy the reader. It also goes a long way in explaining the reasons why the French armored forces failed to stem the Germans despite having technically superior tanks. However, poor ergonomics and a lack of time to develop or modify tactical doctrine were the greatest failings of the French. A great companion piece to the book Panzer IV vs Char Bis! And has me looking forward to the Panzer II vs. 7TP and the Panzer IV vs. Sherman coming next year.

Excellent

another great book in this series, Zaloga knows his stuff and the illustrations are really good. I wish he would make one of 38t vs bt- or 38t vs Hotchkiss or Renault R-35.

An accurate narrative of the first tank versus tank battle and a well-presented technological picture of the Panzer III and Somua S35.

Good treatment of both tanks, giving strong points and weaknesses. Also battle reports of in-action scenarios. Great addition to any armor library.

Excellent

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