Check for updates

Original Article

WAR IN HISTORY

War in History
1–22
© The Author(s) 2025

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/09683445251329056
journals.sagepub.com/home/wih


Au Contact: French Infantry Tactics in the Maginot Line Advance Posts During the Phoney War, 4 September 1939 to 10 May 1940*

Kevin Passmore
Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Abstract

Historians' preoccupation with explaining why France lost the Battle of France in May and June 1940 obscures worthwhile histories that are not relevant to the outcome. Generalisation from the battle on the Meuse, where elite German units faced poor French forces, exaggerates the superiority of German troops' mission-oriented tactics relative to the top-down 'methodical' tactics of the French. This article shows that French infantry tactics were the object of permanent politicised controversy, and that in the course of patrolling and skirmishing in the no-man's-land between French and German fortifications, the French substantially modified their tactics and organisation.

Keywords

Maginot Line, France, phoney war, infantry, military doctrine

In recent decades, historical explanations of the French defeat of 1940 have shifted away from armoured Blitzkrieg towards the superiority of German infantry tactics.[1] These

* This article draws upon, but does not reproduce, material presented in Kevin Passmore, The Maginot Line. A New History (Yale University Press: London, 2025).

1 Compare, for instance Robert Doughty, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine 1919-1939* (Hamden, Conn: Archen, 1985), pp. 3–9 with Robert A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, Conn: Stackpole, 1990), pp. 343–47; Karl-Heinz Frieser, *The Blitzkrieg Legend: The 1940 Campaign in the West*,

Corresponding Author:
Kevin Passmore, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK.
Email: Passmore@cardiff.ac.uk

interpretations highlight the Wehrmacht's combination of infiltration by elite assault infantry and pioneers, the *Stoßtruppen,* with the latitude allowed to subordinate commanders to decide how to complete their missions – the doctrine later known as *Auftragstaktik*. These tactics are contrasted favourably with the French 'methodical doctrine', embodied in the 1921 'Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités' (IPGU), which stressed top-down command in a 'conducted battle'. Defensively, methodical doctrine meant continuous fronts, in which breaches were to be 'sealed off' (colmaté) before counterattack. Offensively, it prescribed 'methodical' advance in short bounds; the Great War supposedly taught that artillery conquered ground, the infantry (supported by tanks) occupied it.

It can hardly be denied that elite assault troops played a decisive role in breaching French defences on the Meuse, thus permitting armoured forces to head to the Channel to encircle the Allied armies that had entered Belgium. It is equally undeniable that French infantry proved no match for the Germans in defensive combat at Sedan or in the near-encounter battle downstream on the Belgian stretch of the river.

Yet viewing French tactics uniquely in the light of the outcome of the campaign leads to generalisation from the unequal combat on the Meuse and thus obscures their complex history. Indeed, the tactical level has been neglected to the extent that the basic unit, the infantry combat group, is rarely, if ever, mentioned in histories of French doctrine or of the 1940 campaign.

A more nuanced understanding of French tactics may take its cue from research on the German side. Marco Sigg argues that what was later called Auftragstaktik often covered the disobedience of divisional and corps commanders, notably Generals Heinz Guderian and Erwin Rommel, in a politicised power struggle against the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW).[2] Although Sigg does not descend to the tactical level with which this article is concerned, attentiveness to conflict complicates understanding of tactical doctrine on the French side. This article argues that while the IPGU and defensiveness more generally were real constraints, they did not wholly determine tactical doctrine and practice. This article shifts the object of enquiry away from explaining the defeat towards the history of tactics.

The first part explores the long-running and widespread politicised dispute in the army concerning the related questions of devolved command and the place of elite units in tactical doctrine. Debate began in the 1900s and intensified during the Great War. Afterwards, new weapons, observation of German tactics, albeit viewed through stereotypes, the discontent of ordinary officers with defensive 'industrial warfare' and sometimes attraction to voluntarist philosophy and pseudoscience modified the debate. The place of combat groups in the 1921 IPGU already represented a compromise between opposed positions. The 1936 definitive *Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des grandes*

trans. John T. Greenwood (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2005), pp. 336-9; Douglas Porch, *Defeat and Division. France at War 1939-42* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 143–48; Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 221; Ladislas Mysyrowicz, *Autopsie d'une Défaite. Origines de l'effondrement Militaire Français de 1940.* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1973), pp. 21–2.

2 Marco Sigg, *Der Unterführer als Feldherr im Taschenformat: Theorie und Praxis der Auftragstaktik im deutschen Heer 1869 bis 1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2014), pp. 229–52.

unités (IGU), shifted further towards initiative and manoeuvre, without eliminating methodical doctrine or structural constraints.

The second part of the article examines the tactics employed on the Maginot Line outposts during the phoney war. Insofar as they notice this conflict, historians have exaggerated French defeats.[3] They perhaps give too much credit to General André Beaufre, a staff officer in 1940, who claimed that 'we came off worst because our men, numbed by static warfare, had to face alert and fanaticised Germans brought from the rear in automobiles'.[4] Conflict was certainly deadly. My calculations suggest that at least 1,385 men were killed in action on the Franco-German frontier from 3 September 1939 to 9 May.[5] Particularly revealing is that from the end of the Saarland offensive on 16 October to 9 May, around 540 men were killed in Moselle, where the majority of clashes between patrols happened. Given that French and German forces faced each other on equal footing, this conflict promises revealing comparisons between French and German tactics.

We shall see that the French brought differing degrees of familiarity with the various regulations, stereotypical views of the enemy and various civilian and service backgrounds to this conflict. And thanks to initiatives from above and below, the army, despite much opposition, partially abandoned opposition to elite units and accepted greater latitude for tactical groups.

Combat Groups and Devolved Command

Before 1914, some officers argued that the Boer and Russo-Japanese Wars demonstrated the necessity of devolving command to small groups using the terrain for cover. The high command resisted innovation, for it considered that its doctrine of all-out offensive required officers to provide strong leadership so that men concentrated against the point of effort. In August 1914, soldiers paid dearly for mass assaults without prior reconnaissance or artillery support. Consequently, they spontaneously dispersed into less-vulnerable smaller groups. Devolved command meant many things, including, for instance, the right of colonels to call down artillery support. Here, the focus is on the infantry platoon (section) and below. Since it was impossible in the dispersed, noisy modern battlefield for lieutenants directly to command an entire platoon, he normally led the most important group, leaving the others to junior lieutenants and NCOs, even to corporals, who in the French army lacked the legal status of 'under-officer'. Assault in close ranks gave way to fire-and-move tactics. In September 1916, the Grand Quartier Général (GQG)

3 Jean-Yves Mary and Alain Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages de la Ligne Maginot*, vol. 3 (Paris: Histoire et collections, 2003), pp. 34–5.

4 André Beaufre, *1940: The Fall of France*, trans. Desmond Flower (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 147.

5 The Mémoire des hommes database gives the total number of soldiers known to have died in the three frontier departments or in Germany from 3 September 1939 to 9 May 1940 as 2003. Because determining cause of death requires examining individual fiches, I sampled each department, to determine the proportion of those killed in action. I used the weighted percentages to estimate total numbers killed. The total includes those men known to have died in Germany, minus the aviators among them.

conceded the division of platoons into half sections as part of a wider reform at division and regiment level designed to make the army more manipulable.[6]

Junior officers and NCOs also took the initiative in forming specialised reconnaissance and raiding units. They soon became an elite, an infringement of the long-standing principle that the best troops should be distributed through the entire army. Sergeant and member of parliament André Maginot was one of many who formed such units – he was seriously wounded in October 1914 during a patrol. These groups probed enemy positions to force them to reveal their fields of fire and captured prisoners in choreographed 'coups de main' [raids] supported by artillery. Famously, on 14 July 1918, a raid captured twenty-seven prisoners and other intelligence that permitted disruption of the imminent German offensive and counterattacks that ultimately brought victory. Among the most courageous participants was 'elite grenadier' Sergeant Joseph Darnand, who distinguished himself again in 1940.[7] Despite these innovations, the offensive remained orthodox at operational level until, in 1917, military disasters and mutinies shook the command system.

On 15 May, to restore the situation, the government appointed General Philippe Pétain commander in chief of French armies. He introduced a lasting compromise. On the one hand, he endorsed devolved command. A note of 10 September further divided the half section into two squads, one of riflemen and a light machine gun (LMG – fusil-mitrailleur) and grenade launchers, the other of riflemen and grenadiers. On the other hand, tactical groups were subject to rules designed to limit improvisation. Pétain's commitment to top-down command was reinforced by his interest in the management theories of Henri Fayol and F.W. Taylor, which had become influential in the war economy. They emphasised downwards transmission of orders through subordinates to soldiers who automatically performed limited tasks. To spare soldiers lives, Pétain adopted a defensive stance pending American reinforcement. He ordered continuous echeloned lines, the first lightly-held, then strong 'resistance lines' and third positions – a method copied from the Germans.[8]

Pétain, himself of peasant origin, rejected the formation of elite regiments resembling the German Stoßtruppen. In answer to a questionnaire, most officers continued to prefer dispersal of the elite through the army. For conservative officers, what they disparagingly called the 'crowd' [la foule] would not fight without firm command. The Left differed only in advocating a democratised officer and NCO corps recruited from the best elements of the 'people', thus forming the core of the 'armed nation' – a concept dating back to the conscripted armies of the revolutionary wars of the 1790s, which defended the nation against French aristocrats and their foreign allies. Pétain was no democrat, but since he owed his position to identification with the ordinary soldier, he opposed division of the army into elites and the rest. Pétain's position was seemingly vindicated in

6 Michel Goya, *La Chair et l'acier. L'armée française et l'invention de la guerre moderne (1914-1918)* (Paris: Tallandier, 2004), pp. 173–91, 382–84; Emmanuel Saint-Fuscien, *À vos ordres? La relation d'autorité dans l'armée française de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: EHESS, 2011), pp. 18–43.

7 Colonel Paoli, 'Le coup du main du 366e R.I. 14 juillet 1918', *Revue Historique des Armées*, XCIII (1968), pp. 51–60.

8 Goya, *La chair*, pp. 371–401; Elizabeth Greenhalgh, *The French Army and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 220–70; Guy Pedroncini, *Pétain, général en chef, 1917-1918* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1971), pp. 63–109.

1918, when German offensives faltered because their elite assault regiments were exhausted in French echeloned defences. Good average French units secured victory.[9]

In 1920–1921, Pétain, now vice-president of the Conseil Supérieur de la Guerre and therefore commander-in-chief designate, enshrined his compromise in the IPGU and associated manuals. The infantry regulations divided platoons into three combat groups, each with an LMG, which were forbidden to improvise. This disposition was suited to defending continuous fronts, but inhibited manoeuvrability since serving these weapons required several men.[10] The major new weapon of the period, the 1924/29 LMG did not cause a tactical re-think, for it enhanced firepower.

Yet however constrained they were, combat groups existed despite opposition of five of eight senior corps commanders consulted in 1925, who held that reserve NCOs were incapable of commanding them. The commission overrode corps commanders' preference for return of leadership to the platoon lieutenant, arguing that impending reforms of military structures (discussed below), would improve training and that stringent rules prevented improvisation.[11]

In 1929, new infantry regulations again endorsed combat groups and warned against initiative.[12] In that year, control appeared even more necessary because military service was reduced to one year plus reserve service to age forty-eight. To ensure command in this semi-militia, recruitment of career soldiers was increased from around 78,000 in 1930 to 115,000 in 1935; they were to be freed for training by having civilian auxiliaries take over routine administratione and by creating a professional Garde républicain mobile to take over the army's public order and forntier-guard duties.[13] For the Left, this professional core provided opportunities for the elite of the people. For the high command, it guaranteed firm command in the whole army.

Small-group combat was also central to the long debate over whether to defend the frontier with huge underground forts – *gros ouvrages* – or numerous small blockhouses. The debate was won by those who saw Taylorised gros ouvrages as better guarantors of command than dispersed blockhouses. The Commission de défense des frontières (Frontier Defence Committee), which drew up the plans, feared that in dispersed blockhouses, men would fight in 'little fractions' linked only by field telephones, whereas in large forts, they would always be under their officers' eyes.[14] From 1933, the conversion of some field into fortification regiments (Régiments d'infanterie de forteresse (RIFs)) also strengthened command at the expense of mobility. Aside from the small proportion

9 Pedroncini, *Pétain*, p. 79; Goya, *La chair*, pp. 380–83.

10 *Règlement provisoire de manoeuvre d'infanterie* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1920); *Instruction provisoire sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1921), p. 24; *Manuel du gradé d'infanterie* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1925), p. 28.

11 Duport to War Minister, 4 Sept. 1925, Service Historique de la Défense [hereafter SHD] 9N306/3.

12 In his *Le vainqueur ligoté: L'armée française des années 1920* (Paris: Kindle, 2020), Goya argues that the tactical lessons of the Great War were quickly forgotten.

13 Note sur la réorganisation, May 1925, SHD 1N27/7; for figures, 'Militaires de carrière..', 14 March 1935, SHD 7N2323/7.

14 'Rapport au ministre', 6 Nov. 1926, p. 55, SHD 1N28/8; 1 Aug. 1927, SHD 1N52/4; Procès-verbal, Commission de la défense des frontières, 25 May 1928, SHD 7N3796/6.

of men who served in the ouvrages and casements, they consisted largely of horse-drawn heavy-machine gun battalions, and were largely defensive.

Criticism of Industrial Warfare

Uniformed intellectuals from Emile Alléhaut through Lucien Souchon to Charles de Gaulle criticised the high command's 'defensive', 'industrial' and 'bureaucratic' doctrine. Practically, each of them disparaged short service, though only de Gaulle advocated a professional corps. In different ways, each condemned existing regulations in the name of heroic warfare. Souchon and de Gaulle drew on the philosophy of Henri Bergson, who held that only intuition, not rationalist science and rules, could grasp the flux of modern life. [15] These men were the most intellectual critics of the high command, but they were not isolated.

Most officers were less likely to read Bergson's difficult philosophy than to espouse the pseudo-science of radiesthesia, a sort of divining that used pendulums to detect movements of troops and natural forces. Army officers, along with priests, were in the forefront of radiesthesia 'research', and by 1939, it was allegedly the orthodoxy at the École de Guerre. General Gaston Prételat, commander on the Maginot Line, persuaded the army to resume enquiry into radiesthesia, and during the phoney war distributed the names of practitioners to his subordinates.[16] Radiesthesia reinforced the conviction that war was an art, dependent on the commander's inner conviction, not pre-determined rules.

Another source of discontent with top-down command was that static units were at the bottom of an unofficial prestige hierarchy with mobile units at the top. Multiple reports by RIF commanders show that officers regarded fortification service as boring, unmilitary and harmful to promotion and that they resented being treated as 'second rate'. The army ultimately compelled officers to serve in fortification regiments, but continued to send others as punishment for disciplinary offences.[17] Young officers who graduated top at Saint-Cyr opted for the colonies, where irregular tactics were common, for light infantry (chasseurs à pied) or Alpine infantry, which prided themselves on initiative and fitness.[18] The half-mechanised cavalry reconnaissance groups established in 1923 at division and corps level (Groupes de reconnaissance de division/de Corps d'armée, GRDI and GRCA respectively) also saw themselves as an elite. One GRCA commander told a journalist that his unit cultivated an 'offensive spirit accompanied by audacity, taste

15 Émile Alléhaut, *Être Prêts. Puissance Aérienne, Forces de Terre. Doctrine, Organisation, Moral* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1935), pp. 133–34, 148–52; Anon. (Capitaine Lucien Souchon), *Feue l'armée française* (Paris: Fayard, 1929), pp. 48–51; Julian Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: Charles de Gaulle* (London: Allen Lane, 2017), p. 122.

16 Prételat circular, 18 Oct. 1939; Prételat to Georges, 20 Oct. and 19 Nov. 1939, SHD 28N15; Jacques Bardoux, *Journal d'un témoin de la Troisième* (Paris: Fayard, 1957), 5 April 1940; 'Entretiens avec François Le Lionnais: L'Ecole supérieure de guerre et la radiesthésie', Oulipo, 2010, https://oulipo.net/en/un-certain-disparate/73-lecole-superieure-de-guerre-et-la-radiesthesie.

17 Herique, 11 Dec 1936; Lemoine,12 Dec 12, 1935, SHD 7N4040/1; Sivot, 28 Dec 1938. 7N4037/1.

18 Raoul Girardet, *La société militaire de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Perrin, 1998), pp. 245–46.

for adventure and risk'.[19] The Sections d'éclaireurs de ski within Alpine units, which patrolled the Italian frontier, also regarded themselves as an elite.

Extreme-right political movements kept the elite infantry ethos alive among some reserve cadres, for the Italian Arditi and German Freikorps had equivalents in France. In the early 1920s, the anticommunist Ligue des chefs de section explicitly evoked the tactical revolution. In the 1930s, Lieutenant-Colonel François de La Rocque, leader of the far-right Croix de Feu, took pride in having led Moroccan irregulars (goumiers) and organised his most active members into 'hands' (mains) resembling combat groups. Joseph Darnand, hero of 14 July 1918 raid, participated in several far-right groups, including the neo-royalist Action française, where he met Félix Agnély. They later joined the terrorist Cagoule before fighting together in the advance posts as reserve lieutenants in 24 BCA (Bataillon de chasseurs alpins).

Revision of the Regulations

In 1931, General Maxime Weygand succeeded Pétain as Vice-President of the CSG and commander designate in wartime, while General Maurice Gamelin became chief of staff. Weygand, like his late mentor, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, opposed defensiveness. For instance, he attempted to limit the conversion of mobile field regiments into static RIFs.[20] His consultation of senior officers on the IPGU revealed widespread dissatisfaction with their rigidity. Weygand was particularly impressed with Gamelin's response, which he saw as inspired by Foch's spirit.[21] Revision came to naught, but Gamelin, who succeeded Weygand in January 1935, saw it through.

By then, as Infantry Director General Julien Dufieux explained, the imminent arrival of new anti-tank guns, tracked supply vehicles (*chenillettes*), 60 and 81 mm mortars, faster tanks and aircraft, motorcycles and common ammunition for LMGs and the MAS-36 rifle made revision unavoidable. Officers were delighted by the reintroduction of two-year service, approved by parliament in March 1935, effective from 1936. Dufieux also urged adaptation of French doctrine to the development of a German army 'furnished with ultra-modern equipment'.[22]

French assessments of German doctrine and capabilities depended as much on stereotypes as on dispassionate analysis. On the one hand, the egalitarian, liberty-loving French contrasted themselves with authoritarian, obedient, militarist Germans. [23] On the other hand, the French were sensitive to the accusation that their own excessive liberty compromised military qualities. One may therefore detect among French officers a covert admiration for 'German order and organisation' (if balanced by 'French liberty') and 'military prowess', which made them particularly attentive to German offensive tactics.

In 1933–1934, the Reichswehr introduced new regulations, the *Truppenführung*, later completed with specialist manuals. These regulations (despite not envisaging

19 *Le Jour*, 3 Sept. 1937.

20 Weygand to Gamelin, 12, 15 Jan., 21 March 1934, SHD 1N34/2.

21 Fréderic Guelton, 'Introduction', in *Le Journal du General Weygand 1929-1935*, ed. Félix Guelton (Montpellier: CNRS, 1998), pp. 72–7, 204–18.

22 Dufieux, 'Note', 27 Jan. 1936, SHD 9N306/3.

23 Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making 1933-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 82–91.

independent armoured divisions) were based on the previously mentioned principle that soldiers should display initiative within the framework of the mission.[24] French observers were most interested in the *Truppenführung*'s small-group tactics. In 1935, the Deuxième Bureau reported that to ensure manoeuvrability, German combat groups were weighted towards riflemen, whereas French equivalents were organised around the LMG. And whereas French infantrymen were trained to lay down a curtain of fire with the LMG, German infantry spared ammunition and probed for weak points.[25] The appearance of the *Truppenführung* intensified pressure for revision of the IPGU.

The 1936 *Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités* (IGU) maintained Pétain's compromise between devolved command and tight regulation, but shifted towards movement and initiative. It saw methodical preparation is appropriate for attacking solidly-established fronts, but stipulated that 'sudden and brutal action is more important than minute preparation' where the enemy is less well established.[26] A commentary in *La France militaire* perceived change and conservatism; it regretted failure to recognise that celerity and surprise were 'inversely proportional to centralisation'.[27]

Contributors to *La France militaire* were more positively inclined towards new infantry regulations. Besides the usual consultation of senior officers and École de Guerre, the high command had authorised discussion in the *Revue d'infanterie*. Controversy began in 1935, when the elderly General Charles Barrard published an article regretting that combat groups placed leadership in the hands of 'poorly-educated' men who found handling mixed weaponry too complex. He held that lieutenants should lead whole sections from the front – at the price of reducing dispersal.[28]

Some respondents backed Berrard or defended the existing regulations. However, most, notably captains and lieutenants, thought it impossible for a young lieutenant to direct a whole platoon with whistle, voice and gesture. Rather, a combat group must enjoy 'a certain autonomy' within the section's mission. Chenillettes should be used to reduce the number of soldiers carrying ammunition and thus grouped around the LMG and allow for an additional rifleman, the 'element of manoeuvre'.[29]

In 1938–1939, the revised infantry regulations and manual for NCOs restructured the combat group according to the majority view. For an anonymous commentator in *La France militaire*, the 1936 debate proved that critics were not isolated. He explained that despite claiming to remain within the existing framework, the manuals were a

24 Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, eds., *On the German Art of War: Truppenführung* (Boulder, Colorado: Rienner, 2001).

25 'Le nouveau règlement…', 28 Dec 1935, SHD 7N2676. The manual in question was probably the *Ausbildungsvorschrift für die Infanterie*.

26 *Instruction sur l'emploi tactique des grandes unités* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1936), article 4, paragraphs 223–4; *Instruction sur le service en campagne* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1939), pp. 45–6.

27 *La France militaire*, 'Instruction du 6 June 1938 sur le service en campagne', 6 June 1939; Circular, 7 Oct. 1936 on publicity for the new regulations, SHD 7N4003.

28 Général Barrard, 'Réflexions sur nos règlements d'infanterie: Le Groupe et la section de F.-V.', *Revue d'infanterie* XXXV (1935), pp. 189–97.

29 'Études et notes sur notre règlement', *Revue d'infanterie* LXXII, no. 523 (1 April 1936), pp. 598–666; 'Études et notes sur notre règlement', *Revue d'infanterie*, no. 531 (1 December 1936): 1107–1218.

'complete re-working'. Whereas the old regulations emphasised firepower, the new were based on manipulation of firepower, terrain and offensive movement, thus restoring commanders' autonomy. Rather than being expected simply to apply the regulations, junior officers now had to combine reflex with reflection in deciding how to implement a command, thus modifying it.[30]

None of these changes eliminated preoccupation with command or desire to limit improvisation.[31] In any case, French industry proved incapable of mass-producing the weapons on which new tactics depended. Commanders had no choice but to improvise. RIF officers were disappointed that the creation in 1935 of specialist companies within the RIFs to man the fortifications did not permit the rest to train for manoeuvre.[32] The point is that the army went to war with evolving, contested regulations and significant constraints.

Patrols

On 16–17 October, in the face of the largest German counterattack so far, the French executed a planned withdrawal from the last positions in the Saarland that they had occupied in support of their Polish allies. Henceforth, French and German outposts and patrols faced each other across a 20-km-wide no-man's-land from which most civilians had been evacuated.[33] No sector was entirely quiet, but most conflict was confined to the 100 km from Forbach (Moselle) to Climbach (Bas-Rhin).

The Maginot Line, designated the 'resistance position', was protected by advance posts close to the frontier. They consisted of rudimentary strongpoints constructed from tree trunks, sandbags and earth, surrounded by barbed wire. Each was manned by three or four combat groups with LMGs, a 25 mm antitank gun and/or an 81 mm mortar group.[34] Their task was to prevent the resistance line coming under heavy-weapon fire and warn of and delay an attack. Since it soon became clear that the advance posts were too lightly held to prevent the enemy from approaching the resistance line, the high command ordered construction of a stronger '*Ligne de recueil*' ('gathering in' or 'retreat line') between the advance posts and resistance line. The new line consisted of strongpoints, which were expected to resist for longer, even if surrounded.[35]

The regulations stipulated that troops holding the advance posts were to carry out patrols with whole combat groups in daytime and by riflemen alone at night, but

30 *Règlement de l'infanterie. Instruction Technique* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1939); *Règlement de l'infanterie. Combat* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1939); *Manuel du gradé de l'infantrie* (Paris: Charles-Lavauzelle, 1939). *La France militaire*, ABC, 'Règlement de l'infanterie', 7, 8, 24 May, 1, 17 June 1939.

31 *La France militaire*, Lieutenant-Colonel Kuntz, 'Le compartiment du terrain', 4 Jan. 1939 for an example of the primacy of command.

32 Chataignon, 28 Nov. 1938, SHD 7N4037/1/6^{e} Région.

33 Kevin Passmore, 'The Drôle de Guerre on the Maginot Line. Soldiers and Civilians in Alsace-Lorraine, September 1939 to June 1940', *French Historical Studies* XXXVIII (2025): 101–37.

34 Rapport Ollivier, 23 June 1945, SHD 34N51/10/4.

35 'Ordre particulier No 11, 12 Oct. 1939, and 46 DI, 'Ordre particulier N^{o} 11', 17 Oct. 1939, SHD 34N156/12.

allowed flexibility regarding deployment. In daytime, any enemy patrols encountered were to be destroyed or captured. At night, patrols were to ambush, reconnoitre and listen in order to discover the enemies plans and prepare future raids.[36]

On 5 November 1939, the GQG ordered campaign units to acquire combat experience through tours in the contact zone, where they served alongside the RIFs.[37] All but three active infantry divisions served there, as did all twenty A reserve divisions, seven North African, and six colonial infantry units (Régiments/Divisions d'infanterie colonial (RICs/DICs)), but only seven of eighteen B Reserve divisions.[38]

These units' conviction of German superiority, shaped by stereotypes as much as reality, contributed to reform of French tactics. The Deuxième Bureau's samples of their letters home showed that officers and men alike were initially confident in their own strength and applied to the enemy the trope of the mindlessly obedient robot. They wrote home that on 16–17 October, as the French withdrew from the Saarland, thousands of fanatical Germans were mown down thanks to their habit of advancing in close order while shouting 'Long live Hitler!'[39] Army communiqués too relied on stereotype. They assumed that while the Germans were simply authoritarian, well-trained French forces combined methodical organisation with initiative, 'bite' and 'clever manoeuvre'.[40]

From November, as German patrols figured increasingly in letters, confidence in French 'bite' declined and accounts of tactical inferiority became dominant. In early December, the most positive letter mentioned 'poor devils' who had lost several wounded repelling a raid that took twelve comrades prisoner.[41] Letters still described infiltrators as fanatical Nazis, but the stereotype no longer connoted foolhardy sacrifice but audacity, its allegedly non-rational character underlined by exaggerating their use of dogs (which they did employ) and identifying the enemy with animals – infiltrators could be heard hooting like owls or yelping like dogs as rallying cries.[42] Also typically, a lieutenant (85 RI) wrote, 'My impression is that the Boche see us, but we don't see them, and there is a lack of audacity on our part which demoralises our best soldiers'.[43]

These interpretations owed much to the difficulty of distinguishing human from non-human on dark, freezing nights, often in pouring rain, with the wind howling in trees during one of the worst winters on record. High alertness in such conditions interfered with cognition and encouraged reliance on cultural expectations. In reality, the enemy was not necessarily well equipped or trained and did not systematically obey Auftragstaktik principles.

36 *Règlement de l'infanterie. Instruction Technique*, articles 357-61; *Règlement de l'infanterie. Combat*, paragraphs 519-23; *Manuel du gradé de l'infantrie*, paragraphs 19, 49, 357-61.
37 Note, Georges, 5 Nov. 1939, SHD 27N156/Orders/1.
38 Pierre Rocolle, *La Guerre de 1940*, I (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), p. 207.
39 Contrôle postal (hereafter CP) Nov. 1939. SHD 27N69/2/2a.
40 'Communiqués', Dec 1939, SHD 29N130/7.
41 CP, Dec 1939, SHD 27N69/2c.
42 CP, 20 Nov. 1939 SHD 27N69/2/2b; CP. Dec 1939, 27N69/2c; Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg, 'Saar 1940', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Saargegend* XV (1965), pp. 27–8.
43 CP, 28 Nov. 1939, SHD 27N69/2/2a.

It is true that during the winter, the Wehrmacht engaged in intensive training, designed to correct poor reconnaissance skills and predilection for continuous defensive lines revealed during the Polish campaign.[44] Yet this effort prioritised units earmarked for the 'Sichelschnitt' through Belgium and Luxembourg, not Army Group C, stationed opposite the Maginot Line, the task of which was simply to hold the line and improve its fortifications. Although from November, OKW planned to attack the Sarre sector, it did not tell the senior officers of Army Group C whether to expect a French offensive or prepare to carry out one themselves. As General von Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg, commander of Armeekorps (AK) XXIV, put it, ignorance of OKW's plans made it 'impossible to act independently in accordance with the demands of the mission'.[45]

Geyr, as an advocate of armoured warfare and Auftragstaktik, criticised Army Group commander General Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb's allegedly outdated thinking.[46] He saw the position of Leeb's HQ near Kaiserslautern, over 30 km to the rear, as violating the principle of leadership from the front.[47] German commanders were no more united on tactics than the French. Politically they were divided too, for Leeb opposed war against France.

Army Group C was neither fully equipped nor trained. The three active divisions assigned to it during the Saar offensive were soon transferred. Of the thirteen divisions involved in patrolling the Sarre and Northern Vosges, only five fourth-wave units – Ersatzreserven who were not fully trained thanks to Versailles restrictions – were ready for limited combat. Three reserve divisions were well-equipped, but poorly trained, while the third and fifth-wave divisions were neither well trained nor well armed. Infanterie Division (ID) 60, for instance, had been hastily formed from Danzig Brownshirts.[48] Leeb thought that his troops' morale was good, but dependent on the Westwall fortifications and the expectation of peace.[49]

The uneven quality of German units did not mean that they were incapable of effective action. Evidence on both sides confirms that they placed microphones in French posts.[50] On 27 April, French patrols fortuitously captured two German NCOs hiding in an attic in evacuated Nousseviller-lès-Bitche in the Northern Vosges – the third such incident that

44 Williamson Murray, 'The German Response to Victory in Poland: A Case Study in Professionalism', *Armed Forces and Society* VII (1981), pp. 285–98.

45 Schweppenburg, 'Saar 1940', 223.

46 General Franz Halder, *The Halder Diaries*, ed. Arnold Lissance (Boulder: Westview, 1976), 14 September 1939, 18 May 1940.

47 Halder, 18 Jan. 1940; Schweppenburg, 'Saar 1940': at 223–4.

48 Georg Tessin, *Verbände und Truppen der deutschen Wehrmacht und Waffen-SS im Zweiten Weltkrieg 1939–1945*, vol. 1: Waffengattungen – Gesammtubersicht (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1977), pp. 43–7; Siegfried Westphal, *Heer in Fesseln. Aus den Papieren des Stabschefs von Rommel, Kesselring und Rundstedt* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1950), pp. 109–10; Williamson Murray, 'The Strategy of the "Phoney War" Revisited', *Military Affairs* 45 (1981): 15; Marc M. Romanych, Martin M. Rupp, and John White, *Maginot Line 1940: Battles on the French Frontier* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010), pp. 24–6.

49 *The Halder Diaries*, 3 Oct. 1939.

50 Lacaze to commander 55 Brigade d'infanterie alpin, 23 Dec 1939, SHD 33N67; Schweppenburg, 'Saar 1940', 226–27.

month.[51] The post at Homerstein was as likely as any other to fire at imaginary infiltrators, but in mid-December, it really was attacked on more than one night, leaving behind a Czech SMG and grenades as evidence. On the night of the 15/16th, the Germans loudly approached from the north to distract attention from their attempt to cross the barbed wire on the other side, their progress facilitated by wire guides installed on previous nights. One German got inside and grappled with a defender, who was rescued by a comrade.[52]

Usually the Germans were cautious. To persuade the French that Germany's only quarrel was with the British – a message hammered home in radio and leaflet propaganda – they generally avoided clashes. In September, the OKW ordered patrols not to cross the frontier. They did, but avoided combat unless attacked. German artillery rarely fired into France.[53] In December, however, Hitler ordered attacks on newly arrived British units to undermine their morale and compromise them in the eyes of the French. A textbook Stoßtruppen raid with artillery preparation on a Duke of Cornwall's Light infantry post was particularly effective.[54]

Some French officers recognised that German successes were exaggerated. The commander of Fortified-Sector (SF)-Vosges told subordinates that most contacts were nothing compared to the nightly fusillades to which flimsily-protected soldiers were subjected in the colonies. He urged troops not to respond to minor incursions with barrages sufficient to stop divisions.[55] In a widely-circulated report, Colonel Jean Manhès, four-times cited in the last war, interim commander of 30 Alpine Division (DIA) in the Northern Vosges, claimed that most raids were figments of overwrought imaginations, fed by the tall stories heard from their predecessors at the front. Manhès claimed that during the previous month the Germans approached closer than 600 m only three times and always withdrew once the French revealed their positions. Intelligence, he wrote, showed that the troops opposite were not Stoßtruppen, but inexperienced infantry, just as brave, jumpy in the dark and attached to fighting shoulder to shoulder as the French.[56] Manhès's superior agreed that the Germans only twice attempted to capture prisoners and reported that the French had carried out three such raids, of which one captured two soldiers.[57]

Furthermore, some French units brought proactive traditions to the advance posts. An officer in a professional Algerian regiment wrote home that his men were expert ambushers and did not allow themselves to be surprised. The GRDI and GRCA, Alpine infantry, chasseurs and small parachute units were also well-versed in small-group combat. A GRDI lieutenant described his men as 'marvellous', performing honourably in clashes and bringing back intelligence.[58] Many reserve officers of Alsace-Lorraine origin

51 Bourret, Note, 29 April 1940, SHD 32N227/1.
52 Compte rendu, 14-18 Dec 1939, SHD 33N67/2.
53 CP, 21 Dec 1939, SHD 27N69/2/2c; *La drôle de guerre du sergent Henri Guizard sur la ligne Maginot,* ed. Geneviève Déhu, (Maisons-Alfort: Guizard, 2010), 23 Oct. 1939.
54 BEF War Diaries DCLI, 1939-40, National Archives (UK) WO167/734; René de Chambrun, *I Saw France Fall, Will She Rise Again?* (London: Jarrolds, 1941), pp. 44–5.
55 SF-Vosges, Note de Service, 13 Oct. 1939, SHD 34N156/11.
56 Manhès, 'Rapport', 28 Dec 1939, SHD 28N19.
57 Duron, 'Enseignements', Dec 1939, SHD 28N19.
58 CP, 4, 11, 24, 29 Oct., SHD 27N69/2/2a; CP, 20 Nov. 1939, 27N69/2/2b.

had served in the German army in 1914–1918. Although identifying confirmatory evidence is difficult, it is implausible that they had forgotten all their training. The ex-German officer, Captain Richard Pierron of 23 RIF, accused after the conflict of flight in the face of the enemy, told his interrogators that his superior had learned nothing since Verdun and that he, Pierron, 'had the right and duty to take initiatives [in defensive deployment] in order to fulfil his mission, which was to prevent the Germans entering the town of Héricourt'.[59]

French infantry training was incomplete, but far from neglected. The GQG issued multiple circulars on weaponry and tactics. Tours in the outposts were themselves considered to constitute training. Units were instructed to divide time between construction and combat training. Men were to be conditioned for attack by running, jumping, hiding, and climbing in full kit on varied terrain.[60] Some units endlessly rehearsed taking the same village.[61] Roland de Margerie (a diplomat who volunteered to serve) remembered that 53 DI received ten days intensive training before going to the advance posts.[62] After their advance-post tours ended, some units went to the Camp de Mailly to practice assaulting Westwall blockhouses.[63] Undoubtedly, terrible weather hampered training, as it did for the Germans.[64]

Wehrmacht training was also uneven. The Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH – the Land Army High Command) urged AOK 1 (Armeeoberkommando – 1st Army) opposite the Sarre-Vosges not to let training slip 'entirely into the background', and to train if possible in no-mans-land.[65] Geyr had his men rehearse capturing French positions. In contrast, General Hans Zorn on the Rhine stated that installing the troops, constructing fieldworks and reconnoitring left little time for training.[66]

French training probably depended on officers' background, age and familiarity with the evolving regulations. An evaluation of the officers of 7 DIC is revealing: Lt.-Colonel Louis Crapon achieved excellent results by organising small training patrols, whereas Lt.-Colonel Boivin was 'a know-it-all who had had to make an effort to adapt to the circumstances of the present war'.[67] That one captain verified the position of machine guns from his quarters using a radiesthesia pendulum cautions against generalisation.[68] Given this diversity, it is not surprising that initiatives to reform tactics came from above and below and revived arguments about command and elite units.

59 Pierron Dossier, SHD GRYE61605.

60 Gamelin, 'Note', 27 Nov. 1939; 29N138/2, Georges, 'Note', 15 Feb. 1939, GA2, 'Note', 16 Feb. 1940, SHD 29N138/1.

61 François Cochet, *Les soldats de la drôle de guerre: Septembre 1939 - Mai 1940* (Paris: Hachette, 2004), p. 93; *La drôle de guerre du sergent Henri Guizard*, 4 May 1940.

62 Roland de Margerie, *Journal: 1939-1940* (Paris: Grasset, 2010), p. 49.

63 Robert Felsenhardt, *1939-1940 avec le 18e Corps d'armée* (Paris: Tête de feuilles, 1972), p. 105.

64 Note, 16 Feb. 1940, SHD 29N138/1.

65 *The Halder Diaries*, 13, 28 Dec 1939.

66 Zorn, 'Le franchissement du Rhin', translated from *Die Wehrmacht*, 12 March 1941. SHD 34N69/11/2.

67 Rapport, undated, ?April 1940, SHD 29N220.

68 Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phoney War, November 1939-March 1940*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1984), 27 Feb. 1940.

Formation of the Corps Francs

Soon infantry units organised specialist patrolling groups. Colonel Léon Legros commanding 56 DI's infantry in Fortified Region (RF)-Metz ordered that while only the high command could formally establish them, each battalion must form volunteer 'scout-patrollers' consisting of one officer, three NCOs and twelve men. These groups were lightened combat groups, explicitly modelled on German methods as revealed in captured documents. That the 56th was a B division composed of older reservists confirms the difficulty of generalisation.[69] The immobile fortress units and even ouvrage crews created similar groups of the same size, henceforth usually designated 'corps francs'. Those of 146 and 156 RIFs in RF-Metz were permanently based on the ligne de recueil rather than rotated to the advance posts for the usual ten-day tour.[70]

A reserve officer (101 RI) wrote that 'Everything is done by platoon leaders. Orders never come from above, but are suggested, sometimes imposed, by us'.[71] In fact, many colonels approved of corps francs, perhaps because most had been junior officers during the last war. Invoking a 1917 raid, General Joseph Hassler (22 DI) in SF-Thionville encouraged subordinates to 'respond to enemy raids! It's the job of junior cadres. It's the front that leads. The rear registers and coordinates afterwards'.[72]

Results varied. In late December, a corps franc patrol led by Lieutenant Guilbert of 99 Régiment d'infanterie alpine witnessed a German patrol follow a barbed-wire barrier towards an unoccupied German observation post west of the Col du Maimont in the Northern Vosges (Figure 1). The next day, he planned to sneak up behind the patrol with two men, fire on it and force it into the field of fire of an LMG hidden in the German trenches, manned by a group led by Sergeant Cusin. The latter's group also posted an LMG covering the rear, while Corporal Vivier, away to the east, covered a possible attempt to escape Northwest. Ambushes at empty positions had been prescribed in early September 1939 to take advantage of the Germans' preference for vacating their posts at night, thus making raids ineffective.[73] In fact, the Germans arrived downhill from the North, and ran straight into Cusin's group, fire from which hit one of them. Another German replied with his patrol's only SMG, but was killed by a bullet in the head. A German officer aimed, but was put off by a grenade, surrounded and captured (his fate is not mentioned). The rest of the Germans attempted to outflank the French, who nevertheless retreated in good order. The commanders of 55 Brigade and of 5th Army congratulated the team for a minutely prepared, perfectly executed operation in which Guilbert had shown 'a cool head and a sharp eye'. Guilbert devised the operation and led the key group, but left his subordinates to react appropriately.[74]

An ad hoc group from 99 RIA performed less well. In early December, officers suspected that human and canine messengers were passing through the Steinbach and

69 Legros, 'Note de Service', 28 Oct. 1939; undated 'Projet d'instruction', SHD 32N257/5.
70 Mary and Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages*, 2003, III, p. 34.
71 CP 28 Nov. 1939, SHD 27N69/2/2b.
72 Hassler, 'Réflexions…', 21 Nov. 1939, SHD 32N257/5.
73 Condé, 'Note relative au contact, 27 Sept. 1940, SHD 32N257/5.
74 Genevier, 23 Dec 1939; 'Compte-rendu de patrouille', 29 Dec 1939, SHD 33N67/2.

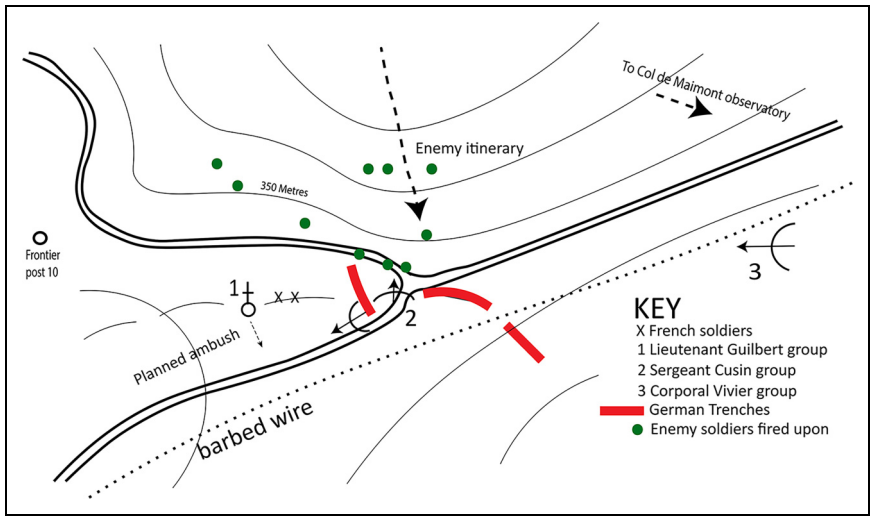

Figure 1. Schematic map of a 99 RIA corps franc ambush laid between the Col de Maimont observatory and Frontier Post 10, based on Lieutenant Guilbert's rough drawing.

Krehberg area. Since the unit's corps franc was already on a mission, a lieutenant and *adjutant* (warrant officer) volunteered to lead a patrol chosen among regimental mule drivers. During the afternoon, three groups laid an ambush in the dense forest. One deployed to meet a German patrol that never came. Another retreated, allegedly to avoid being surrounded by Germans whom none of the others saw. In their defence, the commanding lieutenant explained how unpleasant it had been lying prone in the forest for fourteen hours, lashed by bitter winds. Patrols needed leather clothing, trousers with padded knees, and boots capacious enough for thick woollen socks. Patrollers had carbines, easier to use in the undergrowth than rifles, but lacked more manipulable SMGs, of which the Germans had more.[75] Such shortcomings encouraged the high command to act but also provoked controversy at the highest levels.

Gamelin warned his deputy on the northeastern front, General Alphonse Georges, against static defence and urged 'varied reconnaissances and active patrols' – perhaps Gamelin's stance reflected the fact that he had more front-line experience of the Great War than any other senior general.[76] Georges, who had spent only a few days at the front before being seriously wounded, prioritised central control. He ordered commanders to submit plans for raids to him for prior approval, a requirement that Prételat, as commander of 2nd Army Group on the Maginot Line, saw as stifling initiative. Prételat asked permission for local commanders to submit several scenarios in advance so that they could respond before the Germans took counter-measures.[77]

In the first week of December, the results of an enquiry into German tactics arrived. They revealed that commanders in the field generally saw the Germans as superior.

75 Hau, 'Compte-rendu de patrouille', 16 Dec 1939, SHD 33N67/2.
76 Gamelin, 'Note…', 12 Oct. 1939, SHD 27N12 /4 /4.
77 Prételat to Georges, 19 Nov. 1939, SHD 28N14/1.

VIII Corps (5th army) concluded that German units' effectiveness varied, but nevertheless resorted to stereotype: enemy patrols supposedly displayed the characteristics of the 'race', including painstaking method, a penchant for deception, surprise, booby traps and vigorous patrolling plus careful 'organisation of the terrain'. Another commander claimed that the Germans always opened fire first when patrols met, demonstrating their superior training. A few reports were more nuanced. General Amédée Duron (30 DIA) stated that German patrols were less frequent and combative than commonly imagined. All agreed that the French needed to improve. General Henry-François Vernillat (43 DI) felt that to counter German superiority, the French must form units capable of matching the Stoßtruppen.[78] That was more controversial.

Georges reluctantly followed Gamelin's orders to form corps francs. On 11 December, he told Prételat that since the beginning of November, the enemy had identified fifteen French divisions and taken 118 prisoners, compared to nine identifications and seventeen prisoners for the French. He attributed French inferiority to their 'defensive spirit' and (wrongly) to their preference for continuous positions, which allowed 'dynamic' German patrols simply to advance to find French posts. He ordered the creation of corps francs, but also recommended following the previously mentioned Manhès, who opposed the creation of corps francs and instead advocated gradual introduction of constituted units to patrolling (see Page 14).[79]

Prételat was just as reserved about corps francs, but less opposed to devolved command. Rehearsing the familiar objections, he feared that corps francs would get the most combative killed while consigning the rest to inferiority. Yet he admitted that inexperienced troops were incapable of patrolling deep into forests against Stoßtruppen, for he shared the tendency to exaggerate German capabilities. He opined that French troops were 'resigned' to inferiority, if sometimes tempered by a 'spirit of glorious sacrifice'.[80] Prételat concluded that since the best men were assigned to patrolling anyway, units might as well be organised officially.

He ordered constitution of one group per battalion or reconnaissance group, initially in twenty divisions, then in thirty more. They would serve one-month tours based on the ligne de recueil, but were forbidden to carry out combined operations with other corps francs. They must not recruit too many corporals and the existence of corps francs should not excuse others from patrolling.[81] Meanwhile, Gamelin kept up pressure on Georges, with whom relations were notoriously difficult, beginning a letter to him with 'I am very annoyed, and I know that they are very annoyed in high places too, about the recent series of incidents on your front'. He demanded that artillery be pushed further forward and tactical training improved. It was time, he said, for generals to 'go see'. He reiterated the need for corps francs.[82]

As Prételat feared, corps francs became an elite. His own orders stated that they would raise morale and dominate the enemy and that to allow independent action, they must be detached from parent regiments and placed at the disposition of fortified sectors.[83] Georges's staff told commanders that corps francs were neither new units nor temporary detachments, but would

78 'Procédés de combat', SHD 28N19.
79 Georges to GA 2, 11 Dec 1939, SHD 27N156/1.
80 Prételat to Georges, 12 Dec 1939, SHD 27N156/1.
81 Prételat to Georges, 12 Dec 1939 SHD 27N156/1.
82 Gamelin to Georges, 21 Dec 1939, SHD 27N12 /4/4.
83 VIII Corps, 'Note de Service', 3 and 8 Jan. 1940, SHD 32N169.

stay together for long periods, carry special equipment, including carbines, SMGs, daggers, torches and insulated wire-cutters and wear special clothing adapted to individuals.[84] The corps francs of 44 DI received one month's training as a group, including intensive physical exercise in the mornings, then shooting, tracking and infiltration under fire. They received lessons in German tactics in the afternoon, unless involved in a night exercise.[85] Several groups unofficially designed their own enamel insignia (a recent invention) – the general commanding SF-Haguenau authorised 22 RIF to wear one depicting a black gallic winged helmet. One corps franc described itself as 'an elite group that manoeuvres the best, obeys blindly but intelligently, and is exemplary at the front and in camp'.[86] A soldier in 12 RIC described a different ethos: 'splendid chaps, tattooed, loud, drunken but brave boys all the same, and it works; they don't like the Boche'.[87] The high command claimed that corps francs had improved results.[88] The press celebrated their exploits.

Several soldiers wrote home that they had enthusiastically volunteered. One reported that in 167 RIF, volunteers were offered promotion and decorations, and that five times more came forward than were required.[89] Margerie remembered that most of the junior officers in his unit volunteered for the corps francs. None of the men did, but those who were assigned to them fought well.[90]

Elite status attracted far-right activists, such as the neo-royalist and future resister, Jacques Renouvin (291 RI) and Captain Stéphane Pighetti (6th Bataillon de chasseurs alpins), who had once led the far-right Jeunesses Patriotes' student group.[91] Best known were Darnand and Agnély. Mainstream republican propaganda also accommodated the corps francs. In 1940, the myth of the (conservative) republican Maginot was reshaped. Whereas in the 1930s he had been (falsely) depicted as a defender of Verdun, his 1914 jottings were published in 1940 as *Carnets de patrouille* (Notes of a patroller).[92]

Opposition to elite units persisted. In January, Prételat ordered that in the first tour, corps francs alone would patrol and raid, while the rest of the men improved defences. In the second, all troops would demonstrate their patrolling audacity.[93] In April, 2nd Army Group reaffirmed that regular units must be trained in manoeuvre and ultimately perform like corps francs.[94] Practice varied. In 22 GRDI, the corps franc operated separately, but the rest of the unit also took turns to patrol.[95]

84 Bourgeois, 'Note', 14 Feb.; Roton to Georges, 3e Bureau NE Front, 22 Jan. 1940; Roton, 'Note', 3 March; du Mezel, 'Note, 18 March 1940, 27N156/1; Mary and Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages*, 2003, 3, pp. 36–7.

85 Delmas, 'Programme d 'instruction', 22 April 1940, SHD 32N227.

86 'Projet d'instruction des GF de la 56e Division', 26 March 1940, SHD 32N277/5.

87 Undated late January or early February, 1940, SHD 27N69/2e.

88 Jean-Yves Mary and Alain Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages de la ligne Maginot*, I (Paris: Histoire et collections, 2000), p. 89.

89 CP, 17 March 1940, SHD 27N69/2f.

90 Margerie, *Journal: 1939-1940*, pp. 50–1.

91 Bethouart to SF-Vosges, 5 Jan. 1940, SHD 3N67/2.

92 André Maginot, *Carnets de Patrouille* (Paris: Fédération nationale André Maginot, 1940).

93 VIII Corps, 'Note de Service', 3 and 8 Jan. 1940, SHD 32N169.

94 Bourret, 'Note', 13 April 1940 (refers to Groupe d'arméés 2 Note of 10 April); SHD 32N227/1.

95 CP, 2d, 18 Jan. 1940, SHD 27N69/2.

Performance

The most extensive discussion of the corps francs in combat, two pages in Jean-Yves Mary and Alain Hohnadel's *Hommes et ouvrages de la Ligne Maginot*, is too pessimistic.[96] Where confirmation of the nine clashes listed is possible (there are no references), French losses are exaggerated. For instance, during the night of 18/19 February at Schreckling, the Germans ambushed the lorry taking the corps franc of 1st battalion/6th Infantry Regiment to its start point, killing nineteen – certainly a disaster, but not the twenty-five stated in *Hommes et Ouvrages*.[97] Mary and Hohnadel's account of the death of eleven 47 RIF patrollers at Apach on 22 February probably refers to a German raid on a French post there, which blew up a house serving as a French strongpoint before it was forced back by infantry and artillery fire. Three men in the house disappeared, and one 'certain' German death was reported. The same after-action report mentions another clash at Manderen, 6 km away, in which the French captured a prisoner.[98]

The best-known clash happened on 8 February in the deserted streets of evacuated Forbach, where the groups francs of 24, 25 and 65 BCA and 65 RIF confronted the 'Stoßtruppen' of ID 23. As the French observed enemy activity, two Germans, probably bent on looting, entered a house where the French were hiding. In the ensuing retreat, Agnély was among those killed. Darnand returned with two men to bring back his corpse, a deed for which he earned the accolade 'Best Soldier in France' and made the front cover of *Match*. Nine French soldiers were killed.[99]

Mary and Hohnadel also exaggerate French losses and underestimate their tactical initiative in their account of 127 RI corps franc's loss of twenty-five men who stumbled into a minefield.[100] In reality, on discovering that the enemy detachment it was supposed to capture had been reinforced with troops, barbed wire and mines, the corps franc should have retreated. Instead, its captain sent one group forwards and another to outflank the post. The latter group became trapped in the minefield. Prételat criticised the captain for losing sight of the operation's 'prepared mechanism' and scolded the captain's superiors for allowing the combined action of several corps francs rather than using constituted units in supporting roles. The army reported 10–13 dead and 26 wounded.[101]

Evaluations of fourteen divisions that served on the 4th Army Front in the Sarre were largely positive. They concluded that six were excellent, seven were good and thirteen were fine once they had overcome their initial fear. Two were problematic: 24 DI was

96 Mary and Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages*, 2003, III, pp. 34–35. See also Footnote 55.

97 Georges to Prételat, 23 Feb. 1940, 29N138 /2.

98 'Confirmation de message…, 22 Feb. 1940, SHD 29N130/2'; Gamelin, 'Note', 20 Feb. 1940, 27N12; Mémoiredeshommes lists four 47 RIF killed that month.

99 Gamelin, Note, 20 Feb. 1940, SHD 27N12; dossier Darnand, SHD 32N185; Patrick de Gmeline, *Les Corps-francs, 39-40*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1999), pp. 67–86; The seventeen French dead reported in *Hommes et ouvrages*, 2003, III, p. 35 probably refers to the seventeen German dead claimed by Darnand.

100 Mary and Hohnadel, *Hommes et ouvrages*, 2003, III, p. 35.

101 'Confirmation de message…', 16 April 1940, SHD 29N130/2; Prételat, Note, 23 April 1940 SHD 32N227/1.

still not ready [au point]; 45 DI did not improve despite two tours at the front, thanks to the indulgence of its commanding officer an inadequacy of its cadres.[102]

Almost all the hundreds of patrols that left traces in the archives were incident free. General Charles-Marie Condé's reports on the 3rd Army front from 17 October 1939 to 9 May 1940, mention five substantial clashes between patrols, four French raids on German posts and thirteen German raids on the French. Six of the German raids happened in the few weeks before the 10 May offensive.[103] When attacked, French posts usually repelled the Germans.

That is not to deny French disadvantages. To fulfil their warning role, French pushed posts were close to the frontier, within easy reach of enemy patrols. The Germans occupied their posts only in daylight, for they were less fearful of invasion. They did not necessarily return to the same location, so French night raids often found them empty.[104]

Past equipment choices constrained the French. Development of the SMG was abandoned in the 1920s, so patrollers had to make do with carbines, though from January 1940, corps francs did receive some German Erma-Vollmer SMGs collected from refugee Spanish republican fighters.[105] The French only began mass production of their own MAS-38 SMG in May 1940. Prételat, who had begged for supplies, claimed that in June 1940, he discovered a stock in a factory.[106]

Regulations stipulated that LMGs should not be carried on night-time patrols, but they often were.[107] The FM-24/29 LMG proved reliable in ambushes and could be fired on the move. Yet it was heavy, hard to set up, and often had to stop firing to avoid hitting friendly troops. Pre-war critics were right that it attracted fire: in the Forbach clash, three of the nine dead were killed in quick succession operating the LMG.[108] On 12–13 February, an LMG group prematurely ambushed a German patrol, claiming at least three dead. Yet three Germans replied with SMGs, hitting the lieutenant and killing two others. The commanding colonel commented that 'the enemy benefited from the advantage incontestably accorded by SMGs in close combat'.[109]

Plans to improve the mobility of the RIFs also failed. Four months before the war began, Prételat proposed that once they had covered mobilisation, RIFs should be converted into field units by replacing machine guns with LMGs and rifles and by providing them with transport. At the same time, the specialised ouvrage and casement crews, which could not be dissolved, would be subordinated to field commands. However, most RIF colonels, backed by some corps and army generals, complained that disrupting carefully-established

102 Responses to Troisième Bureau, 4th Army, SHD 29N220.

103 Carmejane-Vesc, 'Rapport', 3 March 1940, SHD 32N169/7DI/2.

104 'Note relative au contact', 27 Sept. 1939, SHD 32N257/5; Général Gaston Prételat, *Le Destin tragique de la Ligne Maginot* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1950), pp. 89–95.

105 Note de Service, 15 March 1940, SHD 32N257/5.

106 Prételat, *Le Destin tragique*, p. 92.

107 For instance, on 20 Jan., Lieutenant Terrot and a sergeant, led a group of twelve men armed with two LMGs, 'Compte-rendu', 20 Jan. 1940, SHD 33N67/2.

108 Schwarzenbach, 'Compte rendu', 12-13 Feb., SHD 32N169; Gmeline, *Les Corps-francs*, pp. 57, 76–8.

109 'Rapport…12-13 février 1940'; 28N19, 4th Army, 'Ordre de recherche', 4 Oct. 1939, SHD 32N169.

fire-plans and reducing firepower would disrupt defences at a dangerous time. The outcome was abandonment of RIF conversion and an unfortunate compromise on command. Supposedly 'active sectors' were commanded by field units. Passive sectors were allocated to new Corps d'armée de forteresse supported by B reserve divisions.[110]

One 'passive' sector was Sedan, where the Germans broke through. It was defended by B divisions that had not served tours on the Maginot Line. General Charles Huntziger, whose 2nd Army was responsible for Sedan, explained in response to a parliamentary commissioner's criticism of its defences that special training was not required for these units – despite telling Gamelin a few days earlier that tours on an active front would revive their warrior spirit.[111]

Conclusion

French infantry tactics were not wholly dictated by methodical doctrine or by the convention that the best troops must form the spine of the whole army but were the outcome of disagreement. The 1921 IPGU represented a compromise between wartime tactical devolution and control from above. One-year service in 1929 reinforced desire for firm command, but at the same time, dislike of 'industrial warfare', analysis of German regulations, new weapons and the reintroduction of two-year military service contributed to pressure for reform of tactics, which was ultimately realised in the reform of the regulations. During the phoney war, junior officers, regimental and divisional commanders, impressed by the Germans' alleged superiority, pressed for more effective patrolling. Alpine troops, reconnaissance groups and North African units as well as far-right leaguers brought reconnaissance skills. However, officers disagreed on whether improvement could be achieved by better training of constituted combat groups or by forming elite corps francs. At the top of the hierarchy, Gamelin backed corps francs against Prételat and the even more hesitant Georges. The combined weight of Gamelin, front-line commanders and junior officers ensured the formalisation of corps francs in most of the units that served on the Maginot Line and therefore in most of the army. However, the nature of patrolling in practice depended on the attitudes of colonels, the initiatives of their subordinates, the availability of equipment and the combativity of the enemy opposite. Tactical innovations did not eliminate defensiveness, as the failure of to convert static fortification regiments into mobile field units amply proves.

Corps francs often fought as such in the May–June battles, but they remained controversial. On the day the German offensive began, 56 DI united all its corps francs into a single *compagnie franche*. Then, as the Dunkirk battle ended, it ordered recruitment of more groups to replace losses in clashes in the SF-Thionville no-man's-land. In response, corps commander General Lucien Loizeau angrily reminded the division that once hostilities began, corps francs should have been dissolved. All units, he insisted, must be capable of combat and no soldier should see themselves as second-rank. The division went ahead anyway, advising those charged with recruitment to stress that compagnies

110 Kevin Passmore, *The Maginot Line. A New History* (London: Yale University Press, 2025), chapter 12.

111 Martin S. Alexander, 'Prophet without Honour? The French High Command and Pierre Taittinger's Report on the Ardennes Defences, March 1940', *War and Society* IV (1986), pp. 53–71.

franches were an elite: they were neither 'walking dead' nor an assembly of 'hotheads and outcasts with licence to do as they please when off duty'. Their existence did not dispense others from patrolling.[112]

The article does not claim to settle this argument about whether corps francs undermined or improved fighting qualities generally, for effectiveness depends too much on resources, circumstances and the actions of the enemy to make generalisation about tactical or any other level of doctrine possible. As Philippe Garraud remarks, even methodical warfare cannot be easily dismissed, for it was close to the victorious American, British and Soviet armies heavy reliance on artillery and infantry with tank support.[113]

Here, it is only possible to say that the evidence regarding tactics in the campaign is complex and points in different directions. Should for instance the disastrous failure on 12–13 May of 22 DI on the Meuse be attributed to commander General Hassler's temporary sick leave, his enthusiasm for corps francs or to the division's lack of sufficient motorised transport to allow it to arrive before the Germans? A month later, in the Aisne/Canal des Ardennes sector, Stoßtruppen sowed confusion deep into French lines without regard for their flanks. However, 36 DI's well-trained corps franc participated in counterattacks with armour that mopped up many of the infiltrators. It was then ordered to withdraw, for General Charles Huntziger, commander of 4th army Group prioritised saving his forces from encirclement over counterattack.[114]

Neither does this article contest wide agreement on the defeat: the initial disposition of French forces, the overmanning of the Maginot Line, the advance into the Low Countries and reliance on the Ardennes Forest and Meuse, which together ensured that the Allies were never able to concentrate for a serious a counter-offensive. The article claims only that it is erroneous to generalise from the unequal combat on the Meuse, where the Germans concentrated their best units against the worst-trained and equipped French units. In other situations, historians have shown, the French more than matched the Germans, however little it ultimately mattered.[115]

This article shifts the story of the May–June battles away from explaining the defeat towards histories that would otherwise be obscured. In the longer term, patrolling on the Maginot Line outposts belongs perhaps to the emergence of irregular warfare. In 1943, Darnand, as head of the collaborationist, paramilitary Milice, organised his most committed followers into 'Francs-gardes', which the Germans armed with captured French MAS-38 SMGs. The united Resistance, the Mouvements Unis de la Résistance simultaneously organised 'corps francs'. Colonel Albert Lacaze of 99 RIA, which had been so active on the Maginot Line, became intelligence chief of its armed branch, the Armée secrete. Furthermore, there is continuity from these groups to the French army's anti-

112 56 DI, Note de Service 30 May; Loizeau, Note personnelle, 1 June, 331 RI Rapport, 6 June 1940, SHD 32N257/5.

113 Philippe Garraud, 'Le rôle de la « doctrine défensive » dans la défaite de 1940 : une explication trop simple et partielle', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* CCXIV, no. 2 (2004), pp. 97–123.

114 Roger Bruge, *Le sang versé*, (Paris: Fayard, 1982), pp. 48–53.

115 Martin S. Alexander, '"No Taste for the Fight?": French Combat Performance in 1940 and the Politics of the Fall of France', in *Time to Kill: The Soldier's Experience of War in the West*, eds. Paul Addison and Angus Calder (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 161–76.

insurgent tactics in the Indochinese and Algerian wars. The best-known example is 23 RIF sergeant and corps franc volunteer, Marcel Bigeard, who, via the Resistance, went on as a colonel to lead 'unconventional warfare' in Algeria, where he struggled to overcome other commanders' preference for battalion-strength actions.[116] Controversy concerning tactics did not end in 1940.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the British Academy, Leverhulme Trust (grant numbers 504960, 505826, 515502, MRF-2013-055).

ORCID iD

Kevin Passmore https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3522-8577

116 Barnett Singer and John W. Langdon, *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire* (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 267–345.