
**THE TECHNICIAN: GUDERIAN'S BREAKTHROUGH
AT SEDAN**

Get there fustest with the mostest men. . . .

—Nathan Bedford Forrest

BACKGROUND

From May 10 through May 15, 1940, General Heinz Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps left their assembly areas on the western border of Germany, broke through the north end of the Maginot Line, and turned a decisive victory at Sedan into a rout of the entire French Army. The offensive ended the so-called phony war, during which most of the German Army, flush with the victory in Poland, moved into assembly areas along the western border of Germany and conducted training and preparation for an offensive operation into France.

From mid-October through late December 1939, the German General Staff produced a series of plans for the campaign, almost all of which bore a strong similarity to the von Schlieffen Plan used by the Germans in 1914. The Allies guessed that the Germans would use such a plan, and although the planning staffs on both sides were heartily unenthusiastic about the prospect of another trench war in France, preparations proceeded apace.

THE PLANS

The German General Staff plan, code-named *FALL GELB* (CASE YELLOW), consisted of two Army Groups, A and B, attacking on a wide front from Metz to Venlo, with Army Group B (commanded by Field Marshal Fedor von Bock) in the north, designated the main

effort. Its mission was to conduct a rapid wheeling movement through the Low Countries while Army Group A (commanded by Colonel-General Gerd von Rundstedt) tied up most of the French Army along the Franco-German border. For these purposes, Army Group B was given most of the motorized forces, since it would have to move very fast to succeed; Army Group A inherited the majority of the foot-mobile and horse-drawn formations.¹

After winter war games had uncovered a potential opportunity for a swift advance through the Ardennes, General Fritz von Manstein raised the issue with Adolf Hitler. On February 18, 1940, Hitler approved a bold stroke through the Ardennes with a fast and powerful tank and motorized infantry force.² To accomplish this task, he allocated an additional six motorized divisions to von Rundstedt's Army Group under the command of General Ewald von Kleist. The force was designated *Panzergruppe von Kleist* and was given the mission of punching a narrow salient through the Ardennes with the objective of forcing a crossing of the Meuse River at Sedan. The spearhead of *Panzergruppe von Kleist* was XIX Panzer Corps, a four-corps formation consisting of five panzer divisions, four motorized infantry divisions, and a flak corps. It was commanded by General Heinz Guderian.³ Figure 4.1 shows the new plan, as modified by Hitler.

Panzergruppe von Kleist had the task of traversing some of the most difficult terrain in Europe, which required that six major rivers be crossed over a five-day period. Given the limited trafficability and narrowness of the avenues of approach in the sector, von Kleist's commanders developed a number of tactical innovations in applying motorization to maneuver and in achieving cooperation between arms of service. Using infantry, armor, engineers, artillery, and air support as a combined-arms team, the panzer units were able to move and fight with a rapidity that was, at the time, breathtaking.

¹T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito, eds., *A Military History of World War II*, West Point: U.S. Military Academy, 1953, Vol. I, pp. 66-70; B. H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War*, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970, p. 65.

²Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes*, New York: Free Press, 1990, p. 202.

³Liddell Hart, 1970, p. 65.

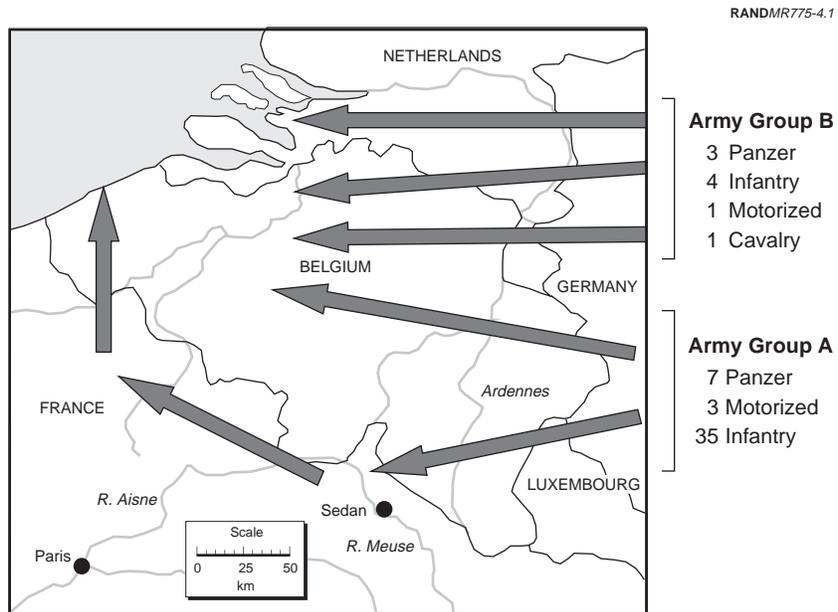


Figure 4.1—**FALL GELB (CASE YELLOW) Modified Operational Concept**

THE CAMPAIGN

On May 10, 1940, at 0535 hours, XIX Panzer Corps initiated the offensive. Advancing in three columns through the Ardennes (2d Panzer Division in the north, 1st Panzer Division in the center, and 10th Panzer Division in the south), the corps found its main difficulty to be traffic control rather than enemy action. Despite the initial confusion, it advanced through Luxembourg on schedule.⁴ On the evening of May 10, the lead elements of the 1st Panzer Division reached the obstacles that marked the Belgian border and began work in earnest to clear the obstructions.⁵

⁴Stamps and Esposito, 1953, p. 75.

⁵Stamps and Esposito, 1953, p. 75.

To gain a firsthand impression of the progress of his corps, Guderian spent most of the day with forward elements of his divisions. His order for the following day, May 11, consisted mainly of a reiteration of his intent to secure the west bank of the Meuse. Guderian's intent for the 1st Panzer Division for May 11 was to break through the Belgian second line of resistance at Neufchateau and, if possible, reach the west bank of the Meuse at Sedan.⁶

Extremely difficult terrain and stiffening French and Belgian resistance frustrated the achievement of that goal. However, by day's end, the lead elements of the 1st Panzer Division were 5 kilometers from the French border and 20 kilometers from Sedan. Guderian's concept for the operation remained the same, and he issued an order to that effect just before midnight on May 11.⁷

On May 12, the 1st Panzer Division covered the remaining 20 kilometers to the banks of the Meuse in just 4 hours, and by day's end, the entire corps had closed on the east bank of the Meuse just opposite Sedan. Although the XIX Panzer Corps had spent nearly five months rehearsing this operation, Guderian insisted on ensuring that his intent was understood:

General Guderian spent the entire morning [of May 13] visiting his three division commanders, conducting face-to-face coordination, and explaining his aims for the upcoming operation.⁸

The French had not yet panicked. They assumed that the Germans would advance in a manner based on the French experience with logistics. That is, the Germans would have to stop at the Meuse, the first river line defended by a major system of fortifications. There, the Germans would have to consolidate and prepare for the river crossing for several days, perhaps as long as a week. General Maurice-Gustave Gamelin, the French commander, ordered an additional 11 divisions to reinforce the Sedan area. They would arrive during May 14–21. Guderian understood that success depended on the speed with which the panzer forces could get across the Meuse

⁶Julian K. Rothbrust, *Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps*, London: Cassell, 1974, p. 60.

⁷Rothbrust, 1974, p. 61.

⁸Rothbrust, 1974, p. 66.

and into the open country on the western side—before the French could identify this threat and take steps to neutralize it. On May 12, von Kleist approved Guderian's request to attempt a crossing without waiting for heavy infantry reinforcements to arrive.⁹

Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps crossed the Meuse on the fly, straight from the march. After an intense bombardment of the river defenses by the Luftwaffe, lasting nearly the entire day, elements of the 1st Panzer Division, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Hermann Balck's 1st Panzer Grenadier Regiment, managed to cross and establish a toehold on the west bank of the Meuse at Glaire, just north of Sedan, during the early evening hours of May 14 (see Figure 4.2):

The soldiers of the 1st Panzer Division, main effort of the Panzer Group von Kleist, observed the devastating Luftwaffe attack the entire day. Nevertheless, the situation was chaotic when they began their river crossing, with French bunkers spitting intense fire at them from the far side of the river . . . at 1500 hours, under the protection of the massive air attack and subsequent artillery preparation, infantry and engineers carried their boats to the water's edge . . . [Balck's boats arrived without operators] . . . Balck had trained his soldiers in the use of pneumatic boats, thus he decided to conduct the assault crossing without the help of engineers. He crossed the river with the first wave and within minutes reached the initial bunker line along the far bank. The advance slowly began to increase momentum. . . . By midnight, Balck had led elements of his regiment to just south of Cheveuges and to the southern edge of the Bois de Marfee.¹⁰

During the night of May 13, Guderian's engineers managed to erect a bridge across the Meuse, and Guderian pushed more than 150 armored vehicles across the bridge that night. When morning came, he had a coherent force on the far bank and began to push for a breakout.

⁹Liddell Hart, 1970, p. 71.

¹⁰Rothbrust, 1974, p. 74.

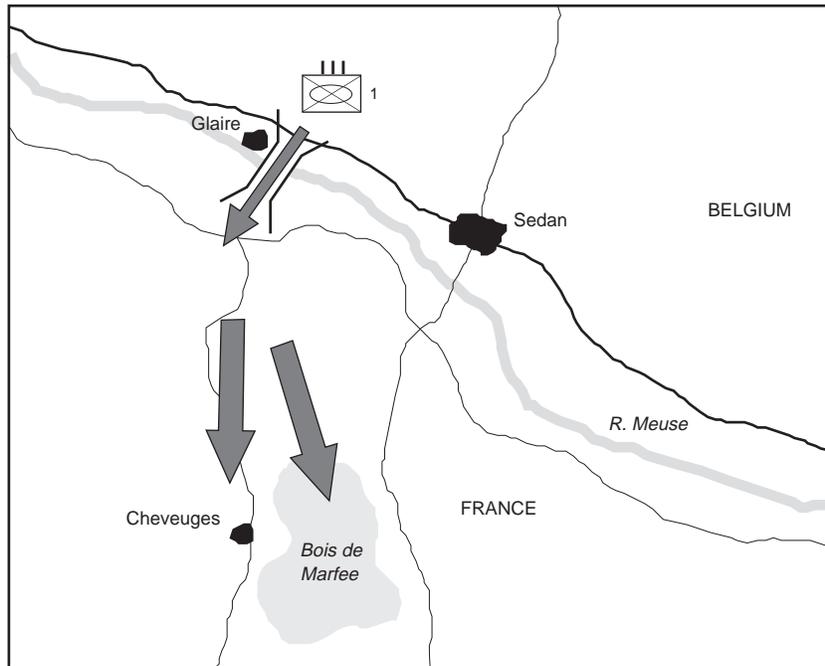


Figure 4.2—The Meuse Crossing

Von Kleist began insisting on consolidation to destroy remaining French forces, to remove a potential threat to his flanks. According to Guderian:

“An order came from Panzer Group Headquarters to halt the advance and confine the troops to the bridgehead gained. I would not and could not put up with this order, as it meant forfeiting surprise and all our initial success.”¹¹

¹¹B. H. Liddell Hart, *The Other Side of the Hill*, London: Cassell, 1951, p. 177.

After a lively argument with von Kleist, on the telephone, the latter agreed "to permit the continuation of the advance for another twenty-four hours—in order to widen the bridgehead."¹²

For the next five days, Guderian struggled with higher headquarters, because he was continually ordered to halt and consolidate his gains. Through a variety of artifices, including receiving permission to conduct "strong reconnaissance" to the west, Guderian's advance guard had, on May 19, arrived in Abbeville, on the Channel coast.¹³ The French armies had not been destroyed, but Guderian's lightning advance had destroyed their center of gravity, and their leadership had collapsed. Large numbers of French units had surrendered with their fighting capability intact. Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps had achieved in nine days what the German Army in 1914 had failed to achieve in four years.¹⁴

COMMAND AND CONTROL

Guderian was a consummate opportunist—not in a pejorative sense, but in his understanding of the effect of speed and surprise on his opponent's operational center of gravity. Of the crossing, the French commander, General Gamelin, commented after the war:

It was a remarkable maneuver. But had it been entirely foreseen in advance? I do not believe it—any more than Napoleon had foreseen the maneuver at Jena, or Moltke that of Sedan [in 1870]. It was a perfect utilization of circumstances. It showed troops and a command that knew how to maneuver, who were organized to operate quickly—as tanks, aircraft, and wireless permitted them to do. It is perhaps the first time that a battle had been won, which became decisive, without having had to engage the bulk of the forces.¹⁵

Guderian's command and control system, consisting of a mixture of wire, short-range tactical radio, and runners, could not inform him of the appearance of opportunities in sufficient time to exploit them.

¹²Liddell Hart, 1970, p. 72.

¹³Liddell Hart, 1970, p. 72.

¹⁴Rothbrust, 1974, p. 88.

¹⁵Liddell Hart, 1951, p. 181.

His response was to physically position himself where he could sense the pulse of the battle and make and rapidly disseminate key decisions. When he was absent, he depended on his subordinate commanders' and staffs' understanding of his intent to keep their units operating in a manner that supported his overall goals. This understanding of the commander's intent, and consequent granting of wide latitude of action to subordinates within the boundaries of that intent—a principles-based doctrine—was a feature of *Wehrmacht* operations.¹⁶

During offensive operations, adherence to fundamental rules, doctrinal concepts, and a solid plan significantly contributed to the German Army's success. . . . Actions at operational and tactical levels resulted from commanders clearly understanding von Brauchitz's [Chief of German General Staff] intent.¹⁷

Not only intent but a clear understanding of time-and-space relationships and the capabilities of other types of units were drilled into the panzer formations down to a very low level of command:

Commanders down to battalion level in Guderian's Panzer divisions understood the operational concept in 1940, and thus were able to take full advantage of unexpected circumstances. Intense training during winter and spring, at all levels, prepared commanders for the mental challenges of making those critical decisions. The numerous war games conducted at army group, army, and corps provided them with the opportunity to study all aspects of the upcoming battle. At the unit level, repeated river crossings at locations closely resembling the actual crossing sites allowed leaders to rehearse their tasks until they became second nature. . . . Through this rigorous training period, leaders perfected the mobile warfare doctrine that ultimately led them to victory in France.¹⁸

¹⁶This operational methodology, known as *Auftragstaktik* (loosely translated as "mission-oriented operation"), is currently in vogue in the U.S. Army and frequently appears in doctrinal articles as an example to emulate.

¹⁷Rothbrust, 1974, p. 92.

¹⁸Rothbrust, 1974, p. 93.

GUDERIAN'S COMMAND CONCEPT

At least three command concepts informed the German operations on the Western Front: (1) the *FALL GELB* plan of the German General Staff (a variation on the von Schlieffen Plan), (2) von Manstein's overlaid concept of punching through the Ardennes, and (3) Guderian's improvised concept of how best to exploit the breakthrough at Sedan by heading directly to the coast. All three were realized to some degree, but it was Guderian's concept riding on the back of von Manstein's that produced the triumph of the blitzkrieg in 1940. Up to the breakthrough at Sedan, Guderian executed von Manstein's command concept; thereafter, his concept dominated the operation—even over the opposition of his superiors.

From the planning and execution of this operation, it is evident that the professional development of the German commanders, at least at an operational level, was extraordinarily high. The technology embedded in the panzer formations (high mobility, good tactical communications) fully supported the exploitation of this command style. The Germans' understanding of "how to do" this modern style of war and of the significant advantages offered by personal leadership—backed by superior staff organization—allowed the German commanders to dominate their French counterparts:

Through years of "efficiency-aimed" training and a common doctrine, [German] staffs were able to dispense with lengthy operation orders during the actual campaign and simply operated on fragmentary orders. The concept of commanders at the front insured more face-to-face discussion between commanders and subordinates, contributing not only to higher confidence levels in command, but also furnishing a clear understanding of the leader's aims.¹⁹

For this reason, the XIX Panzer Corps' advance to the Meuse River in 1940 was a textbook application of a well-articulated and executed command concept. After the crossing of the Meuse, Guderian modified that concept to exploit an opportunity to fulfill the larger, strategic goals of that concept: to neutralize the enemy armies. This

¹⁹Rothbrust, 1974, p. 94.

composite concept, idealized with hindsight and recast in our format, might be stated as follows:

I. ABOUT THE ENEMY AND HIS PLANS:

1. The enemy [France] currently has four infantry and three tank divisions in our [Germany's] sector. He expects our main effort to be a thrust through the Low Countries.
2. Little enemy resistance is expected until the crossing of the Semois River at Bouillon. Beyond that point, the enemy may be expected to resist fiercely any breakthrough attempt. If the main line of the French resistance at Sedan is penetrated, however, the French ability to resist will collapse.
3. We should expect the French to attempt to reinforce and/or assist the troops garrisoning the fortress areas near Sedan with at most two infantry divisions and 250 to 300 armored vehicles.

II. ABOUT OUR FORCE DISPOSITIONS AND PLANS:

1. Our strategic objective is the military defeat of France and the moral collapse of the French Army. Our objective is not the physical destruction of the French Army. Our tactical objectives are to (a) breach the Maginot Line, (b) outflank the French frontier defenses, and (c) establish a salient across the Meuse to enable a drive to the Channel coast.
2. The XIX Panzer Corps shall advance through Luxembourg, Belgium, and France with three panzer divisions abreast to force crossings of the Our, Semois, and Meuse Rivers. XIX Panzer Corps will be the main effort of Panzer Group von Kleist. 1st Panzer Division is the corps' main effort.
3. We shall make intensive use of tactical aerial bombardment to isolate the fortress troops at Bouillon and at Sedan to facilitate the advance of the XIX Panzer Corps.
4. Once across the Meuse at Sedan, XIX Panzer Corps will not consolidate the crossing but will immediately seek opportunities for a breakthrough beyond the Meuse.

5. Given a breakthrough beyond the Meuse, XIX Panzer Corps should turn west and drive for the Channel coast, destroying the ability of the Allied armies to control and maneuver their forces.

III. ABOUT CONTINGENCIES:

1. We must not permit the Belgians to significantly interfere with our offensive operations, despite the defensive advantages the terrain in the Ardennes may afford them.
2. The six water obstacles in-sector must be crossed quickly, without hesitation.
3. XIX Panzer Corps must keep its forward elements supplied and supported by fire from the air while denying the French ability to resupply their fortress troops.
4. The XIX Panzer Corps must penetrate and bypass at Sedan before the French can significantly reinforce that strongpoint.
5. Once across the Meuse, we must seek the best opportunity to neutralize the French Army as a fighting force.
6. The key to our success will be maintaining our forward momentum and advancing faster than the French can react. If XIX Panzer Corps cannot maintain the speed of attack, the French will be able to reorient themselves along interior lines and our corps can become bogged down and be defeated in detail. Therefore, priority of air and artillery fires will be to XIX Corps units successfully advancing in-sector, with the objective of facilitating their advance.

ASSESSMENT

Guderian's concept was daring, appropriate, and visionary. Like Nimitz's concept at Midway, Guderian's concept was embedded in extensive planning and preparation for the campaign, and was so well internalized by his subordinates that Guderian rarely talked to his division commanders during operations. While Spruance at Midway made a wise *tactical* decision to withdraw his carriers to the east during the night, Guderian made an important *strategic*

decision—one contrary to the operational concept of his superior, von Kleist—to exploit his breakthrough by turning west to the English Channel, dividing and demoralizing his enemies.

Unlike the air-sea warfare at the battle of Midway, the nature of ground combat at the time required Guderian to be forward, at the *Schwerpunkt* (“center of gravity”), to exert his personal leadership ability, and to sense when his next trigger point had been reached. It was there, rather than at his headquarters, that Guderian could maintain a situational awareness appropriate to his needs. When Guderian was absent from a particular location, his concept allowed subordinates great freedom of action within the confines of his intent, or, as FM 100-7 maintains, “not to restrain but to empower subordinates by giving them freedom of action to accomplish a mission.”²⁰ The fact that Guderian required little in the way of communication with his direct subordinates during operations speaks volumes about the quality of his plans.

The German C2 system was just robust enough to accommodate Guderian’s leadership style. Often visiting his headquarters for only a few brief minutes each day, he depended heavily on his chief of staff to execute the enormous amount of coordination and planning necessary to keep the iron machines advancing, and in Guderian’s case, to keep the General Staff *uninformed* of the extent of his progress. Through the lens of our theory, Guderian’s campaign offers an example of a leader who, in van Creveld’s words, “recognized the limitations of his C2 system and . . . discovered ways—improvements in training, doctrine, and organization—of going around them.”²¹

The next case study is in many ways the opposite of this scenario. The C2 system is substantially more advanced than Guderian’s—which was just enough to keep up—and the commander, unlike Guderian, is not physically present in the battle space. But the change in concept is similar, as is the degree of success.

²⁰Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1995, p. 5-16.

²¹Van Creveld, 1985, p. 275.