

“Only one thing counts—to win the victory.”
--Reynaud to Gamelin

“France alone is of importance.”
--Gamelin’s reply

The French Army in Panzerblitz and Panzer Leader *By Byron Henderson*

No other counters in the Panzerblitz-Panzer Leader (PB/PL) system generated such excitement when they first appeared as the French counterset designed by Ramiro Cruz. They are still considered the definitive work on the French army in the game, in large part because no other counterset of note has been produced for the PB/PL system since their publication in the Avalon Hill General. But serious flaws in the counters—primarily the armored counters around which the game revolves—has caused too many gamers to abandon the battlefields of 1940 or seek alternatives to better recreate them.

Cruz’s work is excellent in many regards. His infantry and artillery counters “back fit” logically from the existing late war game units. His design notes are concise, well thought out, and present an accurate picture of the weapons of 1940; their developmental and tactical limitations are all touched upon. In fact, when rereading Cruz’s design notes for his Panzer Leader 1940 variant, one cannot but be impressed by his grasp of the subject and his thorough understanding of the tactical situations he sought to simulate through his counterset.

After they initially came out there were several additional scenarios published. The AH General published *The Paths of Rommel* by Daniel Helmbrecht and Alan Arvold has since updated the older *Battle for France* scenarios using Cruz’s counters (they originally used counters created by John Garrett) for the *Boardgamer’s Guide to Panzer Leader* issue. However, very little other work has come out and the counters seemingly have fallen into general disuse for most Panzer Leader enthusiasts.

Overall, while the counterset is held in high regard, there is a sense of frustration in using them to recreate the battles of 1940. This arises from the “split” personality of the counters themselves. The infantry, towed guns and transport units for the French are platoon size, while the armored fighting vehicles (AFV) move about at company strength. To better simulate the abilities and tactics of the French armored forces in 1940, the AFV will need to be adjusted to better reflect the tactical doctrines of the French armored forces during this time.

Cruz organized the French tanks into companies of ten tanks per counter. This grossly undervalues their tactical abilities, effectively stating that their tanks and tank crews were far worse than those of their opponents. In Panzerblitz, the Soviets were organized into companies in part to reflect their tactical limitations in handling AFV. It is notable that the Soviet AFV, in spite of having twice as many tanks as the German AFV, do not benefit from it; their attack and defense factors are the same as those for a five tank platoon. Cruz’s French tanks mirror the Soviet AFVs—twice as many AFV achieve the same ratings as a platoon of German tanks would (given the same armament and armor).

However, Cruz went farther by increasing the defensive value of each French tank unit by 1-2 factors. His notes do not specify why he did this; he may have been working from faulty information or simply applying an unknown modifier.

French tanks were better armored and, in most cases, better armed than their German counterparts. There is ample evidence that the level of training for French tank crews was adequate—and in many cases, equal—to that of German crews. The Germans had a significant advantage in communication (all of their tanks had radios) and in the fact that their tanks had larger crews—meaning less responsibility for each crew member and quicker response to the changing situation and opportunities on the tactical battlefield. How great of an advantage this provided is open to debate, but there is no doubt it was a favorable advantage for the German panzers.

In spite of this, the French tankers did not need twice as many tanks as their adversary to make an even fight out of it. Limited by doctrinal, tactical, and organizational deficiencies they were still able to effectively meet the Panzers head-to-head. The casualty records from the campaign suggest that the French armor performed admirably although they were often both outnumbered and suffered under the effective air support of the Luftwaffe, who controlled the skies above the battlefield. As one French armored unit commander stated: “At two to one we should have had the Boche as easy as winking. But four to one, what can you do?”

Additionally, the company sized organizational structure used by Ramiro Cruz does not properly reflect the French practice of fighting in smaller, more dispersed groups than the Germans. Instead, battles using Cruz’s French AFV will present them as a massed armored front—impenetrable to the weak Panzer IIs and IIIs the Axis commander brings to the battle. While there were armored battles, such as the Gembloux Gap, where the French successfully massed their armor and scored tactical defeats on the Germans, this was not the norm during the campaign. Too often French tanks were deployed in small numbers, with little effective support, incapable of scoring a decisive check or victory over the opposition.

To correctly mirror the French tactical organizations of 1940, Cruz’s AFV counters need to be broken up and reorganized to a proper size. Historically, the French organized their AFV in platoons of 3-5 tanks, depending on their role. Only the cavalry tanks (H39 and Somua 35) were organized in five tank platoons (it was a Cavalry Corps that bloodied the Panzers at Gembloux); the others were deployed in three and four tank platoons, mainly in supporting roles throughout the army. Remember, it was not until 1938 that the French began to form armored corps (DLM and DCR). Most of the French army was still organized to fight WWI when the Germans attacked.

There is already precedent in organizing some French AFV in platoons smaller than the standard five AFV; Panzer Leader introduced the four tank platoon for both the British and German late war AFV. Some caution should be used, however, before applying the standard -1 defense factor for four tank platoons when reducing factors on the early war AFV. Part of any defense factor reduction for a smaller platoon is the inability of the remaining AFV to effectively cover their flanks, exposing them and making it easier to inflict damage upon the platoon. But French tanks possessed excellent side and rear

armor, somewhat offsetting this weakness. In fact, most of their tanks had 30-40mm side armor; greater than the frontal armor of most of the German tanks opposing them. Additionally the small guns of many of the lighter German tanks were ineffective at knocking out the heavier armored French AFV. Because of this, I've chosen not to apply the standard -1 defensive modifier for a smaller platoon to French AFV platoons which only include four tanks. They will retain their normal defense factors. For AFV organized in three tank platoons, I will apply a -1 defense modifier.

Another factor to consider is the tank guns for the French tanks. Ramiro Cruz recognized that the French fielded three different calibers of 37mm guns for their tanks. The first (SA 18) was used on the FT-17 tank, a WWI relic still in service with some units (it was updated in the mid-30s and received a new turret and gun). This gun was modified for use on armored cars such as the Laffley AMD 50. It was primarily an infantry support weapon used to knock out machinegun nests and the like. The second (SA 18m37) was the same gun adopted for use in modern tank turrets of the 1930s. It was used in the FCM 36, H35 and R35 tanks. The third (SA 38) was a longer gun used on the more modern H39 and R40 tanks (as well as some later production R35 tanks). In my opinion, Cruz's handling of the different guns was well considered and adequately fits the game design. I see no reason to adjust his attack factors for most units, although I have made some changes which are explained in the design notes below.

All of this may be seen, in game terms, as weakening the French AFV. However, in much the same way the previously (re)created 1941 Soviets are not artificially hamstrung by incompetent leadership on the East Front in Panzerblitz, a good general can still use the French AFV effectively to blunt the blitzkrieg in Panzer Leader. In fact, these adjustments should allow gamers to effectively recreate the battles of 1940 and, hopefully, entice them to create more.

The following Design Notes are provided to reform the French army from Panzer Leader 1940 into a more historically accurate set of counters that are consistent with the original game countersets for Panzerblitz and Panzer Leader. I am indebted to numerous individuals in the making of this counterset, most notably Carl Schwamberger, Alan Arvold, John Garrett and Greg Moore. Most of all, I am thankful for the efforts of Ramiro Cruz, upon whose original design these counters are built. I sincerely hope everyone enjoys this set of counters and that they result in both new scenarios and hours of enjoyable gaming for the Panzerblitz and Panzer Leader community.

Infantry, Towed Guns, and Transport

I did not mention the need to update the infantry, towed guns, and transport units for Panzer Leader 1940 because the original units created by Ramiro Cruz were well crafted for the game. Some units, however, can be added to better reflect the historical abilities of the French army and/or to expand the counterset, providing more variety for the gaming community.

Infantry (2 I 2/5-1): Another myth of the campaign was that the French infantry did little fighting, preferring to surrender or retreat before the German army. This myth is perpetuated by the continued focus on the second echelon and reserve units defending at the breakthrough at Sedan. There were good and bad formations in every army in WWII

and the French need a better infantry piece to reflect their better troops (the existing 1 I 2/5-1 should still be used for second echelon troops).

Légion étrangère (2 I 2/8-1): The best formation in the French army.

Bicycle (2 I 2/2-2): Bicycle troops appeared in every army during the early years of the war. While handy if you need to move your infantry quickly down a paved road, any off-road movement returns their movement factor to the standard infantry “1”.

Cavalry (2 I 2/2-3): This unit was not included in Ramiro Cruz’s countermix although it did show up on the Imaginative Strategist countersheet for the PL 1940 French. I include it here for any whom have yet to visit that excellent site.

Motorcycle (2 I 2/2-12): This unit was not included in Ramiro Cruz’s countermix although it did show up on the Imaginative Strategist countersheet for the PL 1940 French. I include it here for any whom have yet to visit that excellent site.

HMG (4 I 4/4-1): The French used the Hotchkiss 1914 heavy machinegun as a company support weapon. It was an unsatisfying WWI model that was forced to soldier on through WWII due to lack of funds to develop anything else. Like the German HMG unit provided by Mike Flagiello (see the IMSTRAT Supplemental German countersheet) and the Russian 12.7mm machinegun unit in the original Panzerblitz, it may not use close assault tactics in the game. Carl Schwamberger originally developed this counter for use in his “Stonne” scenario.

Somua MCG Artillery Tractor (0 C 0/1-6): Artillery tractor used to tow long barrel 105mm and 155mm guns.

Unic P 107 Artillery Tractor (0 C 0/1-9): Artillery tractor used to tow 75mm and short barrel 105mm guns.

Armored Cars and SPAA

The French produced a number of effective armored cars, most notably the Panhard which is featured with three different weapon types in the original counterset.

AMC P16 Halftrack (2 H 2/2-10): Produced in 1929, 100 were built and still in use in the cavalry divisions during 1940.

Panhard 165/175 (2 H 2/2-16): Replace the 37mm Panhard in the game with this piece.

Laffly AMD 50 (2 H 2/2-14): Armed with the same short 37mm gun as the Panhard and FT-17.

Laffly AMD 80 (2 I 2/2-17): The Laffly armored car armed with machineguns.

Laffly S 15 TOE (2 I 2/2-12): Twenty five were built and used in North Africa.

Laffly W 15 TCC (6 A 3/1-10): Two versions of this vehicle were produced. Each mounted a 47mm antitank gun in the rear of the armored car. One mounted an “armored windscreen” for the gun only; the second had an open-topped armored body. It is considered unarmored in the game.

VUDB (2 C(I)2/2-10): An APC used in both France and North Africa. 50 were produced and a further 12 were purchased by Belgium.

37 R (2 I 2/2-8): An armored carrier armed with a machinegun for mobile infantry support.

75mm SPAA (10 H 12/1-12): A 75mm antiaircraft gun mounted on a wheeled chassis. The gun was originally developed before WWI for use against airships. It was modernized in the 1930s and there were 236 in service in 1940.

Tanks

French armor has already been discussed in the above design notes. Some additional armored units have been included for this counterset and all counters represent 3-5 AFV instead of the 10 AFV in Cruz's original counters.

AMR 33 (2 I 2/2-10): A light tank armed with 13.2mm and 7.5mm machineguns. 120 were in service in 1940. AMR tanks were organized in three tank platoons and used for reconnaissance by the cavalry.

AMR 35 (2 A 2/2-10): The same tank armed with a 25mm gun. 200 were in service in 1940. AMR tanks were organized in three tank platoons and used for reconnaissance by the cavalry.

AMC 35 (6 A 3/3-8): Fifty of these tanks were produced with 15 being exported to Belgium. They were generally considered unreliable and were only committed to the battle after the German breakthrough at Seine.

FT-17 (2 H 2/2-2): A holdover from WWI, it has little value on the WWII battlefield.

Hotchkiss 35 (4 A 2/4-6): A light tank used by the cavalry. Around 400 in service in 1940.

Hotchkiss 39 (5 A 2/5-7): The improved model with a more powerful engine, mounting a longer 37mm gun. Two companies were sent to Norway as part of the French contribution to the campaign. Around 800-1000 available in 1940.

Renault 35 (4 A 2/5-4): A light infantry support tank intended to replace the FT-17. Around 1400 Renault tanks of all kinds were in service for the battles of France.

Renault 40 (5 A 2/6-4): A later version of the R 35 with increased armor and an improved 37mm gun.

FCM 36 (4 A 2/4-5): Another light infantry support tank. Around 100 produced.

Char D1b (6 A 3/4-4): Early D1 tank.

Char D2 (6 A 3/4-7): Later model. Only 50 D2s were built.

Somua S35 (6 A 3/6-8): The best French tank of 1940, it was deployed as a cavalry tank. Around 400 S35 tanks were in service in 1940.

Char B1 tanks: *The most famous of French tanks, the Char B1 was a nightmare of a vehicle for its crew. The hull gun on all versions of the B1 had little, if any, antitank ammunition provided so the main antitank armament was the turret gun. Unlike other French tanks, the B1 was equipped with a radio although its role was envisioned to be one of infantry support, not independent attack. The crew of four was strenuously overworked by the necessities of the highly complex and demanding machine, which did not lend itself to tactical efficiency on the battlefield. Organized in three tank platoons and possessing very poor strategic range, the B1 was a powerful but extremely limited AFV. Around 320 Char B tanks were in service in 1940.*

Alan Arvold has commented that Ramiro Cruz factored his B1 counters by adding the attack factors for the 47mm gun (6) and the 75mm gun (2) together and then giving it the best range available. However, giving it the highest possible attack and range factor--coupled with an "A" weapons class--greatly overestimates the tank's effective abilities on the battlefield.

The problem lies in how you envision the role of the tank—which armament should be considered primary, the 47mm antitank gun or the 75mm howitzer? The French, during the production of the B1, obviously expected its role to be one of infantry support. This is supported by the distribution of ammunition it carried: 74 rounds for the howitzer, 50 rounds for the antitank gun. As a result, I've chosen to use the H class howitzer to define the tank's attack capabilities, considering the 47mm antitank gun as the secondary armament. While this limits its armor piercing ability, it is somewhat made up for by the increase in range. The result is a well balanced AFV, capable of handling opposing armor or infantry. The Char B-1 is still, even with all its shortcomings, the best tank on the battlefields of 1940 France.

Char B-1bis (8 H 4/5-6): The first version of the B-1 went into production in 1935 and mounted a 37mm gun in the turret and the 75mm howitzer in the hull. It had 60mm of armor. The B1bis retained most of the features of the original B1 but mounted a 47mm gun in the turret. I've reduced the defense factor by one since it was deployed in three tank platoons.

The Quality of the Opponent

Keep in mind when considering these counters that the German army of 1940 is not nearly as dominating as it would later become. The main German battle tanks, the Panzer III (6 A 2/3-8) and IV (5 H 8/3-8), have very thin armor and limited armament. The Czech tanks (5 A 2/3-7 and 5 A 2/3-9) serving in the German army suffer from the same

deficiencies. Overall, French tanks are better and the S35 and B1bis tower over the opposition. The German infantry (2 I 2/8-1) will be tough to break but, unless supported by the heavy 88mm antitank guns, they can do little damage on their own. The German's strongest asset is maneuver—the ability to control the overall battlefield and fight the decisive battle in a location of his own choosing. He will need to use this asset to the greatest advantage to avoid destruction at the hands of the more heavily armed and armored French forces.