

THE LITTLE AVIATION MUSEUM

Workbench notes

RENAULT FT-17 CHAR CANON IN 1/72 BY RPM

(November 2003)

In December 1915 the French Army began thinking about the potential of artillery mounted on a tracked, armoured chassis. When Renault was approached to design such a fighting vehicle the company was too busy with other things and had no experience with tracked vehicles so the first orders were given to the manufacturers of the Saint Chamond and Schneider for 400 vehicles each. Neither of them turned out to be very good.

As well as these medium tanks the French army also had in mind a lighter tank and when Renault was asked to reconsider in July 1916 it had a model of its light tank ready for army officials by the end of the year. Further development was hindered by criticism about its light armament of a single machine gun and suggestions that the char (the French equivalent of the word tank) needed a crew of three rather than the proposed two, a driver and a gunner/commander, so an initial order for 150 was not placed until March 1917.

The Renault tank was radically different from other tank design of the times, featuring the now traditional layout of a driver at the front, a fully traversing turret above a central fighting compartment and the engine in the rear. Official trials began on 9 April 1917 and proved completely satisfactory, an order for 1000 was proposed at the beginning of May with the proviso that many of the tanks would be fitted with a 37mm gun rather than a machine gun.

At the time the first production order was placed another 2500 were requested in three basic versions; those armed with a machine gun, those armed with the 37mm gun and another variant in which the fighting compartment was replaced by an armoured box with enough room for two men and a radio for observation and command duties.

By September 1917 it had become clear that Renault could not produce all the ordered FTs so construction was contracted out to several other companies. By February 1918 there were 4000 of these light tanks on order including 970 fitted with a 75mm gun and a number of experimental types although the more heavily armed version did not go into production. By November 1918 4,635 FTs were on order and 3,177 had been delivered.

The first FTs were ready in September 1917 but the first ones were not delivered to the Army until March 1918. The first engagement in which they took part was on 31 May 1918 when small numbers were committed to the desperate defense against the German offensive and they were credited with making a major contribution to the final checking of the offensive. On 18 July 480 FTs were concentrated in the French counter offensive where they achieved success in breaking through German lines without artillery support but the offensive did not progress far for lack of adequate equipment.

The FTs required a fair amount of maintenance requiring a large support organization. At the end of the war the French Army had a total of 2,720 of them on hand, 1,991 were fit for combat, 369 were under repair and 360 were out of use.

After the war FTs spread around the world. They were exported to Belgium, Brazil, Canada,

China, Spain, Finland, Japan, Holland, Poland and Czechoslovakia. They were made in the United States and Italy and the Soviet Union captured many that had been in White Russian service. They fought in the Spanish Civil War and the French Army still had 1,560 at the beginning of World War II, many of which were taken over by the Germans and used for policing duties in France as late as 1944. What a remarkable little tank.



Now I remember why I stopped making tank models. I've just come out of years of therapy to get over the running wheels and springs of the old Airfix Churchill kit and now I've gone and done this to myself. I definitely need a rest cure of nice Boeing 747s and Airbus 340s after this nightmare. I can see why people like making 1/35 scale armour, most people don't have tiny little fingers to handle the tiny little pieces of kits like this - I don't either and it will take years to get over the experience.

Leaving aside the challenge of making such tiny models with so many even smaller tiny parts, this is a pretty good kit. There are certainly enough parts that are well moulded so that the model has lots of little details such as handles, running wheels and even a starting handle at the back. There are lots of pieces on the sprues that go to make up other versions of the FT than the one I made and it pays to have a look at some reference material, particularly photos, to make sure that you are using the right parts. The instructions are not as helpful as they could be because some parts that the diagrams suggest should go on the model - particularly spare track links - don't appear on any of the pictures I could find while a few other items, such as the driver's visor, appear on the model without any instructions telling you where they came from.

My two complaints about the kit are the plastic that it is made of and the rubber band tracks. The plastic is some of the softest I've ever come across and that made it very difficult to cut some of the smaller pieces from the sprues without damaging them and trimming was a bit of a nightmare because it took only the most tiny slip to cut more off the plastic than intended. The tracks are really not too bad but they are a bit too thick and don't sit very well on the return rollers. A review of the



kit I read suggested putting some weight in the tank body so it would sit well on the tracks and that works nicely, but something needs to be done about the top. On the other hand, I'm perhaps glad that the kit didn't offer the option of those itty-bitty little individual track links - I only tried that once and it was probably the last tank kit I made.

The kit offers options of 14 different FTs equipped with the 37mm gun. Unfortunately my mastery of Polish (the language of the kit manufacturer) is very ordinary and so I couldn't make anything but the most rudimentary sense of what those options are. There was one nice version with the motto 'Passe par tout' ('Cutting through all' more or less) but it is dated 1920 and probably served in Poland but since I wanted a Western Front version I chose a simpler option. The two colour camouflage went on by band and I painted the tracks in several colours of Metalizer, it was all very easy really. The end result looks very pretty in a tankish sort of way. I see that Revel makes a nice little LeClerc and I was tempted for a moment or two ...

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