

SOMUA S-35

History: In June 1934 the French Army issued specifications for a Automitrailleuse de Combat (AMC) for the cavalry, then called the Division Legere Mecanique. It would give the Army a mobile long-range weapon capable of launching 'brutal surprise attacks', a French version of the German blitzkrieg. The Army had already contracted a subsidiary of the Schneider company - the Societe d'Outillage Mecanique et d'Usinage d'Artilerie (SOMUA) - to build the prototype. The company accepted the proposal, construction began on 12 October 1934 and the prototype, named AC3, was ready on 14 April 1935. An improved prototype, the AC4, was adopted as the standard for this new medium tank and an initial order placed for 50. It was formally known at the AMC SOMUA modele 35 (or AMC 1935 S) but it became more commonly known as the SOMUA S-35 or even just the S-35).

Five pre-production AC4s entered service with the 4th Cuirassiers in January 1936 and by mid 1938 100 had been produced. At the beginning of September 1939 270 had been produced and by June 1940 430 had been made. Of these about 300 were in front line service at the beginning of the Battle of France with the three armoured divisions of the Cavalry, each comprising eight squadrons of ten S-35s each. As the Battle progressed further S-35s were issued to other units. By the time the armistice was signed a total of 429 had been delivered.

The S-35 was made of four cast armour sections, the turret, two upper hull parts and a lower hull. The turret was a version of the turret used on the Char B1 with the same gun but a slightly larger turret ring so the radio operator could help the commander with loading the gun. Even so, the one man turret was one of the S-35 weaknesses. The cast armour was another problem because



French industry lacked the capacity to meet demand for cast segments and an advanced version, the S-40, was developed with welded armour but did not enter production. Another weakness was the suspension, designed by the same man who had designed the suspension of the World War I Schneider tank so it was antiquated by the standards of the 1930s. Although it was intended that all S-35s would be equipped with a radio set they were so scarce that generally only unit commanders tanks had them. Another problem discovered in battle was that if an anti-tank round struck the tank where the upper and lower cast sections met the bolts sheared.

Despite its problems the S-35 was superior to German tanks during the Battle of France and, as with much other French military equipment, it was the way it was used that led to defeat. For example, during an attack on a bridge involving 40 S-35s in May 1940 the lack of properly

co-ordinated air cover left the tanks exposed to Ju87s.

After the French defeat 297 S-35s were taken over by the Germans who allowed the plant to complete some undelivered tanks. The German Army designated them PzKpfw 35 S 739 (f) and modified them by cutting off the top of the turret cupola and adding hatches so commanders could stick their heads outside the turret. Fifteen were used on armoured trains, mounted on flatcars that they could disembark if necessary. About 60 were converted to artillery tractors and the surplus turrets were used on the Atlantic Wall. The remaining S-35s were assigned to various tank units, serving mainly in secondary roles including anti-partisan operations in various parts of occupied Europe, and 100 were used in combat after the D-Day landings at Normandy. Forty S-35 went to Italy where they were deployed in Sardinia. They also served with Vichy and Free French forces in North Africa and several that had been hidden in France in 1940 were used during the liberation in 1944.

Data: *Engine* one SOMUA V-8 petrol engine of 190hp. *Hull width* 2.12m (6ft11in). *Length* 5.38m (17ft7in). *Height* 2.62m (8ft7in). *Combat weight* 19,500kg (42,990lb). *Maximum speed* 40.7km/h (25.3mph). *Maximum range* 230km (143 miles). *Armament* 47mm gun and 7.5mm machine gun. *Crew* 3.

The kit: Heller 1:72

I'm a great fan of Heller kits. There was a period in the 1970s when they were making the best kits going around and many of them are still the best 30 years later. Until my little flirtation with French AFVs I hadn't paid much attention to their armour kits but when I saw some of their tank kits available nice and cheap I took the plunge. It turns out that there are some fairly ordinary ones (like their AMX 30) and some very nice ones, like this SOMUA 35. The only part of the kit that I really didn't like when I first saw it, and still don't like, is their tracks. Even the old rubber band tracks could not look as bad as these strips. They are not flexible enough to look like tracks on a tank, they don't look anything like real S-35 tracks, they are too long and too thick. Still, this is the only game in town so I'll have to live with it.

Like most tank kits in this scale, there isn't anything too difficult about putting it together. The instructions suggest that you start with the lower hull and work up but it is not easy to figure out where the joins should be so I started with the hull top and worked down, and everything fitted together nicely. The suspension is simple to put together and looks good. Perhaps it would have been nice if the towing hooks had been moulded separately, but they don't look too bad.



The kit comes with only one decal option but the instruction sheet gives five view colour plans so it is not too difficult to get the pattern looking accurate. The overall scheme is ochre and green but somehow the little tank didn't look quite complete without a bit of highlighting and weathering. I'm not keen on doing this kind of thing to aeroplane models these days but even I cannot come at a pristine looking tank. Consequently I did a bit of work with a dark wash to highlight things like engine grills and a bit of dry brushing with silver and brown to bring out some highlights. The result is a nice looking little tank.