

POSITIVE DEMONS

BELGIAN ARMoured CARS IN WORLD WAR ONE

Words by Carl De Roo



When war came to the kingdom of Belgium in 1914, its army was totally unprepared. The uniforms of the soldiers were colourful but totally outdated. The infantry looked as if they had just stepped out of the action in the Franco Prussian war of 1870. As a small concession to modern warfare, the crack regiment of grenadiers left their bearskins in their barracks. The cavalry where not so quick to concede; the, self-proclaimed, elite regiments of Guides wore a uniform closely based on the Guides regiment in the Imperial Guard of Napoleon III. The training of soldiers was equally poor, not helped by the late introduction of conscription in 1913. In short the Belgian army was ill equipped and ill prepared to weather the storm of the Great War.

In one area however the Belgian army was streets ahead of its rivals. Belgium before the war was a very prosperous country. Among other things the country had a very well developed road network and several world leading car manufacturers. Before the western Front stabilised into the quagmire of the trenches, the Belgian armed forces built and despatched about 30 armoured cars into service. These cars were used both aggressively and efficiently. David Fletcher uses the term "positive demons..." as a description of Belgian drivers' cars in his book *War Cars*ⁱ. As anyone who has ever driven a car in Belgium can testify this description is still true today!

Right: A Belgian machine-gun post. The Belgian uniform being so unsuited for active service, it was quickly replaced by the 'Yser' uniform (named from its use by the troops fighting on the River Yser). The old Shako was replaced by a blue or green soft kepi with arm-of-service piping (blue-grey for infantry), the 1913-pattern tunic by a single-breasted dark blue or grey tunic with seven grey metal buttons and coloured piping on the cuffs, and the blue grey trousers replaced by wine red corduroy with blue puttees and ankle-boots, shortages being made up from French stocks.



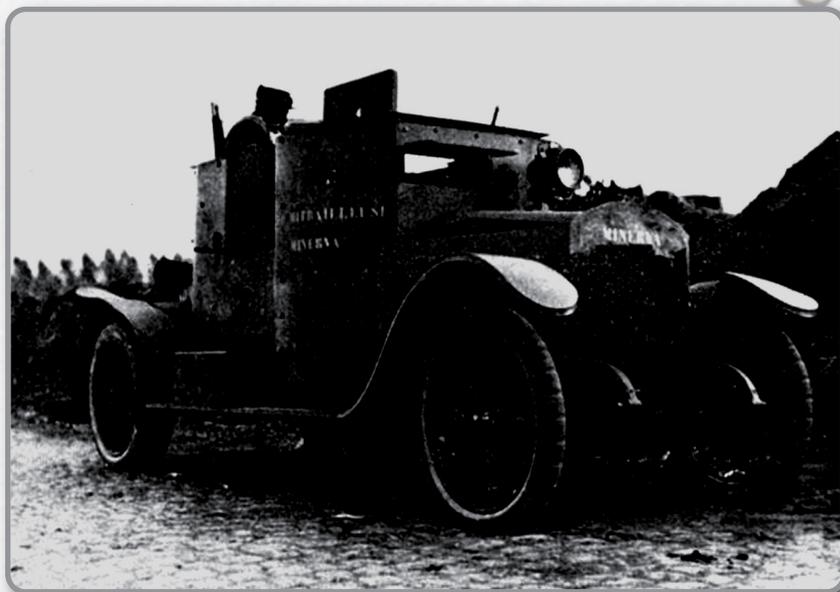
Opposite left: Charles Henkart's armoured car.

Opposite right: Henkart manning the gun of his Minerva.

DRESS DISTINCTIONS: BELGIAN ARMY, 1914

The following basic uniform-colours were worn by the Belgian Army at the outbreak of war:

Unit	Head-dress	Tunic	Trousers
Generals	Kepi	Dark blue piped crimson	Dark blue, Dark blue stripe
Staff	Kepi	Green piped crimson	Green piped crimson
Infantry	Shako	Dark blue piped blue grey on 1913 uniform; otherwise piped scarlet	Blue grey piped black
Grenadiers	Bearskin cap	Dark blue piped scarlet	Dark blue, scarlet stripe
Chasseurs á Pied	Shako	Green piped yellow	Blue grey piped green
Carabiniers	Tyrolean hat	Green piped yellow	Blue grey piped yellow
Carabinier Cyclists	Kepi	Green piped yellow	Blue grey piped yellow
Guides	Colback (busby)	Green piped crimson	Crimson piped green
1st Lancers	Czapka	Dark blue piped crimson	Blue grey piped crimson
2nd Lancers	Czapka	Dark blue piped crimson	Blue grey piped crimson
3rd/5th Lancers	Czapka	Dark blue piped white	Blue grey piped white



Humble beginnings

When, at the outbreak of World War I, lieutenant Charles Henkart rejoined his unit in the regiment of Grenadiers, he brought with him his two private cars. Very quickly these two cars were kitted out with arms and armourⁱⁱ attached to army headquarters,ⁱⁱⁱ with the cars being used for liaison duties and reconnaissance.

The following quotes from Lt. Henkart's log book give the flavour of his early encounters.

- Patrol in the direction of Laroche Houffalize, Bastogne, Durbuy. Reconnaissance of German positions on the rivers Ourthe and Amblève, rescue two prisoners of war (a French cuirassier and a French Chasseur à cheval) killed 3 Germans, wounded one...
- Patrol in the direction Haelen, Diest, Tessenderlo and Leopoldsburg. No contact with the enemy...
- Patrol in the direction of Jodoigne, Jauche, Jeandrain and Orp Le Grand. Cars fall into a German cavalry ambush near Jauche. Escape. Seven Germans killed...
- Patrol in the direction of Westerlo and Herenthout. I am able to push two companies of German jäger and a squadron of hussars back towards Westerlo and to keep them there

for an hour and a half. I retreat when German reinforcements arrive. Twenty Germans killed...

- Patrol on the main road between Mechelen and Leuven. Near Mechelen we encounter a strong German cavalry unit. Twenty one Germans killed, six Germans prisoner...
- Patrol in the direction of Hofstade and Elewijt. I have to retreat as the road is under strong German artillery fire. I return by road to Leuven. Three Germans killed. We find artillery and trenches near Campenhout. I cover the retreat of 2 companies of Chasseurs à pied left as a rear guard...

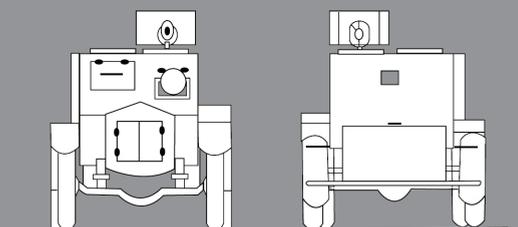
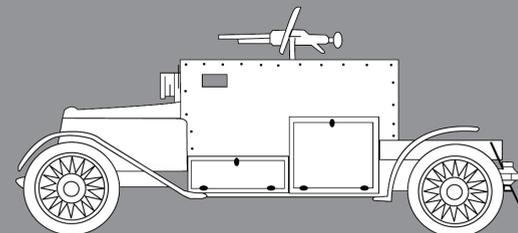
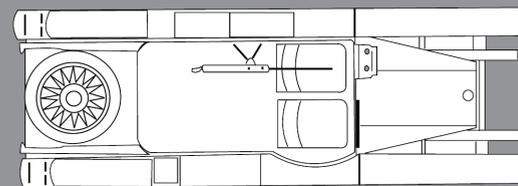
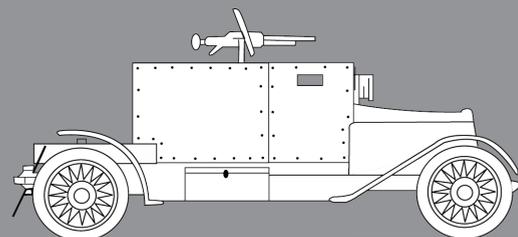
On 5 September (or possibly 14, accounts differ) Henkart and his unit (which included such Belgian notables as Count Louis de Villermont and Prince Baudouin de Ligne) laid an ambush at Zammel (nr Antwerp), in which they confronted a German cavalry squadron of some 450 men. After a fierce two hour battle, Henkart and his men were killed, but not before they had killed 25 Germans and inflicted heavy casualties.

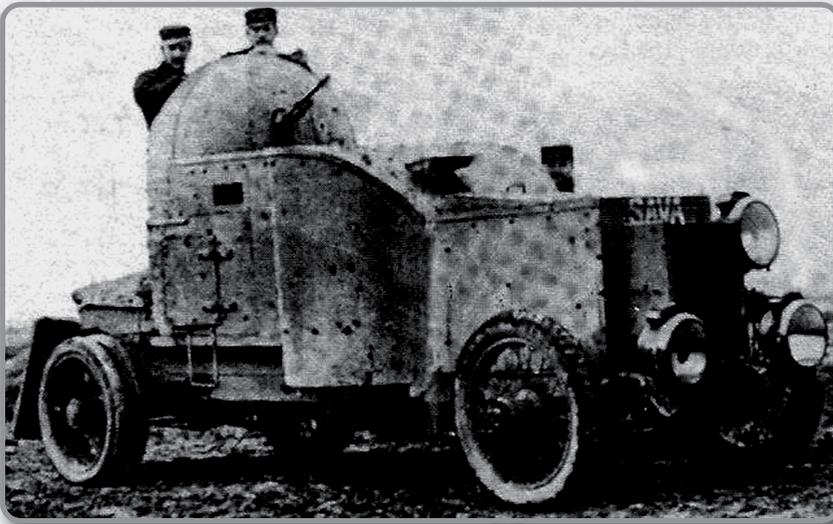
New Cars

Henkart's ad hoc unit had proved its effectiveness and the Belgian authorities commissioned the production of armoured cars in larger numbers. Two manufacturers in the large industrial city of Antwerp were involved. These were SAVA cars^{iv} and MINERVA cars.

Minerva armoured car (4x2)

Engine	38 hp, 4 cylinder Minerva Knight
Dimensions	4,9 m long, 1,75 m wide, 1,80 m height, ^{vi} 4 ton weight
Armour	5 mm
Armament	Hotchkiss MG with 4500 rounds in the vehicle (metal strip feed, 30 rounds on each feed)
Speed	40 km/h with armour
Crew	4





Left:
A SAVA
armoured car.

SAVA produced an armoured car in September 1914 armed with a Hotchkiss machine gun in a partially enclosed turret. Armour plating was provided by the Cockerill steel yards in Hoboken (near Antwerp).

Before the fall of Antwerp MINERVA produced between 25 and 30 armoured cars in its Antwerp factory.^v

Before the war Minerva had produced highly sought after luxury cars, driven by European Royalty and American movie stars. Charles S. Rolls sold Minerva cars in London before joining with Henry Royce to produce Rolls Royce. French car giant, André Citroën was a member of the board of Minerva.

It is not known who actually designed and commissioned the “auto mitrailleuse Minerva”. But the actual designing and producing of 30 armoured cars in such a small period (August 1914 until late September 1914) remains a quite extraordinary feat. The Belgian army continued to use the Minerva cars until the 1930's.

The armoured car was built on a readily available chassis and used a standard Minerva Knight 38 horsepower engine, engines which were reputedly very low noise. Armour plating was (like the SAVA) provided by the Cockerill steelworks.

The armoured cars saw action in reconnaissance, as support in defensive positions, as support in local counter attacks and in raids behind enemy lines. At least four cars were captured by German forces and later used in the German invasion of Rumania in 1916.

Action

The following action report is typical of how the Belgium armoured cars were employed.

“The date is 8 September 1914. Elsewhere the Franco-British counter-attack on the Marne has started. To support this attack King Albert of the Belgians launches a sortie from Antwerp. The sole Belgian cavalry division is on the left of the line. Second lieutenant Thiery of the Guides cavalry, is in charge of Minerva number 7 and attached to the headquarters of the cavalry division.

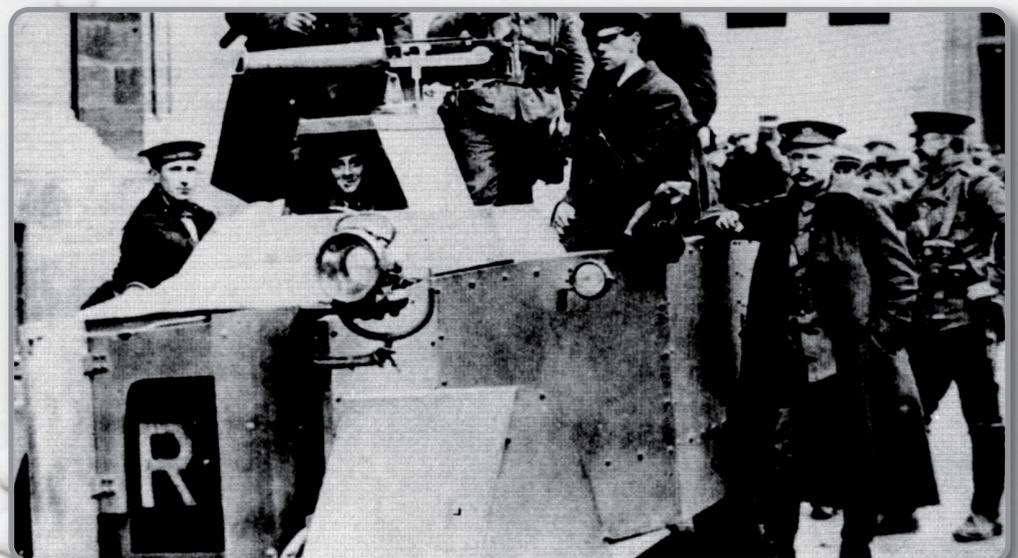
The battalion of Carabiniers-cyclistes (2 companies strong, 250 men) is charged with the recapture of the village of Werchter which is supposedly lightly held. Early in the morning, the cyclists leave their bicycles near the bridge over the Laak, an affluent of the river Dyle, and divide into three groups. The group on the left is supported by a dozen Lanciers of the 2nd regiment. The central group is supported by Minerva

Below:
This vehicle was operated by the Royal Naval Air Service under Flight Commander Samson RN, and was crewed by a mixture of naval and Royal Marine personnel, under the aegis of the Royal Flying Corps. Its sides were protected by steel plates, and it had a Maxim gun mounted on the 'conning tower'.

number 7. When this unit finds that the main road into Werchter is blocked by a barricade, the decision is made to dismount the machine gun. On the other side of the barricade the Belgian soldiers are met by heavy German fire coming from the houses along the main road.^{vii} After a while the group decides to withdraw. The Hotchkiss is reinstalled in the Minerva. Slowly retreating the Minerva gives covering fire for the carabiniers who move back towards the bridge over the Laak. Near the bridge there is an open field of fire but the barrel of the Hotchkiss is overheating and needs to be replaced. The armoured car stays and holds off the advancing Germans for about forty minutes before it has to retreat through lack of ammunition (all 4500 rounds were used). Carrying several wounded carabiniers, Minerva number 7 retreats in the direction of Tremelo. German losses in Werchter were 200 killed.”

Stalemate

By October 1914 the stalemate of trench warfare was beginning to set in and the usefulness of the armoured car began to wain. The Belgian army did however continued to use its Minervas until the end of the war. By 1918 each “division d'armée”^{viii} had a “groupement léger” for reconnaissance. This consisted of two cavalry squadrons, a company of cyclists and an “escadrille” of three armoured cars. The cavalry division also had a similar “escadrille”. The remaining Minervas soldiered on and were joined by a number of other cars; from Great Britain came some Sheffield Simplex and Lanchester armoured cars.^{ix}



Elsewhere

In France about 15 MORS armoured cars were purchased. The crew where dressed in uniforms designed by Jeanne Paquin, one of the leading lights of French haute couture, the soldiers of this unit formed the Belgian armoured detachment in Russia. This unit fought on the Eastern Front against Austro-Hungarian and German forces from 1915 until the start of the Russian revolution. At the start of this momentous event the Belgian unit was near Kiev. They withdrew by way of the Transsiberian railroad towards Vladivostok^x but this is a story for another time...

Painting

According to photographic and literary evidence the early Minerva cars were painted grey^{xi} Early on in the war there were a large number of (generally white) inscriptions on the cars. Photographic evidence shows cars with following lettering: "MINERVA",^{xii} "Auto Mitrailleur Minerva N°x" and "Service militaire".

From 1916 armoured cars in the cavalry division were camouflaged. This camouflage was very similar to that seen on British Rolls Royce and Lanchester armoured cars of the same period.



Armoured cars were common in many armies, the majority providing the crew with more protection than this French example. Cars mounted with machine-guns originated in the French Army with Captain Genty's *auto-mitrailleuse* of 1905-6, basically a Hotchkiss gun affixed to the back of his 1904 Panhard & Levassor automobile. Genty demonstrated the value of such vehicles in North Africa campaigning. According to its French identification, this photograph of a car firing over a street-barricade was taken in action; shortly after this a shell hit the ruined building to the left of the barricade, killing the NCO firing the gun and injuring the loader.

Gaming

Below is an army list for using Belgian armoured car divisions in Warhammer Historical's *The Great War* rules

BELGIAN ARMY 1914

Strategy rating :

1

Command Range :

All command groups in a 1914 Belgian Army have a 10" Command Range.

Carabiniers Battalion - 1914

Carabiniers were the light troops of the Belgian Army. They were used ahead of the main army and gained quite a reputation. They were known as "black devils" by the German Army.

1 HQ

Bataillon command Group

2-3 Core Company

Carabinier company

Regimental Support

(0-1 per 2 Core Company choices)

75mm Gun Machine Gun Section

Divisional Support

(0-1 per 3 Core Company choices)

Cavalry (single Troop or whole Squadron)

0-2 Armoured Car

Special Rules

The battalion Command Group has the Infiltration Tactics and Scouts Special Rules. This increases its cost by +10 points. It is considered lights for Unit Coherency rules.



Charles Henkart in miniature

Bataillon command Group

	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Colonel	4+	4+	3	3	1	4	2	9
Major	4+	3+	3	3	1	4	2	8
Soldier	4+	3+	3	3	1	3	1	7

A Bataillon Command Group consists of a Commanding Officer and two soldiers (aides staff, messengers, etc.). If led by a Colonel, the Command Group costs 50 points. If led by a Major, it costs 20 points.

Equipment:

The Commanding Officer has a pistol. All the soldiers have rifles.

Special Rules:

Infiltration Tactics. Scouts. These troops are considered lights for Unit Coherency rules.

Options:

- The Command Group may have up to three additional soldiers for +10 points each.

Carabinier Company

	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Carabinier	4+	4+	3	3	1	3	1	7
Captain	3+	3+	3	3	1	4	2	8

A Carabinier Company consists of a Command Group and between two and three carabinier platoons. The Company Command Group consists of a captain and two soldiers for 40 points. Carabinier platoons consist of ten soldiers for 70 points.

Equipment:

The Commanding Officer has a pistol. All the soldiers have rifles.

Special Rules:

Infiltration Tactics, Scouts These troops are considered lights for Unit Coherency rules.

Options:

- The Command Group may have up to two additional Carabiniers for +7 points each
- Any platoon may have up to four additional Carabiniers for +7 points each
- In one platoon of each Carabinier Company one soldier may replace his rifle with a Lewis Gun^{xiii} for +10 points each.

Belgian 75mm Field Gun

	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Crew	4+	4+	3	3	1	3	1	7

The unit consists of a Medium Field Gun and four crewmen for 60 pts.

Equipment:

All crewmen have either pistols or rifles.

Options:

- The Field Gun may have up to two additional crewmen for +10 pts each.

Machine Gun Section

	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Crew	4+	4+	3	3	1	3	1	7

This unit consists of one Maxim Heavy Machine Gun and three crewmen for 50 points. This can be replaced by a Hotchkiss Heavy Machine Gun at no extra costs.

Equipment:

All crewmen have either pistols or rifles.

Cavalry Squadron

	WS	BS	S	T	W	I	A	Ld
Trooper	3+	5+	3	3	1	4	1	7
Captain	3+	3+	3	3	1	4	2	8

This profile includes Guides, Lanciers, Chasseurs à cheval and Gendarmes

Cavalry squadrons are composed of a Squadron Command Group and two - three cavalry troops. The Squadron Command Group is composed of a Captain and two troopers for 45 points. A Cavalry Troop consists of nine troopers for 100 points.

Equipment:

The Captain has a sword and pistol.

All troopers have pistols, swords, lances and carbines.

Special Rules:

Cavalry:

These troops are considered lights for coherency rules.

Options:

- The Command Group may have up to two additional Troopers for +11 points each
- Any Troop may have up to three additional Troopers for +11 points each.

Armoured Car

In 1914 the Belgian army fielded the largest number of armoured cars on the Western front.

Pts	Front Armour	Side Armour	Rear Armour	BS
70	8	8	8	5+

The Armoured Car has a centrally mounted Hotchkiss HMG which is classed as a Vehicle Machine Gun.

Figures

Currently there are two ranges with figures for the Belgian Army available (25-28mm). Battle Honours has line infantry, field artillery,^{xiv} a Maxim HMG, a dog cart and Guides cavalry. Brigade Models has recently started what promises to be a very extensive range. Currently available are line infantry, infantry with a "bonnet de police"^{xvi} and carabiniers with their distinctive "chapeau corse" and green instead of blue greatcoat. The size difference between the two ranges is not too bad. There is however no model of a Minerva car available^{xvii}

ⁱ "The Belgians are aggressive and daring motorists at the best of times, and given armoured cars and machine guns they became positive demons..."

ⁱⁱ According to photographic evidence the cars of lieutenant Henkart were armed with Lewis machine guns. When colonel Isaac Lewis was unable to sell his invention to the American army, he moved where his invention was bought by the Belgian army. Apparently the Imperial German army used the nickname "the Belgian rattlesnake" for the Lewis machine gun.

ⁱⁱⁱ Belgian army headquarters was stationed in the town of Leuven between 5 and 19 August. From 19 August army headquarters was in Antwerp.

^{iv} Societe Anversoise de Vehicules automobiles (which means something like the Antwerp society of automotive vehicles)

^v Belgian military archives cannot give an exact number. Most Belgian military archives were removed by the Germans in World War II. Some of these archives were then removed by the Russians in 1945. It is only in the last couple of years that archives are returning to Belgium.

^{vi} The height is an educated guess.

^{vii} German forces in Werchter are estimated as one infantry battalion and a cavalry squadron.

^{viii} This is more or less comparable to an army corps. Each army division consisted of two infantry divisions. In 1918 there were six divisions d'armée.

^{ix} These were used in 1916 and were probably on loan from 15 squadron RNAS.

^x As money was a problem some enterprising soldiers organised a very popular mobile vodka distillery on the transport trains.

^{xi} The term elephant grey is frequently used.

^{xii} Frequently above the radiator.

^{xiii} Standard equipment in the carabinier was a Hotchkiss Light Machine Gun (also known as the Benet Mercie M1909). There is however some evidence that Lewis Guns were issued to the Carabiniers in early August 1914.

^{xiv} The talpac on the artillery figures is too large. The Belgian 75 mm was not identical to the German 77 mm.

^{xv} With a headswap they can represent Lanciers and chasseurs a cheval. The Spanish Gorillo (available from Anglian Miniatures) is identical to the Belgian cavalry and artillery "bonnet de police"

^{xvi} These can be painted either as line infantry, light infantry (chasseurs a pied) or grenadiers

^{xvii} Peter Pig makes a nice model but in 15 mm.