

TAC NEWS

July-August 1997

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Tank Action, Southern Poland, 1944



Under the cover of darkness, on August 13 and 14, German troop trains slipped into Kielce Poland. Strapped to the flat cars were the tanks of 3rd Panzer Division. The division's mission: check the Red Army's summer offensive long enough to allow remnants of Army Group Center to reform along the River Vistula.

The tactical situation around Kielce was utter chaos. The first fighting elements off-loaded were immediately *kampfgruppen* to provide security as the rest of the division detrained. The *kampfgruppe* consisted of:

Headquarters Detachment, 2nd Tank Batt.
Tank Cos. E and F, 6th Tank Rgt. (Panther)
Co. A, 3rd Panzergrenadier Rgt. (armored)
Battery A, 75th Artillery Rgt. (*Wespe*)

Once the division was safely off the railhead, the *kampfgruppe* was given a new assignment by divisional staff at 2000 on August 15. Approximately thirty miles east of Kielce, the Kielce-Opatow road twice crossed a small river. Capturing

these two bridges intact was absolutely vital to secure the division's main avenue of advance to the Vistula.

Aerial reconnaissance reported a relatively weak Soviet force located in a village near the bridges. No other enemy concentrations were observed. The only "friendlies" in the area belonged to the 188th Infantry Regiment, which was forming a defensive line on high ground approximately ten miles west of the objective. The terrain around the bridges was hilly and cultivated, with waist-high grain fields interspersed with potato and beet crops. Patches of forest large enough to conceal ambushes flanked the road. The weather was sunny and dry. The nights were clear and moonlit. Sunrise was at 0445, sunset at 1930.

Assembling a battalion-sized *kampfgruppe* into march formation would take three hours. Moving at night, blacked-out and in column, would restrict road speed to 6 miles per hour. This meant an approach march of five hours. According to the book, a Panther in constant operation for that period of time required refueling before entering battle. All these factors,

coupled with the time necessary to break column and deploy into assault formation, meant the attack would not start until after sunrise. For any chance at surprise, the village had to be attacked at night. It was therefore decided to immediately detach a small advance force with orders to reach the 188th's regimental CP by 0200. After picking up a guide, the advance force could push on and cover the remaining 9 miles in 1-1/2 hours. Even with a refueling stop, this advance force could attack just before dawn with the main body just an hour behind it.

Order of March:

Advance Force

A motorcycle reconnaissance detachment
Company F, 6th Tank Regiment
One platoon from Company A, 3rd Panzer Grenadier Regiment
Two fuel and maintenance trucks

Main Body

2nd Tank Battalion Headquarters
Company E, 6th Tank Regiment

Battery A, 75th Artillery Regiment

Company A, 3rd Panzer Grenadier Regiment (less one platoon)

The marching orders were:

1. The commander Company F and the *kampfgruppe* commander were to depart at 0100 hours and proceed by *kübelwagen* to the CP of the 188th Infantry Regiment.
2. Company E's CO would command the main body from Kielce to the 188th's CP.
3. After the main body reached the 188th CP, radio silence would be lifted. Company E would then assume the lead, followed by battalion HQ, the armored infantry company, and the artillery battery.
4. Refueling of all elements was to take place in a designated woods two miles west of the objective.

Lieutenant Zobel, commander of Company F, personally briefed his platoon leaders, first sergeant, and maintenance section chief on the orders for the advance force. From Kielce to the 188th's Regimental CP, the Company HQs section was to head the column, followed by the four tank platoons, the armored infantry platoon, and the gas and maintenance sections. The motorcycle detachment was to move out 30 minutes ahead of the column and post guides along the road. The ranking platoon leader was to be in charge of the

column until Zobel rejoined it. To keep the men alert, hot coffee was served to all before they moved out.

Zobel then drove with the *kampfgruppe* commander to the 188th CP where they were brought up to date on the tactical situation. After heavy fighting in the Opatou region, the 188th withdrew to its present positions during the night of August 14. As the regiment attempted to contact German units on its flanks, the Soviets established a small bridgehead in the village. Lacking adequate strength to attack, the Soviets immediately set about fortifying the village. Civilians captured in the woods two miles west of the village reported no "Russians" there.

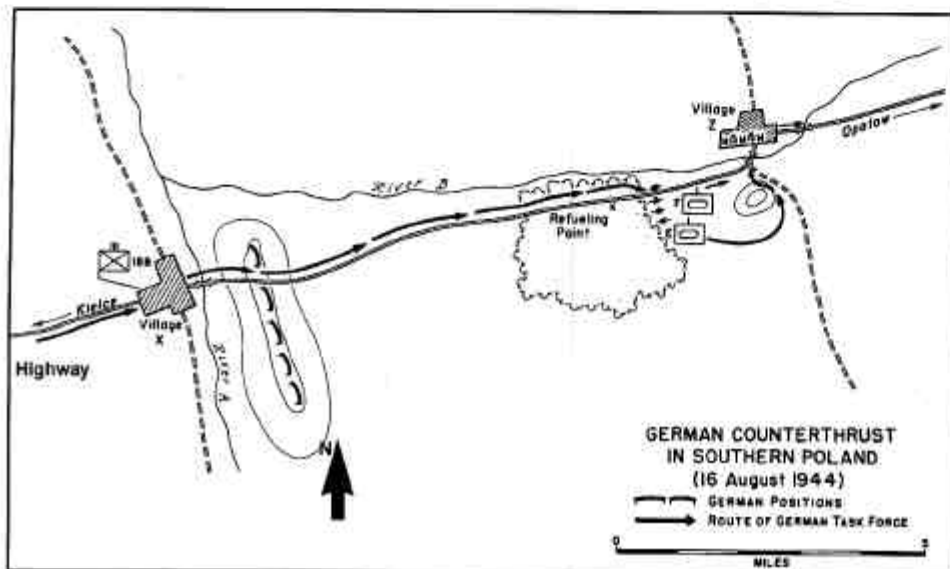
When the advance force caught up with him at 0140, Zobel resumed command and reformed the march column with the 1st Platoon in the lead, followed by the HQs section, the 2nd and 3rd Platoons, the armored infantry platoon, the gas and maintenance sections, and the 4th Platoon. A guide rode on the lead tank of 1st Platoon until the column reached the 188th's outpost perimeter at 0230. Listening posts reported no Soviet activity. Zobel radioed the advance force to ready for action. The Panthers buttoned-up, except for the tank commanders who remained exposed for better vision. Since a tank ambush was expected, the guns were loaded with armor-piercing shells.

The advance force reached the refueling area at 0345. Screened by trees, the tanks parked in rows along the roadside. The panzergrenadiers dismounted and formed a close-in security screen. Sentries were posted at 50-yard intervals in the forest north and south of the road. Fuel trucks drove up and unloaded full jerry cans. The actual fueling was done manually by the tank crews. The trucks then drove back down the road and picked-up the empty jerry cans.

Zobel's plan of attack split his force into two columns. The left column consisted of 1st Platoon, the HQs section, and the 4th Platoon. The right column consisted of 2nd and 3rd Platoons plus the armored infantry platoon. The left column was to establish firing positions south of the village and support the right column as it took the bridges. Once the bridges were captured, the advance force would hunker in and await the main body.

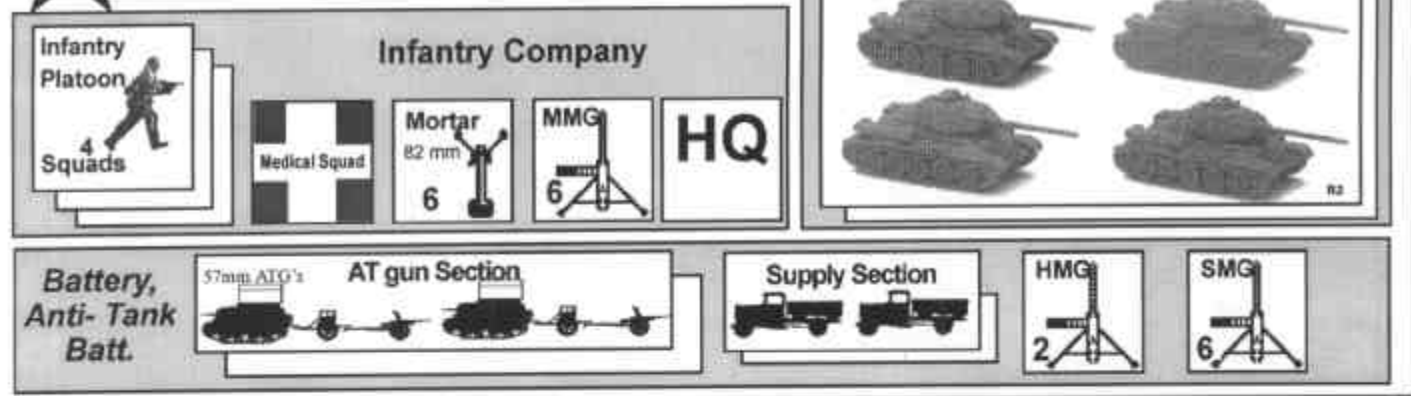
To maintain surprise, Zobel did not conduct a preliminary reconnaissance and instructed his tankers not to fire unless they were shot at. At 0430, with visibility approaching 1,000 yards, the first Panthers moved out of the woods. As 1st and 2nd Platoons drove toward the village, they took an incoming volley of Soviet tank and antitank gunfire. The well-aimed shots tore into the Panthers' relatively thin side armor. Two Panthers shuttered to a halt, a third began to burn. Zobel had walked into a perfectly executed ambush.

With the element of surprise gone, as well as three of his tanks, Zobel called off the attack. When the main body joined him at 0515, Zobel reported his failure first hand to the *kampfgruppe* commander. Although the Soviets were well prepared, Zobel believed them too weak to face a concerted attack. Undoubtedly, the enemy had radioed for reinforcements, so it was necessary to hit them at once. This time, however, the Germans would conduct a set piece battle, in battalion strength, with proper artillery support.





Infiltration Force: Red Army



With Zobel's Company F conducting a feint along its original attack route and firing at targets of opportunity across the river, Company E and the panzergrenadier company would skirt the hill and approach the village from the south. Once there, Company E's 3rd and 4th Platoons, plus the armored infantry company would concentrate their fire on the southern edge of the village. Masked by this fire, Company E's 1st and 2nd Platoons would cross the south bridge, drive into the village, turn east at the market square, and capture the east bridge. As soon as the first two platoons crossed the bridge, the rest of Company E would close up and push into the village. The panzergrenadiers were to cross the south bridge and support the 1st and 2nd Platoon's attack on the east bridge. With Company F pinning any Soviets remaining at the southern edge of town, the *Wespe* battery was to advance to the edge of the woods and engage targets of opportunity.

A potential bottleneck was the southern bridge. It could only support one tank at a time. Thus it was critical for all guns of the *kampfgruppe* to lay a curtain of fire between the village and the southern bridge as 1st and 2nd Platoons crossed. To screen the approach to the bridge, the *Wespe* battery would lay smoke south of the village along the river line. Once in the village, the two lead Panther platoons were to concentrate solely on the east bridge. Directly engaging the enemy was left to follow-up elements. H-hour was 0600.

Company F moved out on schedule, accompanied by the *kampfgruppe* commander and an artillery observer. At 0610 Company E emerged from the woods in two columns. It deployed into wedge formation and turned southward, making a wide turn around the hill. The halftracks followed close behind. As the tanks and halftracks approached the hill from the south, they took machine gun and antitank rifle fire from the hilltop. As Company E slowed to engage the enemy, the *kampfgruppe* commander broke in by radio urging them to push on and concentrate only on the Soviets directly in their line of attack. Company E's Panthers fanned out, protecting the vulnerable halftracks from plunging ATR fire and marauding squads of Soviet infantry. Soon afterward Company E reported resistance on the hill neutralized. It was now time to cross the southern bridge. The signal was passed to the *Wespe* battery and they commenced pounding the southern edge of the village. Three minutes later the 1st and 2nd Platoons drove toward the bridge and crossed it in single file. Company F now broke off the feint and approached the village from the west.

As 1st and 2nd Platoons crossed the south bridge, Company E's 3rd and 4th platoons, along with the halftracks rushed the village at top speed. The Panthers cut through the village and took the east bridge without loss. With the capture of this bridge, the Soviets broke. Two

Soviet tanks, trying to escape north, were destroyed up by the 3rd and 4th Platoons. Soon all *kampfgruppe* units radioed "Mission accomplished." The panzers lingered in the village and waited for the rest of the division to link up with them.

Conclusion

In the opinion of the US Army editors, the *kampfgruppe* commander erred in ordering Zobel's advance force to halt and refuel so close to the objective. In theory, a tank should enter combat with sufficient fuel to assure mobility throughout a pitched fight. In this particular instance, with such a premium placed on surprise, Zobel should have pressed on without stopping to refuel. If the risk was considered too great, the Panthers should have topped-off at the 188th Regimental CP.





Avant Garde of 3rd Panzer Division

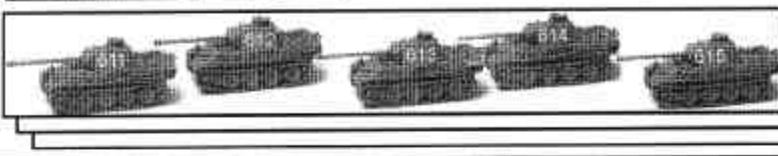
Advance Force

1 Platoon, Co. A,

3rd
PzGr
Rgt

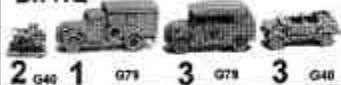


Company F 6th Panzer Regiment

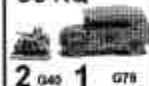


Batt. HQ & HQ Co. 2nd Batt. 6th Pz. Rgt.

Bn HQ



Co HQ



Signals Platoon



AA Platoon

HQ



AA Section



Engineer
Platoon

HQ



Scout Sec.



Pioneer Section



Tank Platoon



Batt. A, 75th Self-Propelled Artillery Batt.

HQ section



Commo Plt.



Gun Platoon

Ammo
Section



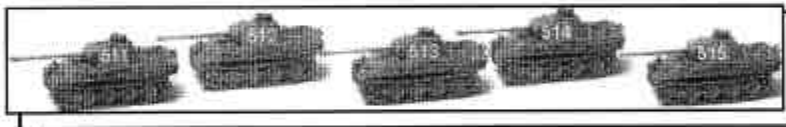
HQ section



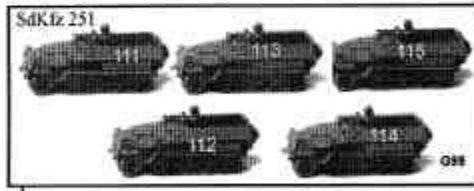
Gun
Section



Company E 6th Panzer Regiment



Co. A
3rd
PzGr
Rgt.



Main Attack Force

Accepting the woods were free of Soviets, on the word of capture civilians, was also a mistake. Surely the Soviets had some sort of prepared perimeter with extended listening posts. The sound of a full Panther company jockeying for position just two miles distant from the objective was sure to alert the enemy.

The *kampfgruppe* commander also should have been with the advance force. As it was, when Zobel ordered his retreat, he had to wait a half-hour for his next order. Luckily the delay was not fatal, the attack by the full *kampfgruppe* was properly planned and its execution got the expected quick victory.

This scenario was excerpted from US Army Pamphlet No. 20-269, Historical Study: Small Unit Actions During the German Campaign in Russia.

By Edward Morris