

TAC NEWS

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GERMAN PANZER TACTICS IN THE WESTERN DESERT

The following excerpts from Guidelines for Commanding and Employing the Panzer-Regiment and Panzer-Abteilung in Combat dated 18 January 1941 provide details on the tactics employed by the Panzer-Regiments during the early battles in North Africa. Similar doctrine was used through out WWII.

The Panzer-Regiment is organized as follows:

Regiments-Stab (headquarters) with *Nachrichtenzug* (signals platoon) & *Leichten Panzerzug* (light tank platoon)

2 *Panzer-Abteilungen* (tank battalions)
1 *Panzer-Werkstatt-Kompanie* (tank repair company)

The Panzer-Abteilung is organized as follows:

Abteilungs-Stab (headquarters)

Stabs-Kompanie (hq company) w/ *Nachrichtenzug* (signals platoon)
Erkunderzug (scout platoon)
Leichten Panzerzug (light tank platoon)
Pionierzug (combat engineer platoon)
Fliegerabwehrzug (anti-aircraft platoon)

2 *Leichte Kompanien* (light tank co.)
1 *Mittlere Kompanie* (medium tank co.)
1 *Leichte Kolonne* (light supply column)

Combat Formations for the Regiment

The panzer-regiment can attack with its *abteilung* in echelon or abreast.

The regiment attacking in echelon strikes the enemy with an initial powerful blow, which is continuously fed by companies from the rear wave. When fighting within zones of enemy resistance, the flanks of the regiment are best secured by echelon in depth.

The employment of both *abteilungen* beside each other with less depth can be useful in the chase of a decimated opponent or by breaking off combat to attack an aggressive opponent.

Combat Formations for the Abteilung

For the *panzer-abteilung*, the *leichte kompanien* normally makes up the front line. The *mittlere kompanie* usually fights in the second line, supporting the *leichten kompanien*. The third *leichte kompanie* brings up the rear, behind the open flank or behind the center.

For the *mittlere kompanie* to provide effective support, it must function as a cohesive unit. The commander must be constantly aware of terrain factors that may break-up or cause

gaps in his formations. If the terrain forces it, sections of the *mittlere kompanie* can be directly attached to the *leichte* units.

The width of the *panzer-abteilung* attack formation should not exceed 1200 meters.

Attacking from a March

In a meeting engagement, the enemy must be immediately attacked. During the assault it is vital to maintain unit cohesion.

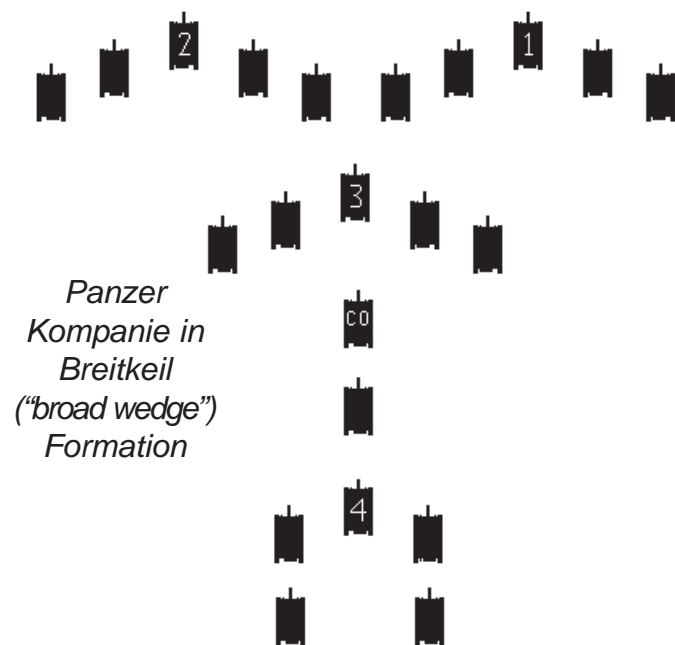
The commander deploys his forces in accordance with information obtained by the combat reconnaissance element of the regimental *leichten zug*. This intelligence determines the feasibility of a panzer attack, and warns of any hidden tank obstacles or impediments. Combat reconnaissance elements should always screen the *abteilung's* open flank.

When attacking from the march, the regiment usually deploys the *abteilungen* one behind the other. The first wave strikes known enemy positions and penetrates beyond them. The second wave follows up and is deployed in depth. Specific objectives are assigned as the attack develops.

Close coordination with supporting artillery is especially vital, because there is no way to pre-plot artillery fire. Artillery fire is corrected by direct radio communication as the attack develops. The artillery must be continually updated about the formation, width, middle line, and objective of the attack. The artillery commander and observer in *panzerbeobachtungswagen* accompanying the attack in the first wave allows the *abteilung* commander to direct the artillery fire against enemy weapons that can't be engaged directly by the panzers.

When the *abteilung* commander receives the attack order, he deploys his *leichten zug* (platoon) to the front or to the open flank in order to expand on information gained by the regimental combat reconnaissance. If necessary, the *leichten zug* is reinforced with panzers from the *leichten kompanien*.

The *abteilung* usually attacks from the march in a "*Breitkeil*" formation.



During the attack, the *mittlere kompanie* is advanced sector by sector,

providing constant support for the lead elements. It is vital that the *mittlere kompanie* not lose contact with the first wave.

Attacks from the Assembly Area

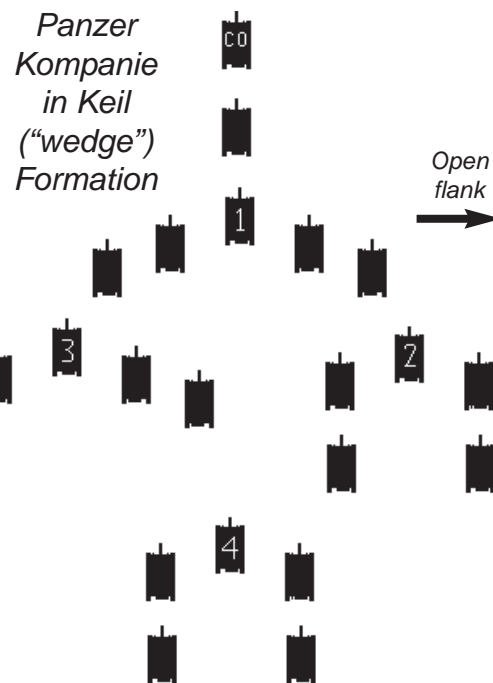
All of the necessary preparations for conducting an attack are to be completed in the assembly area.

These include:

1. Thorough scouting of the terrain to be attacked
2. Clearing of obstacles in front of the enemy
3. Establishing contact with the commanders of other weapon units supporting and escorting the attack, establishing contact with the commanders of the units and elements that already have encountered enemy activity in the terrain to be attacked, and also establishing contact with the commanders of the supporting infantry units.
4. Exploit the intelligence gained from scouting from all units on the terrain, known enemy nests of resistance, especially anti-tank weapons and artillery.

The *kompanie* commanders and junior leaders should be briefed on terrain conditions prior to the attack, as long as such a briefing can be conducted outside of enemy observation.

To counter enemy radio intelligence activities, strict radio silence is to be enforced within the regimental assembly area.

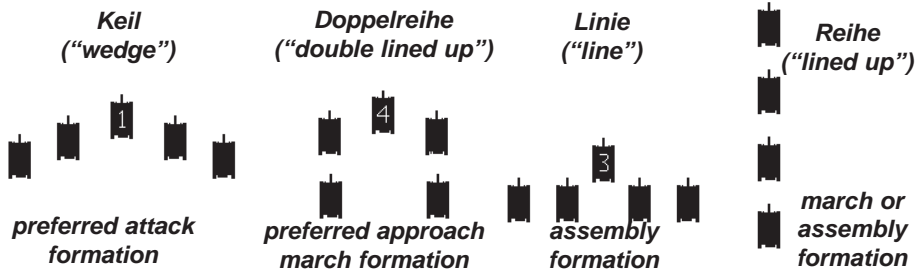


If the regiment attacks in several waves, the first wave has the task of quickly penetrating into the enemy rear echelons and destroying their artillery. Closely following, the second wave engages the enemy infantry and heavy weapons that weren't destroyed by the first wave. The infantry follows close on the heels of the second wave.

If the regiment is to be assigned the task of directly supporting an infantry advance, the *panzer-regiment* commander is responsible for maintaining contact between his regiment and the infantry. The regiment orders which elements - normally up to a *leichten kompanie* - are attached to the infantry for close cooperation.

If *panzer-jaeger* elements are attached, these will be deployed in several waves directly behind the first wave of panzers. Their specific targets are emplaced enemy anti-tank weapons. After the penetration, they will usually follow behind the open wing of the first wave so that they can cover the flanks from enemy tank attacks.

Panzer Zug Formations



The drill manual prescribed intervals of 25 meters to the front, and 50 meters side to side. These distances would be altered by terrain and circumstances.

Close cooperation with the engineers that escort the attack must be assured so that all enemy barriers can be quickly cleared away.

After the front line enemy defenses are breached, the *abteilung* commander must immediately consolidate his unit and prepare for an enemy counterattack.

After the *mittlere kompanie* is finished supporting the breakthrough, its principle task is to repulse any enemy counterattack. To achieve this, strong elements of the *mittlere kompanie* must be quickly deployed in the decisive direction.

After the breakthrough, during the consolidation process, combat reconnaissance is vital, especially in the open flanks.

Tank versus Tank Combat

Decisive factors in tank combat are:

1. A quick grasp of the situation and terrain, plus immediate action at all command levels.
2. Immediate identification of the enemy's strength and direction of attack.
3. Knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of enemy tank types.

With the appearance of enemy tanks, immediately abandon the current task, and attack them. Destroy them by utilizing all available armor-defeating weapons. Once the enemy armor is destroyed, the original task can be pursued.

Combat reconnaissance are to quickly determine the enemy flanks.

All lead elements are to quickly establish a strong fire front to force the enemy to halt his attack. The second echelons are to counterattack as soon as the inertia of the enemy attack is broken. The strength of the reserve, terrain, and weather determine if the counterattack is sent against the front, flank or rear of the enemy tank force.

The axis of attack should keep the sun in the rear and the wind blowing into the front. The counterattack is conducted in waves, with the lead wave engaging the enemy frontally. The follow-up waves take the enemy in his flank or rear. The second wave strike should take full advantage of terrain and be masked by smoke to achieve surprise.

Towed anti-tank guns will accompany the panzers for direct support, with artillery providing indirect fire.

Retiring enemy tanks are to be ruthlessly pursued and cut off from their path of retreat. The execution of a hot pursuit is done with the close cooperation of reconnaissance aircraft.

Attack Against a Fortified Position

The main body of the panzer-regiment is held under cover, until gaps through the anti-tank obstacles have been established. Gaps are opened by the engineer elements, which are closely supported as they clear tank obstacles and barriers.

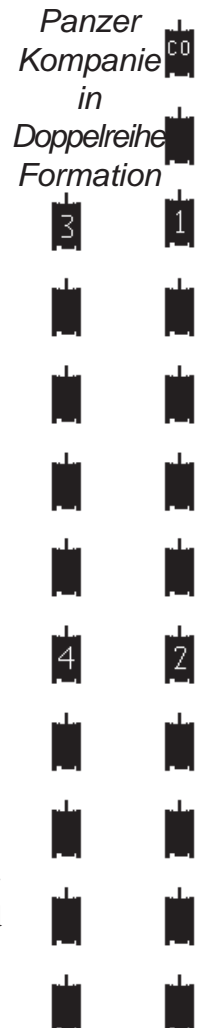
Once a path is cleared, the panzer unit forcing the breach is masked by smoke. The immediate objective of a panzer unit breaking a fortified line is to destroy emplaced enemy artillery.

Combat reconnaissance accompanies the assault elements to spot secondary barriers, tank traps, and mines. Armored engineers are deployed far forward to clear these barriers as they are spotted.

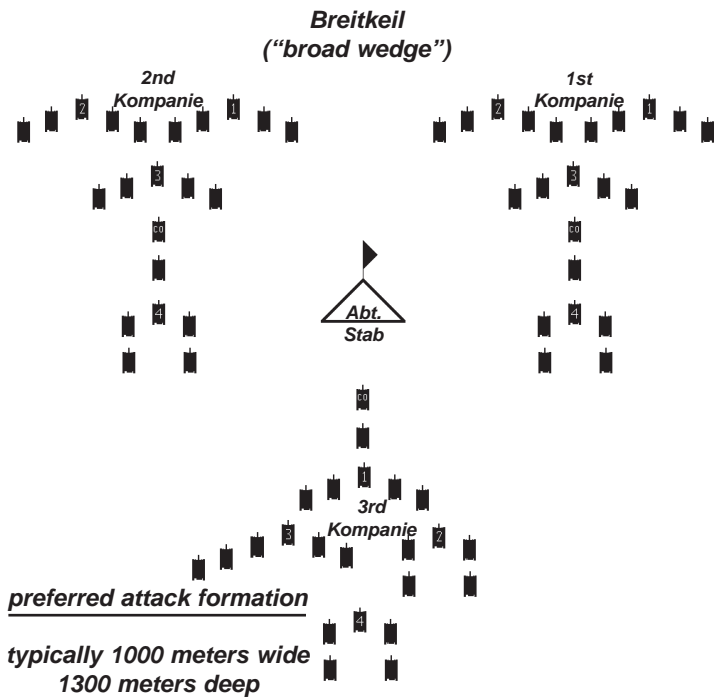
The attack is conducted in depth, ideally with the *mittlere kompanie* firing from covered positions in no-man's land.

Defense

After gaining the objective, the *panzer-regiment* must defend the newly won territory until relieved by



Panzer Abteilung Assault Formations

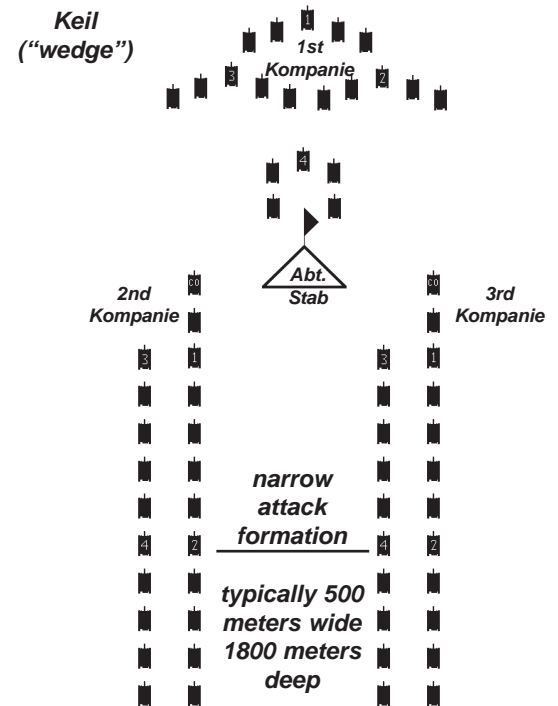


other units. The main panzer body is held in reserve until the main enemy counterattack is launched. This reserve is to be protected against enemy artillery and combat aircraft by utilizing cover and deployed formations.

To prevent a surprise attack, the panzer force must keep a constant vigil. Combat reconnaissance is critical after the objective is secured, especially in close terrain. It may be necessary to reinforce the *leichten panzerzuege* for this task.

Counter measures should be taken against enemy reconnaissance elements attempting to ascertain the strength and depth of the advance. This is done using long range fire, frequently changing the positions of the panzers.

Enemy counterattacks are to be immediately met with early concentrated fire. As soon as the true strength and direction of the counterattack is known, the panzer reserve



force is committed, ideally for a flank attack.

Breaking Off an Action

In the retreat, the panzer force is to cover the unarmored forces. It does this through repeated counterattacks of the pursuing enemy. Ideally, the counterattacks are powerful short-range strikes from unexpected directions. Wide attack formations are the rule.

While breaking off combat with superior enemy tank forces, it is desirable to fall back on a prepared anti-tank position. Active flank reconnaissance and timely counterattacks, especially by *panzer-jaeger* units and engineers, are necessary to keep pursuing enemy tanks at bay. If the opponent is especially tenacious in the pursuit, the retreating panzer force must exploit terrain and favorable positions and counterattack with localized superior forces.

While breaking contact, smoke

should mask the direction of the withdrawal.

Actions When Encountering Mines

The *leichten zuege's* most critical task while deployed on reconnaissance and scouting, is to spot and send timely reports on the position and extent of enemy minefields. Engineer detachments may also accompany the *leichten panzer zuegen*.

The *panzer-regiment's* engineers are to be directly attached to lead elements so they may immediately start clearing paths in the enemy's minefields.

While crossing a minefield, the formation should expand its width and depth. The panzers of the 2nd and 3rd waves should drive directly on the track paths of the lead elements.

by Edward Morris