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Tigers on the Seine

The principle source material for this article comes from Ken Ford's excellent book Assault Crossing: The River Seine 1944.

The Combatants

The German 49th Infantry Division, commanded by Generallieutenant Sigfried Macholtz, mustered three infantry regiments of two battalions each, one artillery regiment, and a fusilier battalion. This was its authorized strength, but in truth the 49th Division was a paper tiger. As it languished in the Pas de Calais as part of the German Fifteenth Army, the 49th Division's men, mortars, and machine guns were siphoned off to replace losses suffered by the Seventh Army in Normandy. By August of 1944, although it had yet to fire a shot, the 49th Division was bled down to a motley collection of Hitler Youth and foreign conscripts.

Following the German collapse in Normandy, the 49th Division was ordered to the Seine River and assigned to hold the area between Giverny and Les Andelys. In that sector the convoluted French road network formed a hub at the town of Vernon, and thus Vernon was the likely spot for an Allied crossing. Arriving on 20 August, Gen. Macholtz immediately set to work organizing a defense on the high ground rimming Vernonette, a small hamlet facing Vernon from the west bank. At first, the only German infantry available was a scratch force from the 150 Regiment. The rest of the 49th Division remained strung out in road column, struggling with push-carts and dodging the hated "Jabos" (Allied fighter-bombers). Slim as his resources were, Gen. Macholtz commanded excellent

ground. Dug in on the heights, he absolutely dominated the river itself and the approaches from Vernon on the opposite bank.

The 43rd Wessex Division, commanded by Major-General G. Ivor Thomas, consisted of three rifle brigades, the 129, the 130, and the 214. Each brigade mustered three battalions. The 214, for example, consisted of: the 7th Somerset Light Infantry, the 1st Worchestershires, and the 5th Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. Rounding out the division roll was one recce regiment, three royal artillery regiments, and the various antitank, antiaircraft and REME detachments.

The Crossing

The crossing at Vernon commenced at 1845 hours on 23 August. The assault forces consisted of two battalions, the 4th Somerset Light Infantry on the left, the 5th Wiltshires to the right. Expecting to cross in DUKWs (amphibious 2-1/2 ton trucks), the battalion commanders were shocked to learn that the banks were too steep for DUKWs to enter the water. The time and activity necessary to construct landing ramps could compromise the element of surprise. Therefore, it was decided to cross the Seine in assault boats.

With artillery and heavy weapons fire based in Vernon, the assault boats struck out under the cover of a dense smoke screen. Just then, on the far bank, the German 1st Battalion of the 148th Grenadier Regiment arrived on the scene. After a ten day bicycle march from Boulogne, the badly disorganized battalion was expecting to go into

regimental reserve. Instead, it was fed into the line by platoons, without any of its organic heavy weapons or artillery.

Unfortunately for the British, the smoke screen drifted. The Germans, up to now hunkered in to weather the preparatory artillery barrage, emerged from their holes and loosed a murderous crossfire. Targeted assault craft splintered apart and sank. Whole platoons were wiped out. The remaining craft scattered, some mistakenly landing their troops on islands rimming the far bank. Eventually, all but one of eighteen the assault boats were sunk. DUKWs (amphibious 2-1/2 ton trucks) tried to follow up with supplies, but these too were sunk, fouled in the shallows, or were unable to climb the steep banks. Eventually a lodgment was secured. A pontoon foot-bridge was thrown across the river and work began on a heavy Bailey Bridge. Until the Bailey was finished, armoured vehicles had to be ferried across in rafts.

Over the next several days the bridgehead was expanded to a breadth of three miles with a depth of one mile. The expected German counterattack never materialized, although localized actions wiped out several British rifle platoons.

In the course of consolidating the bridgehead, the 7th Somersets, led by Lt. Colonel J. W. Nichol, were put into the line on 27 August. Nichol assumed command of the battalion on 13 July, becoming its third commander within three days; the other two having been killed in action. Nichol was a brave and popular leader, winning the DSO at le Plessis Grimault. The men in the bat-

Following up A Company was C Company, commanded by Major David Durie. Durie advanced towards the leading company, but was well short of the original crossroad assigned to A Company. Nichol ordered Durie to send a patrol forward to contact A Company. Meanwhile, the next company in line, D Company, was told to hold fast until the situation sorted itself out.

The C Company patrol soon reached the original road junction assigned to A Company and found it deserted. This information was relayed back to Durie, who sent it on to Nichol. Hardly had Nichol received this message when A Company frantically radioed saying it was surrounded and urgently needed relief. Nichol immediately dispatched D Company along with a Sherman tank troop from the 4th Royal Dragoon to his beleaguered infantry. A second message from A Company reported the situation serious, but that they would hold. Nichol replied tanks were on the way, but the signal was never acknowledged.

The silence worried the Battalion HQ staff, but to everyone's relief, the Shermans radioed back that they had reached A Company and were engaging the enemy. It looked as though the cavalry had arrived in the nick of time, but ten minutes later a message from Durie's C Company said they were under attack by a large enemy force and had just been joined by a troop of tanks. It was immediately evident to Nichol the Dragoon Guards had missed A Company. He ordered them to press on, but the lead tank commander was killed as he maneuvered his Sherman up the forest track. The dense foliage rimming the trail was thick with German infantry armed with panzerfausts.

D Company moved forward to support of the Shermans, but the woods held more than tank hunters. D Company ran smack into the main body of *Kampfgruppe* Schrader and was forced back, along with the Shermans, to the original road junction. The Somersets were in serious trouble; far from advancing, they were hard pressed to hold their ground. Hope was lost for A Company; the battalion was now fighting for its very life.

At the road junction, the two surviving companies desperately fought to stabilize the situation. It was touch and go under early afternoon with the day finally won by the Royal Artillery. Tree bursts rained shrapnel down on the Germans, who, without artillery support of their own could not counter battery fire. The 7th Somerset Light Infantry held the first road junction, but at a tremendous cost. An entire infantry company was lost with two others badly mauled. The battle shifted to the 1st Worcestershires who were now encountering *Kampfgruppe* Schrader on the Gisors road.

Colonel Osborne-Smith's 1st Worcestershire was in column march with D Company as vanguard. D Company halted when lead patrol reported a Tiger tank, with infantry support astride the road a few hundred yards ahead. All infantry fear tanks and, in the Allied army, Tiger tanks were feared most of all. During the war all German AFVs were frequently mistaken for Tigers, but this time it was true, a Tiger was coming down the road straight for the Worcestershires.

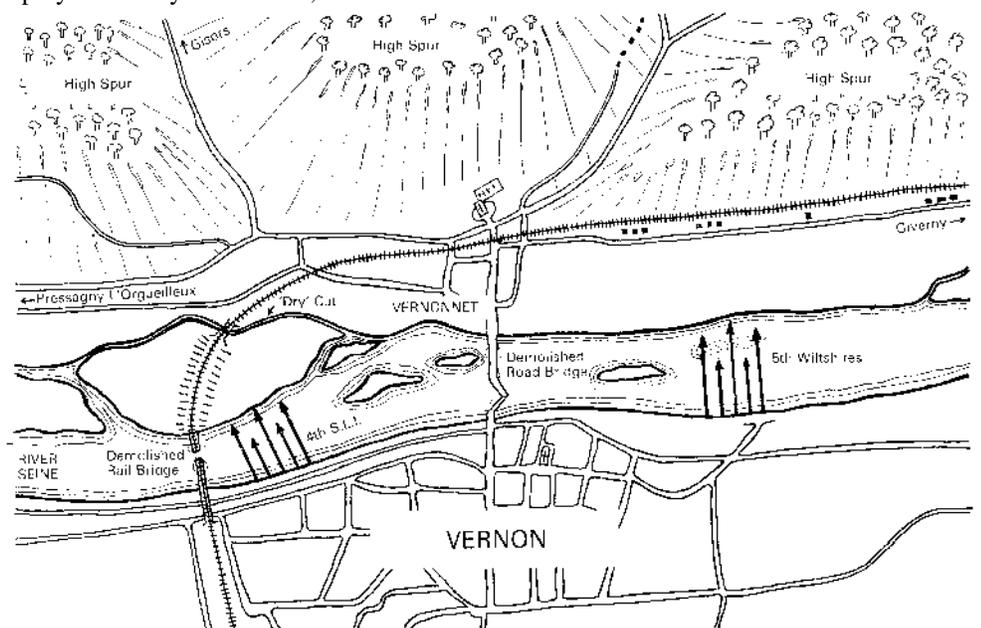
The lead carrier section dismounted and moved off the road to protect the right flank. The second platoon attempted to engage the Tiger with a PIAT, but could not find a favorable firing position. It was up to the two 6-pounder antitank guns supporting D Company to deal with the tank. They deployed directly on the road, one sheltered

around a bend whilst the other held a position a hundred yards farther back.

With conventional shot, the 6-pounder stood little chance of penetrating the 100mm frontal armor of a Tiger. Fortunately, the two 6-pounders this day were armed with sabot rounds. The sabot was a British invention that consisted of a small tungsten core in a light steel sheath. As the shell left the muzzle of the gun, the sabot jacket fell away from the tungsten shot which continued on at a much higher velocity than conventional shot. A sabot round could penetrate 146mm of armour plate at 1,000 yards. At point blank range the Tiger stood no chance.

Slowly the Tiger rounded the bend without any close infantry support. As the off-side of the hull and the turret became visible, the antitank gun opened fire. The first hit penetrated the gun mantle, two more hits penetrated the hull. The Tiger burst into flames, incinerating its crew. The supporting German infantry, which had stood off from the action, hurriedly withdrew.

The introduction of Tigers added a new dimension to the battle. Brigade HQ ordered Osborne-Smith to halt his battalion. It was increasingly evident that the enemy



was counterattacking in strength. Battalions on the Worcestershires' flanks reported contact with the same *kampfgruppe*. The Worcestershires halted and deployed, awaiting tank support to move up from the ferry site. C Company moved to the high ground on the right, D Company dug in astride the road. B Company, commanded by Major Algy Grubb, formed the battalion reserve farther back down the road.

Elements of *Kampfgruppe* Schrader managed to infiltrate both flanks and attacked D Company with machine-guns. The fire, coming out of the thick undergrowth, was both heavy and accurate. The carrier section lost its commander. All around, the enemy pressed forward, overrunning D Company's lead platoon. The second platoon engaged an enemy force to the left of the road, supported by an armoured car. Then a report came down the line that a second Tiger tank was moving down the road.

Although the German infantry remained largely unseen, their approximate locations were known. The Worcestershire mortars and supporting artillery plastered the trees and undergrowth on both sides of the road. The harassing fire kept the enemy from consolidating and delivering a knock-out blow to D Company. Osborne-Smith was confident he could stop any enemy movement to his left along the densely wooded valley. The immediate concern was the high ground on the right. C Company commanded the slopes, but this hill still remained wide open to any enemy flanking movement. Major Grubb had also spotted the danger and decided, without orders, to take his company up the hill.

Grubb collected all the company's heavy weapons and trained them on the hill crest. He split his company into two groups, taking the first group to the hill top, whilst his second-in-command, Captain Noel Watkins, took up a position just short of the crest. Grubb, who was something of a showman, shouldered a Bren gun and ascended the hill only to find another company already dug in. It was C Company. The company com-

mander was as surprised to see Grubb as Grubb was to see him. This awkward moment was broken by Major Tony Benn, the battalion's second-in-command. Benn remarked that the whole action was chaos and asked Grubb what he intended to do. Grubb replied he was taking his company to the hilltop. Benn replied that was fine by him and set off towards the road.

Down on the main road, a second Tiger now pressed the leading company. The tank's machine guns swept the sides of the road dispersing the British infantry hidden amongst the trees. This time there was no element of surprise for the antitank gun covering the road. Harassed by the Tiger's supporting infantry, the gun crew was unable to get a shot off as the massive tank squeezed past its burning comrade. The huge 88mm gun tube swung around to bear and with one blast reduced the 6-pounder to junk. Another shot blew up the second anti tank gun. A third shot destroyed a heavy armoured car from the Reconnaissance Regiment.

The Tiger then drove down the road straight through D Company. The infantry tried to scramble off the road, but was hemmed in by the steep banks. The position was untenable and D Company was ordered to withdraw.

At this moment, a troop of Sherman tanks from the 4th/7th Royal Dragoon Guards arrived at the Battalion HQ. One of the troop was a Sherman Firefly, mounting a 17-pound main gun. The Firefly was one of the few British tanks capable of tackling a Tiger one to one. The British tanks moved into ambush positions and awaited the Tiger which had now halted to allow its supporting infantry to catch up. Grubb's B Company, along with C Company, had pinned the Germans with automatic fire from the hill top. As the Tiger waited, it blasted an abandoned column of British softskins, while its machine guns swept the roadsides and kept the British infantry at bay.

In ones and twos the infantry from D Company tried to slip back down the road. As the D Company men passed through A

Company, those men joined the retreat also. For a few moments, command control was lost. The tactical withdrawal of one company was becoming a general retreat. Major Tony Benn tried to rally the men. He stood in the open, ordering the men off the exposed road and back into cover. At that instant the Tiger started forward again, spraying its machine gun as it moved. The burst caught Major Benn and killed him instantly.

Benn's example was not in vain. The Worcestershires turned and loosed a rapid fire volley into the German infantry. The rifle fire also spattered the Tiger, forcing its crew to button up. The German infantry broke, stripping the Tiger of its support. To advance into an enemy infantry battalion, unsupported and surrounded by thick vegetation was suicide, even for a heavy tank such as a Tiger. The behemoth quickly reversed back around the road bend and stopped. Everything paused as both sides drew breath and took stock of the situation. Thus ended the counterattack of *Kampfgruppe* Schrader.

Aftermath

The meddling of Gen. Thomas cost his division an entire rifle company. At this time in the war the infantry starved British Army could ill-afford such losses. Gen Thomas cannot be faulted for taking a calculated risk and losing, (Germans were in the Vernon Forest), but he had no business maneuvering C Company in the midst of what turned out to be a brigade-scale meeting engagement.

The German tank and infantry coordination was abysmal. This could be expected with two units thrown together on the eve of battle, but other factors may have contributed. Two prisoners taken from the 49th Infantry Division under interrogation revealed they thought the Tigers were from an SS unit, although the 205 Heavy Battalion was a Wehrmacht outfit. Regular German army troops rarely coordinated closely with the SS, and surely the foreign conscripts of the 49th Infantry Division wanted nothing to do with them.

by Edward Morris