

TAC NEWS

November - December 1997

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Tank Action, Normandy, 1944



According to Allied timetables, Field Marshall Montgomery's British forces were to have taken Caen within a week of D-Day. Over a month following the invasion, however, the city was still firmly in enemy control. With the Caen sector in stalemate, the Germans began shifting their strategic armored reserves away from the British and towards the Americans. To tie down these reserves, Monty turned up the pressure by launching a maximum effort to take Caen. The operation, codenamed CHARNWOOD, was a limited success. The British I Corps reached the River Orne running through the center of Caen, but the Germans remained firmly rooted in the industrial suburbs of Colombelles and Faubourg de Vaucelles.

As CHARNWOOD fizzled out, Monty mounted Operation JUPITER. JUPITER's objective was to cross the River Orne south of Caen and force a further commitment of German armored reserves to contain the bridgehead.

British Order of Battle:

Operation JUPITER

The 43rd Wessex Infantry Division

The 46th Highland Brigade

A brigade of the 3rd Canadian Infantry Division

The 31 Tank Brigade, consisting of 7 and 9 RTR

The 4th Armoured Brigade

Artillery support provided by the divisional assets of:

The 43rd Wessex, 15th Scottish, 53rd Welsh and 11th Armoured

Heavy artillery support was provided by two Army Groups of Royal Artillery and offshore naval assets

This account will trace the fortunes of two opposing units in the JUPITER operation, the Churchill-equipped 9th Battalion, Royal Tank Regiment (9 RTR) and the 102 SS Heavy Tank (Tiger) Battalion.

In preparation for JUPITER, 9 RTR formed up north of Cheux and conducted a

reconnaissance in conjunction with 130 Brigade of the 43rd Division to find suitable cross country routes and a ford of the River Odon. No natural track was found, so Royal Engineers blasted a route through the hedgerows. Once the river was forded, all troop leaders dismounted and crawled forward to glimpse the lay of the land. The battalion, less B Squadron, was then laagered south of Bronay. B Squadron was deployed picketing just northeast of Colleville to block the Caen-Villers Bocage road.

B Squadron rejoined the battalion on July 7. Two days later, with all resistance north of the River Orne reported cleared, JUPITER was declared a "go."

Operationally, the 31st Tank Brigade, of which 9 RTR was part, directly supported the attack of the 43rd Wessex Infantry Division. The brigade battleline formed as follows:

To the right, the 7 RTR, less B Squadron, supported the attack of 129th Infantry Brigade against Hill 112.

To the left, 9 RTR supported the attack of

130th Infantry Brigade against Chateau de Fontaine, Eterville and Maltot.

9 RTR's plan of attack consisted of three phases. H-hour was 0500.

Phase 1: B Squadron with 5th Dorsets to Chateau de Fontaine at H-hour.

Phase 2: C Squadron with 4th Dorsets to Eterville at H+75 minutes.

Phase 3: A Squadron with 7th Hampshires to Maltot at H+180 minutes.

At 2000 hours on July 9, the battalion moved to its forward assembly area northeast of Colleville. By 0300 hours on July 10, the squadrons were on their way to the form up points in the Fontaine-Etoupefour sector. The move was covered by artillery and no difficulties were encountered. Battalion HQ was

established at Bas de Mouen, just north of the River Odon.

Across the line, laagered two kilometers southwest of Hill 112, stood the 102 SS Heavy Tank Battalion. Commanded by SS-Sturmbannführer Weiss, the battalion was ordered on July 9 to occupy Hill 112. Formed early in 1944, the 102 SS Heavy Tank Battalion mustered Rumanian volunteers of German ancestry with officers and NCOs cadred from existing units. Weiss was a decorated veteran of the SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*. With Tigers in short supply, the battalion never received its full compliment of tanks. On June 1, Weiss' fighting strength consisted of twenty eight Tiger Is and three SdKfz 10/4 20mm Flak halftracks, about one half of the battalion's theoretical strength. Nonetheless, 102 SS Heavy Tank Battalion was a formidable force.

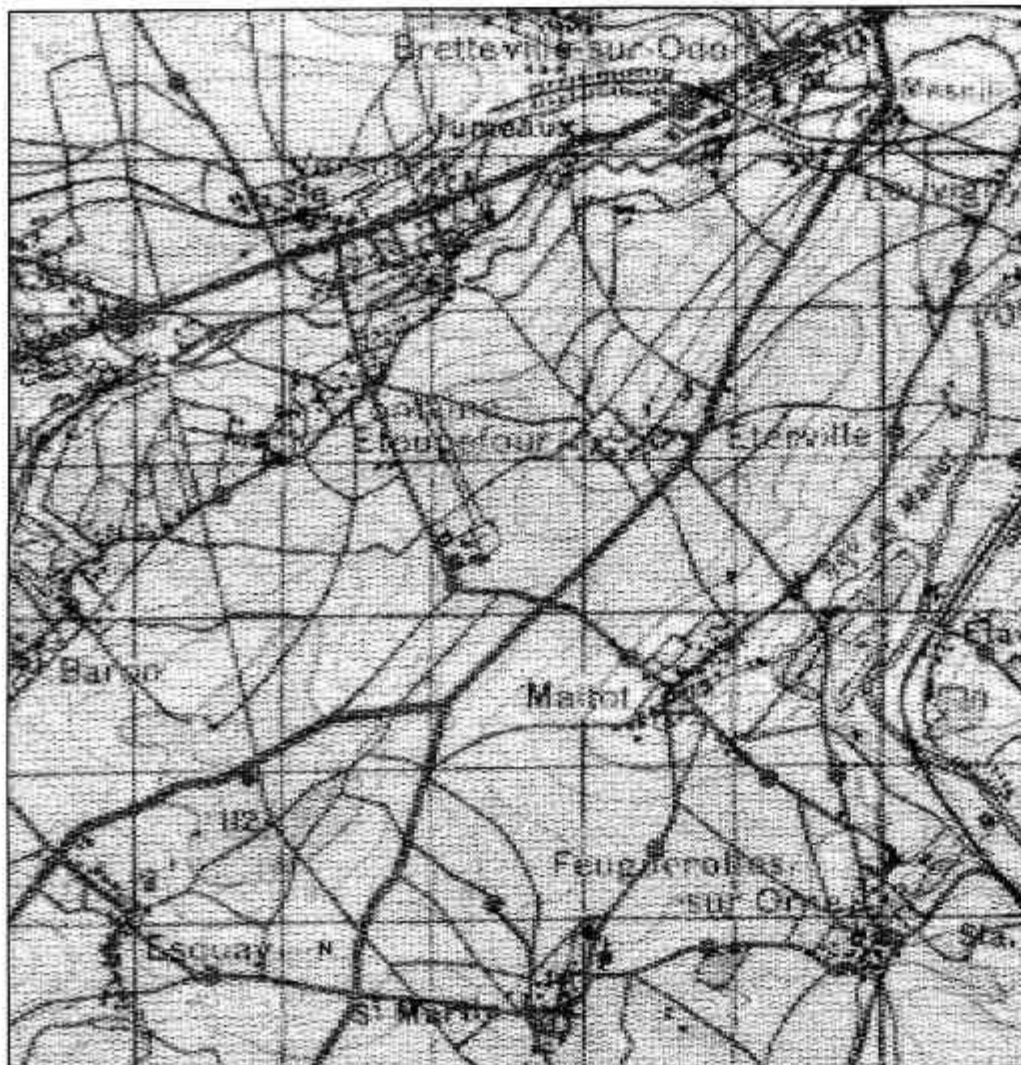
The 9 RTR's attack started smoothly enough. The 5th Dorsets, with B Squadron in support, took Les Daims in less than fifteen minutes against light resistance. Ominously, the few prisoners taken were from the 10th SS Panzer Division and twelve Panthers were spotted in the Eterville area. To counter the Panthers, a troop of Archer 17-pounder self-propelled antitank guns joined the assault force. The panzers kept their distance, however, and by 0552 hours Chateau de Fontaine was declared secure. Casualties included one Churchill lost to antitank gun fire. About thirty prisoners were bagged and six machine gun nests destroyed.

By 0635 hours, C Squadron, supporting the 4th Dorsets, was advancing on Eterville. Along the way some prisoners were taken that belonged to the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 22nd SS

Panzer Grenadier Regiment. As the Dorsets prepared to enter Eterville, B Squadron joined in for added support. German resistance consisted mostly of sniper and machine gun fire, although two antitank guns were encountered and knocked-out. To keep the prowling Panthers at bay, a troop of Archers and 11 Troop of C Squadron further reinforced the attack. By 0735 hours Eterville was secure.

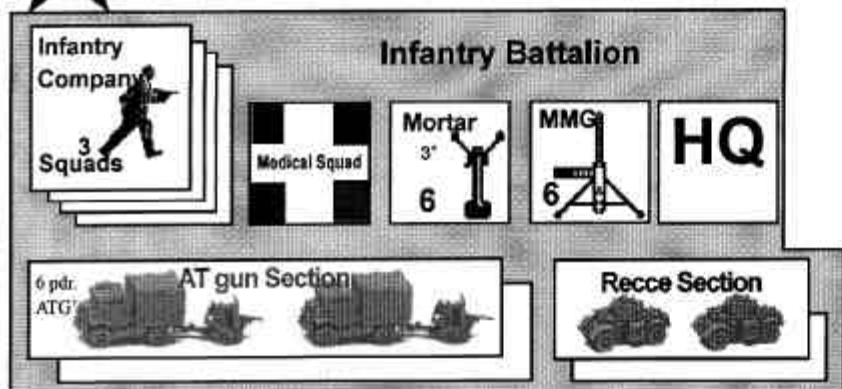
At 0815 hours, A Squadron moved up through B and C Squadrons to support the 7th Hampshires in their attack on Maltot. Up to now the battalion's attack had gone without a hitch, but at 0835 hours A Squadron took fire from four German assault guns in the area of the orchards just north of Maltot. Heavy caliber antitank fire from the reverse slope of Hill 112 knocked-out two Churchills from B Squadron.

On the right of 9 RTR, 7 RTR was now attacking Hill 112 in support of





43rd Wessex Infantry Div. (+)



The British Assaults in this sector were primarily conducted by six similar teams, each of 1 infantry battalion supported by a squadron of Churchills. Other divisional assets (exp: Archers SPATs) could be assigned to a particular infantry/tank team.

129 Brigade. Initially, substantial progress was made, but at 0933 hours the Germans launched a surprise counterattack. Elements of the 21st SS Panzergrenadier Regiment and seven Tiger Is from 2 Company of the 102 SS Heavy Tank Battalion slammed into the 7 RTR and pushed it back. As the Tommies retreated, 2 Company commander *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Endeman ordered his tanks down the hills eastern slope where they could enfilade the right flank of 9 RTR.

Supporting the counterattack's right flank was *SS-Hauptscharführer* Baral's Tiger platoon. Baral entered Maltot and played cat and mouse with A Squadron in the city's streets and alleys. The Churchills, with their superior numbers, tried to maneuver the Tigers into cul-de-sacs and knock them out at close range, but the elusive panzers escaped by knocking down buildings and hedges. For the British this was more than frustrating, each time a Tiger broke out it knocked out a Churchill. With A Squadron down to nine tanks, squadron commander Major Douglas Ballantine decided to better coordinate with the Hampshires by personally speaking to their commander. As he dismounted his tank, Ballantine was caught in a mortar barrage and mortally wounded. At that moment, German infantry counterattacked with

Tiger support. This onslaught quickly destroyed another five Churchills and reduced the Hampshires to company-strength. The four surviving Churchills of A Squadron then withdrew and joined B Squadron hunkered into hull down positions on a spur south of Chateau de Fontaine.

As the afternoon passed and it became apparent the Germans were content to simply consolidate their gains and not press the attack, the British drew up a second battle plan. Major Dick Joscelyne's A Squadron of 7 RTR, would support an assault by 5th Battalion Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry on Hill 112. C Squadron of the 9 RTR was to support an attack by the 4th Dorsets into Maltot. B Squadron formed the immediate reserve, with 4 Armoured Brigade waiting to exploit any breakthrough.

The advance began at 1640 hours and despite antitank fire from southwest of Maltot, C Squadron put the Dorsets into the village by 1700 hours. Ten minutes later, however, *SS-Hauptscharführer* Baral counterattacked. Supported by a second Tiger platoon, Baral swept around C Squadron and took it from the rear. The firepower of eight Tigers and their supporting panzergrenadiers proved too much. The Dorsets withdrew under

heavy pressure. By 1935 hours C Squadron retired under the cover of supporting fire from B Squadron. By 2030 hours all surviving Churchills of 9 RTR were back to the morning's start line. After the battalion rallied, it moved to join A Echelon northeast of Mouden to replenish and refit.

July 10 was a disastrous day for 9 RTR. It had suffered sixty five casualties, more than a quarter of the casualties suffered by the battalion during the entire European campaign. Twenty-two men were killed, thirty four wounded, and nine taken prisoner. Sixteen Churchills had been knocked out, of which only six were recoverable.





Elements: 10th SS Panzer Division

Advance Force

1 Platoon, Co. A,
22nd SS PzGr Rgt
SdKfz 251/1D
131
5 G99

Panther G
013
Headquarters
000

Company F
10th SS Panzer Regiment



Motorcycle
2 G40

Fuel Trucks
2 G64

Batt. HQ & HQ Co. 102 heavy Tank Batt.

Bn HQ
2 G40 1 G79 3 G79 3 G40

Co HQ
2 G40 1 G79

Signals Platoon
3 G118 1 G79

AA Platoon
HQ
1 G40 1 G40

AA Section
1 G92

Tank Platoon
Tiger I
5 G64

Engineer Platoon

HQ
1 G40 1 G79 1 G79

Scout Sec.
2 G40 1 G40

Pioneer Section
1 G102 1 G68

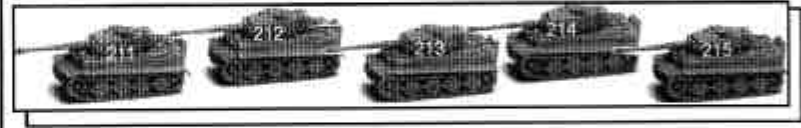
Counter Attacking Forces

HQ platoon
1 G40 2 G40 2 G79 2 G68

AT Platoon
G68
Batt. C,
10 SS PanzerJager
Abteilung

Tiger I
G64
Headquarters

2 Company
102 schwerePanzerAbteilung



Co. A
22nd SS
PzGr Rgt.

SdKfz 251
G99
Headquarters
G40

Co. C
also
available

SdKfz 251
111 115 115
112 114 G99

For 102 SS Heavy Tank Battalion, the day was a mixed bag. Although they had stopped the British cold, they were unable to hold the day's gains. Offshore naval guns hammered the crest of Hill 112 and forced the Tigers to withdraw. As for Operation JUPITER, the Maltot sector, along with Hill 112 remained contested until August 1.

by Edward Morris

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