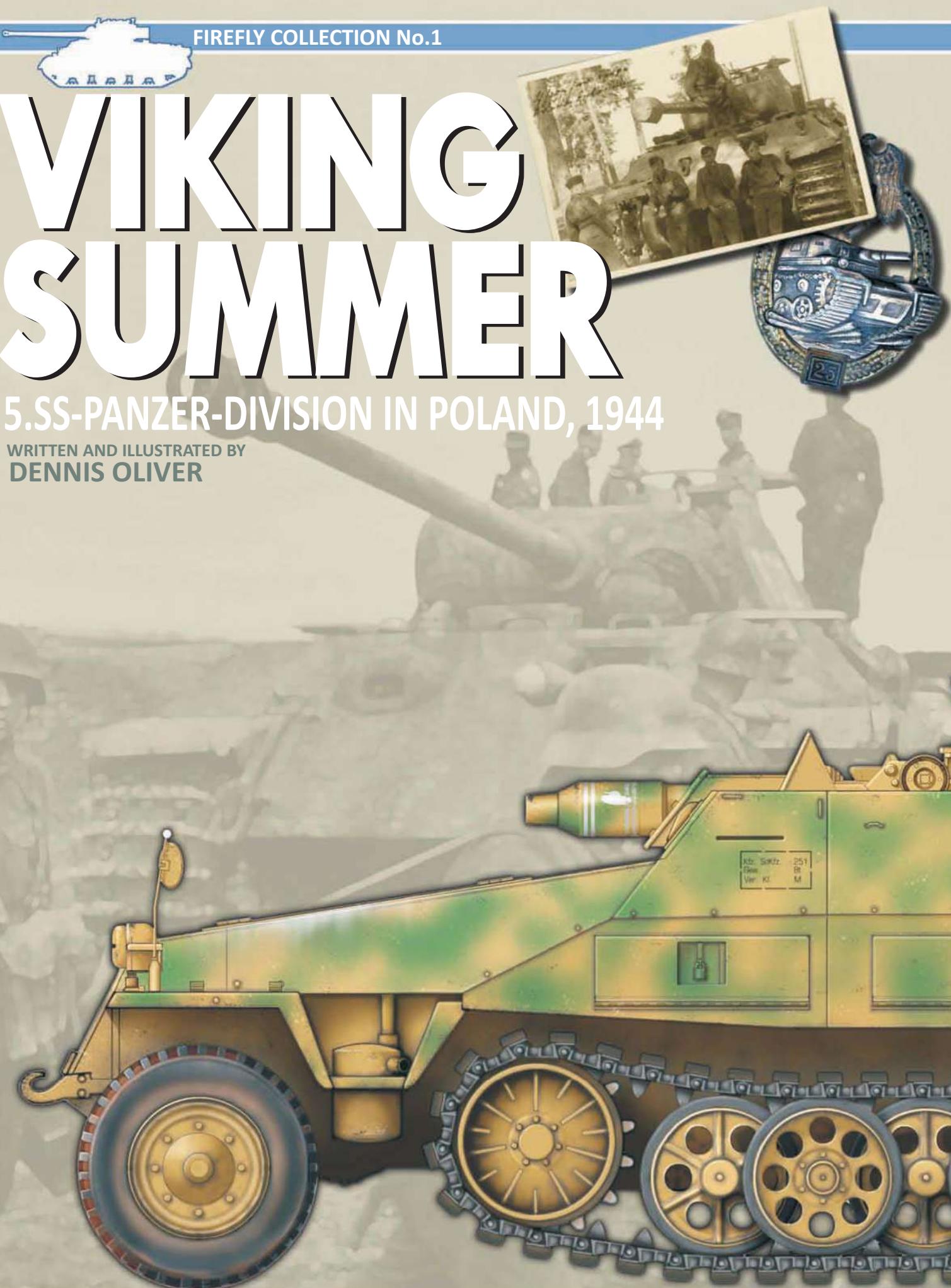


FIREFLY COLLECTION No.1

VIKING SUMMER

5.SS-PANZER-DIVISION IN POLAND, 1944

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY
DENNIS OLIVER



SUPERBLY DETAILED COLOUR PROFILES, BLACK AND WHITE ARCHIVE PHOTOGRAPHS,
COMPREHENSIVE ORGANISATIONAL AND EQUIPMENT CHARTS, UNIT HISTORY AND MAPS

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Front cover: *Sdkfz 251/9. III. Abteilung, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania. Poland, August 1944.*



Above, left: Obersturmbannführer Johannes Mühlenkamp, commander of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. A highly decorated officer, Mühlenkamp led the regiment throughout most of 1944 until 10 September, when he took command of the division. Above, right: A Pzkw V Panther ausf A of 8. Kompanie, numbered 832, photographed during the fighting east of Warsaw in August 1944. Note the unditching beam held in its purpose built bracket on the rear hull. By late 1944 most Wiking Panthers were fitted with a similar arrangement. Above: An Fw 156 Fieseler Storch liaison aircraft, possibly a C-2 or C-3 model. Gruppenführer Herbert Gille used this particular machine when he commanded the Wiking division and later as commander of IV.SS-Panzerkorps. Although we cannot be certain, this may be the aircraft he used to fly into the besieged city of Kovel.

The Year 1944 would prove to be a momentous one for the German Army in the East. Although the Wehrmacht had suffered a series of setbacks and defeats during the previous twelve months, many Germans were still confident at the end of 1943 that the front in the East could at least be held and that the anticipated Allied invasion in the West, when it came, would be defeated. By the end of 1944 all but the most optimistic, or fanatical, had lost faith in the promised final victory.

In the East the war would be fought on a gargantuan scale and Germany came to rely to an ever greater extent on the Army's highly mobile - if increasingly depleted - armoured units, including those of the Waffen-SS. Among the latter, the soldiers of 5.SS-Panzer-Division Wiking would play an important role.

On Friday 3 March 1944, the badly battered remnants of the division that had led the breakout from the encirclement at Cherkassy (1) arrived in Tomaszów in Poland, approximately 50 kilometres south-west of Warsaw. Tomaszów was far behind the front line and the men were expecting a period of rest and refitting and the possibility of home leave. The situation was however far from stabilised with every man needed and disappointingly all leaves were cancelled, except for the wounded and the Germanic volunteers.

Since late 1943, II.Abtteilung of the division's SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 had been training in France with their newly issued Panther tanks and was now alerted on 18 March 1944, that they should be ready for a move to the East. On the same day, the regiment's I.Abtteilung began moving by rail to Chelm, some 200 kilometres further east of Tomaszów, to be re-equipped with men and vehicles. The first battalion, commanded by Sturmbannführer Paul Kümmel, had suffered heavily in the Cherkassy fighting and although new vehicles would eventually arrive, the lack of trained personnel to operate them, particularly experienced NCOs, would remain a constant problem. Indeed Kümmel's men lacked such basic requirements as uniform items, razor blades and even adequate footwear. On 22 March, sufficient crews for twenty-two tanks were sent to the Magdeburg-Königsborn training facility in Germany to take charge of their new vehicles. On 31 March, Kümmel's battalion received twenty-two Pzkw IV tanks, two being allocated to the battalion headquarters with the four companies receiving five each.

In late March, Kampfgruppe Richter - made up from the remnants of Wiking's Germania and Westland Panzergrenadier regiments, the division's artillery regiment, the anti-aircraft and reconnaissance battalions and commanded by Standartenführer Joachim Richter from the artillery regiment - made the first attempts to break the Russian encirclement of Kovel, an important rail junction in present day Ukraine, almost exactly halfway between Kiev and Warsaw (2). The meagre German forces inside the Kovel perimeter - which included a number of hastily armed employees of the German Railways - had been ordered to hold their positions despite the personal intervention of the Wiking division's commander, Gruppenführer Herbert Gille, who flew to Berlin to plead the case for withdrawal but was refused an audience with Hitler. Returning to the front, Gille decided that he could best assist the defence from inside the city and together with Hauptsturmführer Westphal landed in his personal Fieseler Storch aircraft at around noon on 16 March. The decision to remove himself from the division at such a critical time, criticised in some accounts, illustrates Gille's confidence in the abilities of his regimental and battalion commanders. There is no doubt that his presence inside the city contributed greatly to the morale of the defenders and that the name Kampfgruppe Gille was intentionally chosen to reassure them that they would not be abandoned.

On Monday 27 March, the headquarters of the tank regiment and the tanks of

8.Kompanie, the latter under Obersturmführer Karl Nicolussi-Leck, arrived at Maciejów, near Chelm, with a full complement of Panther tanks. The other companies would arrive in the following days as transport was available (3) but Nicolussi-Leck's would be the only Wiking tanks available for an immediate attempt to establish contact with the Kovel defenders. A detailed account of this operation and a map of the Kovel area can be found on page 2.

Although the tanks of 8.Kompanie were a welcome addition to the Kovel defences, a secure and permanent corridor to the town had not been opened and the siege continued. On 2 April a further attack was ordered, this time supported by Obersturmführer Otto Schneider's 7.Kompanie, and again the Germans were unsuccessful.

By now however the units of LVI.Panzerkorps had been ordered to assist in the relief attempts and the following day another attack, this time supported by 6.Kompanie with units of the army's 5.Panzer-Division was launched towards a Soviet strongpoint at Kruhel, about 6 kilometres north-west of Kovel. Amid conflicting reports from the units involved (4) the attack was called off at about 5.30pm. On 4 April, after a two hour artillery bombardment, the attacks resumed with 5.Kompanie supporting II.Abtteilung of the Germania Regiment and 7.Kompanie advancing behind III/Germania, II/Westland, Grenadier-Regiment 431 and Ski-Jäger-Regiment 2.

The Panthers of 6.Kompanie started from their positions of the previous day, this time in concert with the tanks of 4.Panzer-Division, and their initial objective of Kruhel was quickly taken, securing an important stretch of solid ground - a rare commodity in the marshy Kovel area. The advance of the other two companies however was not as successful, stalling in front of a heavily defended wooded area and it was not until a concentrated Stuka attack was called in that the Germans were able to penetrate the woods - although the Russians remained in control of much of the area. The units of LVI.Panzerkorps had however met with greater success, the headquarters assuring the Kovel defenders by radio as early as 9.30am that this attack would be 'the decisive thrust'. The tanks of 4.Panzer-Division entered Moshchena at around noon (5) to the north of Kovel and advanced to Dubove, less than a kilometre from the defensive perimeter. By the evening the tanks had fought their way to the railway line west of the town. In the meantime the Wiking Panthers had reached Moshchena and from there drove straight towards Kovel.

At first light the next day, the battalion - by now led by the regiment's commander, Obersturmbannführer Johannes Mühlenkamp - brushed aside their opposition and reached the railway crossing just outside the perimeter and within sight of the German defenders. As if to emphasise that the battle was far from won, Mühlenkamp's tank was immobilised by a mine and he was forced to withdraw to Moshchena which had become the battalion's headquarters. By early morning the Germans were in control of Dubove and by 2.00pm had established contact with the units inside Kovel. In three weeks of heavy fighting, in atrocious weather and facing far superior numbers, the Germans had managed to deny the city to the Russians and significantly delay the planned Soviet offensive to take Brest.

The most important task now was to keep the corridor open as small but determined pockets of Russian troops remained in what was now the German rear. Indeed, the 5.Kompanie Panther commanded by Untersturmführer Horst Niemann which had been left to guard the regimental commander's tank reported that it was being fired on by Russian anti-tank guns situated over 2,000 metres to the west and it was not until 6 April that Mühlenkamp's tank could be recovered.

.....continued on page 4



THE 'PANTHER POUNCE' AT KOVEL

Kovel had been surrounded since 16 March 1944 and an early attempt to break the encirclement had been halted in front of the villages of Novi Koshary and Stari Koshary. On the afternoon of 27 March, the II. Abteilung of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 - which had been training on its new Panther tanks in France - began to arrive and on the following day the regiment's commander, Johannes Mühlenkamp, briefed the commander of 8.Kompanie, Obersturmführer Karl Nicolussi-Leck, on his part in the planned relief attempt.

KRUHEL



Kovel and the surrounding area as it appeared in 1942, based on a Soviet military survey map published in that year. The names of towns, villages and the suburbs of Kovel are those in present usage. Railway lines are shown in a dark shade while roads and towns are shown in a lighter grey. Areas of marshy terrain dominate all the approaches to the town and the darker shades represent woodland. Not shown is the extensive canal system which covered most of the area and fed into the Turiya River. The German defensive perimeter around Kovel as it was on 4 April, is shown as a broken line. At right: A rather poor quality photograph but one that is worth reproduction as it shows a Wiking Panther in the streets of Kovel. In another image of this tank, taken from the same series, it is possible to make out what is almost certainly an 8.Kompanie number on the turret side.

With sixteen serviceable tanks, 8.Kompanie reached their start positions near Stari Koshary around 11.00am on the morning of Wednesday 29 March, guided by Sturmbannführer Franz Hack, commander of the III. Abteilung of SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment Germania. On the advice of Hack, Nicolussi-Leck decided to eliminate a Russian anti-tank gun position situated approximately one thousand metres east of Stari Koshary which controlled one of the few areas of solid ground on either side of the rail line. The commander of the Germania regiment, Obersturmbannführer Dorr who was also present, agreed and Nicolussi-Leck made ready to move out. Almost immediately Mühlenkamp arrived and countermanded the order, insisting that any attempt to take the Russian position would be costly and reduce the already meagre forces available to break the encirclement. He then ordered Nicolussi-Leck to advance parallel to the railway line towards Cherkasy and from there to Kovel via Moschena.

At around noon the tanks moved off with the Panther of Hauptscharführer Eugen Faas, the commander of the first platoon, in the lead. On the right were the grenadiers of Hack's battalion supported by ten assault guns of leichtes-Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 190. On Nicolussi-Leck's left were volunteers from Grenadier-Regiment 434 of 131.Infanterie-Division commanded by Hauptmann Bolm with a further seven assault guns. Light snow had begun to fall and almost immediately sporadic artillery fire commenced with shells landing either side of the tanks, prompting the Panthers to increase their speed.

Within minutes the Russians were firing with every gun they possessed including anti-tank guns and heavy mortars. From his advanced position, Hauptscharführer Faas reported that muzzle flashes from Soviet anti-tank guns were visible in front and off to his right. Despite the swirling snow the Panthers of his platoon were able to identify the Russian position and returning fire, silenced the enemy guns. This was in fact the first Soviet defensive line and must have been approximately half way between Koshary and Cherkasy-Volinski railway stations, possibly along the road to Volya-Kovelska.

As the tanks ground forward, Faas called Nicolussi-Leck to report that Russian soldiers could be seen leaving their trenches for the shelter of a nearby wood. The company commander now took the lead and drove straight into the



Russian position held only by a few determined machine gunners who were no match for the Panthers. From here Nicolussi-Leck ordered his men to advance north to the rail line, just a short distance away, and to head towards Cherkasy. Only a few metres further on, the marshy ground gave way to more solid terrain and the company's second and third platoons were now able to fan out and advance in line. By now however the snow was falling harder and visibility was becoming a problem with some crews complaining that they could not see further than the muzzles of their own guns.

As the weather grew worse, the lead tank of Untersturmführer Immelmann stumbled into more marshy ground and became hopelessly bogged. Within a short time four more tanks became bogged and Nicolussi-Leck, also concerned that the accompanying infantry were being left too far behind, ordered these tanks to guard his right flank which faced a wood, as a static defence point under the command of Unterscharführer Kasper. The remaining tanks resumed the advance and soon came under fire from Russian anti-tank guns. In his after action report Nicolussi-Leck stated that the Russian position was some 600 metres west of Cherkasy which would mean that his remaining tanks must have now been across the railway line. However, later in the same report he mentions that the attack on the town was carried out by crossing the railway embankment. This suggests that the Russian anti-tank guns were actually located not directly to the west, but south-west of Cherkasy on the southern side of the rail line and there was indeed a narrow stretch of solid ground there rising towards the embankment, just before the line turns south towards Cherkasy-Volinski station.

Advancing on the Russians at maximum speed three Panthers were hit in quick succession - although at least one account suggests that the third was halted by a mechanical failure. A lucky shot from one of the Panther's guns - possibly fired from Eugen Faas' tank - detonated the Russian's reserve ammunition in a mighty explosion and at that moment the Panthers of the third platoon, which Nicolussi-Leck had sent to the right to outflank the Soviet position, opened fire

Two Panther tanks photographed on the Kovel-Chelm rail line during the salvage operation that took place quite some time after the area was secured. In another photograph of the vehicle at left, taken from the same series, the number 811 can clearly be seen on the turret side identifying this as the tank of Eugen Faas which was disabled by a mine early in the morning of 30 March. The vehicle pictured below was positioned immediately in front of Faas' Panther and may be the tank of Scharführer Herberts.



destroying all twelve Russian guns. As the remaining eight Panthers drove into the now deserted Russian trenches at exactly 2.30pm, the weather deteriorated to such an extent that Nicolussi-Leck called a temporary halt to the attack. In a radio message to Mühlenkamp he reported that his remaining tanks had reached high ground, some 600 metres to the west of Cherkasy, and that the accompanying infantry were fighting their way towards his position.

The Panthers remained on the high ground for some 45 minutes and in that time were able to send out patrols to reconnoitre the surrounding area. Realising now that Cherkasy was bordered by swamps on three sides Nicolussi-Leck decided that an attack towards the north-east, directly into the town was impossible. Considering the options available to him, he directed his remaining tanks to advance and take Cherkasy by an enveloping move on his right. However, after moving only a short distance, three more tanks became bogged and it was obvious that this direction was also untenable. Undeterred, Nicolussi-Leck swung his company to his left and crossed the railway embankment and although the Panthers immediately came under heavy fire they were at least on solid ground.

Driving straight towards Cherkasy the Panthers fired on the move as fast as their guns could be loaded. Before the town could be reached eight German tanks were hit and immobilised but managed to keep firing and support the others. With the entire western end of the town in flames and the defenders streaming towards the east the Panthers, led by Hauptscharführer Faas, entered Cherkasy urged on by their company commander whose tank was now stuck in soft mud. Without waiting to consolidate Nicolussi-Leck sent four tanks towards Moschena, their next objective. Meanwhile Hauptmann Bolm's infantry had fought their way through to Cherkasy and now cleared the remaining Russians from the town.

Although the tanks that had moved off towards Moschena had destroyed several anti-tank guns, two had become stuck in the mud and at 6.00pm Mühlenkamp directed Nicolussi-Leck to remain in Cherkasy and screen north, towards Moschena, and east towards Kovel. Much of the infantry which were allocated to support the attack were still far to the west and once darkness fell were only able communicate by signal flare. At 7.00pm Nicolussi-Leck reported that he had six combat ready tanks but was confident of recovering four of the vehicles which were stuck in the swampy ground. He was however concerned that his supplies of fuel and ammunition were unlikely to be replenished before the attack resumed the next day.

That night Nicolussi-Leck determined that the next day's attack would follow the railway embankment all the way into Kovel. Although risky, his plan would conserve what fuel the tanks had left and would ensure that they were at least able to operate on solid ground all the way to their objective. Further, he reasoned that the Russians would expect his force to advance towards Moschena - particularly in light of his reconnaissance towards that town. He also believed that it was significant that his bogged tanks had not received any enemy fire from the south or east despite their vulnerable condition. Therefore, despite the obvious danger, the railway embankment seemed to offer the best chance of success and at 10.00pm Nicolussi-Leck informed Mühlenkamp of his intentions. Unknown to Nicolussi-Leck, for he never received the message, an order was sent from the regimental headquarters at 1.30am the next morning directing him to withdraw to Stari Koshyary and for the men of Grenadier-Regiment 434 to return to their unit. By the time a radio set powerful enough to reach the company could be found the Panthers were already on the railway embankment just 2 kilometres outside Kovel.

During the night three of the bogged tanks were recovered and early on the morning of Thursday 30 March, in complete darkness, the Panthers resumed their advance towards Kovel. Once again the commander of the first platoon, Eugen Faas, was in the lead. Almost immediately Faas reported that muzzle flashes were visible some 400 metres west of the Cherkasy-Volinski railway station and directed his gunner onto a target which was at three o'clock to his tank. This suggests that the Panthers were moving along the main road out of Cherkasy which heads south-east and leads to the station and not directly south towards the embankment which would have been the more direct but perhaps less reliable route. After destroying two T-34 tanks the lead Panthers reached the embankment but within a hundred metres, Faas' tank was disabled by a mine, his vehicle holding up the entire column. That Faas was able to reach the railway embankment is confirmed by photographic evidence.

The remaining tanks moved to the right - that is the southern side - of the rail line to bypass the disabled tank and almost immediately another Panther, this vehicle commanded by Scharführer Herberts, was halted by a mine. Leaving the safety of his tank and coming forward on foot, Nicolussi-Leck ordered Faas to take command of a strongpoint using the two disabled Panthers and sixteen grenadiers. The remaining infantry had formed a defensive screen running through the buildings of the railway station and the wooded area to the east. In the meantime a squad of engineers had been sent forward to clear any additional mines and although a path was secured it was not before 6.00 am. It was now light and Nicolussi-Leck's tanks were visible to every Russian in the area.

As the last mine was being cleared Hauptmann Bolm advised Nicolussi-Leck that he had received an order that the tanks were not to advance any further. Stating that he could not remain where he was, Nicolussi-Leck ignored Bolm and ordered his tanks to push forward towards Kovel. There is some debate over where the order originated with some accounts stating that it came from within Kovel via radio and others that it emanated from regimental headquarters and was delivered directly to Nicolussi-Leck. The latter seems unlikely as Nicolussi-Leck later said in his defence that he was not obliged to follow any orders given by Bolm. In any case, Nicolussi-Leck ordered his remaining tanks forward.

With the company commander's tank in the lead the column had reached a point less than 2,000 metres from the city when Nicolussi-Leck received a message from Scharführer Möller commanding the last tank in line. A despatch rider had caught up with the company with an order that the tanks were to halt. As Nicolussi-Leck listened to Möller his tank began to take fire from the Russian positions immediately to his front and at that moment he heard one of his platoon commanders, Oberscharführer Jauss, state that these Russian troops were blocking the north-west exit from Kovel. Realising that if Jauss were correct the German defenders of Kovel were just on the other side of this Russian position, Nicolussi-Leck ignored the order, told his gunner to engage the enemy and drove straight at the Russian guns.

Although the Panthers received heavy fire from their left they were shielded from the worst effects by the snow which had begun to fall heavily once again. Surging forward the Panthers crushed the Soviet guns under their tracks and shortly, above the roar of their engines, could hear voices calling to them in German. At exactly 7.30am the tanks of 8.Kompanie had reached the railway loop south of Volyn and the defensive perimeter of Kovel.

By 8.10am Nicolussi-Leck, with seven serviceable tanks, was able to report to Gruppenführer Gille.



Above: Pzkw V Panther tanks of Karl Nicolussi-Leck's 8.Kompanie photographed during the fighting in eastern Poland in July or August 1944. At right: The Panzerkampfabzeichen or Tank Assault Badge. Pictured here is the version introduced in June 1943, awarded for taking part in twenty-five actions.

On 10 April, the tanks of 6.Kompanie supported an attack by Panzergrenadier-Regiment 33 towards the north-east of Kovel which pushed the Russians back a further 6 kilometres. Two days later they successfully fought off a counterattack, destroying fifteen Soviet tanks.

After a few days rest, 5.Kompanie and 6.Kompanie were ordered to clear the western parts of the city and secure a bridgehead on the Turiya River. The Germans had been unable to find a suitable place to ford the river and it was decided that Pionier-Bataillon 50 would construct a bridge under cover of darkness during the night of 16-17 April. All went well until the engineers were spotted by a Russian machine gun post which immediately opened fire and as other guns joined in a ferocious fire-fight was soon underway. By 6.35am Kampfgruppe Gille, directing the operation from inside Kovel, was calling for Stukas to attack targets all along the Kovel-Turzys'k road. By 9.00am however, through sheer perseverance, tanks of 6.Kompanie had managed to find a crossing and link up with a Kampfgruppe under Sturmbannführer Hans Dorr, commander of the Germania regiment. Joined by the Panthers of 5.Kompanie, the German units now turned south and drove the Russians out of the city reaching as far as Lubliniec, some 4 kilometres to the south-west. The next day was spent taking stock and preparing for the final operations that would clear the Kovel area of Soviet troops. On 18 April, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 reported that only 40 serviceable Panthers were available and it would be some days before the regiment went into action again (6).

On 27 April, in an operation codenamed 'Ilse', the tanks of the regimental headquarters, and the second battalion - minus Schneider's 7.Kompanie - set off towards Lubliniec. The tanks were supported by an armoured engineer company, one company from Panzer-Jäger-Abteilung 49 of 4.Panzer-Division and a platoon from Flak-Regiment 64. The battalion maintenance company had worked feverishly in the preceding days and including eight new tanks received on 17 April, a total of fifty Panthers - including Mühlenkamp's tank which had been recovered after being damaged by a mine outside Kovel - were ready for combat. The town was quickly taken but then the attack stalled while the engineers cleared a minefield allowing the Russians time to withdraw into the village of Dovhonosy some 3 kilometres to the west. From there they were also able to move troops into the woods near Stari Koshary. The Soviets had ceased to operate as an effective, organised force however and by the next day LVI.Panzerkorps was able to declare that the area around Kovel had been cleared.

By the first week of May, Soviet attacks against German positions to the east of Kovel had ended, both sides exhausted from the previous month's fighting.

On 8 May, the tank regiment was withdrawn to Maciejów and placed under the command of LVI.Panzerkorps as an operational reserve. Here the regiment took part in exercises with 4.Panzer-Division. Later, units of the Wiking division were transferred to the SS-Truppenbüngplatz Heidelager at Debića near Kraków.

During the first two weeks of May, Obersturmbannführer Franz Hack's III.Abteilung of the Germania Regiment took part in a large anti-partisan operation codenamed Maigewitter - May Storm (7). Under the command of Gruppenführer Jakob Sporrenberg, the SS and Police commander for the Lublin area, the operation was actually conducted in two parts - Sturmwind I and II - in the area around Lublin between the Parczew Forest in the north and

Krasnik in the south. Although the southern operation failed to make contact with any partisans, the German units in the north, including Hack's men, fought a particularly vicious battle near Rabłów against units of the Polish People's Army and at least one Soviet partisan group moving west towards Parczew.

During this time the first battalion of the tank regiment continued to receive replacement crews and train on their new tanks. By the end of May, the battalion had twenty-seven Pzkw IV tanks on hand, presumably receiving five tanks since 31 March - still far short of the authorised number. There were in any case insufficient numbers of personnel to man any replacement vehicles and as an interim solution, on 1 June, the division's Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 5 was disbanded and twenty-two Sturmgeschütz IV assault guns and their crews were transferred to the tank battalion. However, it would be some weeks before tanks of the first battalion would be ready for combat.

On 22 June 1944, Hauptsturmführer Alois Reicher assumed command of the second battalion of the tank regiment from Otto Paetsch who left the division to take charge of SS-Panzer-Regiment 10 of the Frundsberg division which was about to depart for Normandy. On the same day the Russians launched a major offensive codenamed Operation Bagration (8). Alerted at once, a Kampfgruppe under the command of Obersturmbannführer Mühlenkamp left the training area on 25 June, headed once again for the area around Kovel that the division had fought over in March and April.

By 3 July, Mühlenkamp's battle group (9) was concentrated near Maciejów about 80 kilometres west of Kovel and almost directly south of Chelm. Over the next days the Wiking tankers exchanged fire with the Russians in a series of minor skirmishes north of the Kovel-Chelm railway line. On 5 July Reicher reported to Mühlenkamp that a number of Russian tanks and supporting infantry were moving out from the cover of the woods north-east of Novi Koshary, headed towards the village of Krasnodub'ya. Accounts differ here with at least one authoritative source stating that 7.Kompanie was sent to attack the Russians and others insisting that Mühlenkamp refused to be drawn out. The latter does seem likely as his mission was to act as a mobile reserve. He did however move his headquarters to Smidyn some 14 kilometres to the north-east of Kovel and directly into the path of the Russian attack and it seems certain that the Wiking Panthers were well forward of their original positions around Maciejów. Late that afternoon, Soviet aircraft bombed the German positions between Kruhel and Smidyn adding to Mühlenkamp's conviction that a major Soviet attack would shortly be directed at that area with the intention of capturing Chelm and a crossing of the Bug River. He shared his concerns with General Johannes Block, his corps commander, who agreed that the Wiking units should be pulled back to the Maciejów (10) area where they would be able to deal with a Russian breakthrough. Just after noon on the following day a large number of Soviet bombers attacked the German positions followed by a force of approximately 400 armoured vehicles. A platoon of 7.Kompanie, commanded by SS-Obersturmführer Ulf-Ola Olin, had been placed well forward of the main force and was now directed by Mühlenkamp to allow ten Russian tanks to pass before engaging the enemy. The fire from Olin's platoon succeeded in focusing attention on that small part of the battlefield and at that moment every tank in the battalion opened fire. In a fire-fight that lasted thirty minutes 103 Russian tanks were destroyed without the loss of a single Panther.

When the officers at LVI.Panzerkorps headquarters were informed of the Russian losses they expressed disbelief and Mühlenkamp immediately demanded that they come forward and count the wrecks for themselves. Documents retrieved from one of the Russian tanks after the battle also showed that his assessment of the enemy's intentions regarding Chelm and the Bug River crossing had been correct. In recognition of his efforts during this engagement Untersturmführer Alfred Großrock - a platoon commander with 6.Kompanie who had personally destroyed 26 Russian tanks - was recommended for the Knight's Cross. Mühlenkamp, whose insight and leadership had prevented a potentially disastrous situation, was awarded the Oakleaves.

Soviet attacks continued for the next few days until on the night of 11-12 July, the Wiking units were relieved by Sturmgeschütz-Brigade 600. Moving by road and then rail, the tanks arrived near Brest on 14 July, to be placed under the command of 2.Arme (11). The chief of staff of Army Group Centre, General Hans Krebs, was determined that the division would not be used in a piecemeal fashion again, and that together with 3.SS-Panzer-Division, would be held in reserve behind the defensive line on the Roś River. However the worsening situation on Army Group Centre's front meant that any units that were available and combat ready had to be thrown into the fight and on Saturday 15 July, Mühlenkamp was ordered to form a battle group made up of the serviceable Panthers of II.Abteilung (probably only 7.Kompanie) and III.Abteilung of the Germania regiment, the latter equipped with armoured half-tracks. Late the same evening Mühlenkamp was ordered to move forward towards Haynówka, southeast of Białystock, to support Korpsgruppe Harteneck, a strong ad hoc formation which included the assault guns of Panzer-Abteilung 118 and the Tiger tanks of schwere Panzer-Abteilung 507. Initially the group's tank strength consisted of only twenty Panthers, however by the following Monday they were joined by a further seventeen (which would suggest a company, probably 5.Kompanie) and importantly by the tanks of the third and fourth companies of I.Abteilung which had completed their training and were able to field seventeen Pzkw IV tanks and fifteen Sturmgeschütz IV assault guns.

While Mühlenkamp's group had been in transit to the front the Soviets had broken through the left flank of XXIII.Armee near Pruzany, northwest of Brest and were headed towards Kamianiec. On 17 July, at 11.00am, the Panthers, accompanied by the half-tracks of the Germania regiment, moved forward past Kamianiec and were soon in contact with the Russians, cutting off their lead elements. The assault guns of 4.Kompanie were slower in moving off and did not engage the enemy until 5.00pm that afternoon. They did however achieve some success managing to destroy several anti-tank guns and a Lend-Lease Sherman tank. That evening Mühlenkamp received orders to attack the next morning and push the Russians back across the Lesna Prawa, a tributary of the Bug River, after firstly eliminating the enemy force trapped to his rear. The headquarters of 2.Arme denied his request that the attack be delayed until the arrival of SS-Panzer-Artillerie-Regiment 5, which was at that moment moving towards the front. Heading out the next morning, 7.Kompanie took the village of Czemery (modern day Ęamiary 1) and 8.Kompanie attacked south,

capturing Rani and opened the way for II.Abteilung to advance to the banks of the Lesna. During the day, the Russians had launched an attack through the Pruska Wielowieska forest which was met by an immediate counter-thrust by the assault guns of Hauptsturmführer Zimmerman's 4.Kompanie and the first battalion of the Germania regiment which had only just arrived. The next morning Zimmerman's company supported by the first battalion of the Westland regiment stormed the heights around Šarašova destroying thirty Russian artillery pieces. On 20 July the last guns of the artillery regiment were unloaded from their railway cars.

On 22 July a new threat materialised with Russian units reported to have crossed the Brest-Bialystock railway line to the west. With 292.Infanterie-Division placed under his command, Gruppenführer Gille was ordered to move his division to the northwest of its present position around Kamianiec and to cut the enemy's lines of communication. Although the Soviet units which remained active in the German rear areas meant that the division's supply position was doubtful at best, Gille had his men moving by that afternoon and by 5.00pm the tanks of II.Abteilung supported by the second battalion of the Westland regiment were in contact with the enemy. On the following day they were able to reach and capture the town of Czeremcha, 40 kilometres northwest of Kamianiec, which lay on the rail line between Brest in the south and Białystock in the north. In a development typical of the confused and hectic fighting at this stage of the war, Brest fell to the Soviets the following day and within days the Red Army was threatening Warsaw. The division was ordered to move to the area some 35 kilometres east of the Polish capital to cover the right wing of 2.Arme.

By the end of July, the Russians had been able to drive a wedge between 2.Arme and 9.Arme near Radzymin, approximately 30 kilometres northeast of Warsaw, and the division was directed to attack towards the west, cutting off the enemy from their supplies and re-establishing contact with the German units fighting to the east of the city. Storming into Stanisławów during the evening of 30 July, the tanks of II.Abteilung were able to capture intact a number of Russian armoured vehicles and trucks and to reconnoitre a further 10 kilometres to the west the following day. At the same time the tanks and assault guns of the third and fourth companies were conducting vigorous counterattacks between Sokół and Ludwinów, west of Stanisławów, in an effort to restore the German lines. By 2 August, a combined effort by 19.Panzer-Division and 4.Panzer-Division succeeded in halting the Russia advance and forcing them into a pocket around Wołomin, a small town on the Warsaw-Bialystock rail line to the southeast of Radzymin. Suffering from a lack of fuel for their tanks and hampered by the incessant rain, the Russians attempted to break out to the south on 3 August, and near Michałów, a village on the Warsaw-Stanisławów road, ran into the Panthers of Reicher's II.Abteilung.

Although the world's attention was now focused on the uprising in Warsaw, fighting continued in the Wiking division's sector with the Russians maintaining pressure on the German defensive line. Towns and villages such as Stanisławów, Pustelnik, Cisówka and Białyki changed hands several times. On 11 August, Obersturmbannführer Fritz Darges arrived to take command of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 from Mühlenkamp who would now lead the division (12).

.....continued on page 10



Officers of III.Abteilung, SS-Panzergrader-Regiment Germania examine a disabled Russian SU-76 self-propelled gun during the battles east of Warsaw. At left is Untersturmführer Gerhard Mahn, commander of 11.Kompanie, and in the centre is Obersturmführer Friedrich Hannes, commander of 12.Kompanie. The Deutsches Kreuz decoration worn by Mahn firmly dates this photograph to post-June 1944.

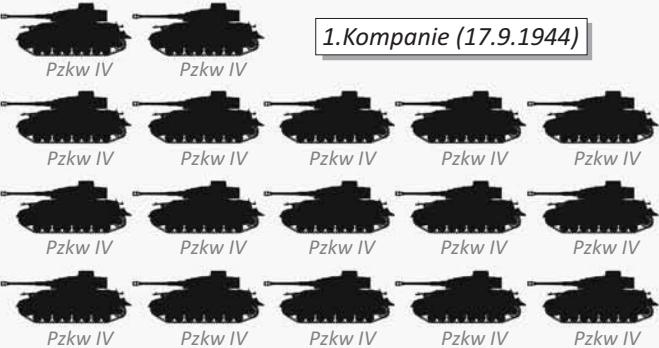
I.ABTEILUNG, SS-PANZER-REGIMENT 5

Most accounts of the Wiking division's Panzers concentrate on the second, or Panther Abteilung. However, the first battalion - although starved for replacement vehicles and men - played an important part in the fighting across eastern Poland in late 1944. When the division escaped from the Cherkassy Pocket in mid-February 1944, all heavy equipment, including a number of Pzkw III and Pzkw IV tanks and Sturmgeschütz III assault guns, were lost. On 18 March 1944, the survivors of I.Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 were transferred to the Chełm training area in Poland and began arriving there during the evening of the following day.



Stab/I. Abteilung

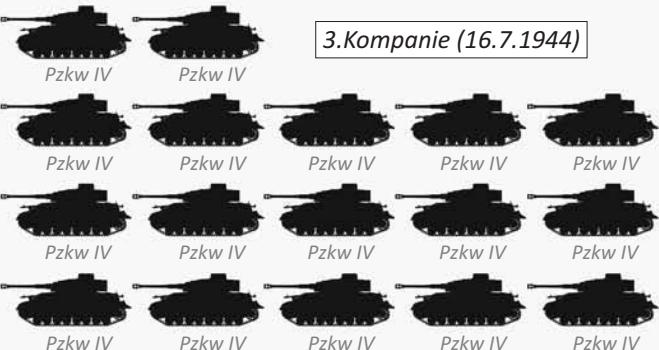
On 16 July, 4.Kompanie had fifteen assault guns on hand and received a further three - presumably from short-term repair - in the course of the following week. There is some evidence that the 'spare' vehicle was maintained at the battalion headquarters.



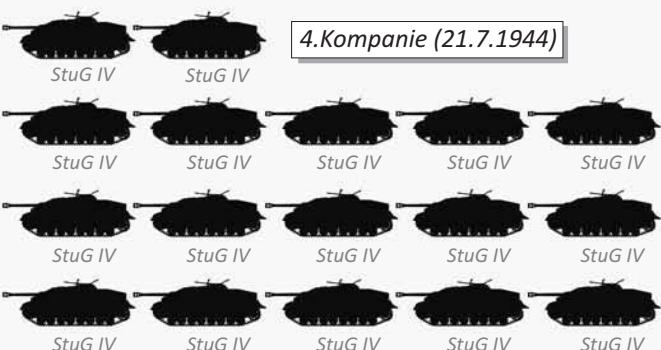
1. Kompanie (17.9.1944)



2. Kompanie (26.9.1944)



3. Kompanie (16.7.1944)



4. Kompanie (21.7.1944)

On 20 March, Obersturmführer Hans-Georg Jessen, at that time the commander of 4.Kompanie, was ordered to take charge of seventeen Sturmgeschütz III assault guns standing at the Chełm railway yards. It is unclear if these vehicles were ever intended for the division, as some accounts suggest, and Jessen and his men may have been the only available troops capable of unloading and delivering the assault guns. In any case they were directed to drive the vehicles towards Kovel where they were to be handed over to an army unit. On the following Thursday, 23 March, Obersturmführer Brand - the commander of 1.Kompanie - took charge of twenty-two Pzkw IV tanks. Rather than allocate all these vehicles to one company, it was decided that two of these tanks would be assigned to the battalion headquarters and each of the four companies would receive five vehicles - that is, enough for one full platoon. It should also be noted that in addition to a shortage of tanks the battalion was also drastically short of personnel - particularly experienced NCO's - and it is doubtful if any one company could have crewed a full complement of tanks. By 23 April, a further five tanks had been received raising the total number to twenty-seven.

During March 1944, the division's Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung had received twenty-two Sturmgeschütz IV vehicles which had been allocated to that unit's first and second companies. When the battalion was disbanded on 1 June 1944, the assault guns and their crews were absorbed by I. Abteilung and it was intended that companies that did not have enough Pzkw IV tanks would be filled out with the assault guns. It should be noted however that by this time the number of assault guns had been reduced to twenty and together with the twenty-two available tanks was still not enough to equip an entire battalion.

Throughout June 1944, the battalion continued to train and receive new equipment. However, by the first week of July only the third and fourth companies could be declared ready for action. Those companies, together with a headquarters element commanded by Obersturmführer Paul Senghas, formed an operational Kampfgruppe while the first and second companies were designated a Lehr or training group and under the command of Obersturmführer Hein, sent back to the Debica training area. There, lacking not only vehicles but even such basic equipment as adequate uniforms and footwear, they trained with the division's anti-tank battalion and an army assault gun replacement unit.

In his post-war account Ewald Klapdor, who served as a company and battalion commander with the division, states emphatically that the third and fourth companies were equipped with twenty of the twenty-two available Pzkw IV tanks and all twenty-one assault guns respectively. Other accounts state that on 10 July, 3.Kompanie had seventeen tanks on hand - which would be the normal complement for a three platoon company - and 4.Kompanie had fifteen assault guns. It is unlikely that Obersturmführer Senghas, who went on to become the division's top-scoring tank commander, would have controlled the Kampfgruppe from one of the transport vehicles and it may be that Klapdor's figures constitute the whole battle group and not only the two tank companies. The figures given for 10 July, could well represent those vehicles deemed combat ready, the remainder being in need of repair or lost. Further, every credible account of the period stresses that the first and second companies had no tanks at all during this period suggesting that all available vehicles were with the battle group.

On Sunday 16 July, Senghas' Kampfgruppe joined II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 in the field. Both the third and fourth companies were committed to action immediately and the following day the tank of the third company's commander, Obersturmführer Kurt Schumacher - which the unit diary mentions as a Befehlspanzer - was knocked out together with three others. The tank of Obersturmführer Josef Hohenester, recorded as being numbered 324, is mentioned as being damaged but later salvaged. This confirms that the tanks of 3.Kompanie at least were numbered using the official system employed at the time - tanks 311 and 312 being confirmed by photographic evidence. A report of October also confirms that 2.Kompanie used this system by mentioning the destruction of tanks numbered 224 and 225. By the end of July, I. Abteilung reported that twenty-two Pzkw IV tanks and eighteen Sturmgeschütz IV assault guns were on hand, although only five and six vehicles respectively were combat ready, the rest being in short and long term repair. Immediately prior to this, 3.Kompanie which had been equipped with six tanks and two assault guns - presumably taken over from 4.Kompanie - lost all its remaining vehicles in the fighting around the Slezany bridgehead on the southern bank of the Bug. By the second week of August the battalion was down to twelve tanks and eleven assault guns which could be described as combat ready. By the first week of September these figures had dropped to four of each type and at this time both companies were withdrawn to be re-equipped. Confusingly, some accounts state that the first and second companies had joined the regiment on or about 21 July, when in fact 1.Kompanie did not receive its full complement of Pzkw IV tanks until 17 September and 2.Kompanie did not receive theirs until 26 September. Further, neither of these companies was equipped with Sturmgeschütz IV assault guns as is often stated - the twenty-two such vehicles taken on during the last week of March were the last that the division would receive.

THE WIKING PANTHERS

While the regiment's I.Abtteilung struggled throughout 1944 to obtain replacements of both men and equipment and never managed to field a complete battalion, the real striking power of the division lay in its Panther Abteilung.

Although photographic evidence confirms that tank R01 did in fact exist, the regiment's commander is most often pictured in the turret of R02. All three Panzerbefehlswagen ausf D vehicles were inherited from SS-Panzer-Regiment 1 in late 1943. The vehicles numbered II01 to II04 are the battalion's reconnaissance platoon although several photographs of tank II11 exist, one in company with other Wiking Panthers, and it would seem that it is not the same vehicle as II01.

| | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| R01 Early ausf D | R02 Late ausf A | R03 Late ausf A | Stab/SS-Panzer-Regt.5 |
| II00 Early ausf D | II01 Early ausf D | II02 Ausf A | II03 Early ausf D |
| II011 Late ausf A | II012 Ausf A | II013 Early ausf A | II014 Late ausf A |
| 500 Late ausf D | 501 Early ausf A | 5.Kompanie | |
| 511 Late ausf A | 512 Late ausf D | 513 | 514 |
| 521 Late ausf A | 522 Late ausf A | 523 Late A/early D | 524 Early ausf A |
| 531 Ausf A | 532 | 533 Ausf A | 534 Late ausf A |
| | | 535 Early A/late D | |
| 700 Late ausf A | 701 Early ausf A | 7.Kompanie | |
| 711 Early ausf A | 712 | 713 Early ausf A | 714 Late ausf A |
| 721 Ausf A | 722 | 723 Ausf A | 724 |
| 731 Ausf A | 732 | 733 | 734 |
| | | 735 Late ausf D | |

| | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 600 Early ausf A | 601 | 6.Kompanie |
| 611 Late ausf A | 612 Early ausf A | 613 |
| 621 Late ausf A | 622 Late ausf A | 623 |
| 631 Late ausf A | 632 Early ausf A | 633 |
| | | 634 |
| | | 635 |

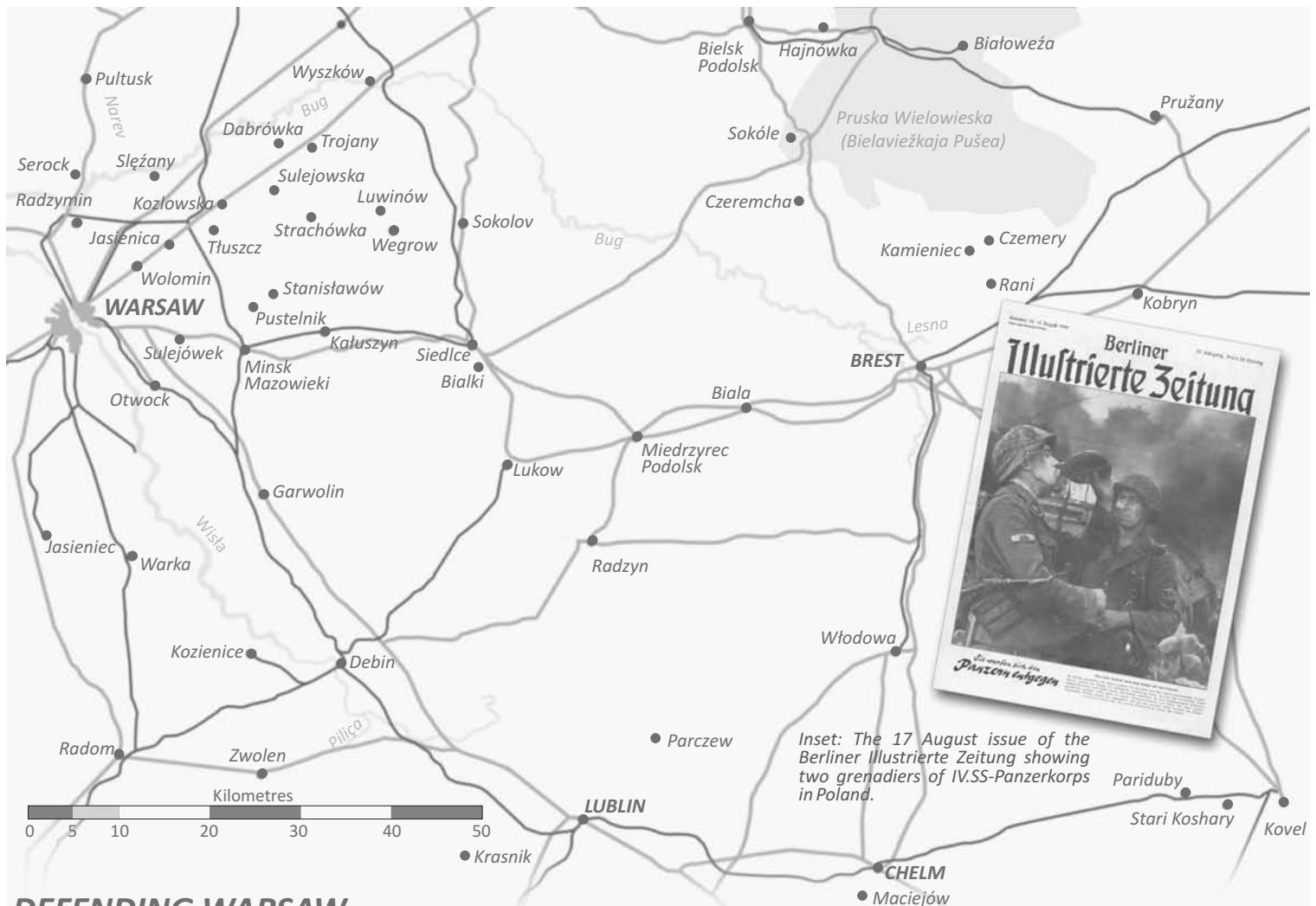
| | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| 800 Late ausf A | 801 Early ausf A | 8.Kompanie |
| 811 Early ausf A | 812 Late ausf A | 813 |
| 821 Early ausf A | 822 Late ausf A | 823 |
| 831 Late ausf A | 832 Late ausf A | 833 |
| | | 834 |
| | | 835 |

The criteria for identification of the model types - or Ausführung - is based on the following and is admittedly simplistic: Early ausf D - a drum type commander's cupola and letter-box style machine gun hull aperture; Late ausf D - a letter-box style machine gun hull aperture and cast commander's cupola without the loader's periscope; Early ausf A - a cast commander's cupola and loader's periscope with the letter-box style machine gun hull aperture, and; Late ausf A - a ball-mount hull machine gun and cast commander's cupola. It is possible that a vehicle classified here as a Late ausf A could in fact be a mid-production model, although it is often not possible to make a definitive identification from the available photographs. Some sources state that additional vehicle numbers existed, and although it is possible that they did, the division never had more Panthers on hand at any one time than the number shown here - that is, seventy-nine tanks. Note however that Klapdor's account specifically states that the regiment had at least two Pzkw IV tanks in its reconnaissance platoon although this does not tally with the other information that we have on the division's tank strengths.

The chart shown above is based on the observation of available photographs and records of the battalion's vehicle strength at various times during 1944. Those silhouettes shown in a darker shade have been confirmed by photographic evidence but the reader should be aware that some tanks were of course, lost or destroyed and replaced by different models. For example the number 534 was originally allocated to a late Panther ausf D at around the time of the Maciejów battles in July and to a later model Panther ausf A when the battalion was engaged east of Warsaw in August. The latter is depicted in the illustration section on page 20. Both tank number 811 and 821 were destroyed outside Kovel in April - The former replaced by a late ausf A by August, perhaps earlier. All German army units were established according to official instructions called Kriegsstärkenachweisungen - usually abbreviated to K.St.N.- which were issued whenever organisational changes were required. While the regimental headquarters and II.Abteilung of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 were forming in France in late 1943, K.St.N.1151a, K.St.N.1150a and K.St.N.1177 of 1 November 1943 were issued stipulating the organisation of a tank regiment's headquarters company, a battalion's headquarters company and a medium tank company respectively. The regimental headquarters was to contain a Nachrichtenzug - literally a signals platoon but in reality a command troop - with three Panzerbefehlswagen and an Aufklärungzug - or reconnaissance platoon - with five tanks. The battalion headquarters had eight tanks of which three were supposed to be command tanks. Each company contained a command troop with two tanks and four platoons of five tanks each. On 1 April 1944, the first of the so-called Freie Gliederung instructions was issued, and K.St.N.1103 called for a regimental headquarters made up of a Nachrichtenzug of three Panzerbefehlswagen and an Aufklärungzug of five Pzkw IV tanks. The battalion headquarters remained unchanged although a new instruction was issued - K.St.N.1150 (fG) - which allowed for an establishment using either Pzkw V or Pzkw IV tanks. Importantly, K.St.N.1177(fG) stipulated that a company would now contain a Gruppe Führer, or command troop, of two tanks and three platoons of five tanks each.



At left: Pages from the Pantherfibel, a manual for Panther crews which presented technical information in a series of comic illustrations designed to appeal to young soldiers. Although humorous and often risqué the information imparted was deadly serious, the page shown here describing the best method of hitting a Russian T-34. Above: A Pzkw Panther V ausf A of 6.Kompanie photographed in May 1944.



DEFENDING WARSAW

During the 1939-45 period most of Poland was administered by the German General-Government and many towns and villages, particularly those which had been part of Silesia before 1918, were forced to revert to their German names. The German accounts of course use these names while Polish histories use Polish names. Confusingly, English language histories tend to use either. In light of this we have used the names in general usage today. The reader should bear in mind that many of the locations mentioned in this book are no longer part of Poland but are today within the borders of Belarus and Ukraine.

At 9.00am on 18 August, a furious artillery barrage blasted the division's front line announcing the resumption of the Red Army's offensive. Directing their attacks to the flanks of the division the Soviets were able to break through the left wing held by the tanks of the fifth and sixth companies of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Within minutes the Russians pushed to the command post of I.Abteilung and were only beaten back after a hand-to-hand battle. At Wymysły near Sulejówek, the headquarters of II.Abteilung of the Westland Regiment was only saved by three Pzkw IV tanks from 3.Kompanie. By noon however, a battle group made up of 3.Kompanie, an assault gun platoon of 4.Kompanie and a number of grenadiers from Westland had managed to drive the Russians back to Wólka Sulejowska, a small village north-east of Tłuszcza. The German success was not without loss and Obersturmführer Lüthgarth, the 4.Kompanie commander was badly wounded and his assault gun destroyed. Also lost were four tanks and their crews under the command of Oberscharführer Ruf which had been positioned in the woods to the northwest of Sulejówek and were overrun by the initial Russian attack.

Scraping together a force of two Pzkw IV tanks and two assault guns, Obersturmführer Schumacher - the 3.Kompanie commander - attacked Wólka Sulejowska in the late afternoon and finally drove the Russians out.

On the division's right wing the II.Abteilung of the Germania regiment was unable to hold back the Soviet tanks and two enemy companies occupied Tłuszcza. Near Jasienica, the Panthers of 7.Kompanie and 8.Kompanie held fast and were able to halt the enemy, destroying twelve Soviet tanks in the process. Here, on the right, at the junction of the Wiking division and 3.SS-Panzer-Division Totenkopf, the Russians were able to penetrate the line in several places and the headquarters of II.Abteilung and 7.Kompanie - hurriedly named Kampfgruppe Flügel after Hauptsturmführer Hans Flügel, the battalion adjutant - were cut off. Holding their positions until dark, Flügel's men were able to fight their way out and head towards Tłuszcza which was at that time - unknown to Flügel - also under attack. Just north of the town, 5.Kompanie managed to stop the initial Russian assault and was joined by 8.Kompanie the following morning.

All that day the two companies fought a running battle between Kozły and Wólka Kozłowska supported by the Panther battalion of the Totenkopf division. Late in the afternoon the tanks and assault guns of the third and fourth companies managed to hold the positions of the Westland regiment around Wólka Kozłowska destroying thirteen Russian tanks.

On the division's left the reconnaissance platoon under Hauptsturmführer

Renz had been fighting to hold Przykory, near Tłuszcza, all day against a force of armour and infantry that was being steadily reinforced as the battle progressed. The Soviet attacks continued all the next day and by the evening the left flank of the division was almost bare. By 8.00am the next morning the Wiking units began pulling back with the remaining assault guns of 4.Kompanie holding back the enemy and preventing a complete breakthrough. The Panthers of 5.Kompanie conducted a fighting withdrawal along the Wyszków road towards Trojanów where the regimental command post found itself almost in the front line.

By the following evening, after attacking all day, the Russians were able to take Trojanów and the Wiking units, which were being supported by the first battalion of SS-Panzer-grenadier-Regiment Eicke of the Totenkopf division, pulled back to the village of Dąbrówka, another 2 kilometres to the east. The security of the left wing was assumed by Infanterie-Brigade 1131 under Oberst Söth allowing the division to move into a defensive line running north to south just behind the Radzymin road with the tank regiment headquarters in Gutzwałka, southwest of Dąbrówka. The regiment's second battalion screened the area to the southwest while the first battalion was held in reserve halfway between Dąbrówka and Slezany and the important bridge over the Bug River. During 23 and 24 August, the Russians attempted to cut the Radzymin road to the north and heavy fighting took place around the village of Malapole which changed hands three times. Also on 23 August, Obersturmführer Metzger assumed command of 4.Kompanie.

By 25 August, a Soviet armoured thrust had reached Czarnow and bypassing Ludwinów, created a gap between Wiking and Infanterie-Brigade 1131. Realising the danger to the whole southwestern flank, Hauptsturmführer Säumenicht, the commander of I.Abteilung of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5, hurriedly led his tanks in an attack towards Czarnow. In truth the vehicles available to Säumenicht meant that his advance was little more than a reconnaissance-in-force and would have been unable to stop a strong, determined enemy. On reaching the Ludinów area at about 4.00am, Säumenicht found that there was an undefended gap of some 2 kilometres in the German line and immediately ordered his third company to take up positions on the southern edge of Slezany and to expect an attack from the direction of Czarnow.

As the tanks of 3.Kompanie began to move, the Russians appeared and although they were driven back a stray shell detonated the charges that had been laid on the Czarnow bridge trapping the companies of I.Abteilung on the south bank of the Bug.

Unable to communicate with regimental headquarters some 13 kilometres away at Beniaminów, Säumenicht ordered Obersturmführer Mittlebacher to cross the damaged bridge on foot and make contact with Oberst Söth who would inform Mühlenkamp of the situation and relay any orders.

The divisional commander, in the presence of Obergruppenführer Gille - who was now commanding IV.SS-Panzerkorps - directed that Säumenicht's remaining tanks attack towards Czarnow, destroy the enemy units there and proceed to Kuligow, which was still in German hands. With the meagre resources at his disposal Säumenicht doubted his chances of success but went ahead with the attack at about 1.30pm on 26 August. All went well until 2.00pm when a sniper's bullet struck Säumenicht, mortally wounding him and taking the momentum out of the assault. By now the tanks and assault guns were almost out of ammunition and withdrawing back into Slezany, destroyed their vehicles and scrambled across the bridge to the relative safety of the north bank of the Bug where a defensive line was formed by scraping together units composed of rear area personnel bolstered by the few remaining tanks and assault guns. During the evening of 26-27 August, the remnants of I.Abteilung - less 4.Kompanie - were withdrawn to the west bank of the Narew.

On 29 August, the Russians succeeded in penetrating the German line north-west of Radzymin but were beaten back by the Panthers of 6.Kompanie while 5.Kompanie held their left flank. Over the next two days the tanks of II.Abteilung, supported by the infantry of SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment Eicke, managed to destroy twenty Soviet tanks but could not hold onto the crossroads village of Cegielnia 15 kilometres north-east of Warsaw. Less than 1,000 metres to the east of the village lay the main road to the Polish capital and here on 1 September, after a heavy artillery barrage, the Russians attacked, overrunning the second battalion of the Westland regiment and 5.Kompanie of the tank regiment.

During the following days the Russians maintained a relentless pressure on the German defenses even attacking at night. However on 4 September, the axis of the Soviet attack changed completely when Wyszków fell and the enemy pressed forward towards Pultusk. At 7.00pm that night, the four remaining assault guns of Metger's company were ordered to intercept the Russian force and although they knocked out a number of self-propelled guns they could do little more than cover the retreat of Infanterie-Brigade 1131 and 35.Infanterie-Division. The German units withdrew across the Narew river at 7.05 am the next morning, destroying the bridge behind them. The loss of the east bank of the Narew left the northern approach to Warsaw open and 7.Kompanie was ordered to Serock to cover the bridge there.

In a daring move, during the night of 4-5 September, a number of Red Army infantrymen swam the river at a point some 7 kilometres north of Serock. The Russians poured men and material into the bridgehead as fast as they could and despite an immediate counterattack by 4.Kompanie supported by the division's engineer battalion and later by 7.Kompanie, the Soviets held their ground and by 3.00pm that afternoon had expanded their bridgehead by some 3 kilometres. Although the fighting continued throughout the next day the Germans were merely able to slow the Russians in a series of counterattacks undertaken by the Panthers of 7.Kompanie and the assault guns of 4.Kompanie - joined later in the day by Bauer's 8.Kompanie. Realising the seriousness of the situation, the remaining tanks of II.Abteilung which were still south of Radzymin, were pulled back behind the Zeranski Canal near Nieporęt, a further 10 kilometres to the west.

At 4.00pm on the afternoon of 7 September, twenty Russian tanks broke through the German defences 5 Kilometres north-west of Serock and advanced toward the town. At the same time a large force of Soviet infantry managed to push back the men of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 73 who had been positioned north of Serock and were only stopped by the tanks of SS-Panzer-Regiment 3 from the Totenkopf division.

Meanwhile the Panthers of 7.Kompanie were reinforced by the tank of Hauptsturmführer Flügel, who was now commanding the battalion, and a single assault gun. Together the German tankers knocked out eleven Soviet tanks, one of them the 500th enemy tank to be destroyed by the regiment in five months of operations. Further to the east at Dzierżenin on the road to Serock, 4.Kompanie held fast with only three operational assault guns, making a stand in the grounds of the local cemetery.

By now the Russians were exhausted and over the next few days only minor skirmishes were fought until by the middle of September, most of the division's units were south of the Narew with the headquarters of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 at Wieliszew, positioned halfway between the two bridges which crossed the river into the so-called Wet Triangle and headed straight to Warsaw. On 26 September, Mühlenkamp officially handed over command of the regiment to Obersturmbannführer Darges.

At 9.00 am on 10 October, Soviet artillery began pounding the positions of the Wiking and Totenkopf divisions and within ninety minutes of the first shell landing, Russian infantry units were attempting to infiltrate the boundary between the two divisions. Within a short time the Russians had crossed the Zeranski canal and reached the woods around Michałów, overrunning the third battalion of the Westland regiment and either killing or wounding all the company commanders. In an immediate counterattack five Panthers and a single assault gun were able to stabilise the line. Further north, the division's reconnaissance battalion was thrown back and it was only due to the decisive actions of the 4.Kompanie commander and his assault gun crews that the Soviets were held until, at 3.30 pm, the division reserve arrived to shore up the front. Attempting to advance into Nieporęt the Germans lost two Pzkw IV tanks and an armoured halftrack and three more tanks while withdrawing. As darkness fell, 5.Kompanie was pulled out of the line to act as the division reserve. During the night, units of the Westland regiment attacked the Russian positions but were unsuccessful and at first light the Soviets resumed their advance. By late afternoon they had advanced past the men of 9.Kompanie of Westland, who were almost buried in the initial barrage, and reached the rear of the reconnaissance battalion's position forcing the German units to pull back to the north-west of Nieporęt. By this time the division reserve, 5.Kompanie and their Panthers, had been committed at Michałów.

On 12 October the fighting intensified and the Russians, ignoring their staggering casualties, pressed forward to Wieliszew and were by now behind 5.Kompanie. That night the tank crews could hear the sound of many tracked vehicles assembling in the woods and the battalion commander decided to pull back all his Panthers south of Wieliszew. The next morning the anticipated attack began and until 15 October, the Wiking tanks and their enemy would struggle for possession of the parish church and cemetery at the western end of Wieliszew. Frustrated by their lack of success the Russians launched a series of air attacks on 16 October, followed by an advance towards Zagroby, but this too was beaten back. Later that day the arrival of a Nebelwerfer unit and the ensuing barrage helped to hold off another Russian drive. At Wieliszew, that afternoon, a German counter thrust ran into an advancing Russian force and retreated in some confusion until the arrival of Obersturmbannführer Darges with two Pzkw IV tanks restored the situation. On 19 October, the Russians again attempted to take the church at Wieliszew and once again were driven back. This pattern continued until 24 October, when the Russians were able to cross the Narew and consolidate a bridgehead on the southern bank.

Two days later, Russian infantry were able to cross on rubber rafts, so depleted had the German defences become, and also to attack out of their bridgehead towards the south-west. What remained of the Wiking division joined the other German units in the area and moved towards the fortress of Modlin where the Narew and the Wisła (Vistula) meet.

Pzkw Panther aus A tanks of II.Abteilung photographed in the area east of Warsaw in August 1944. Both are shown and discussed in the illustration section.



Below: The Soldbuch of an SS Grenadier who served with the division's artillery regiment and the Wiking cuff-title, woven and embroidered in a light-grey thread on a black band. Officer ranks had their cuff-titles embroidered in aluminium or silver bullion wire. The Germania and Westland regiments had their own cuff-titles.



Later that night the complete division performed a complicated withdrawal manoeuvre to align its left flank with 5.Jäger-Division which had been pushed back during the day. Pivotting on the Germania regiment, which was stationed on the right wing between Tłuszcz and Strachówka, the division swung in a huge arc until the Westland regiment on its right wing reached Sulejówek, just over 10 kilometres east of the Wisła (Vistula). Realising what was happening the Russians launched attacks on both flanks and it was only through determined counterattacks by the Panthers of 7.Kompanie and the grenadiers of the Germania regiment that the line was re-established. The division was now poised to defend Warsaw and the Vistula. An account of the Wiking division's part in the Warsaw battles, the final phase of our story, can be read on pages 8 and 9.

By the beginning of November the tank strength of the division stood at 15 Panther and 7 Pzkw IV tanks and 3 Sturmgeschütz IV assault guns and shortly thereafter it was decided that the survivors of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 would be divided into a combat ready group - consisting of the second, fourth, fifth and sixth companies, and a training group - made up from the remaining companies. Under the command of Karl Nicolussi-Leck, the latter group was sent to the training centre at Litzmannstadt (modern day Łódź) to be re-equipped. At the same time the division was reinforced by the first battalions of the SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 23 Norge and SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment 24 Danmark which were detached from the 11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier-Division Nordland.

The war would of course go on for the soldiers of the Wiking division. In late December 1944, the Hungarian capital of Budapest was encircled by the advancing Soviet Army, trapping a large number of German and Hungarian units, including IX.Waffen-Gebirgskorps der SS whose commander Obergruppenführer Karl von Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had been placed in command of the city's defence. The Wiking division, as part of IV.SS-Panzer Corps, was ordered to join 6.Armee which would lead the relief effort, codenamed Operation Konrad (13). The attack would begin on the first day of the new year.

NOTES

1. German units including the Wiking division staff, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania (less III.Abteilung), SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 10 Westland (less III.Abteilung) and I.Abteilung/SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 had been trapped in the pocket since December 1943. Attached to the division at that time were also SS-Freiwilligen-Sturmbrigade Wallonie and SS-Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier-Bataillon Narwa. As one of the few armoured units inside the pocket, Wiking was chosen to lead the breakout and in the attempt lost all its heavy equipment. The debate over exact casualty figures rages to this day, however what is certain is that some 8,300 men from the Waffen SS units reported for duty after the breakout. Among the dead was the popular commander of the tank regiment's first battalion Sturmbannführer Hans Köller. Cherkassy on the Dnepr should not be confused with the village of Cherkasy near Kovel.

2. Contrary to some accounts there were no Wiking units inside the city when the siege began. The only Waffen SS formation present was SS-Kavallerie-Regiment 17 which had been detached from 8.SS-Kavallerie-Division Florian Geyer. A number of Sturmgeschütz III assault guns were used by the defenders and this also seems to have caused confusion with at least one account stating they belonged to Stug.Abt 118 - a unit that never existed. It is possible that these vehicles were from Panzer-Abteilung 118.

Above: A Volkswagen Type 166 Schwimmwagen from III.Abteilung, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment Germania. In the distance can be seen an Sdkfz 251/1 half-track of the same unit and a Pzkf V Panther of 5.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank is shown and discussed further on page 15.

3. Even at this stage of the war transport was at a premium and 7.Kompanie did not arrive until 31 March, while 5.Kompanie and 6.Kompanie were not able to unload their Panthers until 2 April, the day after Karl Nicolussi-Leck's surviving tanks entered Kovel. This large force equipped with their powerful tanks significantly tipped the balance in favour of the Germans.

4. The commander of 6.Kompanie complained that his infantry support never arrived while the grenadiers from 5.Panzer-Division stated that they were halted by Russian fire.

5. During the night of 3 April, German units reset their timepieces to summer or Daylight Saving time putting them one hour ahead of the Russians. This may account for some discrepancies in various sources.

6. Klapdor's account - which may be inaccurate but which cannot be ignored - states that 40 Panthers, 4 command tanks and 4 Pzkw IV tanks were on hand. While the latter are almost certainly vehicles of one of the army regiments, the command tanks are not so easily explained. The regiment did in fact have a number of Panzerbefehlswagen Panther tanks on hand, all taken over from SS-Panzer-Regiment 1.

7. Confusingly, another anti-partisan sweep took place in Yugoslavia under the same codename at almost the same time and the name was also used for a similar operation conducted in the Ukraine the previous year.

8. A detailed account of the Soviet offensive is far beyond the scope of this book and it is sufficient to state here that the Red Army was able to field almost 2.5 million men and approximately 4,000 tanks and assault guns. Operations conducted in 1944 would see Russia cleared of German troops and a bridgehead on the Vistula created within striking distance of Berlin.

9. Mühlenkamp's force was made up from the mobile units available to the division at that time - his regimental staff and second battalion, equipped with Panther tanks, and the second and third battalions of the Germania regiment.

10. The exact position of Mühlenkamp's force is another bone of contention. The village of Maciejów is approximately 17 kilometres southwest of Chelm and almost 35 kilometres to the west of the nearest crossing of the Bug. It seems likely that Mühlenkamp suggested to Block that his tanks be withdrawn from the Kruhel area not to, but in the direction of Maciejów. This would have placed his tanks on the southern side of the Kovel-Chelm road, on the eastern bank of the Bug. The position is described in German accounts as Hill 220 and the village of Rymacze (modern day Rymachi, approximately 7 kilometres east of the Bug crossing) would seem to fit the bill.

11. The regimental HQ was located in Białystok with the headquarters of II.Abteilung and 7 and 8.Kompanie. Just 4 kilometres to the east, sheltered by a wood, were 5 and 6.Kompanie.

12. In October, Mühlenkamp was appointed to the position of Inspekteur der Panzertruppen der Waffen-SS and replaced by Oberführer Karl Ullrich.

13. In some accounts referred to as Armeegruppe Balck, named for its commander General Hermann Balck. This was in fact a much larger formation which included units of 6.Armee and was not formed until 17 January.



Below: Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther ausf A. Stab, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5.
Almost every available photograph of this tank shows the regiment's commander Obersturmbannführer Johannes Mühlenkamp in the cupola - as can be seen at left. Interestingly, a command tank numbered R01 is known to have existed and there is at least one image showing R02 with a different commander - who we have unfortunately not been able to identify.



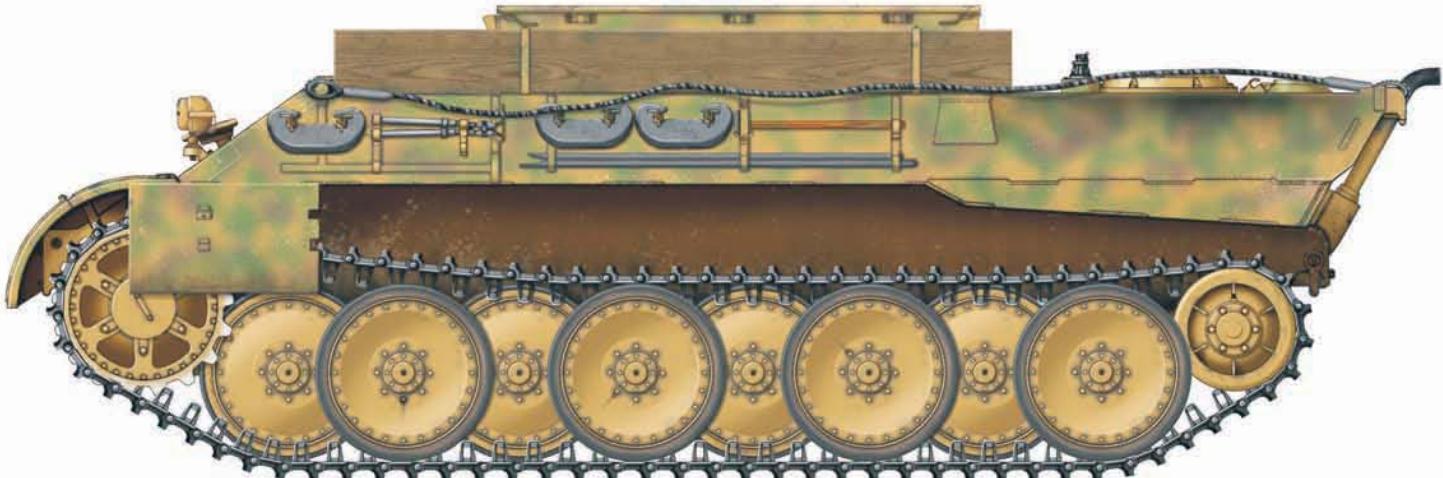
During the relief of Kovel, the tank commanded by Mühlenkamp was disabled by a mine just outside the city in the early hours of 5 April, and could not be recovered for two days. It is possible that the disabled tank was R01 and that until it could be repaired Mühlenkamp adopted his adjutant's vehicle - and apparently retained it for some time.



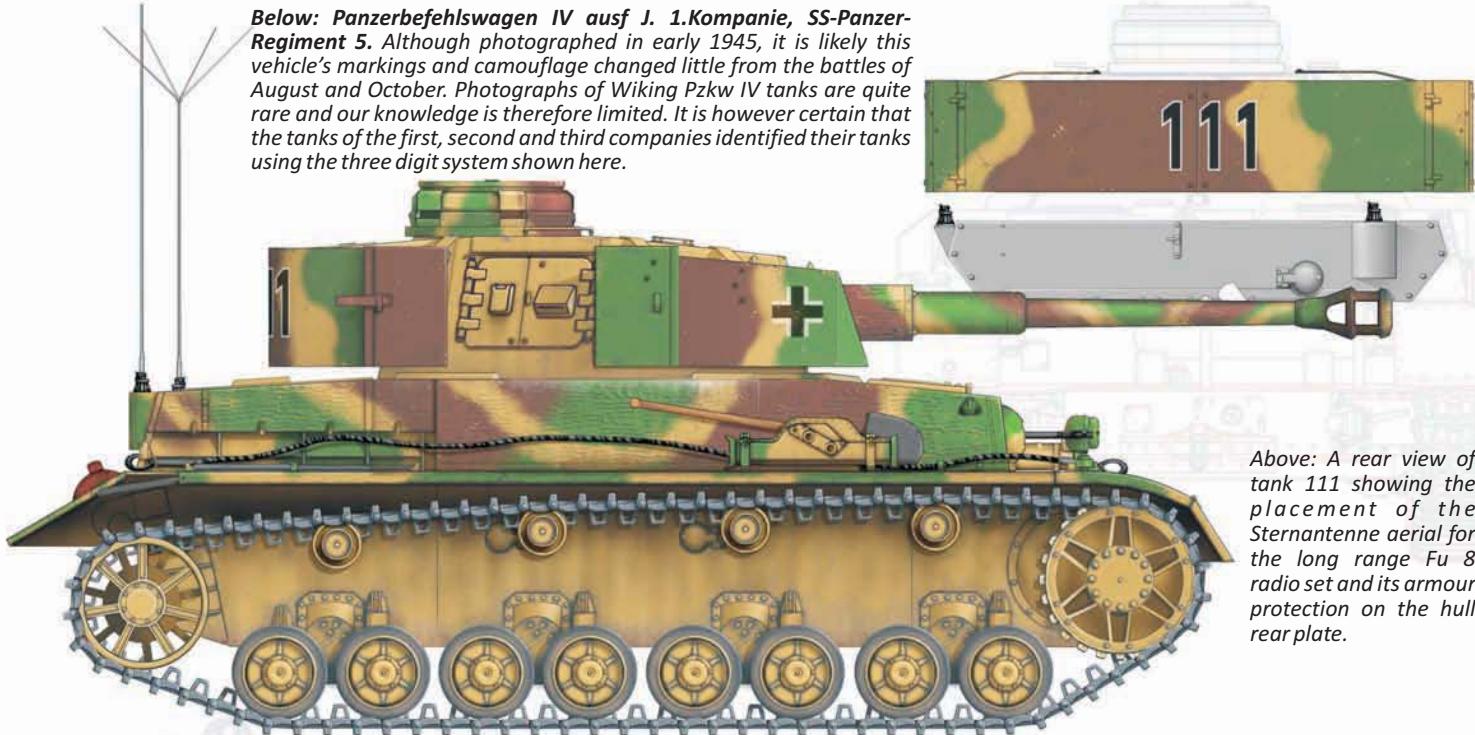
Below: Sdkfz 251/7 ausf D. SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Although these vehicles were used by the division's engineer battalion, the tank regiment did have a number on hand at the time this photograph was taken during the fighting between Kovel and Chelm on the Bug in July 1944. Note that in the photograph at right the Panther just visible on the left hand side with a wooden ladder propped against the hull is in fact tank R02 shown above. The SS registration number shown on the Sdkfz 251/7 at left is purely fictitious but feasible.



Below: Bergepanther, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. In his account of the fighting around Kovel in late March, Karl Nicolussi-Leck, the commander of 8.Kompanie, mentions that he had three of these recovery vehicles available to him, implying that they were an integral part of his company. This is a very early model and lacks the large spade at the hull rear. This illustration is in fact based on a photograph taken in the summer.

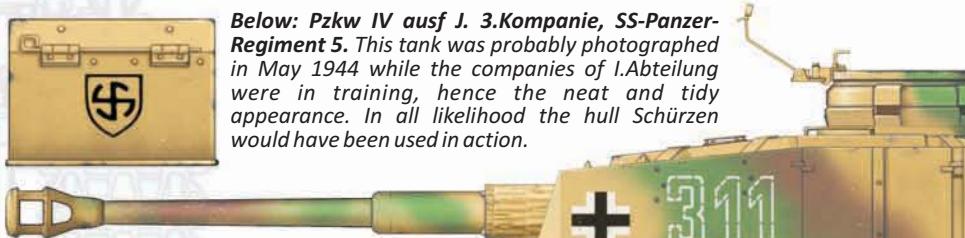


Below: Panzerbefehlswagen IV ausf J. 1.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Although photographed in early 1945, it is likely this vehicle's markings and camouflage changed little from the battles of August and October. Photographs of Wiking Pzkw IV tanks are quite rare and our knowledge is therefore limited. It is however certain that the tanks of the first, second and third companies identified their tanks using the three digit system shown here.

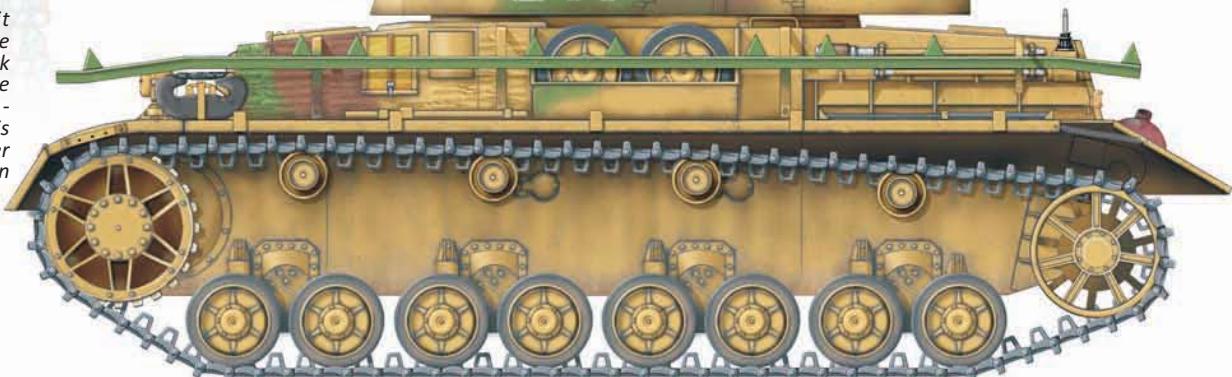


Above: A rear view of tank 111 showing the placement of the Sternantenne aerial for the long range Fu 8 radio set and its armour protection on the hull rear plate.

Below: Pzkw IV ausf J. 3.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank was probably photographed in May 1944 while the companies of I.Abtteilung were in training, hence the neat and tidy appearance. In all likelihood the hull Schürzen would have been used in action.



Above: The division's unit insignia as it was applied to the 3.Kompanie Pzkw IV tank shown at right. Although the colour here is shown as black - which is highly likely - it is entirely possible that another dark shade could have been used.



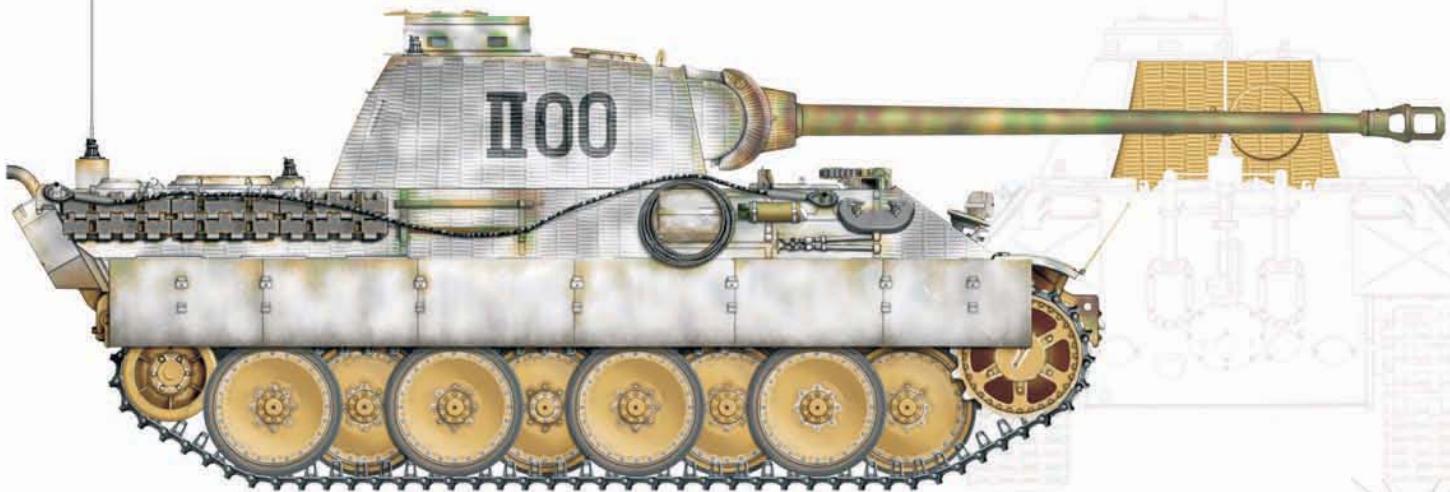
Below: Sturmgeschütz IV. I.Abtteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. In June 1944, the division's Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 5 was disbanded with the battalion's assault guns and crews being re-assigned to I.Abtteilung of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. At first it was planned that the assault guns would be used to fill out the companies that had insufficient Pzkw IV tanks but they were all eventually concentrated in 4.Kompanie - with perhaps one exception as discussed on page 6. The vehicle depicted here was probably photographed in June when the battalion was still in training or perhaps even earlier as the crew all seem to be wearing the field grey jacket issued to assault gun crews.



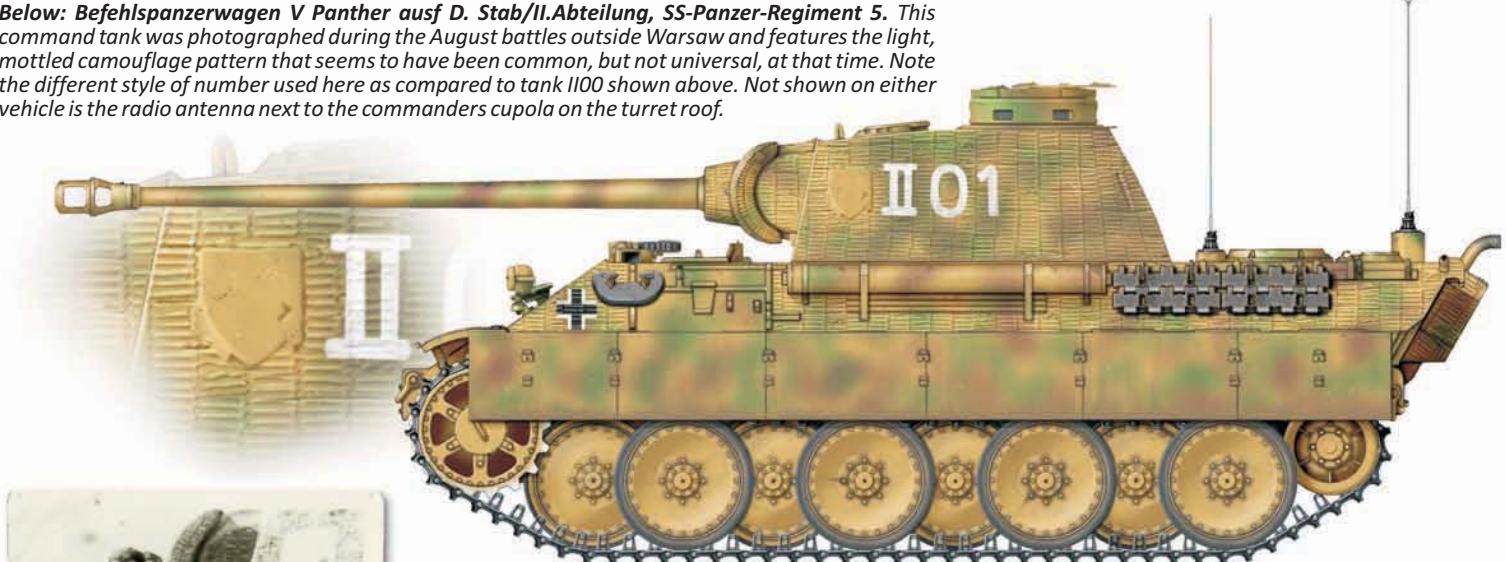
Above: The photograph on which our illustration is based. The dark coloured barrel is rendered here in a shade that represents the red oxide primer used at this time, although the exact shade may have been somewhat more yellow in appearance. The same colour can be seen on the Schürzen which must have been painted very hurriedly.



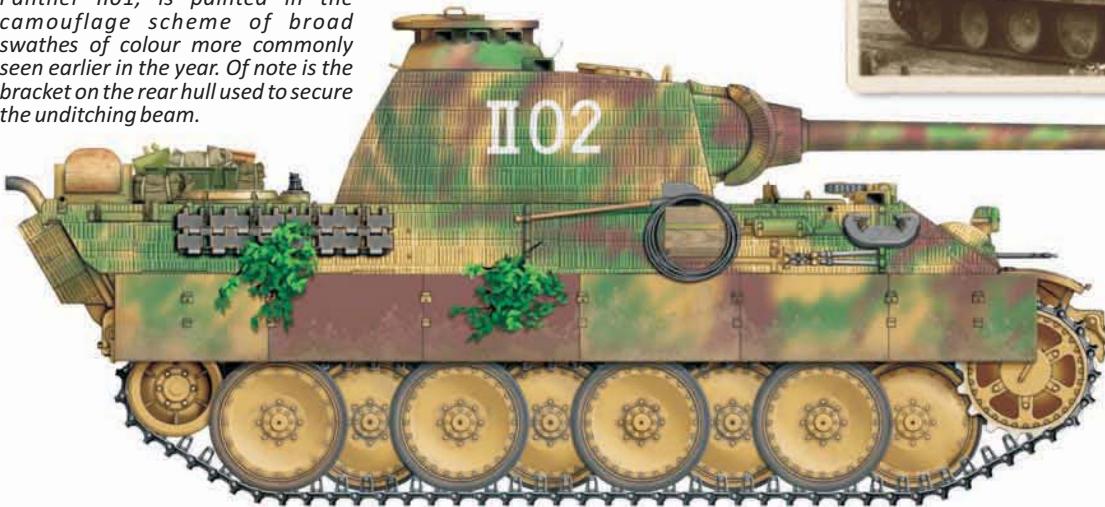
Below: Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther ausf D. Stab/II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5.
Photographed outside Kovel, probably just east of Stari Koszary, this tank was the mount of Obersturmbannführer Otto Paetsch who had taken over command of the battalion on 1 March 1944. The rear view at right is shown here merely to illustrate the position of the Sternantenne on the hull's rear deck. Although the turret number is shown here as black it is entirely possible that some other dark colour was used.



Below: Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther ausf D. Stab/II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This command tank was photographed during the August battles outside Warsaw and features the light, mottled camouflage pattern that seems to have been common, but not universal, at that time. Note the different style of number used here as compared to tank II00 shown above. Not shown on either vehicle is the radio antenna next to the commander's cupola on the turret roof.



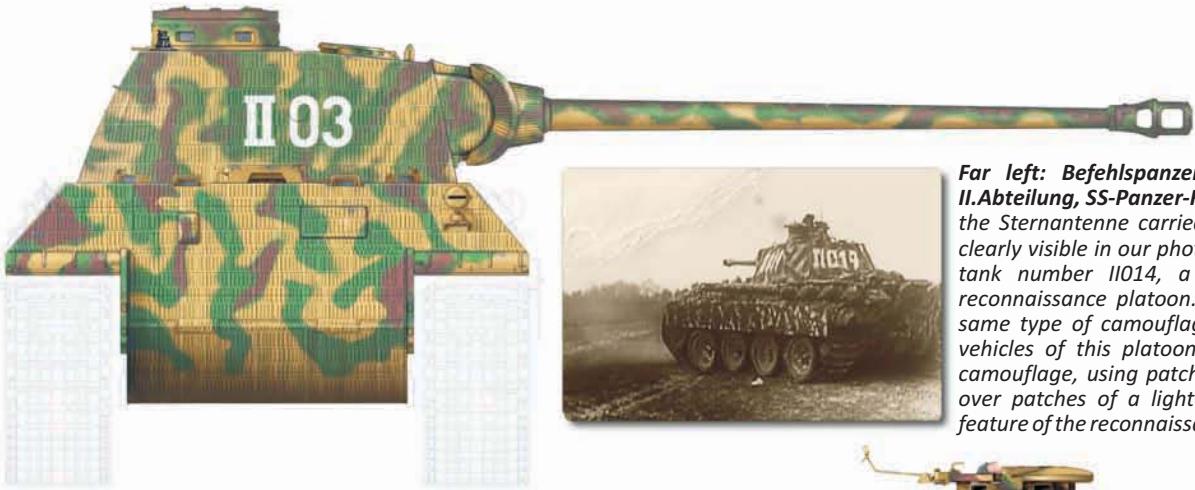
Below: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. Stab/II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank, although photographed at the same time as Panther II01, is painted in the camouflage scheme of broad swathes of colour more commonly seen earlier in the year. Of note is the bracket on the rear hull used to secure the unditching beam.



At left: The alteration of the Zimmerit paste on the turret side was evident on many of the battalion's Panthers by July, however this tank has not had a patch removed - as was the case with most vehicles - but rather fresh Zimmerit has been added, as can clearly be seen in the accompanying photograph. Although obviously intended for the division's unit insignia of a sun-wheel inside a shield it would seem that the actual design was never applied.

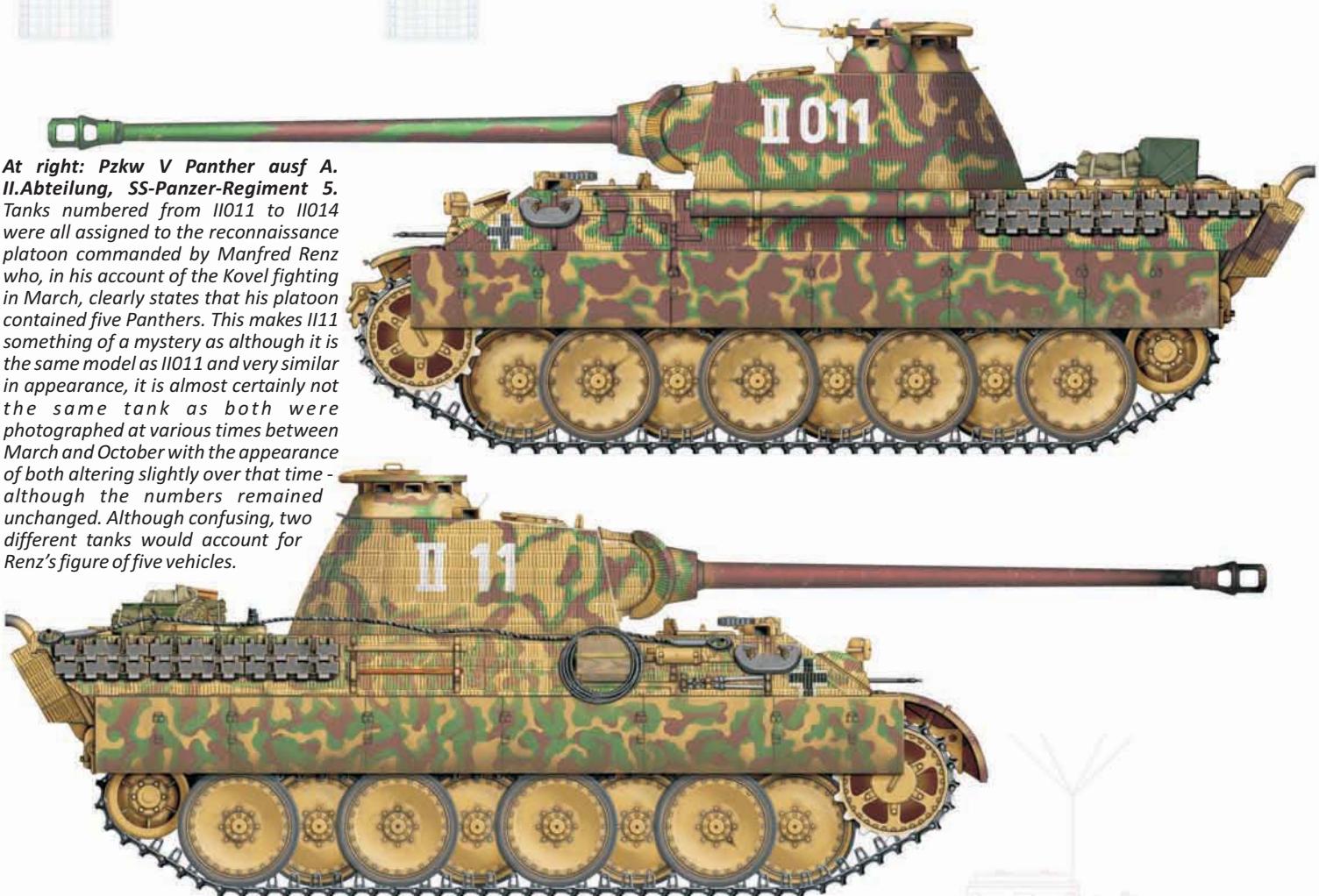


Above: The photograph of tank II02 on which our illustration is based. That this image was made in August 1944 is confirmed by other photographs in the same series which show Panthers of SS-Panzer-Regiment 3 of the Totenkopf division following immediately behind the Wiking Panthers. Not the mixture of early and later style wheels.



Far left: Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther ausf D. II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Not shown here is the Sternantenne carried on the rear hull which was clearly visible in our photograph. Also shown at left is tank number II014, a late A model also of the reconnaissance platoon. Note that this tank has the same type of camouflage pattern seen on the other vehicles of this platoon in early 1944. This style of camouflage, using patches of a darker colour painted over patches of a lighter shade, was an identifying feature of the reconnaissance platoon.

At right: Pzkv V Panther ausf A. II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Tanks numbered from II011 to II014 were all assigned to the reconnaissance platoon commanded by Manfred Renz who, in his account of the Kovel fighting in March, clearly states that his platoon contained five Panthers. This makes II11 something of a mystery as although it is the same model as II011 and very similar in appearance, it is almost certainly not the same tank as both were photographed at various times between March and October with the appearance of both altering slightly over that time - although the numbers remained unchanged. Although confusing, two different tanks would account for Renz's figure of five vehicles.



Below: Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther ausf D. II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed near one of the Bug River bridges opposite the Slezany bridgehead in August 1944 this command tank was very liberally covered in local foliage obscuring the turret and making a positive identification impossible. However, the other Befehlspanzerwagen V Panther aus D of this battalion are all depicted in photographs and no others have the Zimmerit covered hull schurtzen seen here.



Above: The construction of the bracket used to hold the unditching beam on this vehicle seems to have been unique and is built in such a way as to avoid the Sternantenne on the rear deck. Although it is not possible to be certain, this tank may be R01 the Panther disabled by a mine outside Kovel in April 1944 and repaired some time later.

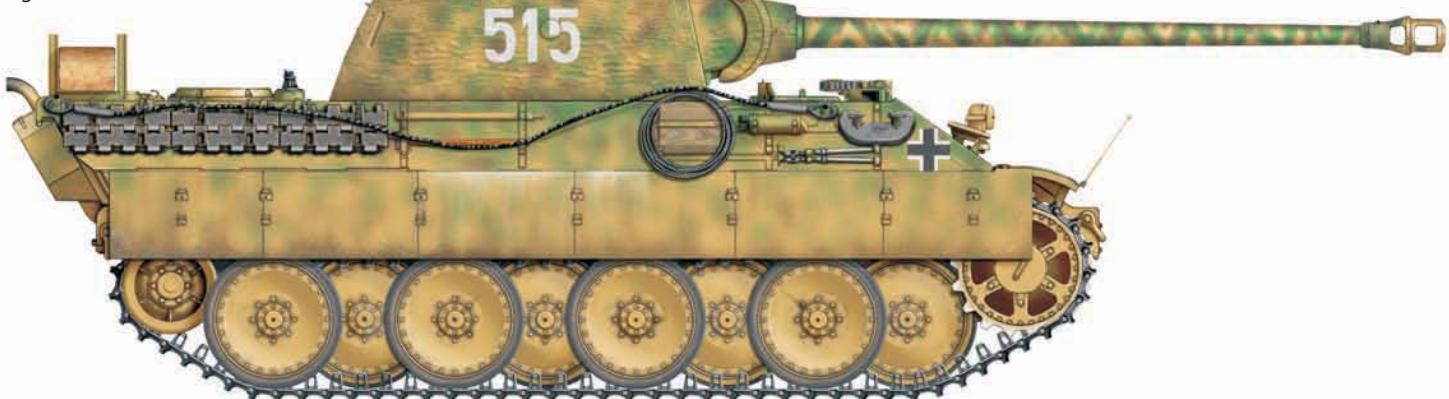
Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 5.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. The camouflage scheme shown here, made up of a lightly sprayed mottling of Olivgrün and Rotbraun on the Dunkelgelb base colour, was common to most tanks of 5.Kompanie by summer. Another common feature of this company's tanks was the neatly stenciled turret numbers. Of note is the early exhaust system and the Horizontal position of the jack. The bracket welded to the rear hull has been Badly damaged.



Above: A right hand side view of Panther 501 shows a crewman in conference with men of III.Abteilung/SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment Germania.



Pzkw V Panther ausf D. 5.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Although it is difficult to be absolutely certain from the photograph on which our illustration is based, this tank appears to be without a coating of Zimmerit on the hull and only a very rough coat applied to the turret. This tank is one of the very few early model D vehicles on hand with the battalion that was not a command tank.

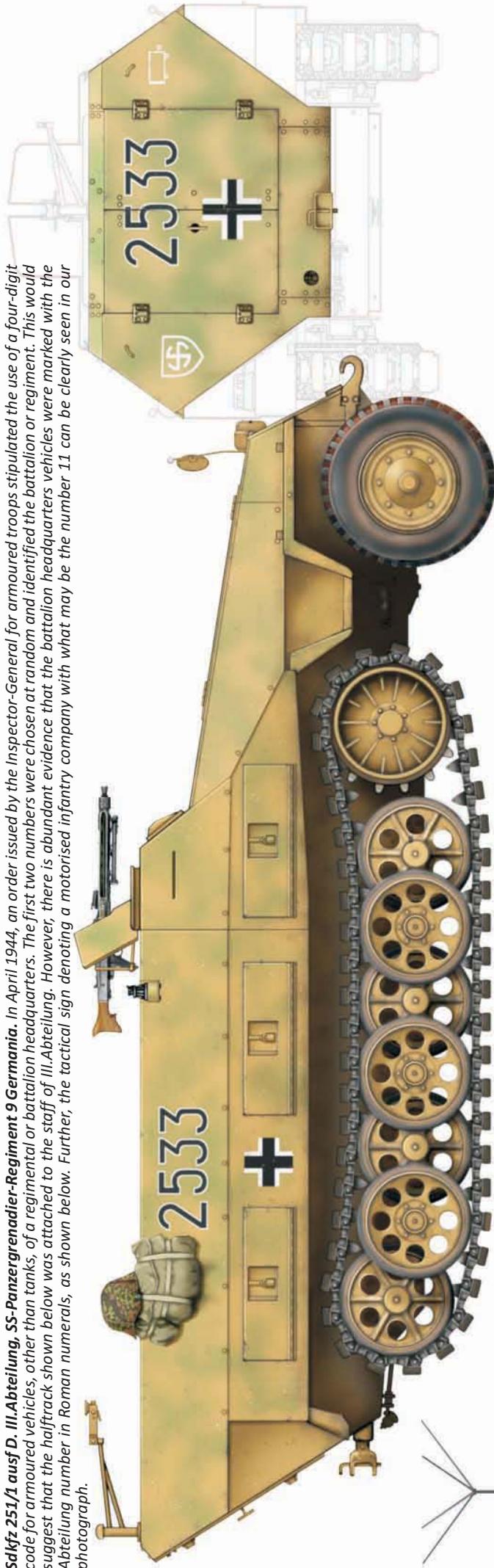


Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 5.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This vehicle is one of the most photographed tanks of the battalion enabling us to be quite sure about its appearance. In common with most of the Panthers, a bracket has been welded to the rear hull to hold the large unditching beam which was an essential piece of equipment in the marshes and sandy soil of eastern Poland. Indeed, these beams were also a feature of Russian tanks operating in the same area. Note also the alteration to the front mudguards, a common sight on the tanks of this company. The reason for this is unclear but it may have assisted access to the hull.



Above: A rear view of Panther 521. Note the later style exhaust and horizontal position of the jack. The application of Zimmerit in the pattern shown here of ridges within small squares seems to have been the most commonly used although exceptions certainly existed and are shown throughout the illustrations.

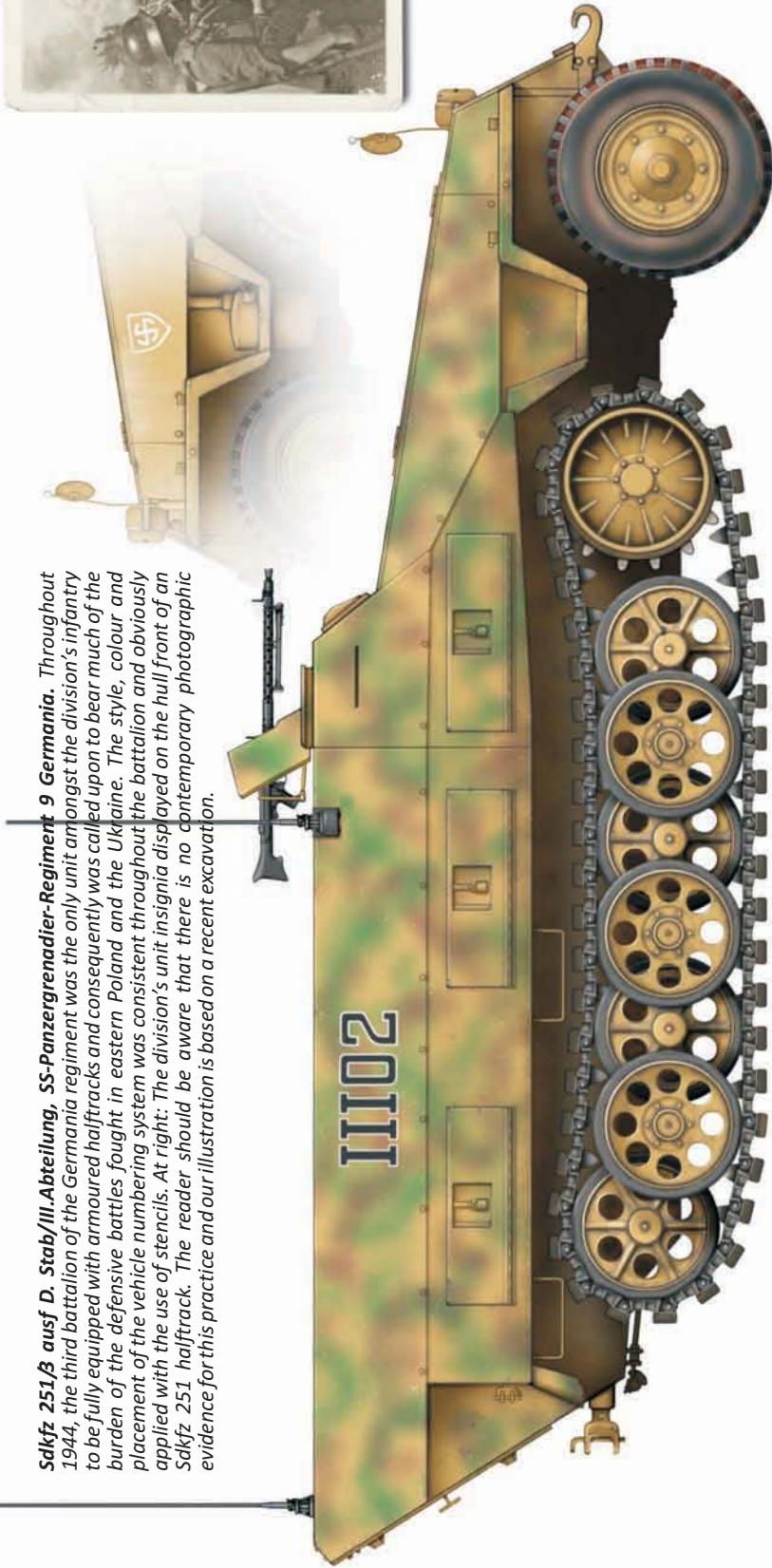
Sdkfz 251/1 ausf D. III.Abtteilung, SS-Panzergradier-Regiment 9 Germania. In April 1944, an order issued by the Inspector-General for armoured troops stipulated the use of a four-digit code for armoured vehicles, other than tanks, of a regimental or battalion headquarters. The first two numbers were chosen at random and identified the battalion or regiment. This would suggest that the halftrack shown below was attached to the staff of III.Abtteilung. However, there is abundant evidence that the battalion headquarters vehicles were marked with the Abteilung number in Roman numerals, as shown below. Further, the tactical sign denoting a motorised infantry company with what may be the number 11 can be clearly seen in our photograph.



Sdkfz 251/3 ausf D. Stab/III.Abtteilung, SS-Panzergradier-Regiment 9 Germania. Throughout 1944, the third battalion of the Germania regiment was the only unit amongst the division's infantry to be fully equipped with armoured halftracks and consequently was called upon to bear much of the burden of the defensive battles fought in eastern Poland and the Ukraine. The style, colour and placement of the vehicle numbering system was consistent throughout the battalion and obviously applied with the use of stencils. At right: The division's unit insignia displayed on the hull front of an Sdkfz 251 halftrack. The reader should be aware that there is no contemporary photographic evidence for this practice and our illustration is based on a recent excavation.

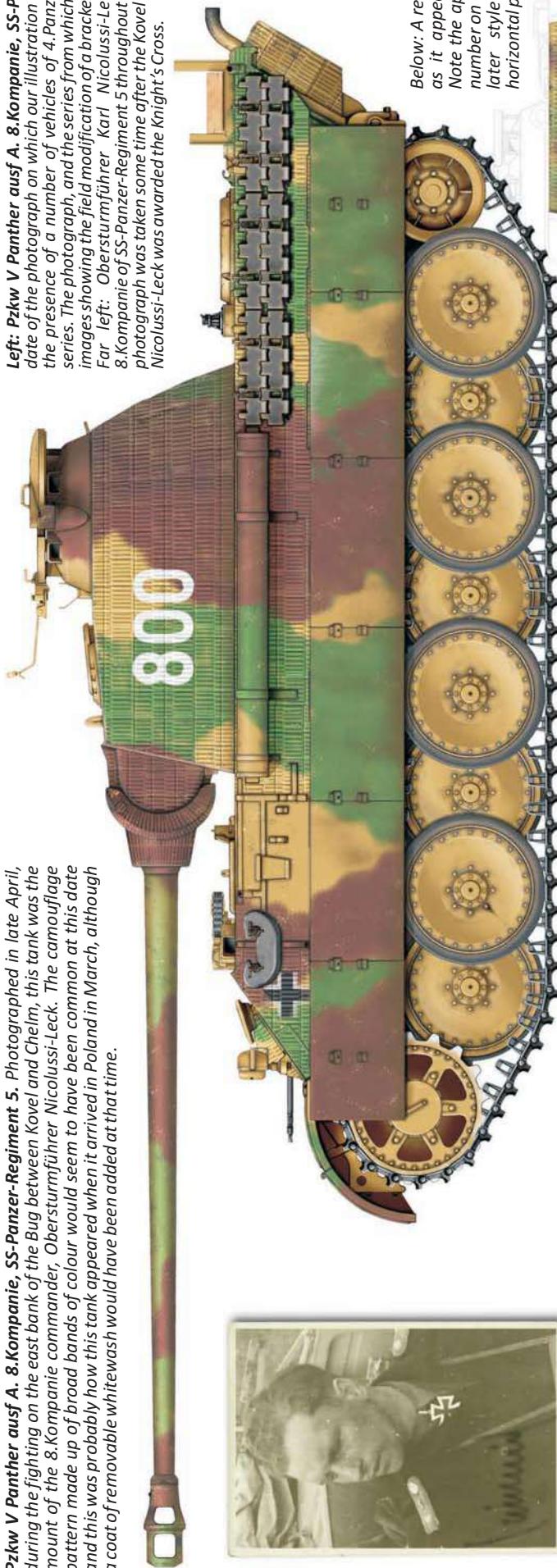


Above: The photograph on which our illustration of the vehicle shown at left is based. Sometimes credited with having been taken during Operation Maigewitter, an anti-partisan sweep conducted near Lublin in early May, this image was almost certainly made in August 1944 during the battles to defend Warsaw and the Vistula. The officer at left is Obersturmführer Friedrich Hannes, commander of the Germania regiment's 12.Kompanie

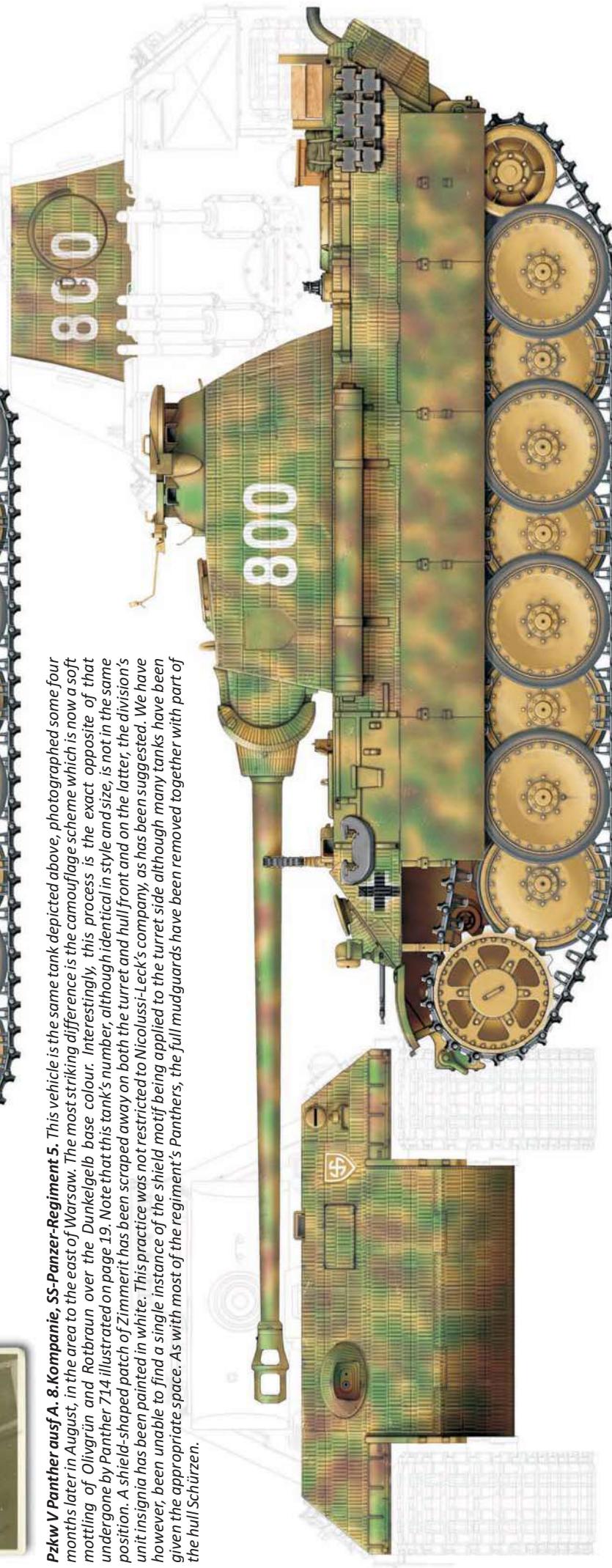


Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed in late April, during the fighting on the east bank of the Bug between Kovel and Chełm, this tank was the mount of the 8. Kompanie commander, Obersturmführer Nicolussi-Leck. The camouflage pattern made up of broad bands of colour would seem to have been common at this date and this was probably how this tank appeared when it arrived in Poland in March, although a coat of removable whitewash would have been added at that time.

Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed in late April, date of the photograph on which our illustration is based is confirmed by the presence of a number of vehicles of 4. Panzer-Division in the same series. The photograph, and the series from which it came, are the earliest images showing the field modification of a bracket welded to the hull/rear. Far left: Obersturmführer Karl Nicolussi-Leck, who commanded 8. Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 throughout the battles of 1944. This photograph was taken some time after the Kovel relief attempt for which Nicolussi-Leck was awarded the Knight's Cross.



Below: A rear view of Panther 800 as it appeared in August 1944. Note the application of the tank's number on the turret rear; also the later style exhaust system and horizontal position of the jack.



Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This vehicle is the same tank depicted above, photographed some four months later in August, in the area to the east of Warsaw. The most striking difference is the camouflage scheme which is now a soft mottling of Olivgrün and Rotbraun over the Dunkelgelb base colour. Interestingly, this process is the exact opposite of that undergone by Panther 714 illustrated on page 19. Note that this tank's number, although identical in style and size, is not in the same position. A shield-shaped patch of Zimmerit has been scraped away on both the turret and hull front and on the latter, the division's unit insignia has been painted in white. This practice was not restricted to Nicolussi-Leck's company, as has often suggested. We have however, been unable to find a single instance of the shield motif being applied to the turret side although many tanks have been given the appropriate space. As with most of the regiment's Panthers, the full mudguards have been removed together with part of the hull Schürzen.

Below: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 5.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank was photographed in August 1944 and carries, for the time, a very unusual hard-edged camouflage scheme, departing from the more common soft mottled pattern.



Above: An earlier model Panther ausf A photographed near Maciejów in April 1944 which also bears the number 534. What became of this tank is not known.



Left: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 6.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. The scrappy application of camouflage paint is typical of this company's tanks. Note that although the photograph on which our illustration is based was taken in May, this vehicle does not have the bracket on the hull rear and also retains one of the large mudguards.

Right: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 6.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank has been almost completely covered in dark shades of paint without regard for either the turret number or the Balkenkreuz national insignia on the hull front. A series of photographs of this tank can be seen on page 31.



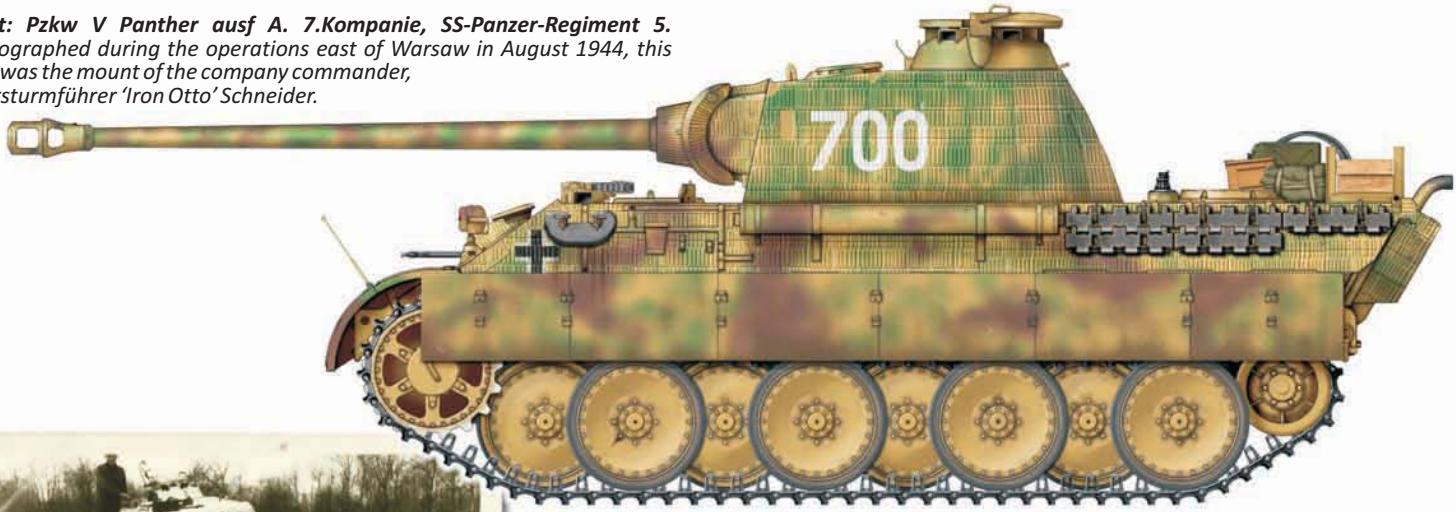
At left: An interesting photograph of Panther 611 seen from the left hand side which must have been taken at approximately the same time as the image used to produce our illustration.



Right: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 6.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. This tank features an almost identical camouflage scheme to that shown on Panther 611, above. Note however, that the turret number here has been hand painted and that an unditching beam is carried on the rear hull although the bracket has yet to make its appearance.



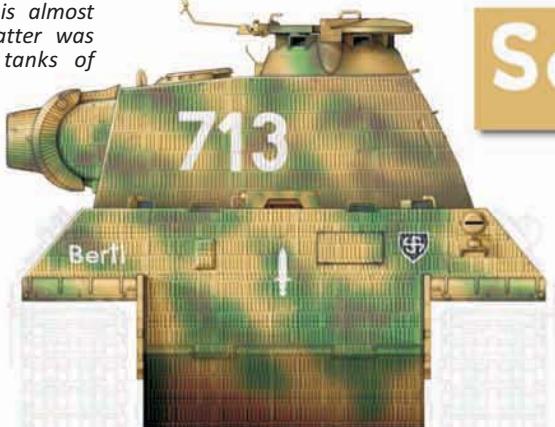
Right: Pzk w V Panther ausf A. 7.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5.
Photographed during the operations east of Warsaw in August 1944, this tank was the mount of the company commander, Obersturmführer 'Iron Otto' Schneider.



Below: Pzk w V Panther ausf A. 7.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Still bearing its coat of whitewash camouflage this tank must have been photographed sometime in April 1944. At least one account attests to the comprehensive application of white paint that is apparent here. The full mudguards were a feature of the battalion's Panthers when they arrived in Poland and this tank has only lost one due to the traumatic track damaged. In the original photograph there is evidence of what may be a thin, dark line around the turret number although it is not clear enough to make a definitive pronouncement.



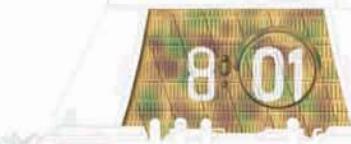
Below, right: Another depiction of Panther 713, this time without its coat of whitewash camouflage. Note the name, Berti, and the sword insignia. It is almost certain that the latter was restricted to the tanks of 7.Kompanie.



Below: Pzk w V Panther ausf A. 7.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. The two views show this tank as it appeared in late 1943, just before the company left France (top), and in August 1944 when the tanks of this company were filming fighting east of Warsaw with units of 3.SS-Panzer-Division. The similarity of the early version to Panther 713 is obvious and note that both have the division's insignia painted over the Zimmerit coating - unlike our photograph at left. In the later version the mottled camouflage has been replaced by broad bands of colour on the Dunkelgelb base. Note also that the headlight is missing.



Below: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed in July or August 1944 this tank carries an unusually rough, apparently hand-painted, number. Although the company commander, Karl Nicolussi-Leck, was photographed standing in the cupola of this tank we feel sure that this vehicle was in fact commanded by the company's adjutant as Panther 800 - shown on page 17 - was fully operational at this time. This tank was in all probability a convenient prop used by a visiting Propaganda-Kompanie photographer in which to place the now famous Nicolussi-Leck.



Above: A rear view of Panther 801 showing the later exhausts and the horizontal position of the jack. Note that the tank's number has been applied in a much neater fashion than that on the turret sides.



At left: The right side of the hull of the Panther depicted below. Note that the Zimmerit has not been removed from this side although the photograph on which this drawing was based was taken long after that shown at far left.



Right: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed during the fighting east of Warsaw in August, this tank displays modifications which are by now identifying features of the division's Panthers: the bracket for the unditching beam on the rear hull and the removal of a small, shield-shaped section of Zimmerit from the turret. Also of note is the metal tube protecting the antenna base and insulator.

Right: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed on the Kovel railway line just south of Cherkasy this tank was disabled by a Soviet mine. Note the unusual method by which the Zimmerit has been applied similarly to Panther 801 shown at the top of this page.



Right and above: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. In common with many tanks of this company, a patch of Zimmerit has been neatly cleared from the turret, presumably to accommodate the division's unit insignia. We have however, been unable to find a single instance of the latter ever being applied.



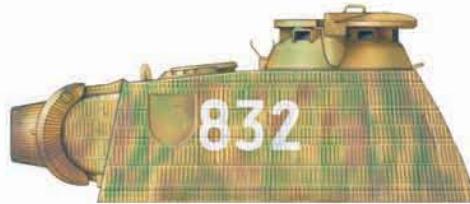
Below: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. The bracket welded to the rear hull was a common feature by the time of the summer battles. Used for holding an unditching beam, this field modification made its appearance at around the time of the fighting near Maciejów and is not seen on any of the Panthers which took part in the Kovel battles. The bracket is still absent on tanks known to have been photographed in May.



Above: A rear view of Panther 823. Note the early type of exhaust system and the horizontally mounted jack. The unditching beam bracket has intentionally been omitted from this drawing.



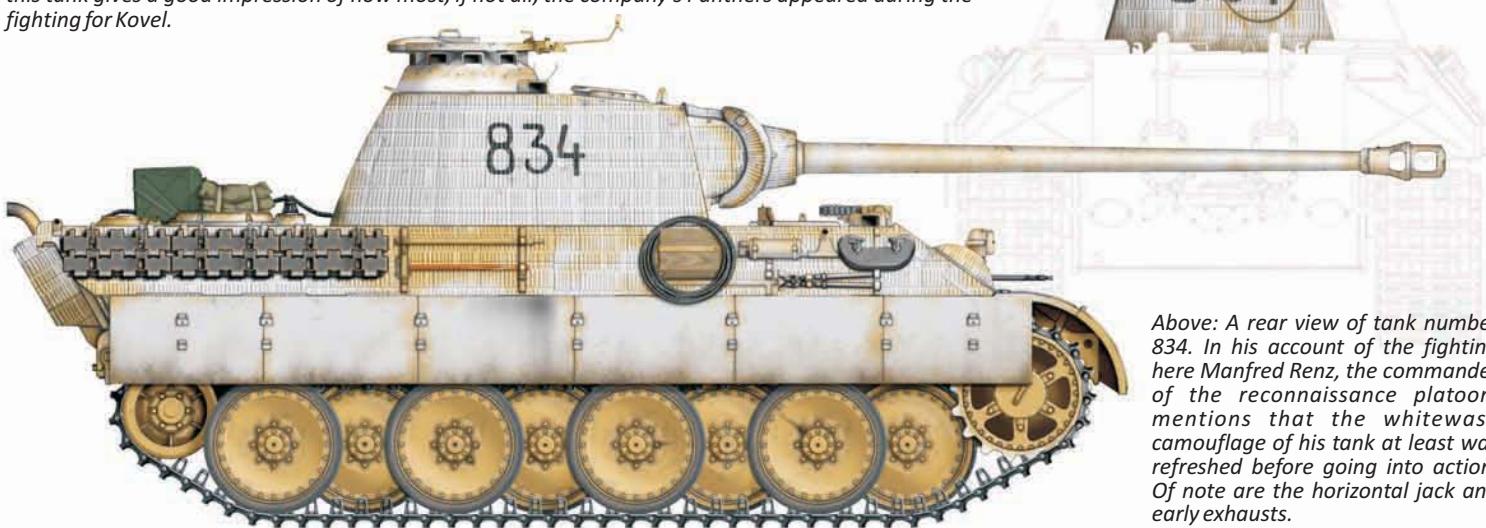
Above: Panther number 833. Note the wooden beam at the hull rear and the patch where the Zimmerit has been removed next to the driver's visor.



Left: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. By the time of the August battles many, if not all, 8.Kompanie tanks carried the division's insignia as shown here. It would seem that the left side only of the turrets was prepared but for some reason the shield and sun-wheel motif were never painted on.

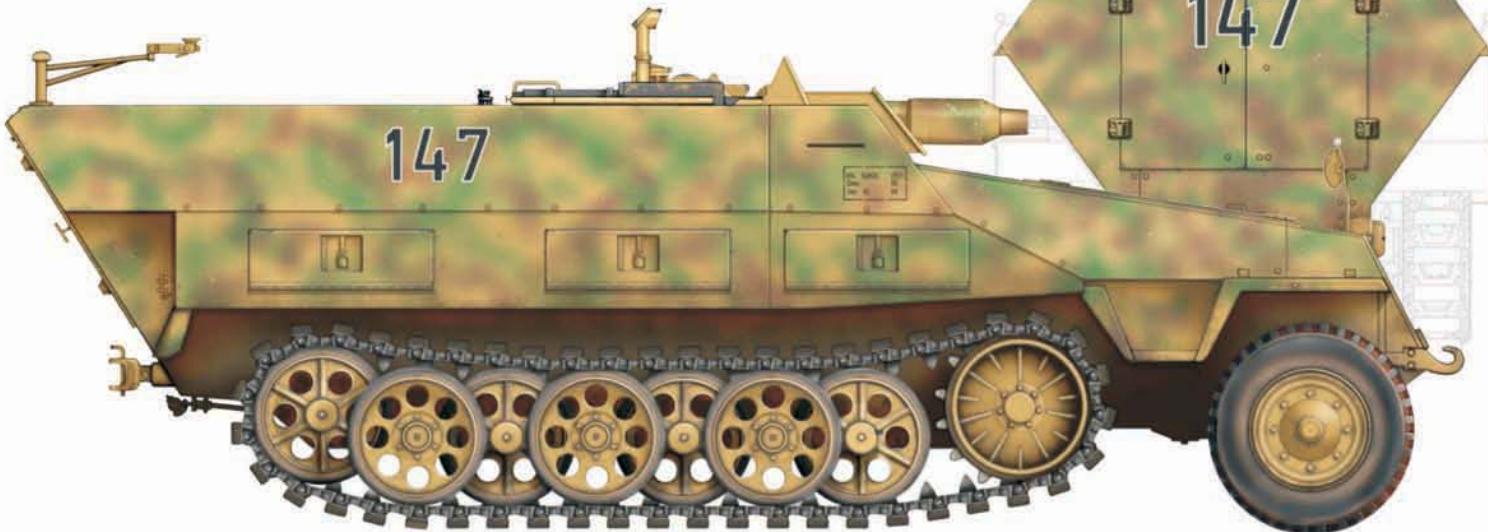


Below: Pzkw V Panther ausf A. 8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5. Photographed in company with Panther number 1100 depicted on page 13, probably near the village of Stari Koshary in early April 1944, this tank gives a good impression of how most, if not all, the company's Panthers appeared during the fighting for Kovel.

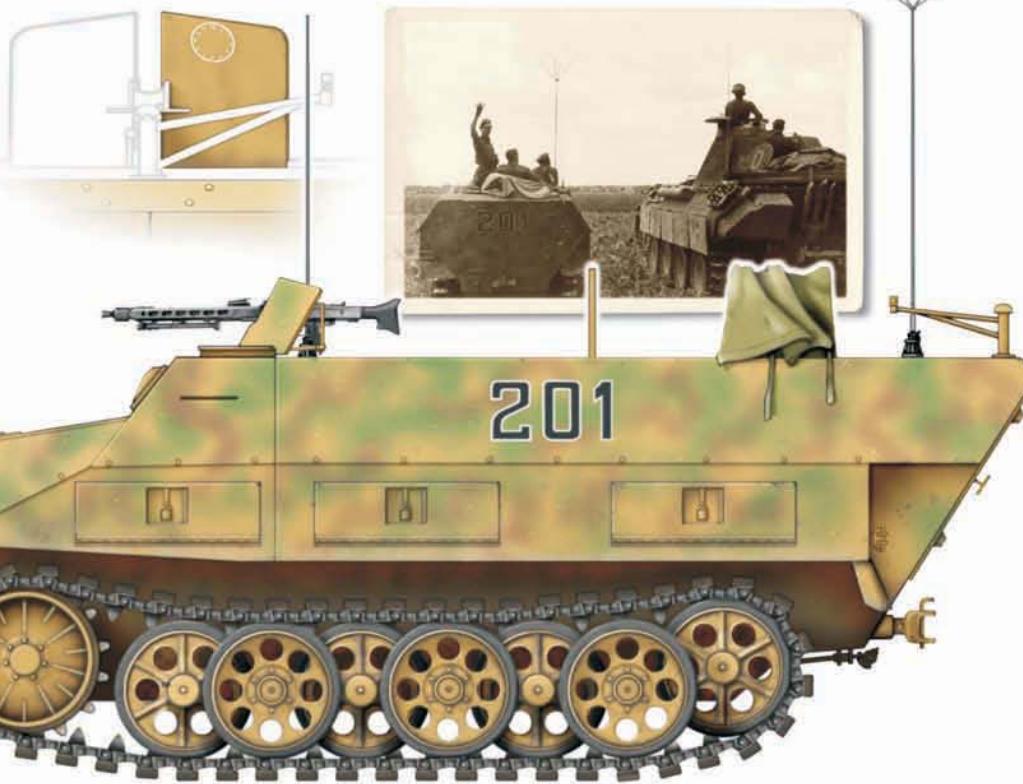


Above: A rear view of tank number 834. In his account of the fighting here Manfred Renz, the commander of the reconnaissance platoon, mentions that the whitewash camouflage of his tank at least was refreshed before going into action. Of note are the horizontal jack and early exhausts.

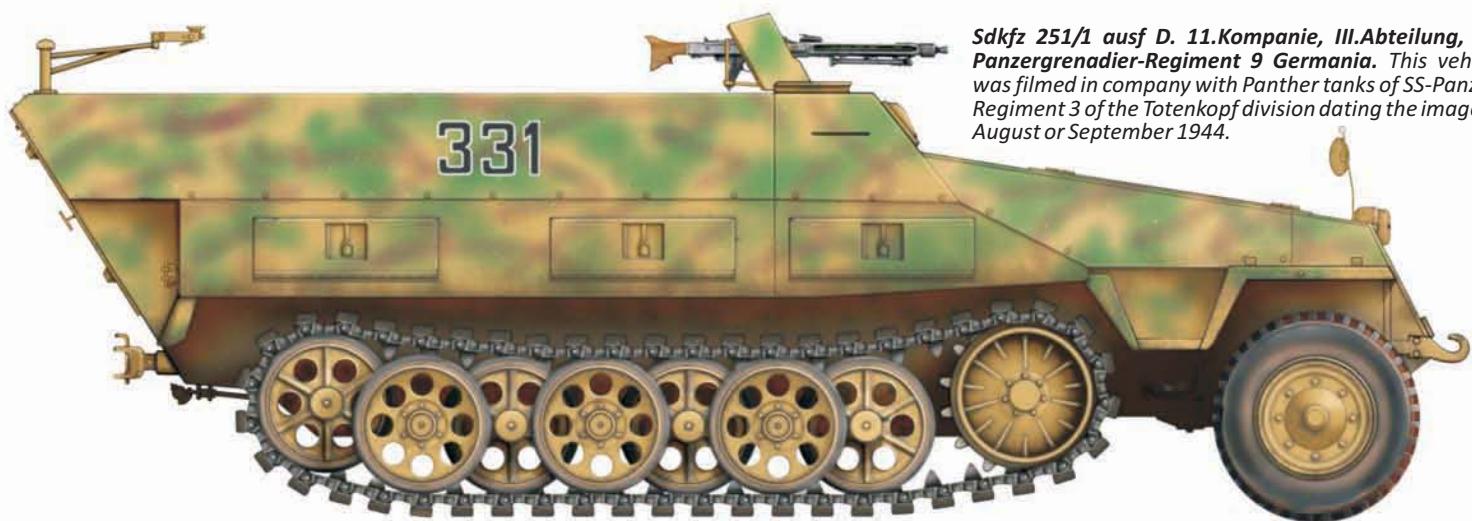
Sdkfz 251/9 ausf D. 9.Kompanie, III.Abteilung, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania.
Photographed during the August battles, this halftrack presents an appearance typical of this battalion's vehicles. The halftracks of III.Abteilung used a system whereby the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 identified the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth companies respectively. The number was repeated on the rear access doors as shown here. Many halftracks carried the divisions unit insignia and an appropriate tactical marking although this vehicle certainly did not.



Sdkfz 251/1 ausf D. 10.Kompanie, III.Abteilung, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania. Photographed next to Karl nicolussi-Lecks' Panther 800 in August 1944, this command halftrack belongs to the headquarters of 10.Kompanie. Note the clock face painted on the inside of the machine gun shield.



Sdkfz 251/1 ausf D. 11.Kompanie, III.Abteilung, SS-Panzergrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania. This vehicle was filmed in company with Panther tanks of SS-Panzer-Regiment 3 of the Totenkopf division dating the image to August or September 1944.





This photograph and those on the following pages depict the vehicles and men of the Wiking division and most, if not all, were taken at the SS-Truppenübungsplatz Heidelager located between Dębica and Sandomierz in Poland in early May 1944. We are able to date this series with some certainty as several photographs show Mother's day cards being printing and made ready for issue to the troops. Here men of the first platoon of 6. Kompanie train on their Pzkw V Panther tanks. Both are later model ausf A vehicles and carry the hurried, rather scrappy camouflage common to many tanks of this company. The tank in the foreground, number 611, is also shown in the illustration section on page 18. The Panther in the background is numbered 615 which indicates that this platoon at least had its full complement of tanks.



The photographs on this page show Panther 613 - note the number 3 just visible on the turret rear access hatch in the photograph above - bogged in thick mud almost to the tops of its wheels, being dragged free by Panther 612. The picture above offers the reader a good view of the exhaust system and the vertically mounted jack. Note that the field modified bracket used to hold the unditching beam, which became an identifying feature of this division's tanks, is not yet present although the beam is clearly visible, strapped to the spare tracks. It is possible - or even likely - that the last of these metal brackets were added before the division left Heidelager, although some 8.Kompanie tanks had them as early as April. The flat, marshy terrain, bordered by woods, is typical of eastern Poland and what is today western Ukraine and Belarus.



The same tank shown on the previous page, Panther 613 - in happier circumstances. Note that the number three has recently been repainted giving the impression that it is a different colour entirely to the first two. Tanks very quickly attain a dirty and worn appearance - even in training - and numbers and markings that are sometimes identified as yellow are very often actually white, albeit with a coat of grime. As with most of the Wiking division Panthers this tank is fitted with the later, reinforced 24-bolt wheels.



Panther 613 undergoing maintenance after being concealed in a pine forest. Again the number 3 is just visible on the rear access hatch of the turret. On the original print of this photograph it can be seen that the 200 litre (44 gallon) drum is actually full of lubricant with the notation 'Schmierstoff - 200L - Feuergefährlich' embossed on the top.



Although this tank's number is entirely concealed there can be no doubtting the style of camouflage painting that is an identifying feature of 6.Kompanie Panthers. Of note is the later type exhaust, clearly visible here.



Although the presence of these Soviet prisoners would give the impression that this photograph was taken in a front line area, this image was almost certainly made at the the SS Heidelager training ground north of Dębica and these Russians are in all likelihood the Hivis, or Hilfswilliger, that accompanied every German unit in the East. Located between the Wisła (Vistula) and San rivers, the Heidelager facility covered an enormous area and featured large patches of heavily wooded terrain in addition to large open stretches dominated by low hills and soft, sandy ground broken by marshes and swamps. A railway line, visible in the background, ran through the area from east to west cutting the training complex almost in half. The photograph on which our illustration of Panther 632 is based, shown on page 18, was also taken in this location.



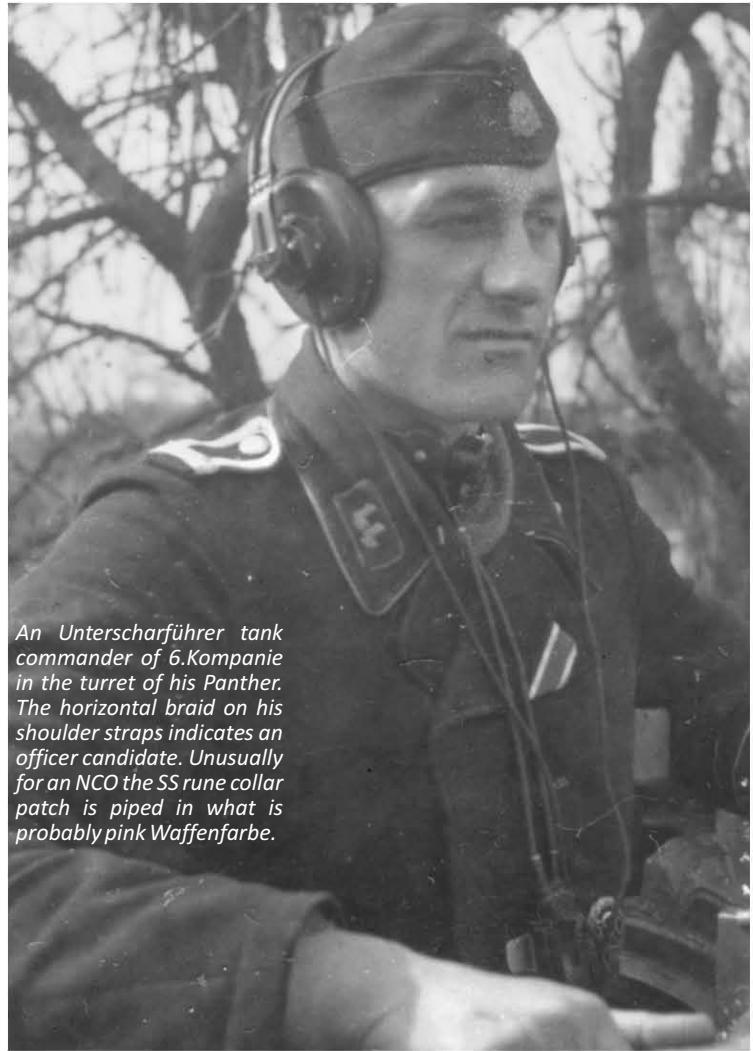
The tank shown here is almost certainly Panther 613 depicted on the previous pages and the Hauptscharführer is very possibly the platoon commander - senior NCO's commonly fulfilling positions normally held by officers at this stage of the war. This image offers a good view of the opened driver's visor, the Bosch headlight and the later 24-bolt wheels.



Although images of Panther tanks towing Russian anti-tank guns may be quite rare, other photos in this series - unfortunately of poor quality - show that each tank in this platoon had their own gun. Several detailed narratives of the division's history exist, however none mention, or even hint, that these guns may have been used in action by the tank crews. As these photographs were taken while the company was in training it is highly likely that the guns were left at Heidlager when the division returned to combat.

In a landscape typical of the SS Heidelager training ground a Hauptsturmführer confers with the NCO's of his company. In another photograph of this series, this same officer is seen in the company of the tank commander and infantry officer shown on page 30. These photographs were almost certainly taken at the same time and probably show a mixed group of personnel from 6.Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 and one of the divisions Panzergrenadier regiments - either Germania or Westland. Although we have carried out extensive research we have been unable to identify the Hauptsturmführer - possibly a company commander - and would be grateful to hear from any reader who may be able to help.





An Unterscharführer tank commander of 6.Kompanie in the turret of his Panther. The horizontal braid on his shoulder straps indicates an officer candidate. Unusually for an NCO the SS rune collar patch is piped in what is probably pink Waffenfarbe.



This Grenadier is examining Mother's Day cards which have just been printed and are ready to be distributed to the troops. In another photograph from this series the notation on the cards is quite clear. We are therefore able to date these images with some degree of certainty.



A platoon commander and his NCO's confer during a training exercise. All are wearing the reversible combination coverall for armoured vehicle crews which appear to be the early type, lacking the large pocket on the left thigh which was a feature of later models. All are constructed from camouflage fabric printed with the so-called Platanemuster except the crewman at the extreme right whose coverall is made from Eichplatanenmuster fabric. The reader should be aware that the terms used to describe Waffen -SS camouflage patterns are modern day inventions and were not used during the war.



A Panther crewman, possibly the gunner or loader with two 7.5cm rounds. Ordnance was colour coded with black indicating armour-piercing and olive-green denoting high explosive. The worn appearance of these shells would suggest that they may in fact be practice rounds.

The photographs on this and the facing page show tanks of the sixth company's second platoon carrying infantrymen, possibly from 5.Jäger-Division. The officer shown in the photograph on this page, an Untersturmführer, is probably the platoon commander. The collar tabs of his black Panzer jacket are - against regulations - piped in the pink Waffenfarbe denoting tank units, as is our example at far left. Although this was officially frowned upon it was a common affectation among tank officers. This series of photographs provide an excellent view of the details of the cast commander's cupola including the periscopes, the hatch in its open position and the sighting vane welded to the front of the cupola. The three photographs on page 31 almost certainly depict Panther number 625 which is also shown in the illustration section on page 18. At left, accompanying the rank tab of an Untersturmführer, is an officer's grade SS-Armelheitsabzeichen or sleeve eagle, the white-metal Totenkopf cap badge and SS rune collar tab for officer ranks below Standartenführer, here piped in the regulation aluminium wire.





TANK STRENGTH, SS-PANZER-REGIMENT 5, 1944

The figures given below are based on official returns and, to a lesser extent, unit histories and diaries. They should be read in conjunction with the information presented on pages 6 and 7 which show the establishment of the regiment's two battalions during 1944. The reader should also be aware, as is noted below, that the figure provided for II. Abteilung usually includes the Panthers allocated to the regimental headquarters which apparently had none of its authorised Pzkw IV tanks throughout the whole period.

| | Pzkw III | | | Pzkw IV | | | Pzkw V | | | StuG III | | | StuG IV | | |
|---|--|----|--------|---------|----|--------|--------|----|--------|----------|----|--------|---------|----|--------|
| | Au | Op | Repair | Au | Op | Repair | Au | Op | Repair | Au | Op | Repair | Au | Op | Repair |
| 1.1.1944 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| I. Abteilung | 35 | 13 | | 14 | 8 | | | | | 7 | 4 | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | 33 | | | | | | | |
| <i>Since December 1943, the headquarters of SS-Panzer-Regiment 5 and the companies of II. Abteilung were at the Mailly-Le-Camp training area in France being re-equipped with Pzkw V Panther tanks</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 17.2.1944 | | | | | | | | | | 6 | | | | | |
| I. Abteilung | | 5 | | | 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>The vehicles shown here were operational with I. Abteilung when the remnants of the division began the breakout from the Tscherkassy pocket at 5am on 17 February. One of the Pzkw III vehicles was a Befehlswagen. By 10am all but one Pzkw III tank had been lost. The division was not able to save any of its vehicles or heavy equipment and only managed to escape after heavy losses. Included among the dead was the commander of I. Abteilung, Sturmbannfuhrer Hans Köller.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.3.1944 | | | | | | | 75 | 79 | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>The Panthers of II. Abteilung began arriving in Poland from this date. On 19 March 1944, 19 Sturmgeschütz III assault guns were received by 4. Kompanie, I. Abteilung re-fitting at Chelm in Poland. All 19 vehicles were immediately handed over to an unknown army assault gun battalion. On 20 March, 22 Sturmgeschütz IV vehicles, originally intended for 4. SS-Polizei-Panzergrenadier-Division - which at that time was stationed in Greece - were diverted to Wiking. These were the last assault guns delivered to the division before the war's end. In April 1945, five of what must have been the original vehicles were still operational. Note that the figure of 79 Panthers includes those with the regimental headquarters.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 24.3.1944 | | | | 27 | | | | | | | | | 22 | | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 78 | | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Some sources give a total of 79 serviceable Panthers - a full complement. During the fighting in March, II. Abteilung had lost 8 Pzkw V tanks as total write-offs and later received 8 replacements bringing the battalion back to full strength.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.4.1944 | 7 | 0 | | 73 | 21 | 1 | | | | | | | 31 | 19 | 3 |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 58 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.5.1944 | | | | 27 | | | | | | | | | 21 | | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 79 | 78 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.6.1944 | 2 | 0 | | 73 | 27 | | | | | | | | 7 | 20 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 77 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | <i>On this date SS-Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 5 was disbanded with its men and vehicles being incorporated into I. Abteilung. It was originally intended that the battalion's 1st and 4th companies would be equipped with StuG IV assault guns and the 2nd and 3rd companies with Pzkw IV tanks. In practice however this was not achieved and is discussed further in the text. Accounts mention that during the fighting around Maciejow in Poland on 1 July 1944, II. Abteilung was able to field 50 Pzkw V Panther tanks only.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.7.1944 | | | | 23 | 4 | | | | | | | | 17 | 4 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | | | 69 | 2 | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | <i>The regiment also had on hand 5 Befehlspanzer V Panther tanks although it is uncertain how many were attached to the regimental headquarters and how many were with II. Abteilung. An official report of 10 July 1944, states that 20 StuG III assault guns were sent to the division, however these never arrived and what became of them remains something of a mystery. On 8 July 1944, 21 Jagdpanzer IV vehicles were dispatched to SS-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 5.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 16.7.1944 | | | | 17 | | | | | | | | | 15 | | |
| I. Abteilung | <i>The Pzkw IV tanks were all with 3. Kompanie - at least one a Befehlpanzer - while the assault guns were with 4. Kompanie. These figures are taken from the battalion's history and consequently there are no entries for II. Abteilung.</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 31.7.1944 | | | | 5 | 17 | | | | | | | | 6 | 12 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 22 | 45 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | <i>The regiment also had on hand 5 Befehlspanzer V Panther tanks although it is unclear if these were all attached to the regimental headquarters or if a number were with II. Abteilung. Of the vehicles in repair, 8 Pzkw IV tanks were considered long term as were 17 Pzkw V and 9 StuG IV</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.8.1944 | 2 | 0 | | 73 | 12 | | | | | | | | 0 | 11 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 42 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | <i>On 26 August 1944, with only 6 Pzkw IV and 2 StuG IV remaining, 3. Kompanie was almost completely wiped out in the fighting for the Slezany bridgehead. The other companies of I. Abteilung lost a further 2 Pzkw IV and 2 assault guns along with the battalion's commander, Sturmbannfuhrer Rudolf Säumenicht</i> | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.9.1944 | 2 | 0 | | 73 | 4 | | | | | | | | 0 | 4 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 19 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1.11.1944 | 2 | 0 | | 73 | 7 | | | | | | | | 0 | 3 | |
| I. Abteilung | | | | | 75 | 15 | | | | | | | | | |
| II. Abteilung | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Below and right: Sdkfz 251/9 ausf D. 11.Kompanie, III.Abtteilung, SS-Panzergrrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania. Both vehicles shown here were based on photographs taken from the same sequence, one of which is shown at far right.



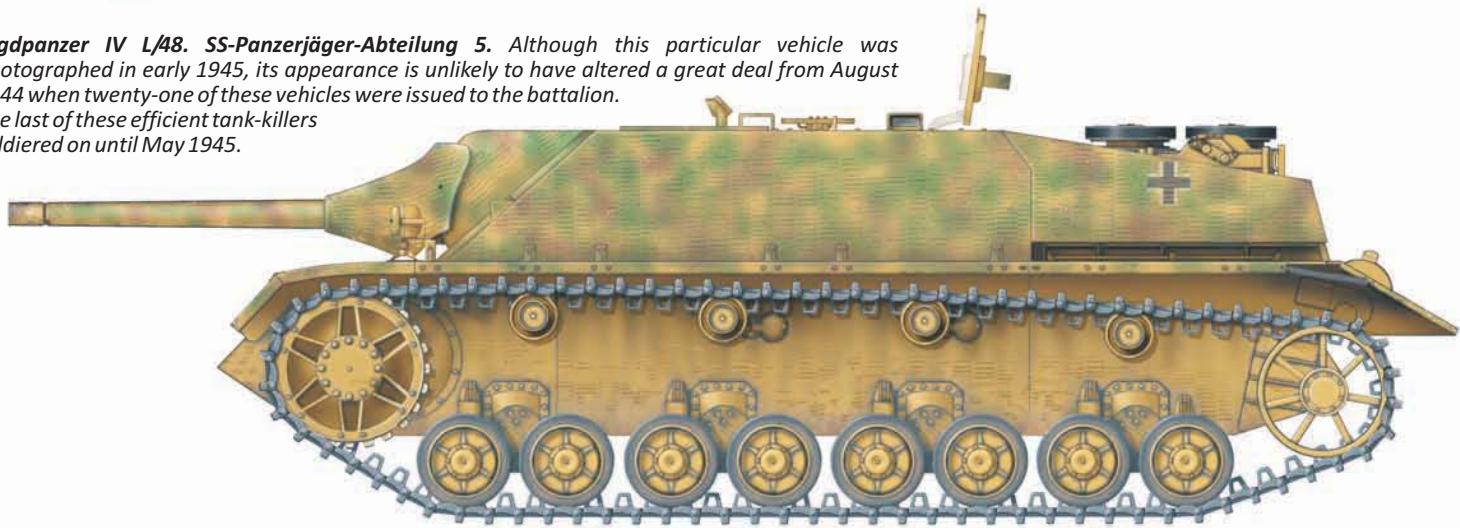
At left: An example of the ammunition used with the halftrack's gun, the Granatpatrone mit kleinen Aufschlag-zünder 23, 7.5cm, a high explosive round. Each vehicle also carried a number of chemical and armour-piercing rounds.

At right: This photograph of halftrack 344 clearly shows a dark background to the shield of the division's unit insignia



Jagdpanzer IV L/48, SS-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 5. Although this particular vehicle was photographed in early 1945, its appearance is unlikely to have altered a great deal from August 1944 when twenty-one of these vehicles were issued to the battalion.

The last of these efficient tank-killers soldiered on until May 1945.



Sdkfz 251/9 ausf D. 12.Kompanie, III.Abtteilung, SS-Panzergrrenadier-Regiment 9 Germania. In the original photograph on which this illustration is based the camouflage cover for the 7.5cm gun has a very purpose built appearance, conforming to the angles of the hull and the gun shield. The cover was probably constructed from a number of Zeltbahn tent quarters. The vehicle numbers - in both style and size - were consistent throughout the battalion and almost certainly applied using stencils. The photograph at right is an excellent example.

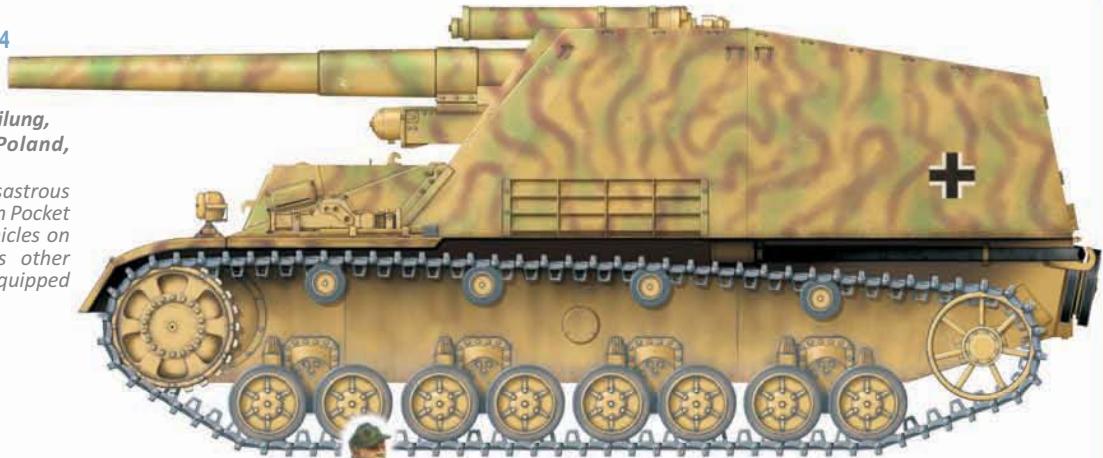


VIKING SUMMER

5.SS-PANZER-DIVISION IN POLAND, 1944

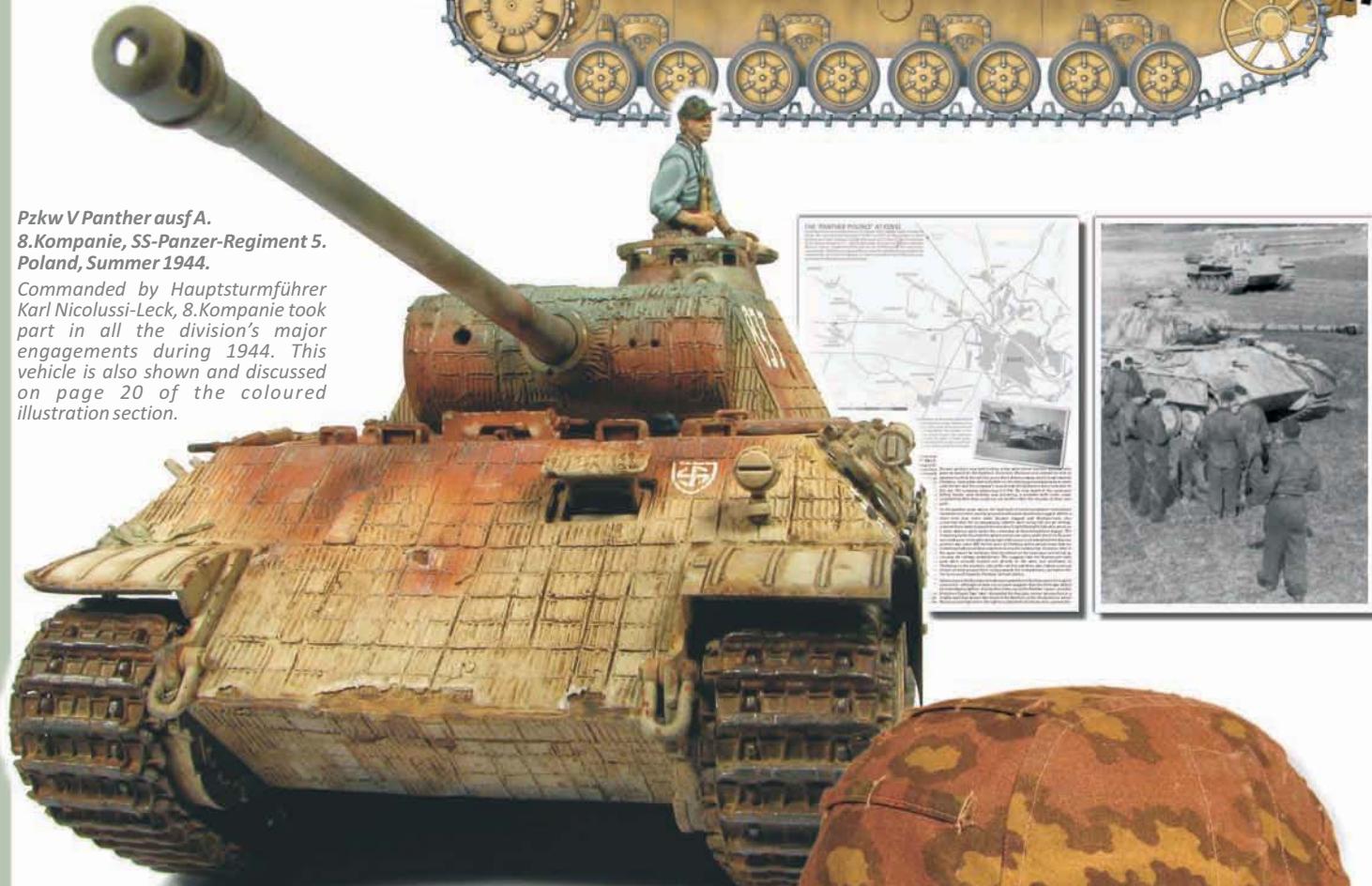
*Sd.Kfz. 165 Hummel. 5.Batterie, II Abteilung,
SS-Panzer-Artillerie-Regiment 5. Poland,
Summer 1944.*

Reformed and re-fitted after the disastrous losses sustained in the Cherkassy-Korsun Pocket battles, 5.Batterie had six of these vehicles on hand by June 1944. The battalion's other batteries, numbered 3 and 4, were equipped with Wespe self-propelled guns.



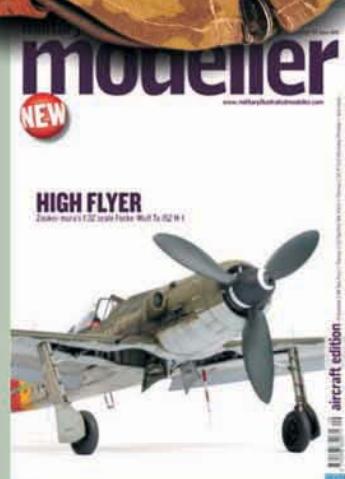
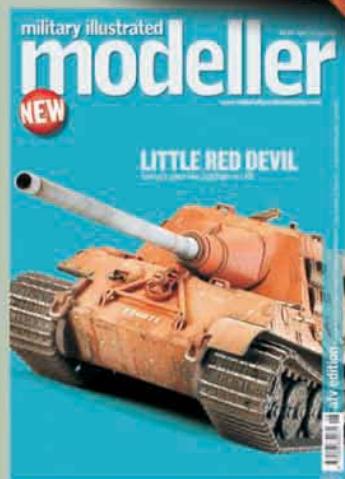
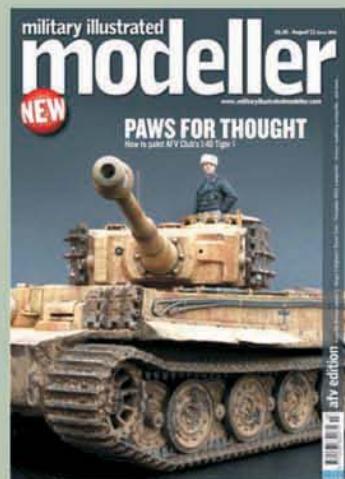
*Pzkw V Panther ausf A.
8.Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Regiment 5.
Poland, Summer 1944.*

Commanded by Hauptsturmführer Karl Nicolussi-Leck, 8.Kompanie took part in all the division's major engagements during 1944. This vehicle is also shown and discussed on page 20 of the coloured illustration section.



Model photograph courtesy of Glenn Bartolotti. Details on inside front cover.

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