

Panzer III in Romanian Service: T-3 Tank

Brief Historical Context

Romania joined the Axis and started conducting military operations against the USSR at the onset of Operation Barbarossa, in June 1941, and, albeit fielding a numerically large force, the hardware used, especially when it came to armoured vehicles, was inferior to the German ally, and more alarmingly, inferior to the Soviet enemy. The Romanian tank force was an eclectic mix of French and Czech-built vehicles, reflecting the inter-war rearmament efforts conducted by the government in Bucharest (France – the traditional ally and Czechoslovakia – a convenient partner for cheaper but still modern vehicles produced by companies like Skoda, Tatra and Praga). It contained, among other vehicles, the French Renault R35 (known as R-35 or T-35 in the Romanian Army) and Czechoslovak Skoda Lt. Vz. 35 (known as R-2 in the Romanian Army) light tanks – the main battle tanks of the 3rd and 4th Romanian Armies during operations in 1941 and most of 1942. Given that the Soviets were not well organized and their superior T-34s and KV-1s were poorly distributed, these light tanks performed well and were valiantly manned by their Romanian crews, hence the Romanian victories during 1941. Still, the battle for Odessa in the fall of 1941, inflicted massive casualties and materiel losses in the Romanian Army; by the end of that year Romanians had almost no tanks left. This was sought to be remedied by Field Marshall Antonescu's regime by means of approaching the German ally – a continuous need for hardware during the massive operations the German Army was conducting on the Eastern Front and the miser attitude from Berlin contributed to this effort proving largely fruitless until the end of 1942. This will change slightly with the large operations in and around Stalingrad in the fall of 1942, and with the Romanian Army given the key role to protect German 6th Army's northern and southern flanks. The lack of available armor in the Romanian camp proved to be a red flag for the Germans and they finally decided to re-supply their ally, albeit in very small numbers.

Panzer III Delivery to the Romanian Army

On September 17, 1942 - the head of the German Military Mission in Romania, Major General Arthur Hauffe, announced the Romanian General Staff that, following the meeting between General Ilie Steflea and Col. Krammer, from 16 September, under the German Fuhrer's special directive, the Romanian 1st Armored Division will receive, among other vehicles, 11 medium tanks Sd. Kfz. 141 Panzerkampfwagen III Ausführung N equipped with the KwK 37 75mm/L24 short barrel gun (the last type iteration of the Panzer III before production completely switched to the Sturmgeschütz III), and 11 medium tanks Sd.Kfz. 161 Panzerkampfwagen IV Ausführung G and G equipped with the KwK 40 L/43 long barrel gun. This materiel was supposed to be sent on September 21, 1942, together with the training Romanian detachment from Wunsdorf, Germany, directly to the Divisional headquarters on the front line, and was planned to be taken over by the Division at the railway station for immediate deployment. Instead, delivery was made on October 17, just a month before the start of the Soviet offensive at Stalingrad (Operation Uranus), and immediately 10 Panzer III tanks (redesignated by the Romanians as T-3, the T initial standing for "tanc" or tank in Romanian) were incorporated in the 1st Armored Division, 1st Tank Regiment (under the command of Col. Emilian Popescu), that was operating in the Don Bend area part of the Don Front. It is possible that one T-3 was delivered to the 2nd Tank Regiment based at Tirgoviste, Romania, for training purposes, but returned to the frontline later on. These 11 frontline T-3 tanks, together with the 11 T-4s, albeit a minuscule force, proved to be a sizeable improvement to the existing Romanian force, comprised of well used and obsolete R-2 light tanks, and they immediately started operations.

T-3 Operational History

With the 22 T-3s and T-4s, the 1st Tank Regiment organized the 4th and 8th Companies, each with a platoon of five T-3s and five T-4s, plus the company commander's tank (one T-3 and one T-4). In the eve of the battle for the Don's Bend, the Romanian tank crews were not yet familiar with

the new tanks, as the first exercise had taken place only three days before. As a consequence, besides massive losses in R-2 tanks, ten of the eleven T-3 tanks were lost in battle (only four were lost as result of enemy fire, the rest were lost due to a combination of mechanical failures and crew abandonment due to lack of fuel) and in early 1943 the 1st Armoured Division was withdrawn back to Romania. In a review dated 15 April 1943, the Romanian Army had a total of 149 tanks, a mix of R-2, R-35, T-3 and T-4, but only a small fraction were operational: 15 R-2's , 54 R-35's, a single T-3 and another single T-4. At the beginning of 1944 the single remaining T-3 tank was incorporated into the "Dimitrie Cantemir" Mixed Armoured Group that was sent to the front in February. The Group operated 55km south of Vinnitsa during the offensive conducted by the Red Army's 2nd Ukrainian Front (led by Marshall Konev) that achieved a major breakthrough and overran Northern Bucovina. Unfortunately the sole survivor T-3 tank was lost during this operation. No other Panzer III tanks are known to have been transferred to the Romanian Army by the Germans, and with the type's frontline withdrawal in 1943, the Romanian Army could not have captured any others during the operations in Transylvania and Hungary in late 1944-1945, after Romania had already switched to the Allied side.



A Romanian Panzer III (T-3) on the Eastern Front during the winter of 1942-1943: the German Balkenkreuz is clearly visible on the side together with a black silhouette-only Michael's Cross on the front of the side armour plate; military registration number in black on the front glacis, with no white plate painted behind it, reading U-039483; spare track links only on the lower front armour plate; note that the vehicle does not wear a whitewash and the overall colour appears to be too dark to be Field Grey (Feldgrau), suggesting either a darker shade of grey or olive/khaki green; note the tank commander's fur hat - "cusma" (kushma) - a traditional Romanian hat made of sheepskin, very warm and soft and worn in cold winter weather (corner: Romanian infantryman at Stalingrad, wearing the same type of hat).

Painting and Markings of Romanian T-3 Tanks

As was the norm, vehicles to enter Romanian military service were painted overall olive green (khaki green) and the T-3s were painted this colour over the (most probable) German Field Grey (Feldgrau/Dunkelgrau) that they were received in. It is interesting to note that the German

Balkenkreuz (the full version: black cross with white outlines, that German vehicles wore for identification) was kept (or re-painted after painting the vehicles were painted in olive/khaki green) and the Romanian Michael's Cross was added as well as military registration plates; Michael's Cross was either a white or black silhouette-only and the registration numbers were applied either on white painted plates or directly painted in black on the front glacis and, possibly, on the rear armour plate, just above the muffler. It is believed that during the 1942-1943 winter the vehicles had a water-based whitewash applied, as it was the case with the R-2 tanks, but unfortunately, there is no photographic evidence of this.



A Romanian Panzer III (T-3): this vehicle has military registration plates and no other national or divisional markings or emblems; it appears that the gun recoil sleeve is removed.



A Romanian Panzer IV Ausf. G (T-4) and a T-3 in the background, behind the T-4 – we can clearly see military number plates on both tanks, on the sloped front armour on the T-3 and on the front glacis on the T-4. The T-4's registration number is U-039253 and the T-3's number is U-039252; it seems that the T-3 recoil sleeve was removed. The tanks belong to the same unit, most probably the 1st Regiment of the 1st Armoured Division. Given the surrounding settings and T-3's missing gun sleeve, it is almost certain that this tank is the same as the one in the photo above. It is believed that these tanks were survivors of the Battle of Stalingrad (the last of each type that survived the onslaught), and are pictured here after the battle.



(left) Same T-4 with registration U-039253 at King's Day Parade on May 10, 1943, in Bucharest, Romania; multiple sources mention this machine as the last surviving Romanian Panzer IV Ausf. G (T-4) from the Eastern Front in 1942-1943, before a new batch of Panzer IV's were delivered by the Germans, later in 1943 (Ausf. H and J).

Romanian T-3 for modellers



There are a number of 1/35, 1/48 and 1/72 scales model kits of Panzer III Ausf. N, but to our best knowledge, none of them contains markings to build a Romanian T-3. Since the tanks did not suffer any alterations while in Romanian service, it is easy to build a Romanian T-3 just by using the available kits and adding Romanian markings. Note, however, that the Romanian T-3 tanks did not have side skirts ("Schurtzen"), so we don't recommend using them even if they are supplied in the kit, for historical accuracy. As for after-market decals, Star Decals have released a 1/35 scale decal sheet (product code 35-C 1163) for models of Romanian tanks during WW2. The decal sheet presents the modeller with two options for Romanian T-3's: U-039483 in an overall Dunkelgelb or Gelbbraun and U-039493 in an overall Feldgrau or Dunkelgrau, both tanks belonging to the 1st Armoured Division on the Don Front, winter 1942-1943; their interpretation of the colours for the T-3 is probably wrong (definitely wrong about the Dunkelgelb/Gelbbraun scheme – German vehicles would be factory painted in Dunkelgelb only from February 1943; there is, however, an explanation for their choice in Dunkelgelb/Gelbbraun – it is thought that the Panzer III tanks destined for the Romanian Army on the Don Front were initially destined for North Africa, but the few photographs of the T-3 suggest a much darker colour instead, unless, of course, the ones in photographs had already been overpainted in olive/khaki by the Romanians); the set is also probably wrong about the dark grey scheme as well, since the Romanians would have painted the T-3 tanks olive/khaki green upon receiving them. U-039483 is present in their decal sheet, as seen in the photograph above and is shown with the correct application of the numbers, as black letter and numbers directly on the hull, with no white plate

behind them; it is possible that these numbers, together with Michael's Cross contour in black, were applied in a hurry, upon receiving the tanks, and the original German paint and markings (Balkenkreuz on the sides and rear) were kept; it is also possible that, later on, the Romanians would have painted the vehicles in olive/khaki green and would have applied the correct registration with black characters on white number plates. As for the winter whitewash, it is very probable that the Romanian vehicles would have worn it, and as it was the case with the R-2 tanks, it would have gradually dissolved and left patches of green paint visible, but unfortunately there is no photographic evidence of it on T-3 tanks, instead, for reference, we show an artist's impression of an R-2 with patchy winter camouflage.

Panzer 38(t) in Romanian Service: T-38 Tank

Brief Historical Context

The Romanian armored force was largely destroyed in the 1942 fighting that culminated in the disastrous Stalingrad campaign (as we have seen in the T-3 chapter, at the beginning of 1943, only three T-3 and T-4 tanks were left out of the initial 22 delivered by Germany in the fall of 1942). In a report dated April 15th, 1943, it is said that the Romanian armed forces were equipped with a total of 149 tanks (vast majority R-2 light tanks), which is on its own a very small figure compared to the thousands of tanks in German or Soviet service at the same time. Another contemporary report tells us that the 1942-1943 winter campaign was responsible for the loss of 64% of the entire Romanian tank force. The requirements at the start of 1943, as evaluated by the Romanian strategists, were listing a minimum of 450 armoured vehicles and, given the superiority in firepower and armour protection of the Soviet T-34/76, which was already in widespread use with the Red Army, it was necessary that the Romanian vehicles be armed with 75mm high-velocity guns. This was far from the reality of a worn-out, poorly equipped force that was still operating the lightly armed and armoured R-2 tank as its mainstay type. Another pressing issue was the poor mechanical state in which the remaining tanks were at the time; it was estimated that 77% of the then current inventory needed at least light repairs, if not major overhauls. As a result, it was decided that a unit-level reorganization was needed and new vehicles were to be purchased from abroad to complete the decimated units; it was also decided to incorporate at least one Anti-tank (AT) company (fielding the German Flak 36/37 88mm AT gun) and, ideally, one company of T-4 (Panzer IV) tanks. This will result in a mixed nature of Romanian tank units, a result drawn from necessity and lack of vehicles, but that proved to be tactically useful in the future. Among the newer types that Romania purchased from Germany were a handful of Panzer 38(t) tanks (redesignated T-38 by the Romanians).

T-38 Operational History

In the last week of April, 1943, the Germans triggered the Birnbaum Program, aimed at a modicum of resupply towards their Romanian ally; that resulted in the transfer of a total of 164 vehicles, including 50 Panzer 38(t) Ausf. B from existing German units directly to the Romanian units that would use them in Russia (contrary to the Romanian logical request to be delivered in Romania for examination and training prior to frontline deployment). In the case of the Panzer 38(t) tanks, or T-38 tanks as they appear in Romanian documents, they were mostly old used tanks from the 22nd Panzer Division and its successor units, displaying heavy wear from the previous winter's operations. They formed an independent tank battalion ("Batalionul Carelor de Lupta T-38", T-38 Tank Battalion) but less than half of the tanks were functional (sources state only 17 out of the delivered 50 were in running order) and it took time for the Romanian mechanics to repair the remainder. The poor overall condition in which the tanks reached the Romanian beneficiary was not well received by the Romanians, moreover since these tanks had been delivered straight to the Romanian units engaged in battle in the Kuban and Kerch, and were supposed to perform operational duties immediately, the crews had little training, a similar situation as with the Panzer III's and IV's delivered the previous autumn.

Leaving aside their poor condition that led to an actual Romanian-German row, the tanks were not much superior to the R-2 and R-35 and were still vulnerable to all Soviet anti-tank guns and rifles, but they were badly needed by the Romanian units nonetheless. By June 1943 they were fully operational and integrated in the T-38 Tank Battalion of the 2nd Tank Regiment, with the 51st, 52nd and 53rd tank companies of fifteen T-38's each. There was also a 54th tank company, allegedly formed much later in the winter of 1943/1944, with five T-38's of the battalion's HQ; other sources mention the remainder of five T-38's were kept in reserve.



A Romanian Panzer 38(t) Ausf. B (T-38 in Romanian documents) and its crew on the Eastern Front, during the battles in Kuban/Kerch/Perekop. Note the Romanian Michael's Cross in white contour only on the turret, with no other unit markings.

The T-38 Tank Battalion took part in the defensive battles of Kuban and Crimea, in support of the Cavalry Corps and the Mountain Division ("Vantori de Munte", the equivalent to the German Gebirgsjaeger Division). Heavy fighting in Kuban, the Azov Sea and Kerch Peninsula, towards the Perekop Peninsula leading into Crimea saw heavy losses; starting from November 1943 the few remaining T-38's of the 51st and 52nd companies were evacuated to Romania. However, in April 1944 there were still ten T-38's of the 53rd Tank Company in support of the 10th Infantry Division in Crimea. Due to vehicle losses in these operations, in August 1944 the 2nd Tank Regiment could hardly set up a company of nine T-38 tanks. They participated in the fights around Bucharest and at Ploiesti oil fields, and from March 1945 in the forcing of rivers Hron, Nitra, Vah, Morava in Czechoslovakia and then into Austria. By 22 April 1945 the regiment still possessed five badly worn T-38 tanks, then by May they had lost three, so the last two T-38's were seized by the Soviets when hostilities ended, putting an end to the type's presence in the Romanian Army.



Romanian T-38's on the Eastern Front, summer 1943.



Romanian T-38 tank and its crew in the Kuban, on the way to the front, spring-summer 1943.



A Romanian T-38 tank column near Poltava, central Ukraine, in the summer of 1943, it appears this is the full complement of a company



Colour profile of a T-38 belonging to the 51st company.

A note on the type of Panzer 38(t) that was transferred to the Romanian Army: the tanks came from the 22nd Panzer Division (known as the last Panzer Division to receive the Panzer 38(t) as main battle tank, and also known as the shortest lived Panzer Division) and albeit Romanian records don't mention it explicitly, since the German division had Ausf. E/F types in its inventory in March 1943, we believe the Romanian T-38's were of the same type. We also know that the 22nd Panzer Division was heavily involved in battles in and around Crimea until its disbandment in March 1943 so it is only fair to assume the level of mechanical fatigue their tanks were at and how much work the Romanian mechanics had laid in front of them when they had had received the German tanks.



Romanian T-38 tanks in training.