

ACCIDENTAL HERO

John Blackman recalls Trooper Joe Ekins who knocked out three Tigers, one of which is widely thought to be that commanded by Germany's most celebrated WW2 tank ace

Ask the average military-vehicle enthusiast for a list of WW2 tank aces – those most celebrated for the number of enemy tanks they destroyed – and, unless said enthusiast is a dyed-in-the-wool tank-warfare buff, it is likely that they would only be able to name a handful. And it is equally likely that SS-Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann would be somewhere near the top. As a matter of interest he wasn't actually Germany's top-scoring tank ace. That was Feldwebel Kurt Knispel, who was credited with destroying at least 168 enemy tanks during WW2, almost 30 more than Wittmann. However, clean cut, military careerist Wittmann fitted the requirements of the Nazi propaganda machine and it was he that became a national hero.

Some sections of the media have referred to Wittmann as the 'Black Baron' so drawing a parallel between him and WW1 air ace Manfred von Richthofen, the so-called 'Red Baron'. Admittedly there are similarities between the two, not least in that controversy surrounds the manner in which they met their deaths. Was von Richthofen shot down by Captain Arthur Roy



Right: Trooper Joe Ekins of the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry.



While no photos of Ekins's actual tank appear to exist, you can see the Firefly's main distinguishing feature from this image, the long barrel of its 17-pounder gun. The box-like extension to the turret rear accommodated radio equipment for which there was no longer any room in the turret proper.

Brown as claimed by the RAF, or was he fatally wounded by ground fire emanating from one or more of several candidates? Similarly, who fired the round that destroyed Wittmann's Tiger and all in it? And again there are several candidates.

We make no pretence of knowing the truth, but the most generally accepted explanation credits 21 year-old Trooper Ekins of the 1st Northamptonshire Yeomanry (1 NY) with the kill.

DOING HIS BIT

Joseph William Ekins was born on 15 July 1923 at Yelden in Northamptonshire, an area renowned at the time for shoe and boot-making. And that is the industry in which Ekins was employed, coincidentally making army boots, when war broke out in 1939. As the situation worsened and despite being in a reserved occupation, Ekins was determined to 'do his bit' and enlisted in 1940.

During interviews in later life Ekins commented that the he didn't think the training he received prior to going into action was sufficient, saying: "When you got over the other side you realised that not only did you not know what you were doing, the officers didn't know what they were doing and nobody else knew what they were doing."

Further, Ekins estimated that he'd only fired about 20 rounds during his two years of tank training, and when 1 NY received its Sherman Fireflies only four to six weeks before D-Day, there was only the opportunity to fire five 17-pounder rounds before heading for Normandy. Contrast that with the experienced and battle-hardened crews operating the Tigers of 2 Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Abteilung 101, a handful of which were to cross Ekins's line of sight on 8 August 1944 at St Aignan de Cramesnil. They were commanded by Wittmann whose career path could not have been more different to that of Ekins.

"Ekins was determined to 'do his bit' and enlisted in 1940."

WORTHY ADVERSARY

Born into a Bavarian farming community on 22 April 1914, Wittmann joined the Freiwilliger Arbeitsdienst (Voluntary Labour Service), a state-sponsored employment organisation, in February 1934 prior to enlisting in the Germany Army in October of the same year. He went on to join the Allgemeine-SS and was subsequently accepted by 17 Kompanie of the élite Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH) in April 1937. Holding the rank of SS-Mann, Wittmann went through driver/crew training on Sd Kfz 222 and Sd Kfz 232 armoured cars and, following promotion



Michael Wittmann, tank ace and national hero, strikes a pose for the German propaganda machine in 1944.

to SS-Sturmmann in November 1937, was with the LSSAH when it entered Austria in March 1938 and then, some eight months later, into the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia.

Wittmann's first taste of active combat came during the campaign in Poland in September 1939 by which time he was an SS-Unterscharführer. Following a spell of training he was transferred to a newly-formed assault gun unit of the LSSAH equipped with the Sturmgeschütz III Ausf A and gained his first combat experience as the commander of a tracked armoured vehicle during Operation Marita, the battle for Greece launched on 6 April 1941. But it was on the Eastern Front where Wittmann's unit was posted to take part in Operation Barbarossa, launched on 22 June 1941, where he was to really make his mark. The tally of 'kills' attributed to Wittmann's StuG III rocketed and resulted in him being awarded the Iron Cross Second and First Class and continuing promotion.

It wasn't until April 1943 that Wittmann took command of the tank with which he is most associated, a

Panzerkampfwagen VI, Sd Kfz 181, Tiger 1. He went on to take part in the Battle of Kursk prior to his unit being utilised as the basis for a new panzer battalion, Schwere SS-Panzer-Abteilung 101, and being deployed to Ukraine. Wittmann's rise continued unabated – in the month of January 1944 his total 'kills' jumped from 56 to 117 – culminating in the award of the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords (the Oak Leaves being personally presented by Hitler), promotion to the rank of SS-Obersturmführer and being appointed commander of 2 Kompanie, Schwere SS-Panzer-Abteilung 101.



Relatively few Fireflies still exist in running condition. This example belongs to the Belgian Tank Museum and illustrates the disruptive pattern sometimes painted on the 17-pounder's barrel to disguise its length lest the extremely potent tank be singled out for attention by the enemy. (John Blackman)

NORMAN CONQUESTS

While it was the Eastern Front that enabled Wittmann to build his kill score, it was an action in Normandy that cemented his almost legendary status. As part of the response to the D-Day landings, Wittmann's unit moved west from its then base near Gournay-en-Bray towards Normandy. By the time it arrived in the Bayeux/Villers-Bocage area over the night of 12/13 June only five or six Tigers were still serviceable. On the morning of 13 June 1944 these were positioned just north-east of Villers-Bocage close to the main road to Caen, with Wittmann's command post a mere 150 yards from Hill 213 – a strategically important point on which a column of the 4th County of London Yeomanry (4 CLY), part of the 22nd Armoured Brigade of the 7th Armoured Division, had been instructed to advance.

When alerted to 4 CLY's approach

Wittmann immediately took command of one of his few serviceable Tigers, deciding to attack rather than wait for reinforcements. "I had no time to assemble my company," he said after the event. "Instead I had to act quickly as I had to assume that the enemy had already spotted me and would destroy me where I stood. I set off with one tank and passed the order to the others not to retreat a single step but to hold their ground.

"Driving up to the column I surprised the English as much as they had me. I first knocked out two tanks from the right of the column, then one from the left, then turned about to the left and attacked the armoured troop-carrier battalion in the middle of the armoured regiment. I drove towards the rear half of the column, knocking out every tank that came towards me as I went. The enemy was thrown into total confusion. I then drove straight into the

town of Villers, getting to approximately the centre before I was hit by an anti-tank gun and my tank disabled. Without further ado I fired at and destroyed everything around me that I could reach."

TAKING NO PRISONERS

Around two-dozen (sources differ) British armoured vehicles fell to Wittmann's Tiger on that occasion but his days were numbered. On 8 August 1944, Anglo-Canadian forces launched Operation Totalize with the aim of securing high ground over Falaise. Among the 12th SS Panzer Division



This photo taken by Serge Varin shows the remains of Tiger 007 as it appeared in 1945. Its turret lies upside down next to the hull.



Joe Ekins passed away on 1 February 2012.



Above: Wittmann's unit photographed while moving towards Normandy. (Bundesarchiv, 1011-299-1804-07)



One of a series of publicity photos taken of Untersturmführer Michael Wittmann (left) and his Tiger I Ausf E crew taken in January 1944. The rings on the Tiger's 88mm gun barrel coincidentally, or perhaps not, mark 88 kills.

units opposing the attack were a handful of Tigers from 2 Kompanie, SS-Panzer-Abteilung 101, including turret number 007 commanded by Wittmann.

As the Tigers positioned they were observed by the four Shermans of 3 Troop, A Squadron, 1 NY, which was deployed in an orchard at the westernmost end of 1 NY's defensive position. Three of the troop's M4s – number 9 commanded by the troop leader Lieutenant James, plus numbers 10 and 11 – were standard 75mm-armed types, while the fourth, number 12 commanded by Sergeant Gordon and with Trooper Ekins in the gunner's seat, was a Sherman VC Firefly. While the latter's armour protection was no better than that of any other Sherman, it at least had a 17-pounder gun capable of knocking out the German Tiger at a better than suicidal range.

When interviewed on behalf of the Tank Museum about the occasion, Ekins said that three Tigers were spotted moving in line some distance apart across 3 Troop's front at a range of about 1200 yards. "We waited until they were about 800 yards," he reported. "My tank commander pulled us out of the orchard – you had to move out to fire – and said target the rear one. I fired two shots at him and hit him, and he went on fire."

Sergeant Gordon quickly directed his Firefly back under cover and, as he did, Ekins could see the turret on the second Tiger start to traverse in their direction. "They fired at us, two or three shots. Then we pulled out again and I fired at the second tank and hit him with my first shot. He went up in an explosion, so obviously we'd hit the ammunition or something.

By this time, the first tank of the three had realised what was going on and was starting to mill around looking for cover. He turned a bit towards us but we pulled out and fired two shots at him and hit him as well. He went up and I thought, thank God, it's not going to be us today."

DO OR DIE

Ekins admits that he and the rest of the crew were shaking with relief. They'd been told it took five Shermans to destroy one Tiger and knew that the 75mm gun on the troop's other M4s was all but useless against the German tank at 800 yards. The single Firefly was effectively on its own. As Ekins later put it: "It was a case of get them before they get you. I think it was fairly automatic. You had to think, you had to aim off because they were moving – and that was largely guess work. And you had to think about traversing the turret and pressing the trigger with your foot. Considering that I'd been in (the Army) for three years, I hadn't fired very many rounds, so I think I must have had a bit of natural ability."

What Ekins didn't mention in his account and what must have increased stress levels somewhat is that return fire from the second Tiger caused the flap on the Firefly's commander's cupola to fall on Sergeant Gordon's head. Badly dazed, Gordon climbed out of the turret and was immediately wounded by shrapnel from German mortar and artillery fire. All that Ekins knew at that moment was that his Firefly had no commander yet faced two Tigers.

However, Troop Commander Lieutenant James immediately left his Sherman and ran across to the Firefly to take over, and it was he that directed the tank into position

and ordered Ekins to engage the second Tiger. As we've already mentioned, this particular Tiger was rent asunder by an enormous explosion which blew the turret off. To confuse the issue somewhat, it has been reported that there were actually four Tigers in the vicinity, not three. However, only one had its turret blown off and that was 007, commanded by the enemy's most celebrated tank ace, Michael Wittmann.

HIT PARADE

In the space of some 12 minutes, Ekins had despatched three Tigers with just five rounds. A little later on the same day, he destroyed what was thought to be a Panzer IV at a distance of about 1200 yards before his good fortune ran out and the Firefly was hit, forcing its crew to bail out. "We ran like hell," said an unapologetic Ekins.

You might think that having distinguished himself in no small way, Ekins would have been given the gunner's seat in another Firefly as soon as possible. But no; when reassigned to another tank he was assigned the job of radio operator and never fired another round. Ekins was invalided out of the Army with diphtheria in 1945 and returned to the shoe industry. He passed away on 1 February 2012.

So there we have a simple account of what was a confusing action in that other Allied units were close by which, it has since been suggested, might also have been responsible for

despatching Wittmann. In particular, A Squadron of The Sherbrooke Fusiliers Regiment, 2nd Canadian Armoured Brigade, was positioned in the grounds of a chateau at Gaumesnil, not far from Joe Ekins. Its



Wittmann meeting Adolf Hitler. (Bundesarchiv, 146-1989-099-15)

Fireflys were also said to have engaged several Tigers. There is also the suggestion that Wittmann's Tiger may have been destroyed by a rocket fired from a Typhoon

almost certainly never know with absolute certainty what happened and, in a sense, it doesn't matter. Joe Ekins was by all accounts a self-effacing man

with little enthusiasm for the authoritarian military life. He left his comfortable home, family and job to fight for his country and did the very best

he could. In that regard he was no different to the thousands of others who likewise felt compelled to fight for their country's freedom. They were and will forever remain unremarkable heroes.

"It was a case of get them before they get you."

of the RAF Second Tactical Air Force.

Nevertheless, that Joe Ekins was responsible is the most widely accepted version of events, not that he sought (or received) any glory as a result. We will



Two Cromwells knocked out during the battle at Villers-Bocage. (Bundersarchiv)