



**WHO KILLED MICHAEL WITTMANN?**

A Great Mystery of the Second World War Solved?

# Who Killed Michael Wittmann?

At approximately 1230 hours on 8 August 1944, seven Tigers of 101 SS Heavy Tank Battalion attacked north along Route Nationale 158, writes **military historian Lt. Col. Brian Reid (retd.)** Little did anyone know that the coming engagement would lead to one of the Second World War's greatest mysteries. >>

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**ABOVE:** British Sherman tanks pass a knocked out Tiger in Normandy. (THE TANK MUSEUM)

**RIGHT:** A Tiger from 1<sup>st</sup> Company, SS Panzerabteilung 101, involved in the wider Battle of Villers-Bocage which saw Wittmann's destructive charge. French Historians claim this tank was knocked out by British infantry, with no crew surviving. Although the tank had already been taken out, much of the damage to the surrounding buildings occurred on 14 June, the day after the battle, when RAF Typhoons attacked the town. (THE TANK MUSEUM)

The attack, part of the 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division counterattack intended to block an Allied offensive until reinforcements could arrive, was a disaster; the Germans lost five Tigers, including one commanded by SS-Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann, the acting battalion commander, who was killed in action sometime between 1230 and 1252 hours.

At the time of his death, Wittmann was the top-scoring German tank ace, credited with the destruction of 143 Allied armoured vehicles. In recent years, Wittmann has become a bit of a cult figure and the subject of more than one book, as well as several websites and documentaries. Part of his posthumous notoriety had its roots in the circumstances of his death, as there was nothing to indicate who had killed him. The location of his grave remained a mystery until his remains and those of his crew were discovered in 1983, but the “whodunit” mystery remained unanswered. Various possibilities had been proposed, but most have been discounted. The list has been reduced to two possible contenders. This article examines the arguments, pro and con, for each.

### AMBUSHED THE ADVANCING GERMANS

The claim that a British armoured regiment, 1 Northamptonshire Yeomanry, had knocked out Wittmann's tank has been widely accepted, and in fact, a Firefly of the regiment did destroy three Tigers of 101 SS Heavy Tank Battalion in a matter of a few minutes that afternoon.<sup>1</sup> Far too much weight has been given to an entry in the British unit's war diary, which has gained the status of dogma by repetition rather than by passing rigorous analysis. That is not to say that the unit diary was incorrect, or that there was a deliberate attempt at deception. Indeed, the unit does have a good case, but their claim that one of their Fireflies knocked out Wittmann's Tiger is not ironclad.

The truth is that while the Northamptonshire Yeomanry was not the only unit that engaged Tigers that afternoon, it was the only one whose claim was used by Les Taylor, himself an ex-member of the regiment, as the basis for his 1985 article in *After the Battle* magazine.<sup>2</sup> No written record of the involvement of the other main contender, the 27<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Regiment (the Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment) of 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade, has survived. And the regimental headquarters half-track was destroyed by a bomb dropped by a B-17 Flying Fortress of the US 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force within an hour of Wittmann's death.<sup>3</sup>

The subsequent fire destroyed all the radio logs and operational records. What we do know has come



**LEFT:**  
British soldiers  
example a Tiger  
tank said to have  
been knocked out  
by a PIAT round.  
(THE TANK  
MUSEUM)



**RIGHT:**  
Hauptsturmführer  
(SS) Michael  
Wittmann, on 22  
June 1944.  
(BUNDESARCHIV)

from the recollections of then Major Sydney Radley-Walters (known to all ranks as Rad), now deceased. A Squadron of the regiment ambushed the advancing Germans from a position on the outskirts of Gaumesnil. In the ensuing engagement, the squadron claimed two Tigers as well as a number of other armoured vehicles.<sup>4</sup>

### THE FORENSIC EVIDENCE

A RAF vertical air photo taken on 9 August showed five knocked out Tigers in the area between the Route Nationale and the woods and orchard southwest of St Aignan de Cramesnil. In fact this photograph appeared in Taylor's 1985 article.<sup>5</sup> Three of the Tigers lay in a rough line running from southeast to northwest, within 800 yards of the woods and orchard where A Squadron of the Yeomanry was

deployed. The fourth was 1100 yards from the orchard, but within 200 yards of the highway and 400-500 yards of the position where the Sherbrooke's tanks were concealed. The fifth trailed the fourth by a few hundred meters and was south of a road that crosses the Route Nationale.

Furthermore, the grave where the remains of Wittmann and his crew were discovered in 1983 was adjacent to the location of the fourth Tiger in the air photo, and the forensic evidence in fact indicated this was their common grave. The obvious conclusion is the tank closest to the highway was the Tiger commanded by Michael Wittmann. This tank was photographed a few months after the battle and the markings on the Tiger's turret, "007," that is, the commanding officer's tank, were clearly visible.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it must be assumed this was Wittmann's tank.

**BELOW:**  
An excellent  
example of the  
terrain facing  
Allied troops  
in Normandy,  
which frequently  
reduced the  
combat range to  
almost point blank  
- where armour  
was less relevant  
- in which the  
tank or gun which  
fired first typically  
excelled.



### EXPLODED IN A FLASH OF FLAME

It is time to examine the two competing claims beginning with the Yeomanry. The claim by 1 Northamptonshire Yeomanry was that three Tigers were destroyed between 1240 and 1252 hours, although it claimed a total of 20 tanks or SP guns, including five Tigers, were destroyed that day, probably based on a physical count. In 1946 the regiment published an account of its service in northwest Europe; the following extract deals with the engagement with the Tigers east of the Route Nationale.

No. 3 Troop (Lieut. A. James) of "A" Squadron, the forward Troop covering the right flank, were the first to make contact. Sjt. Gordon commanding a 17 pounder Tank reported three Tigers advancing slowly North, in line ahead, along the Falaise-Caen road. These were seen at a range of 1200 yards. On hearing Sjt. Gordon's report, Captain Boardman, the Squadron Second in Command, ordered him to hold his fire and moved over to the Troop position where he could control the shooting. When the range had closed to 800 yards Captain Boardman gave the order to fire. Sjt Gordon engaged the rear tank of the three. Two shots from Tpr. Ekins, the gunner set it on fire. Time 1240 hours. The second tank traversed right and fired three shots at Sjt. Gordon, but anticipating this he had already reversed into cover. Unluckily as he did so, either his turret flap hit a branch of an apple tree or it received a glancing blow from the enemy's shot; whatever the cause it came crashing down on the Serjeant's head almost knocking him out. Sjt. Gordon, completely dazed, climbed out of his tank and as he did so was wounded by shrapnel, for it must be remembered >>



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*that the Squadron's position was continually under mortar and shellfire. Lieut. James dashed over to Sgt. Gordon's tank, took command, quickly moved into a new fire position and Tpr. Ekins fired one shot at the second tank. It exploded in a flash of flame. Time 1247. By the time the third Tiger was in a panic, milling about wondering how he could escape. To add to his confusion, Captain Boardman peppered away with 75 mm A.P. [armour piercing], which stopped him but did not put him on fire. Two shots from Tpr. Ekins settled the matter and this Tiger also started to burn. Time 1252. Three Tigers in twelve minutes is not bad business. Captain Boardman later described it as "rather like Practice No. 5 on the ranges at Linney Head."*

This was the basis, along with later statements by Boardman and Ekins, for the Yeomanry's claim that it killed Michael Wittmann. Everything that has come later merely repeated the basic story. As additional proof, 'A' Squadron of the Northamptonshire Yeomanry reported sighting three tanks, no more and no less, and in 1999 this was confirmed in a rather forceful

letter to Radley-Walters from Lord Tom Boardman, the Yeomanry 'A' Squadron second-in-command, who made it clear that he was also quite sure from the evidence he had seen that Wittmann was in one of the three tanks engaged by his squadron, especially as no other tanks were visible from the British position.<sup>7</sup>

Unintentionally, Boardman's statement supports the argument that the Sherbrooke Fusiliers knocked out Wittmann's tank, since if the Yeomanry were unable to see it, they could not have engaged it. Note also that Ekins was sure that he saw and engaged three Tigers. This effectively debunked a rather desperate claim that Ekins knocked out four, rather than three, Tigers. It begs the question; who got the fifth Tiger?

Others argued that Ekins could have hit Wittmann's tank with an Armour-Piercing Discarding Sabot round that had sufficient power to penetrate the Tiger's armour and set off its ammunition at 1100 yards range. However, this ammunition was not yet issued by 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group.

### SERIES OF LOCAL COUNTER ATTACKS

As for the Sherbrookes, as we have seen, any logged radio reports of the battle were destroyed when its regimental headquarters half-track was destroyed by an American bomb later that same afternoon. However, the squadron commander, Major Sydney Radley-Walters, has recorded the events surrounding his squadron's part in the action of 8 August. His account begins after the series of local counterattacks that perhaps started as early as 0830 hours, were defeated. He decided to move forward to Gaumesnil and be in position to support the Royals [Royal Regiment of Canada] when they were ordered to capture the

**ABOVE:**

*Three Sherman tanks and a Sherman Firefly move on German positions during Op.Totalise.*

**BELOW:**

*The upturned turret of Wittmann's Tiger, 007, taken by French civilian Serge Varin in 1945. Varin also found an unexploded 60lb rocket nearby, but conclusions the RAF or USAAF destroyed 007 are disputed. German witnesses reported no aircraft at that time, and the thin, unarmoured, turret bin has sustained no fragmentation damage.*





village. At approximately 1030 hours he moved his squadron forward under cover and entered a large chateau on the east edge of the village near the Route Nationale. It had a tall stone and cement wall completely around the property, giving good fire positions to the east and southeast.

We took up defensive positions about the farm and made holes in the stone wall so we were covered from view but could observe any targets coming north on the Caen-Falaise Highway and in the fields to the east of it.

... It is my recollection that it was somewhere between 1215 and 1230 hours when the attack started. . . . In our area around Gaumesnil the visibility, I recall, was thick with smoke and the German attack was supported by mortars and

artillery as they moved parallel with the Highway towards Point 122. It is my recollection that the attack moved as a group with five Tigers leading the group well spaced with four at the front and the fifth leading a number of Mk IVs and half-tracks with Jagdpanzers.

One of the Tigers was running close to the highway beside Gaumesnil followed by two Jagdpanzers advancing on the main highway. . .

When we saw the German attack coming in, I just kept yelling, "Hold off! Hold off!" until they got reasonably close. We opened fire at about 500 yards. The lead tank, the one closest to the road, was knocked out. Behind it were a couple of SPs. I personally got one of the SPs right on the Caen-Falaise Road.

The other Tigers were engaged not only by my Squadron, but also by two Fireflies from 'B' Squadron that had moved over to the La Jalousie when the counter-attack started. Once we started to fire, the German column turned to the north-east and headed for the wooded area south of St Aignan [de Cramesnil] . . . . It is my recollection that we destroyed two Mk IVs before the rear of the German group veered too far to the east. . . . When the action was over we claimed the Tiger beside the highway, a second Tiger which

**RIGHT:**  
An RAF photograph taken on 9 August 1944 showing the scarred landscape around St Aignan de Cramesnil and the locations of four of the knocked out Tigers (Circled).



**LEFT:**  
Debris from the Normandy battles was still in evidence in the 1950s, including this knocked out Tiger, being visited by this British tourist.



was at the rear of the advancing column, two Mk IVs and two SPs.

It is important to note that the Tiger engaged and knocked out was the one closest to the road, and Rad makes no mention of any hits on the other leading Tigers. The second Tiger he claimed was the one at the rear of the advancing column, which was destroyed after the four other Tigers were lost in the engagement.

### 'I THINK WE GOT HIM'

The available photographs of the scene indicate that Wittmann's

tank was more or less parallel to the Caen-Falaise Road, perhaps inclined a bit towards Cramesnil. As the only damage to the tank that could have caused the explosion was on the left rear of the hull, this rules out both of the British armoured regiments, even if they could have observed or even hit that tank from their positions.

British historian Stephen Hart argues that 'A' Squadron of the Sherbrookes could not have destroyed Tiger 007, as Gaumsenil was beyond the bomb line and >>



**RIGHT:**  
Michael Wittman smokes with others from his unit.



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### RIGHT:

Cromwell tanks, from one of the three British, or Canadian armoured units involved in the battle, pass an abandoned PAK 43/41 (88mm) anti-tank gun during Operation Totalise on 8 August 1944. The gun was one of 100 75mm and 88mm guns positioned around Crammesnil and Saint-Aignan-de-Crammesnil or along the Verrières Ridge. The guns supported the remnants of three German infantry divisions, and 50 tanks from 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend and were positioned as a blocking force some three to six behind German lines. The advance through these villages and positions would see Wittmann's Tiger, '007', destroyed.

### RIGHT:

The Walther 6.35mm Calibre Model 2/5 pistol which belonged to Michael Wittmann.

### BELOW:

The remains of an identity tag of one of Wittmann's crewmembers.



thus would not have been occupied by Canadian troops at the time. This means Rad's squadron could not have engaged Wittmann at close range from the left rear, and therefore discredits the Canadian claim. Hart's claim, however, is built on the premise that the units of 2<sup>nd</sup> Canadian Armoured Brigade had been directed to stay north of the bomb line. The evidence suggests otherwise. There was no mention of the restriction in the corps and divisional instructions. Moreover, at about 0630 hours, the commanding officer of the Sherbrookes requested authority to resume the advance, as he realised the British and Canadians had broken through the German lines. His brigade commander

denied his request, telling him that the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division would be passing through their lines in a few minutes. These were not the words of officers who were aware of the planned



bombing and any restrictions on movement. There is other evidence that supports the presence of Canadian tanks in Gaumesnil. Rad returned to the area in 1980 when he accompanied a battlefield study organised by the Royal Canadian Dragoons, at that time serving in Lahr, Germany, as part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group. Major General (retired) Clive

Addy, who was commanding the Dragoons at the time, recalled that Rad described his squadron's deployment on the ground in Gaumesnil and pointed out the places where the wall had been repaired. He then gestured with his arm out at the fields east of Gaumesnil and said the German panzer ace was killed out there. General Addy was quite certain that at no time did he identify Wittmann by name or make any claim for his squadron having killed him. Furthermore he added that Rad's recall of events was clear and accurate.

Rad later attended several battlefield studies in Normandy conducted by the Canadian Land Forces Command and Staff College and has consistently maintained it was on one of these studies where he first heard of Wittmann. On one of the studies at a stand near the chateau wall in Gaumesnil, the presenters indicated both the location of Tiger 007 on the ground and the area where the remains of Wittmann and his crew had been found in 1983. Someone asked Rad if his squadron got Wittmann. He thought for a moment and then replied "I think we got him." It was an opinion, but it was based on more than a guess.

### ANALYSIS OF THE FACTS

So, what do we know for sure? a. Seven Tigers of 101 SS Heavy Tank Battalion advanced in a north-easterly direction from Cintheaux on 8 August 1944.





b. A Firefly from 'A' Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Northamptonshire Yeomanry, from its position in an orchard, reported three Tigers were moving north in line ahead across a field south-west of St-Aignan.

c. Captain Tom Boardman, the squadron second-in-command, moved to the area of the orchard and controlled the engagement. He personally engaged one of the Tigers, damaging its suspension and causing it to flit about like a frightened water bug. The pattern of track marks in the aerial photo shows that one of the Tigers did in fact scurry to and fro in a futile attempt to escape. Furthermore its erratic movement was mentioned by Ekins in a videotaped interview.

d. The Sherman Firefly engaged and destroyed all three Tigers visible from the orchard.

e. According to German accounts, a total of five Tigers were destroyed in the engagement. Therefore someone else destroyed the other two Tigers.

f. 'A' Squadron of the 27<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Regiment (the Sherbrooke Fusilier Regiment) was concealed behind the walls of a chateau in the hamlet of Gaumesnil. From this position, five Tigers, along with other armoured fighting vehicles and half-tracks, were observed advancing from the area of Cintheaux.

g. The squadron engaged the



**LEFT:**  
A British tank crew from the Westminster Dragoons (2<sup>nd</sup> County of London Yeomanry) installing a new bogie suspension unit after a hit from an 88mm shell shattered the original unit and broke the track.

nearest Germans at close range, taking them by surprise. They claimed to have destroyed two Tigers and a number of other armoured vehicles. Given the nature of the damage to Wittmann's Tiger and the location of the second tank when it was destroyed, they could only have been knocked out by the Sherbrooke's 'A' Squadron.

Therefore, British and Canadian tanks knocked out five Tigers in a very short period of time on 8

August 1944. The evidence leads to the conclusion that Shermans of A Squadron, 27<sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Regiment, destroyed Wittmann's Tiger along with the trailing tank. Trooper Joe Ekins, the gunner in a Firefly of 'A' Squadron, 1<sup>st</sup> Northamptonshire Yeomanry, knocked out the other Tigers in a remarkable feat of gunnery that unfortunately went unrewarded.

Before leaving the subject, it must be emphasised that the truly important event was that British ➤

**BELOW LEFT:**  
Tanks of the fourth armoured formation involved in Operation Totalise, Shermans of 1<sup>st</sup> Polish Armoured Division, assembled ahead of that day's operations.

**BELOW:**  
The well attended grave of Michael Wittmann.





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and Canadian soldiers destroyed five Tigers as well as a number of other German AFVs. This in turn played a significant part in the defeat of the German counterattack, an action that at this key moment in the Normandy Campaign opened the road to Falaise and beyond. Essentially, the death of Wittmann was no more than an incidental result of the battle.

One last – important – point; the accident of fate that saw Wittmann fall prey to a Sherbrooke Fusilier tank was a case of pure blind chance. The path Michael Wittmann chose led him into the sights of a Canadian Sherman, and given the slightest of changes in circumstances, he could just as easily have fallen prey to a British tank. ☉

### NOTES

1. The entry in the unit war diary reads "Three Tiger (VI) reported moving towards A Sqn: and were brewed at 1240, 1247 and 1252 hours, all without loss." TNA, War Diary 1 Northamptonshire Yeomanry Sheets 2 and 3, 8 Aug 44; Hastings, Battle for Normandy, 351.
2. The extract from the diary shown on page 47 of the article in fact is a montage of two pages. The first line of the entry dealing with the destruction of the Tigers is on the bottom of one page, the remainder on the second. Les Taylor, "Michael Wittmann's Last Battle," in *After the Battle*, Number 48, (London, 1985), 46-53.
3. "All regt records on hand were destroyed." A report of a survey of the site by 21 Army Group Operational Analysis personnel may be found in Montgomery's Scientists, Operational Research in Northwest Europe. LAC, War Diary 27 CAR, 8 August 1944; Copp, "Report No. 9, The Effect of 90lb Fragmentation Bombs" in Montgomery's Scientists, 279-282.
4. Author interview, January 2002.
5. Taylor, "Michael Wittmann's Last Battle," 48.
6. Agte, Wittmann, 289.
7. Neville, *The First Northamptonshire Yeomanry*, 35, 29-30.

### Additional Sources:

- A. Lord Thomas Boardman, Letter to Radley-Walters, 13 Jun 99. Copy provided by Brig-Gen. Radley-Walters, January 2002.
- B. 'Rad's War', an account compiled by Lt-Col. Larry Zaporzan, RCAC, as part of his MA thesis on the career of Brig-Gen. S.V. Radley-Walters, CMM, DSO, MC, CD. Used with kind permission.
- C. Telephone conversation between Addy and Reid, 11 August 2011.

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