

Black Sabbath

A fierce engagement by a small group of Panzer IVs in Normandy during June 1944 led to the near annihilation of the Canadian First Hussars, as **Dr. Roman Töppel** explains.

On 6 June 1944, D-Day, a total of 155,000 Allied soldiers, over 1,500 tanks and 16,000 motor vehicles landed on the coast of Normandy. One of their first targets was the city of Caen which was not only an important traffic junction, but also the gateway towards the River Seine and ultimately Paris. For four days the British 2nd Army, under Lieutenant General Sir Christopher Dempsey, tried in vain to capture Caen from the north. On 9 June, General Bernard Montgomery, commanding the

21st Army Group, ordered a pincer manoeuvre with the aim of encircling the city. It was to be called Operation Perch.

To surround the Germans in Caen, the 51st Highland Division and 6th Airborne Division were ordered to thrust past the city in the east. At the same time, the 7th Armoured Division received the order to advance towards the village of Villers-Bocage to the west of Caen. After reaching their operational goals, both attack groups were to encircle Caen by swinging inwards and linking up south

of the city. In the second week of June, German forces in the area comprised the 716. Infanterie-Division and three Panzer Divisions: 21. Panzer-Division to the east of Caen, 12. SS-Panzer-Division 'Hitlerjugend' and the Panzer-Lehr-Division to the west of the city. On 10 June, the 7th Armoured Division, which had already fought the Germans and Italians in North Africa, and known as the "Desert Rats", launched a push towards Villers-Bocage - albeit that at the start of Operation Perch, it only had its 22nd Armoured Brigade supported



by the 56th Independent Infantry Brigade.

On the same day, near Tilly-sur-Seulles, about 20 kilometers west of Caen, the attackers were stopped after running into elements of the Panzer-Lehr-Division. To impart fresh momentum to the assault, a number of Canadian formations now joined in support. This included the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment, better known as the First Hussars, and the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada.

AMBUSH

On 11 June 1944, the Canadian forces were tasked with capturing the high ground (Hill 107) south of Cheux - a key tactical position between Caen and Villers-Bocage. To avoid having to attack the hills at Cheux frontally, the Canadian forces would swing toward the west before advancing through Le Mesnil-Patry. Once arrived south of

Cheux they were to turn east before commencing the attack on Hill 107. As such, the first operational target was Le Mesnil-Patry.

On the morning of 11 June, the First Hussars had 76 operational M4 Sherman tanks at its disposal, 21 of which were attached to B Squadron and formed the spearhead of the assault. On the German side, around Cheux and Le Mesnil Patry, the Pionier-Bataillon and the II. Bataillon of SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 26 of the Hitlerjugend Division lay in position. In the evening, the tanks of B Squadron, First Hussars, accompanied by D Company of the Queen's Own Rifles were the first to advance towards Le Mesnil-Patry, the 135 riflemen riding as passengers on the tanks. Unknown to them, the Germans had captured wireless codes from the wreck of a Canadian tank a few days earlier, and having gleaned information from intercepted radio

traffic had been warned about the impending attack. As a precaution, two Panzer companies of the Hitlerjugend had deployed south of Le Mesnil-Patry. One of them, 8th company of SS-Panzer-Regiment 12, was under the command of 25-year-old SS-Obersturmführer Hans Siegel.

HANS SIEGEL'S 'HALSSCHMERZEN'

Having volunteered at the age of 17, Hans Siegel had joined the SS in 1936. He initially served with the infamous SS Totenkopf-Verbände (SS-TV), which were responsible for administering the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. As a guard, he first served in the KZ Sachsenburg and later KZ Buchenwald. In 1938, he was transferred to the Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH). Even although he had seen his first combat action during the campaign in Poland in 1939 (in command of the



■ British Sherman tanks and infantry during the advance on Caen, 9 July 1944.



■ Two 12 SS Panzer Regiment soldiers during the battle of Caen near Tilly-sur-Seulles, June 1944, in front of a heavily camouflaged tank. (Berliner Verlag)



■ A SS Hitler youth crew in their Panzer IV, France, 1943.



■ Hans Siegel, pictured shortly after joining the SS.(GM)



mortar platoon of 12.(MG) company), he had to wait a long time for his first gallantry award. This “stigma of a bare chest”, and a perceived disregard of him by his superiors, led to a deep-seated wish to distinguish himself. In 1940 he was promoted to Untersturmführer and posted, at the end of 1941, to command 1st Platoon, 3rd Battery, SS-Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung LSSAH.

During the Battle of Kharkov, in March 1943, Siegel and his StuGs were fighting as part of Kampfgruppe Peiper. It was there that he was severely wounded by a sniper and spent the following six months in hospital. After recovery, he was classified unfit for front line service. By the start of 1944, however, Siegel had managed to get himself transferred into SS-Panzer-Regiment 12 of the Hitlerjugend Division and it didn't take long until his subordinates realized that Siegel was suffering from ‘Halsschmerzen’ (a

sore throat); a ‘condition’ ascribed to soldiers who strived to be decorated with the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross and thus acted like go-getters. In June 1944, Siegel's 8th company of II. Abteilung, SS-Panzer-Regiment 12, was equipped with Panzer IVs. In command of the Abteilung was 30-year-old SS-Sturmbannführer Karl-Heinz Prinz.

ENEMY TANKS REPORTED

In the early afternoon of 11 June, Siegel and his men celebrated the birthday of one of the company's tank commanders. In their sector, all was quiet. The enjoyment of birthday cake and coffee was cut short when a messenger arrived summoning Siegel and other members of 8th company to report to Prinz immediately. Siegel suspected what all this was about. Awards were due to be handed out and Siegel was to be decorated with



■ A Panzer IV of a Hitler Youth Division, Normandy, 1944 (BA)

the Iron Cross 1st Class. Siegel and his comrades had just left to see Prinz, however, when the Sturmbannführer came rushing to meet them. Enemy tanks had been reported!

Meanwhile, B Squadron of First Hussars had broken into the Hitler Youth's infantry positions. SS-Pioneers and Grenadiers had managed to destroy some of the tanks with Panzerfausts and other close-combat weapons, yet the mass of tanks was too well protected by the accompanying infantry and it didn't take long until the German units had been forced to withdraw. Trooper Dodds of B Squadron later reported: *"I saw two Jerries myself through my periscopes, we were now firing much co-ax and HE, we moved into an orchard. The enemy infantry were apparently quite thick there. In a very short time we fired nearly half of our Browning ammo. We fired HE into dugouts, at times having*

to back the tank up to get sufficient depression for the 75 gun. We ran out of HE in the turret twice, and the Captain ordered us to "let him have an AP down dugouts" - not 15 yards away".

When Obersturmführer Siegel had returned to his company the men were still celebrating the birthday. *"Everything is quiet here", his soldiers confidently assured him. Yet, just a few hundred metres eastwards, the din of fighting grew louder. Through his binoculars, Siegel saw typical black mushroom clouds rise into the air denoting the demise of tanks. Because of this, he then decided, as he later wrote, to take three tanks: "...to see if all was in order".*

During the drive into the neighbouring sector, Siegel's vision was blocked by the countless hedges that characterised the terrain around Caen. Only when the three Panzer IVs approached the battleground did Siegel





■ A Sherman of the 2nd Canadian Tank Division sits burned out on the streets of Rots, Normandy, 11 June 1944.

spot a gap in the hedgerow:

“Appearing to be within my reach when looking through my binoculars, I could see some of our Grenadiers falling back one by one. Some of them, still facing the tanks, pressed themselves into the ground using their spades to point towards the enemy. Then they fell back further, all the time repeating the same gesture. I had understood and ordered the crew: ‘Get ready for action! Load AP shell!’.

BLACK SABBATH OF THE FIRST HUSSARS

Buttoning up before traversing the edge of the hedge, the leading tank now had a clear view as Siegel went on to describe:

“In the same moment I spotted a swarm of Sherman tanks mounted by large numbers of infantry approaching me from the left. ‘Enemy tank 9 o’clock, two hundred - AP shell - from the right

to the left, one by one - Fire!’ The driver swung the tank around by 90 degrees, and now our constant drill proved itself in practice. Without further orders, and with lightning speed, shot after shot left the barrel and hit after hit lit up one Sherman after the other, taking them out of action”.

Canadian Trooper Dodds was inside one of the Shermans targeted by Siegel’s gunner:

“I was kneeling on the flooring rearranging the ammo when the tank was struck. The driver’s hatch was knocked off and the 75 knocked out - the breech etc. shook violently and went downwards. Serjeant Johnston said: ‘Bail out!’ ”.

After Siegel’s gunner had destroyed the Sherman’s of B Squadron, Siegel decided to counter attack, yet his headlong foray nearly proved to be fatal. When his tank had pressed about 1 kilometer ahead, Siegel realised

that the two other Panzer IVs were lying destroyed a few hundred meters behind him. The infantry had not followed him either, and by now his tank was being fired at. Siegel engaged in a short exchange of fire with his opponent, which he thought to be an AT gun. His high explosive shells, however, had no effect as he was actually trading blows with a Sherman Firefly. Siegel’s Panzer IV was eventually hit by a 17 pdr shell and caught fire, but Siegel managed to bail out and struggle back to the German lines. By this point, the remaining tanks of Siegel’s 8th company, with the remainder of II. Abteilung of SS-Panzer-Regiment 12, had deployed and entered the fray, managing to beat back the First Hussars’ C Squadron and repelling the Canadian assault on Le Mesnil-Patry.

Sunday, 11 June 1944, thus entered the history of the 6th Canadian Armoured Regiment as the “The Black Day of



■ A Panzer IV of SS Panzer Regiment 12 in Normandy, summer 1944. The crew have adorned parts of the tank with names of wives or girlfriends. The ridged appearance was Zimmerit paste, applied as a measure against magnetic mines. (BA) **Above right:** A British Sherman in Normandy, June 1944.



■ A Panzer IV commander scans the horizon for the enemy. The risk of air attack was also considerable and many German vehicles operating in Normandy during the summer of 1944 resembled clumps of mobile vegetation! (BA)

the First Hussars”, otherwise “The Black Sabbath” or “Black Sunday”. The regiment lost 37 M4 Sherman tanks (11 of them destroyed by Siegel) and 61 men killed in action. Sixteen Hussars were taken prisoner by the Germans, but the number of wounded isn’t known. The Queen’s Own Rifles had lost 99 men; among them, 61 dead, 33 wounded and 5 POWs. Total Canadian losses added up to at least 180 men, with 122 of them dead and 21 taken POW. The Hitlerjugend, meanwhile, had lost 6 Panzer IVs and 147 men, 48 of them dead, 88 wounded and 11 missing.

‘HEROIC STORIES’

To shine some positive light on their heavy casualties, several Canadian soldiers exaggerated the numerical strength of the Germans and the number of their casualties. Officially, it was spread about that the Canadian attack had thwarted the Hitlerjugend Division who aimed to throw the Canadians back into the sea. Others, like Sergeant Leo Gariepy, a tank commander in B Squadron, spun some heroic stories. His was published in Alexander McKees book: *Caen: Anvil of Victory*.

“Gariepy’s Sherman was probably the last to go. In the ‘point’ tank, he arrived first, and had the distinct impression that the Germans were not in defensive positions, but were themselves forming for an attack. He saw in rapid succession three of the half-tracks which the Germans used for bringing up their Panzer-Grenadiers, lined up side by side, with Germans milling around them in confusion. Then some thirty tanks, also tightly aligned; a battery of 88 mm guns, still limbered up; and then more half-tracks, with men jumping out of them. Firing on the run, he accounted for three of the half-tracks, before his Sherman was hit and set on fire.”

The German ‘tools of war’, and which Gariepy claimed to have seen, existed mainly in his imagination. The only German units deployed in the area of the attack of B Squadron, First Hussars, were II. Bataillon of SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 26 (which did not employ any half-tracks) and 1st company of SS-Panzer-Pionier-Bataillon 12. The “30 German tanks” were, in reality, just three tanks under the command of SS-Obersturmführer Siegel. After the war,



■ An exhausted Panzer IV crew rest awhile on their tank during the Battle of Normandy, 1944.



■ Hans Siegel pictured later in the war and after the award of a Knight's Cross.

the former Operations Officer (and later chronicler) of the Hitlerjugend Division, SS-Obersturmbannführer Hubert Meyer, noted: *“No 8.8cm Flak took part in the action, either. Spurious claims about the use of these guns were often made when the enemy had to explain his own severe tank losses.”*

COVETED KNIGHT'S CROSS

Remarkably enough, the events that had been so tragic for the Canadians only received a very terse mention in the war diary of SS-Panzer-Regiment 12. And Siegel's attack on B Squadron in the early afternoon isn't mentioned at all, although the Canadian sources confirm Siegel's account. Indeed, just three Panzer IVs commanded by Siegel played a decisive part in the Canadian defeat. Yet, much to Siegel's dismay, his feats were not only disregarded in

the war diary but for his actions at Le Mesnil-Patry on 11 June 1944 he should probably have been decorated with the coveted Knight's Cross without further ado. If a superior officer had witnessed the engagement, he would likely have recommended Siegel for it. But it was not to be.

After the war, Hans Siegel had the chance to meet several of his former enemies in person and engaged in correspondence with others. One of them wrote to Siegel in September 1994, saying:

“I was disappointed to learn that you were not awarded a decoration for your part in the action. Your courage and initiative deserved official recognition.”

Only after another victorious engagement at the end of that same month was Siegel finally decorated with the prestigious Knights Cross - his ‘Halsschmerzen’ at last being cured! ❏