

VILLERS-BOCAGE

The village of Villers-Bocage still lies in ruins months after the fierce clash, October 1944



VILLERS-BOCAGE

With a beachhead in occupied France established, Allied and German forces made a desperate scramble to grab strategic positions that saw opposing armoured divisions forming the tips of the spears

NORMANDY, FRANCE 13 JUNE 1944

As Allied forces stormed ashore along the Norman coast of France on 6 June 1944, all ready to begin the arduous campaign to liberate Western Europe from Nazi occupation during World War II, the primary D-Day objective of the British 3rd Infantry Division was the port of Caen.

As one of the largest cities in Normandy, Caen was a communications hub at the

centre of a major road network, connected to the English Channel through a canal. Its seizure would anchor the left flank of the Allied perimeter and deny the defending Germans the advantage of the river and canal, which would otherwise present major obstacles to inland expansion of the D-Day beachhead.

General Bernard Law Montgomery, commander of Allied ground forces in Normandy, envisioned the capture of Caen within hours of British ground forces storming ashore at Sword Beach, the easternmost of the five D-Day landing beaches. However,

stiff German resistance from the veteran 21st Panzer Division, the 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend and the 716th Infantry Division had stymied progress towards the city and with that, Montgomery's belief that it could be captured on D-Day proved overly optimistic.

A week after the Normandy landings, Allied troops were slugging their way inland against fierce German opposition, but Caen remained firmly under enemy control despite numerous efforts by British forces to take the city in a direct assault. For Montgomery though, an opportunity had developed, as the US 1st Infantry Division pushed southward from



Omaha Beach, compelling German forces to retreat and opening a gap west of Caen between the 352nd Infantry Division and Panzer Lehr, a crack German armoured division.

Operation Perch

Montgomery's staff altered Operation Perch – its plan for the early ground phase of the Normandy Campaign – hoping to take advantage of the recent development in the enemy's front line. A pincer movement might outflank Panzer Lehr and envelop Caen, forcing its stubborn German defenders to retire or risk being surrounded. While the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division attacked in the east, the 7th Armoured Division – the "Desert Rats", who had achieved fame with Montgomery's Eighth Army in North Africa – was to swing south-eastward and capture the town of Villers-Bocage, just more than 27 kilometres southwest of Caen, along with nearby high ground identified on maps as Point 213.

On 10 June, the refocused Operation Perch commenced with the advance of the 7th Armoured Division, while the 51st (Highland) Division stepped off the next day. Although some initial gains were made east of Caen, a powerful counterattack from 21st Panzer stopped that British thrust cold, eventually

forcing the Highlanders to retire to the banks of the Orne. Still, the prospects for the western pincer's success remained.

As the 7th Armoured Division advanced, Major General Fritz Bayerlein – the capable commander of Panzer Lehr – realised the predicament his division faced and ordered a ferocious counterattack that bogged the western drive down around the village of Tilly-sur-Seulles. On the morning of 12 June, Lieutenant General Miles Dempsey, commander of the British Second Army, travelled to 7th Armoured headquarters to meet with Major General George 'Bobby' Erskine, the division commander, who suggested that Panzer Lehr might still be outflanked if 7th Armoured disengaged from the fight at Tilly-sur-Seulles and struck toward Villers-Bocage from further west.

Rolling towards Villers-Bocage

Within hours, the 22nd Armoured Brigade – the vanguard of the Desert Rats – was on the move toward Villers-Bocage with the tanks and armoured cars of the 8th and 11th Hussars covering its flanks. As darkness fell around them, Brigadier Robert 'Looney' Hinde, leading, called a halt to the advance after reaching the Caumont-Villers-Bocage road, just eight kilometres from his objective. Early on the

morning of 13 June, tanks of the 4th County of London Yeomanry and troops of Company A, 1st Battalion, The Rifle Brigade, rolled into Villers-Bocage against only token resistance. French civilians turned out in large numbers to welcome them.

Wary of the fact that a German counterattack was likely, since control of the road network emanating from Villers-Bocage was tactically significant for the Germans as well, Brigadier Hinde ordered the tanks of A Squadron, County of London Yeomanry and Company A, The Rifle Brigade, to occupy Point 213. About 1.6 kilometres north west of Villers-Bocage, the high ground commanded the approaches to the town and National Highway 175 toward Caen.

Although his tankers were exhilarated by the rapid run to Villers-Bocage, Lieutenant Colonel Viscount Arthur Cranley, commanding the 4th County of London Yeomanry, was worried. German reconnaissance vehicles had been spotted and enemy soldiers were seen making a hasty getaway in a staff car. Soon enough, the enemy would be coming back and occupying Point 213 would invite a counterattack against the exposed position.

Nevertheless, Cranley left four tanks of his regimental headquarters in Villers-Bocage before hurrying off to take stock of A Squadron's new posting. B Squadron was positioned to the west of the town, guarding the intersection along the road that led to the village of Caumont.

Just after 9am, the leading elements of the 4th County of London Yeomanry and the accompanying infantry reached Point 213. The bulk of the British armour and infantry halted along the road, awaiting orders for deployment

“ALTHOUGH HIS TANKERS WERE EXHILARATED BY THE RAPID RUN TO VILLERS-BOCAGE, LIEUTENANT COLONEL VISCOUNT ARTHUR CRANLEY, COMMANDING THE 4TH COUNTY OF LONDON YEOMANRY, WAS WORRIED”




A Waffen SS MG42 and Panther tank take up defensive positions around Caen, ready to repel the allied advance, 1944

Right: German reinforcements race towards Normandy in an attempt to bolster the coastal defences against the anticipated invasion



OPPOSING FORCES




BRITISH ARMY
22ND
ARMoured
BRIGADE

LEADER
Brigadier Robert
'Looney' Hinde

INFANTRY
1/7th Battalion Queen's
Royal Regiment (West
Surrey); 1st Battalion
Rifle Brigade

ARMOUR
4th County of London
Yeomanry; 5th Royal
Tank Regiment

vs



GERMAN ARMY
SS HEAVY
TANK BATTALION
101

LEADERS
SS Obersturmbannführer
(lieutenant colonel) Heinz
von Westerhagen

ARMOR
1st Panzer Company,
SS Hauptsturmführer
(captain) Rolf Möbius;
2nd Panzer Company,
SS Obersturmführer
(1st lieutenant) Michael
Wittmann

to consolidate their hold on the high ground. More than two dozen tanks and halftracks lined the road, along with numerous troop carriers. Sentries were posted but their field of vision was limited due to the terrain and thick woods in the area.

Tigers unleashed

In the wake of the D-Day landings, the relative few German panzer formations in Normandy were alerted. One of these, the 1st SS Panzer Corps, had started towards the fighting early on 7 June. Ravaged by Allied fighter-bombers along

the route, the corps lost a significant number of armoured vehicles, and by the morning of 13 June, SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101, its last uncommitted reserve advancing from Beauvais, had been reduced from an original strength of 45 tanks to fewer than 20.

Most of the German armoured battalion's vehicles, however, were the 56-ton Tiger I heavy tank, mounting a high-velocity 88mm cannon that was superior to the 75mm and 17-pounder (76mm) guns of the new British Cromwell and Sherman Firefly tanks in the field. Although plagued by mechanical difficulties, the Tiger was a daunting foe in combat. Hits from Allied shells were often deflected harmlessly away by its thick armour plating, and the range of the formidable 88mm weapon allowed the Germans to engage enemy targets at standoff distances.

On that morning, two companies of Tigers from SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101 had reached the vicinity of Villers-Bocage. The 1st Company was under SS Hauptsturmführer (captain) Rolf Möbius, and the 2nd Company was led by Obersturmführer (first lieutenant) Michael Wittmann. Already a leading panzer ace and holder of the Knights Cross with Oak Leaves, Wittmann had well over 100 kills on the Eastern Front to his credit. Accounts vary as to the actual strength of the two panzer companies and the details of the engagement that followed.

Right: A Tiger tank lies abandoned after being taken out of action during the battle – evidence against the supposed invincibility of this model

However, the ensuing battle contributed to the growing legend that was Obersturmführer Michael Wittmann – possibly even exaggerating his role in the fight for Villers-Bocage.

Wittmann's Tiger company had taken positions along a ridge south of Point 213, to offer support to either Panzer Lehr or the 12th SS Panzer Division. The young Tiger ace was astonished when British armoured vehicles appeared throughout Villers-Bocage. He later recalled: "I had no time to assemble my



company; 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."

Just as the British tankers and infantrymen on the road to Point 213 were ordered to resume their advance to the high ground, three Tiger tanks, those of Wittmann, SS Oberscharführer (company sergeant major) Jürgen Brandt and SS Untersturmführer (2nd lieutenant) Georg Hantusch, were seen advancing parallel to the British column along a path adjacent to the highway but screened by a tall hedgerow. Apparently, the two other German tankers had moved forward with Wittmann, despite his order for them to remain where they were.

As the other two Tigers attacked the British armour at Point 213, Wittmann emerged from a wooded area onto National Highway 175, where he destroyed a Cromwell at close range and then blasted a Sherman Firefly, its blazing hulk blocking the British column. He turned and worked his way down the line of armoured vehicles strung out along the road. In short order, the Tiger's 88mm gun and its two 7.92mm MG 34 machine guns destroyed eight halftracks and four troop carriers.

Struggle in the streets

Leaving a trail of destruction on the highway, Wittmann then rolled down the Rue Georges Clémenceau towards the eastern edge of Villers-Bocage. Three M5 Stuart light tanks of the 4th County of London Yeomanry Reconnaissance Troop, their 37mm guns no match for the thick armour protecting the Tiger, were stationed at the intersection with the road to Tilly-sur-Seulles.

No doubt, the reconnaissance squadron leader, Lieutenant Rex Ingram, knew that his situation was perilous. Nevertheless, he ordered the driver of his 15-ton Stuart into the road – directly in the path of Wittmann's oncoming Tiger – in an attempt to delay the German tank's advance into the town. A single 88mm round caused the British tank to erupt in flames. The Tiger shunted the blazing wreck aside and blasted at least one more of the light tanks.

SS Obersturmführer Michael Wittmann strikes a jaunty pose atop his Tiger tank



03 END RUN TO VILLERS-BOCAGE

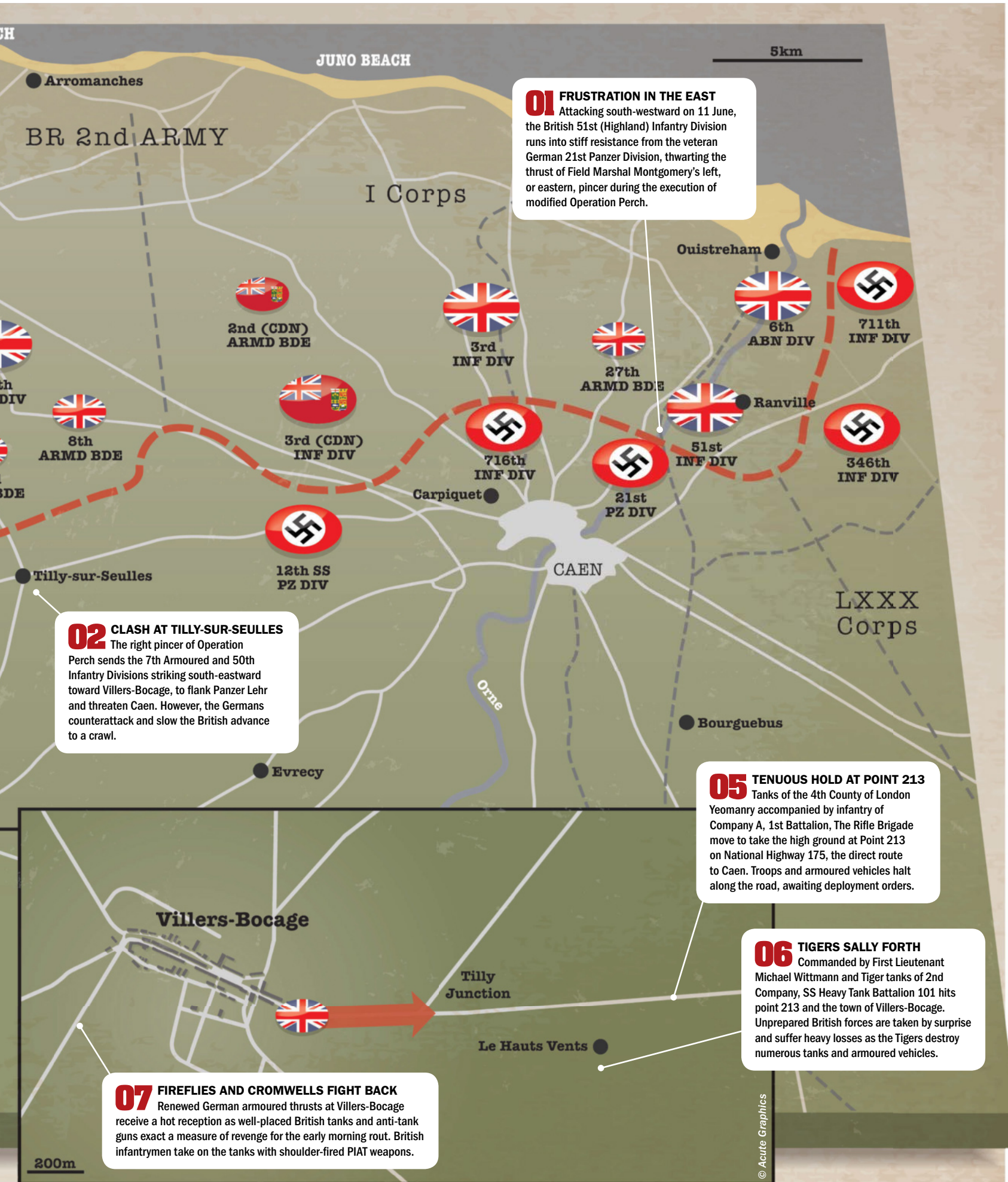
With the 22nd Armoured Brigade in the lead, the 7th Armoured Division sidles out of the line at Tully-sur-Seulles and races toward Villers-Bocage to re-energise the British effort to flank Panzer Lehr and eventually drive on Caen.

04 RUSH THROUGH FRANCE

Elements of the 22nd Armoured Brigade brush aside light enemy resistance and cover the distance to Villers-Bocage in a matter of hours. The swift movement through a stretch of open country boosts morale among the British troops after hard fighting in the hedgerow, or bocage, country of France.

08 THE BRITISH BACK AWAY

Continuing pressure from German forces and the inability of the 50th Infantry Division to come to the aid of 7th Armoured doom Operation Perch and the reach for Villers-Bocage to failure. British forces reluctantly withdraw.



01 FRUSTRATION IN THE EAST
 Attacking south-westward on 11 June, the British 51st (Highland) Infantry Division runs into stiff resistance from the veteran German 21st Panzer Division, thwarting the thrust of Field Marshal Montgomery's left, or eastern, pincer during the execution of modified Operation Perch.

02 CLASH AT TILLY-SUR-SEULLES
 The right pincer of Operation Perch sends the 7th Armoured and 50th Infantry Divisions striking south-eastward toward Villers-Bocage, to flank Panzer Lehr and threaten Caen. However, the Germans counterattack and slow the British advance to a crawl.

05 TENUOUS HOLD AT POINT 213
 Tanks of the 4th County of London Yeomanry accompanied by infantry of Company A, 1st Battalion, The Rifle Brigade move to take the high ground at Point 213 on National Highway 175, the direct route to Caen. Troops and armoured vehicles halt along the road, awaiting deployment orders.

06 TIGERS SALLY FORTH
 Commanded by First Lieutenant Michael Wittmann and Tiger tanks of 2nd Company, SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101 hits point 213 and the town of Villers-Bocage. Unprepared British forces are taken by surprise and suffer heavy losses as the Tigers destroy numerous tanks and armoured vehicles.

07 FIREFLIES AND CROMWELLS FIGHT BACK
 Renewed German armoured thrusts at Villers-Bocage receive a hot reception as well-placed British tanks and anti-tank guns exact a measure of revenge for the early morning rout. British infantrymen take on the tanks with shoulder-fired PIAT weapons.

© Acute Graphics

Wittmann then directed his lumbering Tiger down the main thoroughfare in Villers-Bocage and a few yards beyond the road junction, the four Cromwells of the regimental headquarters came into view. Apparently, several of the crewmen were actually outside of their vehicles when the encounter began. The first Cromwell, commanded by the regimental executive officer, Major Arthur Carr, was damaged and attempted to back out of the line of fire. Two more British tanks, under Lieutenant John L Cloudsley-Thompson and Regimental Sergeant Major Gerald Holloway, were both destroyed.

As Cloudsley-Thompson's crew bailed out of its burning Cromwell, Captain Pat Dyas, the regimental adjutant, reversed his tank and backed ponderously into a garden, obscured from Wittmann's view. The action had developed so rapidly that Dyas's gunner, away from the vehicle on a nature call, had no time to return to the tank. Positioned for a killing shot, Dyas was powerless to act as the big Tiger rumbled past, its broadside completely exposed to him.

Continuing down the Rue Georges Clémenceau, Wittmann spotted two observation post tanks of the 5th Royal Horse Artillery as they tried to avoid contact, backing around a corner into the Rue Pasteur. Due to its observation role, the Sherman commanded by Major Dennis Wells was quite defenceless, mounting a wooden decoy gun rather than a real main weapon; the Cromwell was most likely unarmed as well. Captain Paddy Victory continued backing his Cromwell into a side street behind the Sherman at the rear entrance to the Hotel du Bras d'Or. A moment later, Wells's tank was blown up by an 88mm shell from Wittmann's Tiger.

Captain Victory tried to escape, but his transmission gears locked up. As Wittmann passed by, the Cromwell crew grasped a fleeting hope that they had remained unseen. But the Tiger stopped, reversed for a moment, then pumped a round into the British tank just below its turret. The crew bailed out, but Captain Victory returned to the disabled Cromwell and destroyed its interior best that he could before slipping away.

While Wittmann shot up these British tanks and moved steadily westward towards the centre of Villers-Bocage, Lieutenant Charles Pearce escaped from the area in a scout car and alerted B Squadron to the presence of the marauding Tiger on the other side of the town. After winning a momentary reprieve, Captain Dyas began tracking Wittmann through the streets of Villers-Bocage.

“CAPTAIN VICTORY TRIED TO ESCAPE, BUT HIS TRANSMISSION GEARS LOCKED UP. AS WITTMANN PASSED BY, THE CROMWELL CREW GRASPED A FLEETING HOPE THAT THEY HAD REMAINED UNSEEN”

As Dyas followed his Tiger, Wittmann ran into a Sherman Firefly of B Squadron under the direction of Sergeant Stan Lockwood. Lockwood was the first British tanker to hear Lieutenant Pearce's alarm; he turned his Firefly from the Place Jeanne d'Arc onto the Rue Georges Clémenceau and got the drop on Wittmann, firing a 17-pounder shell that inflicted slight damage on the big Tiger. In turn, Wittmann swerved into a brick wall causing it to collapse on top of Lockwood's Sherman.

Captain Dyas sensed an opportunity, rolling his Cromwell forward and firing two 75mm rounds that hit the Tiger, but failed to penetrate its armour. In seconds the tables were turned. The Tiger's turret swung around, its cannon belched flame and the resulting hit killed the Cromwell gunner and driver while blowing Dyas clear – stunned but remarkably uninjured.

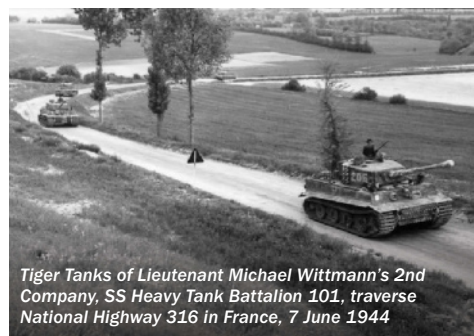
Wittmann knew that other B Squadron tanks were closing in. He turned back down the Rue Georges Clémenceau and proceeded only a few yards before the crash of a shell caused the Tiger to lurch to a halt in front of the Huet-Godefroy clothing store. A single round from a six-pounder anti-tank gun had accomplished what numerous British tanks had failed to do. Fired from an alley between the Rue Jeanne Bacon and Boulevard Joffre, the anti-tank round disabled a drive sprocket. Wittmann and his crew abandoned their Tiger, expecting that it might be recovered later and made their way seven kilometres to Panzer Lehr headquarters at Chateau d'Orbois, where Wittmann described the situation around Villers-Bocage to the officers present.

Chaos at Point 213

While Wittmann was devastating the British armour in Villers-Bocage, Brandt and Hantusch drove on to Point 213 and added to the carnage. Within the hour, a third Tiger, commanded by Unterscharführer Kurt Sowa, joined the assault and by 10am, reconnaissance troops and armoured vehicles of the 4th Panzer Company, SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101 reached the one-sided battle. Half an hour later, the Germans were rounding up scores of prisoners and consolidating their hold on National Highway 175 between Villers-Bocage and Point 213.

The morning action ended with a staggering tally of destruction. 20 Cromwells, four Sherman Fireflies and three Stuart tanks were thought to have been destroyed, along with numerous troop carriers and other vehicles. The Fireflies of B Squadron, 4th County of London Yeomanry prepared for a renewed battle that would surely come, while the 1/7th Battalion, Queen's Royal Regiment also occupied positions in Villers-Bocage. Anti-tank guns studded the British defensive cordon.

Despite their losses, the British still menaced the flank of Panzer Lehr and there was hope at the headquarters of the 7th Armoured Division and its parent XXX Corps that the 50th Infantry Division might break through at Tilly-sur-Seulles and support the drive through Villers-Bocage and perhaps even to Caen. However, the vigour of the morning Tiger assault had shattered the spearhead of the British offensive and the initiative lay squarely with the Germans, who sensed the potential for a solid local victory.



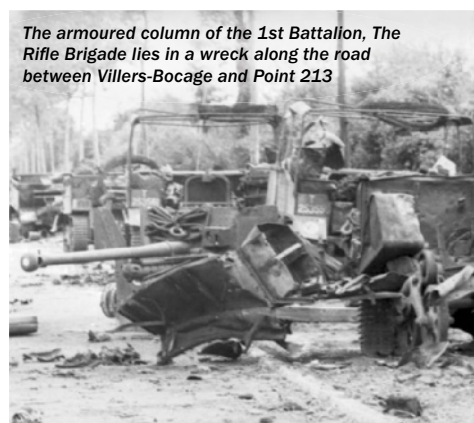
Tiger Tanks of Lieutenant Michael Wittmann's 2nd Company, SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101, traverse National Highway 316 in France, 7 June 1944



Its hatches thrown open, a destroyed PzKpfw IV tank of Panzer Lehr sits amid the rubble in Villers-Bocage



Captain Victory's Cromwell was immobilised when attacked by Wittmann's Tiger tank



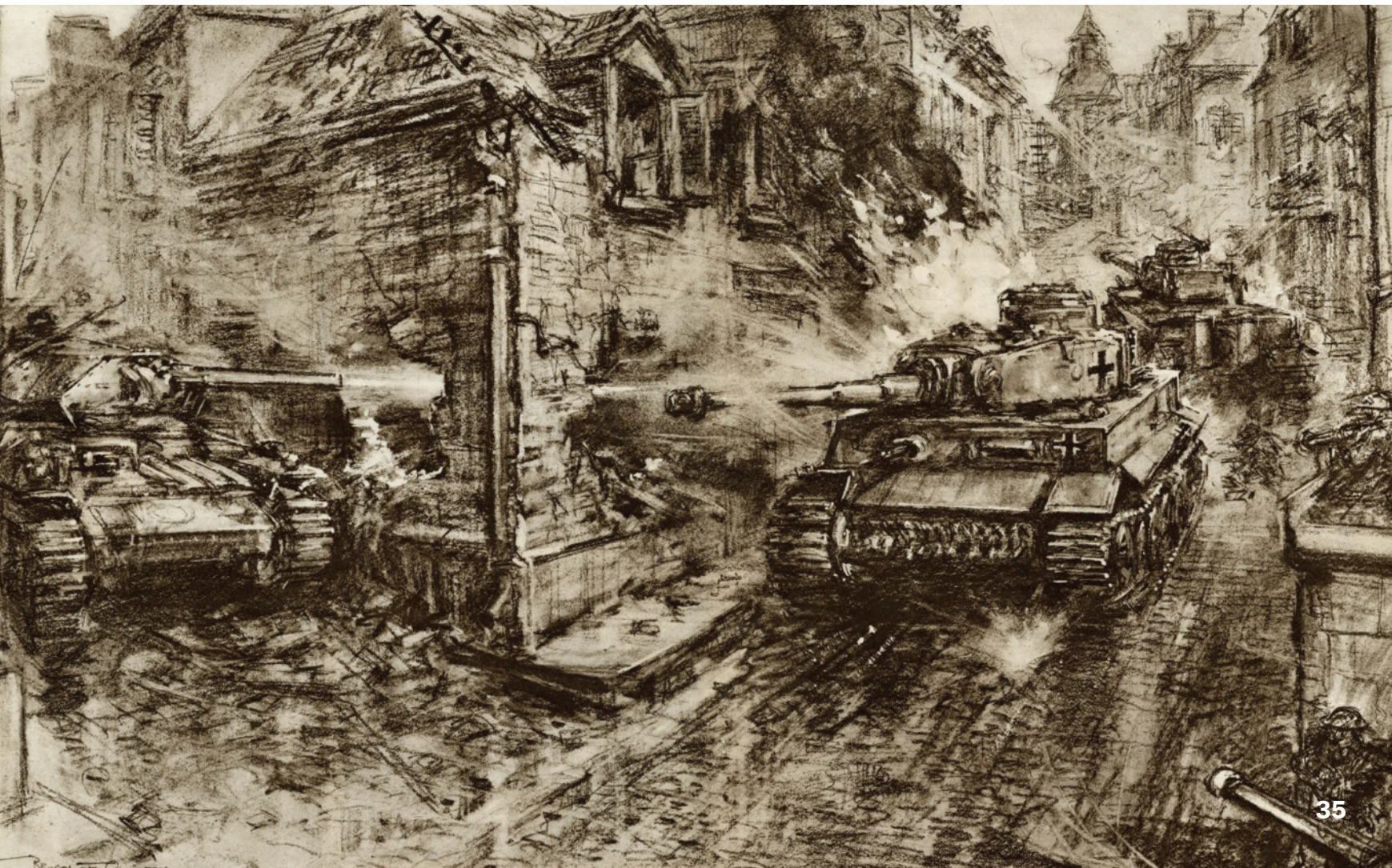
The armoured column of the 1st Battalion, The Rifle Brigade lies in a wreck along the road between Villers-Bocage and Point 213



The blackened hulk of a Cromwell tank, one of more than 30 British armoured vehicles lost at Villers-Bocage, rests abandoned

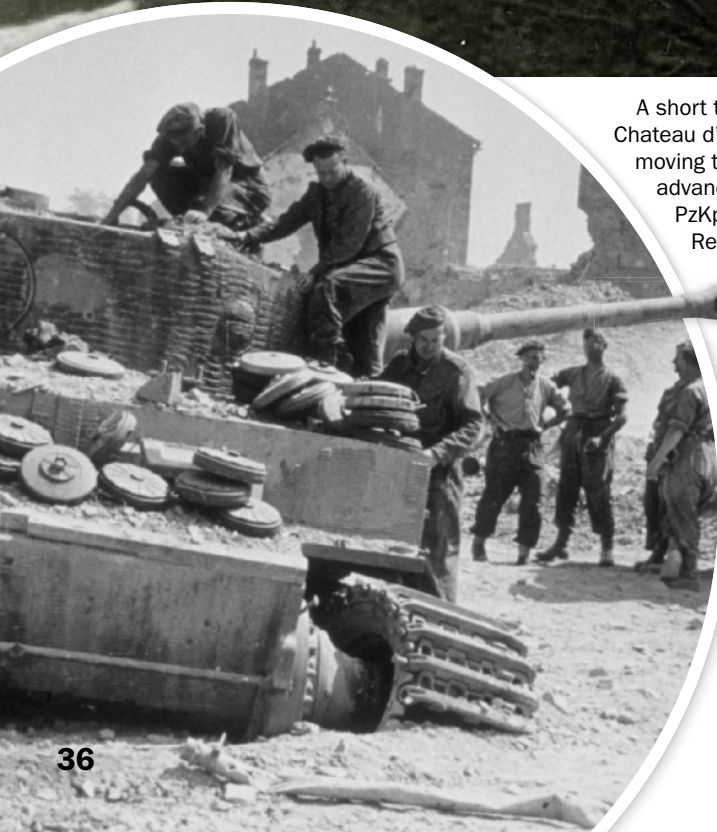
Below: An artist's impression of the battle from the London Illustrated News. The British tank pictured is an older design, possibly a Covenanter

“THE TIGER’S TURRET SWUNG AROUND, ITS CANNON BELCHED FLAME AND THE RESULTING HIT KILLED THE CROMWELL GUNNER AND DRIVER”





Below: After recapturing the town in August, British engineers fill a Tiger with land mines to destroy it



A short time after Wittmann's arrival at Chateau d'Orbois, Captain Helmut Ritgen was moving to block potential British routes of advance north of Villers-Bocage, with 15 PzKpfw IV tanks of the 2nd Battalion, Regiment 130, Panzer Lehr. Ritgen soon ran into some intense fire from concealed anti-tank guns, lost one PzKpfw IV and was ordered to regroup near Villers-Bocage. Subsequently, he sent four tanks roaring in from the south, while ten more renewed their advance along Rue Georges Clémenceau, the British claimed

a pair of PzKpfw IVs. Around 1pm, Panzer Lehr's armour tried to take the town again, losing two more PzKpfw IVs in the process.

The 1/7th Battalion, Queen's Royal Regiment held the railway station and other key positions in and around Villers-Bocage and put up stiff resistance. British and German infantrymen fought street-to-street and house-to-house, before the defenders pulled back to positions along the edge of town. A British roadblock in the centre of Villers-Bocage concealed several six-pounder anti-tank guns, at least one Sherman Firefly and several Cromwells, which lay in wait for any German tanks advancing towards the town square.

“BRITISH AND GERMAN INFANTRYMEN FOUGHT STREET-TO-STREET AND HOUSE-TO-HOUSE, BEFORE THE DEFENDERS PULLED BACK TO POSITIONS ALONG THE EDGE OF TOWN”

An Allied Sherman recovery tank towing a crippled Sherman behind it during the Battle of Caen

Right: The lightning fast advance of the Germans on the morning of 13 June led some British tanks, like this Cromwell, to be abandoned

“BOTH SENIOR COMMANDERS SEEMED UNCHARACTERISTICALLY DETACHED, FAILING TO ASSERT STRONG LEADERSHIP AND DECISION MAKING DURING THE FIGHT”

from the Wild West. One of these Tigers fell victim to an anti-tank gun, while an infantryman destroyed another with a PIAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) spring-loaded, shoulder-fired weapon. Another second shot from a PIAT disabled the last of this Tiger trio.

Yet another Tiger, its commander well aware of the commotion to his front, stopped short of the British trap in the town square and waited. An opportunistic Firefly crew took a shot at the Tiger through the windows of a corner building and the round glanced off the German tank's gun mantlet. The Tiger began to churn down the street as its driver accelerated. A Cromwell emerged from behind, killing the behemoth with a shot to its vulnerable rear. At the same time, the Firefly that had spooked the Tiger blasted another PzKpfw IV.

Meanwhile, outside the city limits other units of the 7th Armoured Division repulsed German attacks along a north-south line in the vicinity of Amaye-sur-Seulles and Tracy-Bocage.

Although some historians have disputed the presence of elements of the 2nd Panzer Division during the fighting at Villers-Bocage, others assert that as many as two panzergrenadier battalions entered the town on 13 June, pressing the infantry of the 1/7th Battalion, Queen's Royal Regiment until the tanks of B Squadron began to cut down German troops in heaps with their machine guns.

Nevertheless, by 6pm the enemy had advanced close to the 1/7th Battalion headquarters and reluctantly, the decision was made to withdraw from the town. Under a covering barrage from the 5th Royal Horse Artillery and the heavy guns of the US V Corps, the British pulled back. The Germans harassed their movement until well after dark.

Overnight, Hinde reinforced a defensive box on high ground at Point 174, 1.6 kilometres west of Villers-Bocage, and Panzer Lehr, along with the few remaining Tigers of SS Heavy Tank Battalion 101, assailed the position the next day. Artillery of the US 1st Infantry Division helped to beat back the initial German thrusts, but simultaneous attacks in the afternoon succeeded in breaching the defensive box and rendering artillery support useless since British and German troops were intermingled. Just as the German assault threatened the 22nd Armoured Brigade headquarters, it was finally beaten back.

Although Hinde remained confident that the 22nd Armoured Brigade could hold its salient at Villers-Bocage, the 50th Division remained tangled with Panzer Lehr, unable to move up in support. Therefore, the 22nd Armoured Brigade was pulled back and consolidated with the Allied line to the north and west, effectively ending the British bid for Villers-Bocage.

In the aftermath of the battle, the capabilities of the British field commanders, including Brigadier Hinde, Major General Erskine and Lieutenant General GC Bucknall commanding XXX Corps, were debated. The tactical deployment of the 22nd Armoured Brigade was questioned and the troops of the 50th Division were not the only potential reinforcements available. None of these commanders made a formal request for support from the 50th Division or any other units that might have intervened.

Equally, Dempsey and Montgomery cannot escape some responsibility. Both senior commanders seemed uncharacteristically detached, failing to assert strong leadership and decision making during the fight. Within weeks of the failed offensive, Hinde, Erskine, and Bucknall were relieved of command. Dempsey later admitted that, "...the whole handling of the battle was a disgrace."

Casualties were substantial on both sides, with 217 British dead and the loss of more than 40 tanks and armoured vehicles. A Squadron, County of London Yeomanry lost all 15 of its Cromwells, Fireflies and Stuarts. As many as 15 German tanks, including six irreplaceable Tigers, were destroyed and although dozens of Germans were killed, the exact number is unknown. British forces hammered away at Caen for two months before capturing the city, and Villers-Bocage remained in German hands until the first week of August. Perhaps the greatest casualty of Operation Perch and the affair at Villers-Bocage was that the chance to race for Caen slipped through British grasp.

FURTHER READING

- ★ DECISION IN NORMANDY BY CARLO D'ESTE
- ★ SIX ARMIES IN NORMANDY BY JOHN KEEGAN
- ★ VILLERS-BOCAGE BY GEORGE FORTY
- ★ VILLERS-BOCAGE: NORMANDY 1944 BY HENRI MARIE