

7TH PANZER DIVISION IN FRANCE: THE GHOST DIVISION

Yousaf Malik

[NOTE: Field Marshal Erwin Rommel is a name made famous by the tank battles in the deserts of Africa, but there are many more famous and some not so famous battles to the credit of this charismatic war commander. Not many know that Rommel was a Lieutenant Colonel at the start of WWII and in the next five years he was promoted to Field Marshal. His first field command in this war was that of 7th Panzer Division whose battle account I have tried to put up here. This division created havoc in the French heartland and was known as **The Ghost Division** because of its lightening speed and bold use of armour in the battlefield. I believe that not even the maverick American General Patton showed more boldness in armour use and quickness to exploit success than Rommel.]

Rommel took over the 7th Panzer Division at Godesberg, on the Rhine, on February 15th 1940, succeeding General Stumme, whom he was to succeed again when Stumme died of a heart attack at the beginning of the battle of El Almein. In two months' intensive training, before being ordered into action, he worked out his theories of tank tactics on the ground.

On May 10th the frontier was crossed about thirty miles south of Liège. On May 13th the division had its first big task, to effect a passage of the Meuse. The Belgians fought well from houses, which had been put into a state of defence, and from pill-boxes. They had anti-tank guns in concrete positions and plenty of covering artillery. A bridge had to be built and Rommel was up to his waist in water helping to shift baulks of timber. Towards the evening the French counter attacked with tanks and infantry but were beaten off and by nightfall the first tanks were across, with Rommel's tank leading.

By May 15th, 7th division was far ahead of 5th Panzer Division on its right flank and during the night captured a French battery when it was moving up into what its commander supposed to be a supporting position. The following day the division broke through the extension of the Maginot line in the fortified zone west of Clairfay. The rearward positions, with their artillery and anti-tank guns under concrete, were smothered with artificial fog and artillery fire; the villages to the flanks were blanked off by the same means. At 11 P.M. the attack was launched by the moonlight, the tanks and motorcycle battalion leading. The mass of the division followed. As they broke into and out of Avesnes around midnight, leaving it still occupied by French troops, with French tanks firing wildly in all directions and heavy street fight continuing, the German tanks fired on the move at batteries on both flanks. A French mechanized division retreating on the westward along the road, crowded with refugees, and French tanks parked alongside it were over run before they could come into action. An artillery regiment followed the tanks through Avesnes during the night and captured forty-eight tanks intact. Had all stood fast the Germans would have been in trouble, for guns of their tanks and the ported anti-tank guns of the motorcycle battalion could at first do nothing in Avesnes against the heavy armour of the French tanks.

All communications were interrupted and even the infantry brigade was unaware of the breakthrough. Nevertheless, Rommel determined, on his own responsibility to launch the whole division in an attack toward the west, in an endeavor to reach the Sambre, secure a bridgehead and keep it open. The attack began at about 5:30 in the morning (after a night's continuous fighting), with 25th Panzer Regiment pushing towards Landrecies. They were attacked by motorized columns from both flanks but French infantry were shocked into surrender by the sudden appearance of German armour. By 6:00 a.m. Landrecies was captured, large number of French troops caught in their barracks and a bridge over the Sambre seized intact. The regiment pushed on into Le Cateau, where it was halted, for the advance had been made by only two companies of the battalion, with part of the motorcycle battalion, and mass of the division was far behind. The 25th Panzer regiment took up a position on the high ground east of Le Cateau.

All day the 25th Panzer regiment was heavily attacked by tanks. Behind it, Pommereuil was recaptured by the French, who were thrown out again by the oncoming division. By the evening of 17th May the situation was sufficiently clear to allow the divisional artillery to move up into forward positions and another bridge over the Sambre had been seized at Berlimont, enabling the 5th Panzer division to come up and cross on the right.

If one looks at the map, one sees that Rommel's 7th Panzer division had pushed forward a narrow salient, thirty miles long and only two miles wide, with strong French forces on both flanks. But had broken through the fortified zone and had secured a vital crossing of the Sambre. In doing so the division's total casualties were only 35 killed and 59 wounded. Whereas it had taken over 10,000 prisoners in two days and captured or destroyed over 100 tanks, 30 armored cars and 27 guns.

By 5 a.m. on 20th May the 25th Panzer regiment had crossed the Canal du Nord, bypassing Cambrai, and had taken positions south of Arras. The fighting around Arras on May 21st is of interest because here for the first time Rommel bumped up against the British. Debouching from Arras to the south and south-east, the 1st Army Tank Brigade attacked him around Achicourt and Agny. The British broke through and German 42nd Anti-Tank Battalion was overrun, with most of the gun crews killed.¹ The attack was only stopped by artillery fire from an artillery regiment and from a flak (anti-aircraft) battery armed with 88 mm guns. The British armour withdrew to Arras when German Stukas were called up for air strike. Meanwhile 25th Panzer regiment, which had pushed on and reached the high ground south of Acq, was ordered to turn around and attack the British tanks in the rear. In the tank battle which followed near Agnes, the British lost seven tanks and six anti-tank guns while 25th Panzer regiment lost three Mark IV tanks, six Mark IIIs and some light tanks. That this was a harder day is shown by the fact that 7th Panzer division lost 250 in killed and captured alone, whereas its total bag of British prisoners was only 50, though it claimed 43 British tanks destroyed.

The next few days were tough too. The division crossed the Scarpe on May 22nd but the diary records that British tank attacks were beaten off with difficulty, mines had been laid against them and Mont St. Eloi was captured and lost and captured again. In the advance to the La Bassée Canal, on the 24th, British snipers were proving difficult to dislodge from the bushes and hedges south of the canal. In spite of them, bridgeheads were secured on both sides of Guinchy on the 26th, the first tanks and guns went over on the 27th, on the 28th the division had taken up a line facing east toward Lille and on 29th was ordered out to rest west of Arras.

Within a few days 7th Panzer Division was called out of rest and given a special task. The British had been driven out and the French were nearing the end. Between 29th May and June 4th, more than 300,000 British troops had been embarked at Dunkirk. There remained the 51st (Highland) Infantry Division, now about to take ship from Fécamp and St. Valéry. Rommel was ordered to stop them. He first had to cross the Somme and break through what was left of the Weygand Line.

The division crossed the Somme on the morning of June 6th, that day and next had to stage attacks to clear the opposition. On the night of June 9th they reached the Seine, ten miles south-west of Rouen. By the next afternoon the division had reached the sea, between Fécamp and St. Valéry, with divisional artillery well forward.

At Fécamp embarkation was going on and ships were laying off the shore under destroyer escort when 37th Reconnaissance Battalion appeared and with its supporting artillery engaged them. A British destroyer promptly closed for the action and was hit. Other vessels were also hit and the small harbor was brought under heavy artillery fire.

St. Valéry was the headquarter of General Fortune, commander 51st (Highland) Division, and it was here that the bulk of the division was preparing to embark. During the night of June 10th and morning of 11th Rommel seized the high ground to the west, from where he could bring the port under artillery fire. By evening, Rommel had taken about a thousand prisoners and was in a dominating position west of St. Valéry.

¹ Editor's note. It seems more likely that most crews were dispersed, with a number killed, given the total casualties given at the end of the article. The British attack was made by 58 Mark I (machine gun-armed) and 16 Mark II (2-pounder) infantry tanks, along with two battalions of infantry. Whatever the quality of their armament, the tanks certainly had adequate armor to deal with the normal anti-tank weapons of the time (the German 3.7-cm and British 2-pounder weapons being roughly equivalent).

A written demand from Rommel to General Fortune to surrender and march out the 51st Division under white flag was refused. At 9 p.m. heavy bombardment was opened. The concentration point of the whole of the divisional artillery and light artillery was the northern part of St. Valéry and the harbor. At the same time 25th Panzer regiment with 7th Infantry Regiment and 37th Pioneer Battalion were put into action and the line was advanced nearer to St. Valéry. In the early morning hours the British were trying to embark from the steep coast to the east of St. Valéry, under cover fire from warships. Parts of 6th and 7th Infantry Regiment attacked and gained more ground near St. Valéry. On the left 25th Panzer Regiment under Colonel Rothenburg and part of 7th Infantry Regiment pushed into St. Valéry itself causing the British commander to surrender.

The surrender of St. Valéry took place on 12th June. Twelve thousand prisoners were taken of which 8,000 were British. They included, besides Major General Fortune himself, the commanders of the 9th French Army Corps and of three French divisions. Tanks to the number of 58, 56 guns, 17 anti aircraft guns, 22 anti-tank guns, 368 machine-guns and 1,133 trucks were amongst the booty.

Three days after Germans entered Paris, the 7th Panzer Division was pushing up the Cotentin Peninsula to attack Cherbourg. Without any support, it had moved 150 miles and met to mentionable resistance. But just before midnight 17th June it bumped into strong French position at Les Fosses and was driven back by heavy artillery and anti-tank gun fire. Rommel moved up the infantry brigade and an artillery regiment, and by 8 a.m. he had broken through and resumed the advance on Cherbourg. At mid-day when he was three miles south-west of the city he ran into strongly held road blocks. However during the evening 7th Infantry Regiment under Colonel von Bismarck, with two panzer companies, had pushed into the suburbs of the city. Before midnight his troops had reached the railway station.

During the night divisional artillery was moved up to begin bombardment of the forts next morning. At first light it opened up, while the infantry pushed farther into the suburbs. French commanders present in Cherbourg did not put up a fight; rather they surrendered barely 12 hours after coming under attack. At 5 p.m. on June 19th unconditional surrender was signed. The total prisoner count was 30,000 and in the harbor was the undamaged transport of a British mechanized division.²

7th Panzer Division since 10th May had captured:

- The Admiral of French Navy (North) and 4 other admirals,
- 1 Corp Commander,
- 4 Divisional commanders with their staffs,
- 277 artillery and 64 anti-tank guns,
- 458 trucks and armored cars,
- 1,500-2,000 cars,
- 1,500-2,000 horse- and mule-drawn wagons,
- 300-400 buses, and
- 300-400 motorcycles.

Apart from this it had brought down 52 aircraft, captured 15 more on the ground, and destroyed another 12. There was much more booty which could not be counted because the division moved too fast.

Its own casualties during the period were: 48 officers killed and 77 wounded; 108 sergeants and above killed and 317 wounded; 526 other ranks killed and 1252 wounded. While missing included 3 officers, 34 sergeants and above and 229 other ranks.

² Editor's note. However, the British did manage to evacuate their last combat troops in France from Cherbourg, with 40,000 personnel taken out in some two days before the port fell. There were still some base troops further south, who were evacuated later.