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Title : Panzer Tactics in Normandy

Source : Gen Pz Geyr von Schweppenburg, Leo

Position : Cmdr, Pz Gp West, 1943(?) - 5 Jul 44;
Inspector of Pz Troops, Aug 44 - May 45

Date : 11 Dec 47

Place : Irschenhausen, Germany

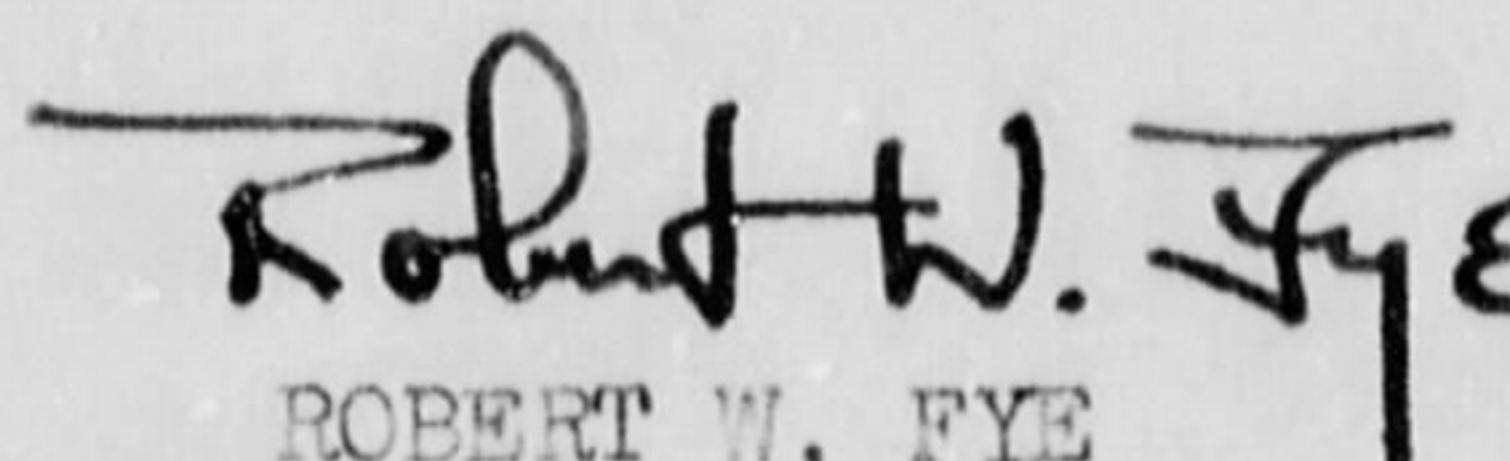
Interviewer : 1st Lt Robert W. Fye

Circumstances: Gen Pz von Geyr is a very impressive figure. At the time of the interview, he did not appear as yet in the grasp of old age, although he has 43 years of active service in the German Army behind him. He is quite tall and well built, with greyish-white hair and a very kindly face; he gives the appearance more of a scholarly college professor than a retired army officer. Since he speaks good English, the interview was held in that language. Gen Pz von Geyr is very expressive, and his conversation was animated by the use of his hands, which were constantly in motion.

Upon being informed of the nature of the questions, his disappointment that an armored officer, and an officer of considerable experience, had not been sent to conduct the interview was quite evident; he apparently was afraid his answers would be too complex for the average officer to understand. However, throughout the interview he was never too technical--perhaps rather by his design than by accident. At the outset of the interview, he announced his belief in complete frankness, and one got that impression from him as he answered questions with what immediately came to his mind, rather than pondering over a more "correct" answer.

Foreword

This interview is the result of specific questions by Mr Gordon A. Harrison, European Section, Historical Division, Special Staff, United States Army, to be answered by both Gen Pz von Geyr and Genobst Guderian, if possible. The interview was held in English, and since the interviewer also had the opportunity of being his own editor, the authenticity of the work can be assured. Gen Pz von Geyr's answers are as he gave them, except for slight changes in grammatical construction and word choice. Comments and additions by the interviewer-editor are clearly identified as such.



ROBERT W. FYE
1st Lt FA
Historical Editor

DEC 23 1947

PANZER TACTICS IN NORMANDY

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I. The Possibility of Mass Panzer Counterattacks in Normandy

1. Q: Would mass counterattacks by two or three panzer divisions have been possible in the bocage country?

A: Definitely yes.

2. Q: How would they have been protected during assembly?

A: By concentration of forces and all other troop movements during the night. The road net permitted this, and the cover was there. Under my supervision, the panzer troops had been trained in these tactics.

3. Q: Could attacks have been made at dark?

A: Yes, we would have used the one to two hours of dawn and dusk and attacked with limited objectives during these hours. I suggested these "tiger tactics" to Hitler. If the attack had been successful, effecting a breakthrough, we would have gotten in among the Allied forces, forcing your air power to quit its attacks, which were a constant menace to panzer forces. Our supply routes would then have suffered from air attacks, but the success would have been worth it.

Such a night attack with two panzer divisions did take place on 10 Jun 44, at Caen, the 21 Pz and 12 SS Pz Divs each employing a panzer regiment in its attack element; but, as you know, the attack never really got under way and was called off when my staff was destroyed by air attack.

4. Q: What losses could have been expected?

A: (Interviewer's Note: Here Gen Pz von Geyr threw up his hands and shook his head in a very helpless gesture. For the first time, he waited for a few moments before answering, as if groping for a reply.) I can't tell--I can't foretell that answer.

5. Q: What measures might have been taken to neutralize Allied air forces?

A: Only passive ones. The only measure we could take was using dusk, dawn, and night for all operations.

6. Q: What objectives would have been attacked?

A: That depends on the situation, of course. Generally, one thing sure, we would have made the enemy artillery our first objective. I had always taught my troops the Napoleonic principle of "s'engager, puis voir" (Interviewer's Note: a free translation would be, "engage the enemy and then we shall see"), get into the enemy lines, lose the enemy air striking force, and take advantage of any opportunities that arise.

7. Q: What decisive results could have been achieved?

A: The fate of panzer attacks you can't foretell. If a breakthrough had been achieved, perhaps complete success, if failure to achieve a breakthrough, perhaps complete failure. (Interviewer's Note: Here, in an effort to pin down his term "complete success," I asked Gen Pz von Geyr if by it he meant a drive clear to the beach and the ultimate ejection of the Allies from the continent, as Hitler anticipated. He answered, "No, it would have been impos-

sible to push you into the sea, in my opinion. And we would have stopped short of the beach, out of the range of your naval artillery, for which we had a healthy respect--this we learned at Salerno. We would have attempted to split up your forces and create havoc in your rear, disrupting communications, etc.")

II. Infantry-Tank Team Tactics

8. Q: What panzer tactics had been developed for fighting in the hedgerows?

A: This too depends entirely on the situation and terrain. In very bad terrain, where only forces in platoon or company strength could be committed, our Pz Lehr Div decided on the tactics of joining up a panzer company, a grenadier platoon or company, and a pionier (engineer) company. This would result in only local action, though, for if you disperse forces in this way, there is much local fighting, you lose control, and no big success is achieved--contrary to the opinion of the Pz Lehr Division Commander, who believed and put in writing that with such tactics the enemy could be thrown into the sea. This violates the principle that panzer tactics require concentration of force.

9. Q: Did you have specially trained infantry-tank teams?

A: We trained these troops for cooperation even in night fighting. I checked myself on these night tactics to see that

liaison and communication worked well, but I wouldn't say that this difficult problem was completely solved below battalion level.

Another difficulty that arose in our infantry-tank tactics was the lack of armored personnel carriers to make it possible for the infantry to keep up with the swiftly moving tanks.

10. Q: Had you solved the problem of communication between infantry and tanks?

A: We had solved the problem in an even greater aspect in training. I had subordinate commanders who from their mobile command tanks could direct their divisions or regiments and coordinate their actions with that of the infantry, the artillery, and the air force--all by radio. However, this was all on battalion level or above; below that level, I would not say that the communication problem between the individual tanks and infantry was ever solved. We were forever concerned with our radios; as long as they functioned, cooperation among the various forces was possible--we were afraid of their being jammed though, tactics which the British employed very successfully in Africa.

III. East vs West Panzer Tactics

11. Q: In reference to your statement that panzer divisions were ordered committed intact by Genfldm von Rundstedt, was this general armored doctrine in the German army at the time?

A: There was no over-all armored doctrine in the

German army at that time! This order came out through my instigation, but it was not practiced or carried out. Panzer divisions were committed piecemeal or had elements lent out and attached to infantry divisions on orders from Genfldm von Rundstedt when he thought the occasion demanded it.

Of all the German generals, Genfldm von Rundstedt knew the least of panzer tactics--he was an infantryman of the last generation. He and his staff were armchair strategists who didn't like dirt, noise, and tanks in general (as far as I know, Genfldm von Rundstedt was never in a tank). Do not misunderstand me, however; I have the greatest respect for von Rundstedt, but he was too old for this war. I had a free hand in the training of panzer forces in the West, and Genobst Guderian (Ed: at that time Inspector General of Pz Troops) and I saw eye-to-eye on this. I should have been allowed to employ these forces as they had been trained. Hitler, with his 1918 ideas of trench warfare, also was responsible for the incorrect use of panzer forces.

12. Q: What was the practice on the Russian front?

A: On the Russian front, as elsewhere, the only rule in panzer tactics was that there was no rule! In Russia, I myself broke many basic panzer principles because of this. Normally, however, divisions were committed intact in the East. (Interviewer's Note: Gen Pz von Geyr clarified this as follows: a panzer division was given a definite sector to operate in and functioned under one commander, normally, rather than having elements parceled out and

attached to other units.)

13. Q: How far could panzer tactics as developed in the East be applied in the West?

A: This question is too difficult to answer in short. Briefly, the tactics were entirely different. I wouldn't say they couldn't be applied at all, but generally the fighting and tactics were entirely different. Space is endless in the East, limited in the West, and this makes a big difference in panzer warfare.

14. Q: What differences were there?

A: I could write a book on this. There was little to compare between tactics that were successful in the West and those in the East. Complete differentiation was made in training for the two fronts. New problems arose every day in the West, a new front. Enemy air power was something to be reckoned with seriously for the first time. Rocket-carrying planes were a menace that continually harassed our tanks; I recommended that fully one-third of our tanks in the West should be primarily anti-aircraft weapon carriers. Whether you realize it or not, it was British rocket-carrying planes that halted our counterattack at Avranches, not your 30 Inf Div. (Interviewer's Note: Here, in attempt to draw Gen Pz von Geyr out more on these differences between the East and West, I asked him if enemy artillery in the West was not also a more serious consideration than in Russia. "Do not underestimate Russian artillery for a minute," he said. "You had good artillery that could adjust quickly on point targets, such as tanks, and bring down sudden concentrations, but the

Russians can too. When I was in Russia in 1941-42, their artillery was not this proficient, but the Russians learn quickly and reports that came to me near the end of the war indicate that Russian artillery had improved immeasurably and was capable of any tasks put before it.")

15. Q: Did panzer divisions shifted from the East need retraining in new types of warfare in the West?

A: Entirely new training, most of all in leadership. In the West, divisions had to be kept together, their power concentrated, while in the East, they had to be broken down and formed into combat groups (Ed: Kampfgruppen) to try to cover the vast spaces. Here, the basic principle of concentration of force had to be habitually violated. The troops had to be trained more for consciousness of air power in the West; although the Russians had Lend-Lease planes in great numbers, they never employed them as effectively against tanks as they were used in the West.

16. Q: If so, did they receive such training in adequate amounts?

A: (Interviewer's Note: Gen Pz von Geyr, after losing his command in the West, became Inspector of Pz Troops and was responsible for the training of all panzer troops, a task for which he obviously had a great deal of enthusiasm and in which he took great pride. Therefore, this question was almost a personal one, and he laughed a little self-consciously before answering.) They got all that was humanly possible to give. Those troops already in the West

had received very thorough training before the Invasion. You would have won anyway, I feel quite sure, but you would have had a harder time, I am equally as sure, if we had been able to employ these troops as we wished, as panzer troops.

IV. The Meaning of Kommandoweg

17. Q: What does "auf dem Kommandoweg aufgestellt" mean? Specifically, in a listing of artillery under 716th Division, five batteries are set down as "auf dem Kommandoweg aufgestellt." Best guess is that these were Corps artillery battalions attached to the division. Is this correct? Subsequent references are made to Kdo batteries. Presumably these are the same type units.

A: I am not at all familiar with this term. However, that is understandable as I was almost always serving with troops rather than on the Staff, where this term was probably used. However, from the German it would appear that these are those units which were formed by bodily "borrowing" small elements from other organizations to create the new unit. This was a wartime measure that was employed to save the usual time spent in activating and training the new unit personnel. The higher headquarters could order this done and would then apply to the War Office for confirmation, listing, and a numerical designation of the unit; this latter sometimes took as long as a year and a half.

For instance a division might arrive in the West

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from the East with no division artillery. Genfldm von Rundstedt might then order a number of divisions to each supply the incoming division with one battery from their own artillery regiments to form the new one. The new regiment immediately became operational, and then the request for a listing and designation went to the War Office. I presume that the batteries mentioned in this question are of this type.