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Sample Article

TANK DESTROYERS ON THE AKSAI Germany's Marders in "Winter Storm"

by Andrew Mulholland

One of the more interesting weapon systems to see action during 'Winter Storm' was Germany's Marder III tank destroyer. Nine of these vehicles formed the first company of the anti-tank battalion of the 6th Panzer Division, and they were in the thick of the fighting throughout the campaign.

The German tank destroyer concept was driven by two imperatives: one tactical, and one to do with productive capacity.

Even in 1939 it was evident that Germany's industry could not keep pace with the army's need for tanks. The turret-less tank destroyer was simpler and cheaper to manufacture. It could marry components from captured equipment or designs, and it provided a means of mounting a larger gun than a given chassis could normally accommodate. You got more bang for your buck.

Tactically, German infantry needed to defend itself from swarms of Russian tanks which were heavier than those fielded by earlier opponents. Ideally, this role could have been undertaken by providing them with more tanks mounting bigger guns; but they were needed for offensive action. Anti-tank guns were effective (at least when the PAK 40 came along), but the crews were vulnerable and they lacked the tactical maneuverability of a fully tracked vehicle. In a defensive role, the absence of a turret mattered less.

The Marder came in three basic versions, with a range of further refinements subdividing the three. That said, the entire Marder family shared a number of important characteristics. All Marders featured a large caliber gun mounted in an open topped configuration, with no turret and therefore very limited traverse. The vehicles tended to have a high profile, and the superstructures provided minimal armored protection. Consequently, Marders were highly vulnerable armored vehicles by the standards of the day, and it was this vulnerability that bespoke designs such as the Hetzer and Jagdpanther would ultimately address.

Marder IIIs were based on the Czech T38 tank chassis, probably the most useful of the captured designs taken up by Germany during the war. The earlier Marder Is had used three different French tank chassis, and Marder IIs were mounted on those from the Panzer II light tank. By mid 1942, Marder IIIs were being introduced into anti-tank battalions, but in modest numbers. Re-equipped in France, the 6th Panzer division had what were then the latest German tank destroyers available to the Wehrmacht. That said, these were something of a stopgap within a stopgap program. For the earliest Marder IIIs featured captured Russian 76.2mm guns and rear-mounted engines.

The 76.2mm was a Russian divisional artillery piece, captured in large numbers during 1941. The Germans re-chambered it to take 75mm ammunition. The purpose-built PAK 40, unavailable in sufficient quantity in mid 1942, was nonetheless used to equip Marder IIIs from mid '43.

Similarly, the later Marder IIIs enjoyed a centrally mounted engine. This enabled the installation of a better-armored and ergonomically superior fighting compartment at the rear of the vehicle,

instead of in the bow. The Marders (SdKfz 139) in 'Winter Storm' had the more exposed front compartment, with no rear protection.

These vehicles were deployed in platoons of three, supported by three halftracks, ammunition trailers, and one or two motorcycles. At Mayorskiy on 3 December, the third platoon, led by Leutnant Gunter Hoffken, participated in the successful defense of the village from a mixed Russian assault. The Russians had detected the build up for Winter Storm and mounted local spoiling attacks, of which this was one. Hoffken describes how his Marders first engage the T34s and anti-tank guns, before switching to time-delayed high explosive ammunition to shell the Russian infantry. His platoon confirmed one T34 and one anti-tank gun knocked out, plus an unknown number of infantry. The anti-tank battle took place at between 200-600 meters, whilst the harassing HE fire was directed from 3,500 meters. Hoffman lost one man when a teller mine slung on the back of one of his Marders suffered a direct hit. Amazingly, the badly damaged Marder was later repaired and saw further action.

Later in the campaign 6th Panzer's Marders fought a series of defensive actions around the village of Zalivskiy, the division's bridgehead on the Aksai River. The pattern of the fighting was similar, with the Marders combining with an 88mm Flak gun to account for nearly a dozen T34s, before turning their fire on the supporting infantry.

These actions provide some intriguing insights into the way these platoons were used on the battlefield. Platoon leaders directed their units on foot, joining individual crews as the occasion demanded. The Marders were used defensively, and set up in ambush positions behind buildings or crests. Bore sighting was used to maximize effectiveness against known lines of advance. Yet once battle was joined they were moved around frequently, either rolling forward to engage or switching to threatened sectors, often one vehicle at a time. Clearly their priority was the enemy armor, but once this was stalled or in retreat, they would target the infantry.

Russian armor seems to have conducted itself with relative timidity in the known presence of Marder units. Although close range engagements are described, there are a number of instances in which the Russian tanks go hull down at medium/long range, and the loss of a few T34s would knock the momentum out of these mixed assaults. This is an interesting echo of the British experience with the Marder in North Africa and Normandy, where they were mistakenly thought to be equipped with 88mm guns.

6th Panzer's Marders crossed the Mishkova and claimed (perhaps exaggerating) the destruction of some fifty Russian tanks during 'Winter Storm'. With the tank units fully committed to the offensive, the role of these early tank destroyers in dealing with armored counter-attacks was an important one.

By 1945 the toll taken of Allied tanks by the Marder's successors, operating in small numbers from concealed positions, offered proof of concept. And Sweden's adoption of the S-tank illustrates that this approach continued to influence tactical thinking way beyond World War II. ♦

Wintergewitter Bonus Rule

GERMAN VARIANT UNITS

Tiger Tanks and He-177 Heavy Bombers

The following units are admittedly a bit “out there” as far as historical accuracy, but then if Hitler had been a bit more focused, or his minions more concerned over the rapidly failing position in and around Stalingrad, perhaps these formations would’ve been used...



Tiger Tanks

There is a Tiger company unit supplied in the mix. This represents the 2nd Kompanie, 502nd Schwere (heavy) Panzer Abteilung (Tiger I tanks) being rushed to the front despite the crews not having been fully trained, or the teething troubles with this new weapon fully addressed. It is deployed at the start of any scenario with the 57th Panzer units.

The Tiger tank unit shifts the combat odds one column, attack or defense, when the hex the unit is located is involved in combat. The Tiger unit must be designated the lead unit for the shift to be used. If not the lead unit the combat is resolved normally without the odds shift.

At the end of a turn the Tiger unit moves more than 1 hex or is involved in combat (lead unit or otherwise) the German player rolls a die during the Disruption Recovery Phase. If the DR exceeds the unit's Proficiency Rating the unit is immediately reduced; if already reduced it is eliminated (the machines have broken down and have been evacuated to the rear for repair). Unlike other units, if the Tiger unit is eliminated it cannot be returned to play via replacements (once it is gone it is gone).



He-177 Bombers

There is a He-177 air unit supplied in the mix. The He-177 (Grief) Heavy Bomber was very much an aircraft in search of a mission. Conceived as a strategic bomber in an air force and military hierarchy that was in denial that such a weapon could be of use until too late, the He-177 was pressed into a variety of missions that make for good novels but poor history. With this rule the bombers are diverted from bombing Soviet factories beyond the Urals and long-range recon and covert commando missions to provide bombardment support of Operation Thunderclap.

When/if Operation Thunderclap is declared the He-177 Sonder Kommando (Special Command) Bomber unit is made available to the German player. The air unit has two sides. One side is for high altitude bombardment missions with better defensive and proficiency ratings (making it harder to intercept) but has a significantly reduced bombardment factor (its harder to hit those itty-bitty tanks and soldiers from way up there!). The other side is for lower altitude bombardment missions. The bombardment factor is higher, but the other factors are reduced (so, do your air crews feel lucky?).