

P 40 tanks of the Karstjäger-Division in Ospedaletto

Two P40 tanks belonging to the Waffen-SS Karstjäger-Division were destroyed by British Sherman tanks of the 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry (a reconnaissance armoured regiment belonging to 6th Armoured Division) near the village of Ospedaletto, just north of the town of Gemona (near Udine, Italy), on 3 May 1945. There are several photos of these tanks, two of them taken by a British war correspondent (Stg. Palmer) the day after their destruction, others later by passing soldiers.

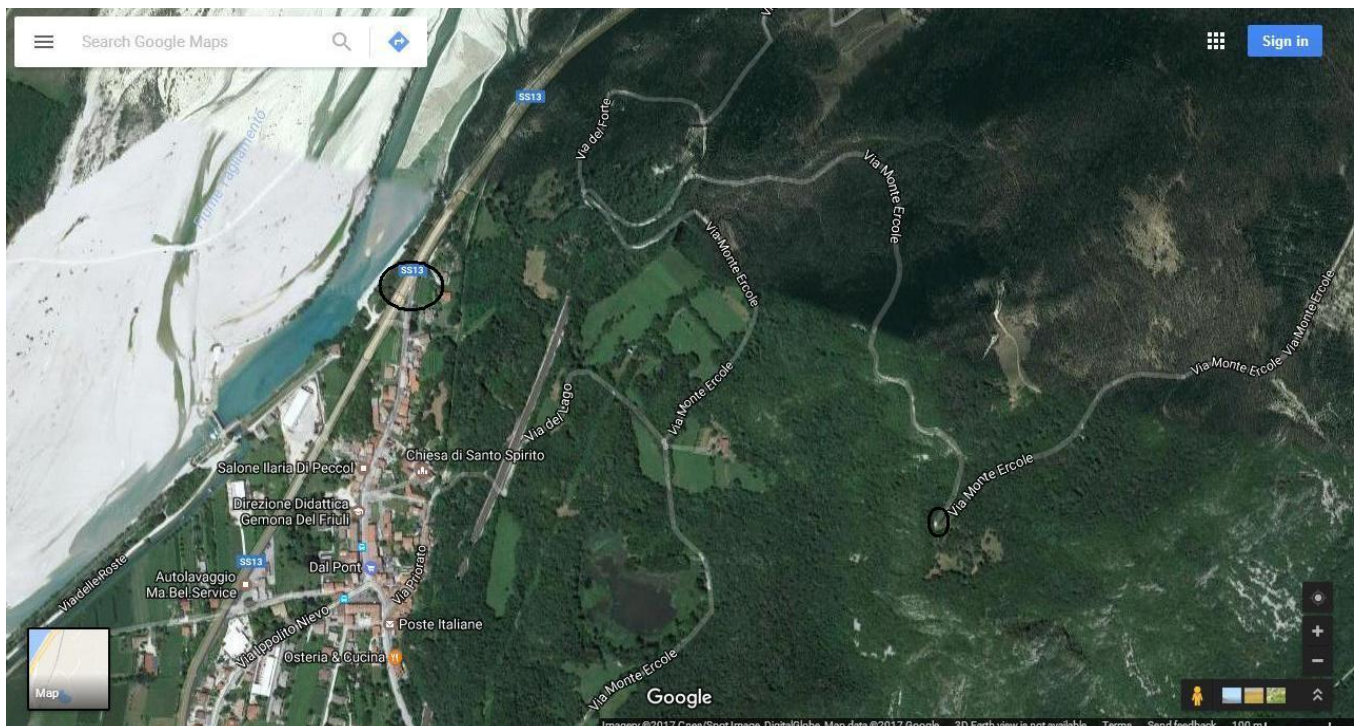
The exact place where the episode took place is the junction between the State Road 13 “Pontebbana” (leading from Udine to Austria) and the road exiting Ospedaletto northwards. The two tanks were part of a defensive position set up by the Germans at entrance to the Tagliamento river valley, where – due to a narrow spot at the end of a long straight road stretch – advancing enemy forces would have found themselves without cover. According to the war diary of the 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry on 3 May *“four Italian tanks and two Mark III had been seen in and around the town of Ospedaletto”* (probably these were respectively P40s from the Karstjäger-Division and Pz.Kpfw. III from Panzer-Abteilung 212).

While talks were taking place at the initiative of the British to obtain the surrender of the German forces, six Sherman tanks of “B” Squadron of 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry, guided by partisans, climbed from Gemona up the dirt track and – passing by the country church of Sant’Agnese and then going over a pass – reached a position on the mountain side from where the Ospedaletto junction and the German positions were well visible, at a distance of around 900 meters.

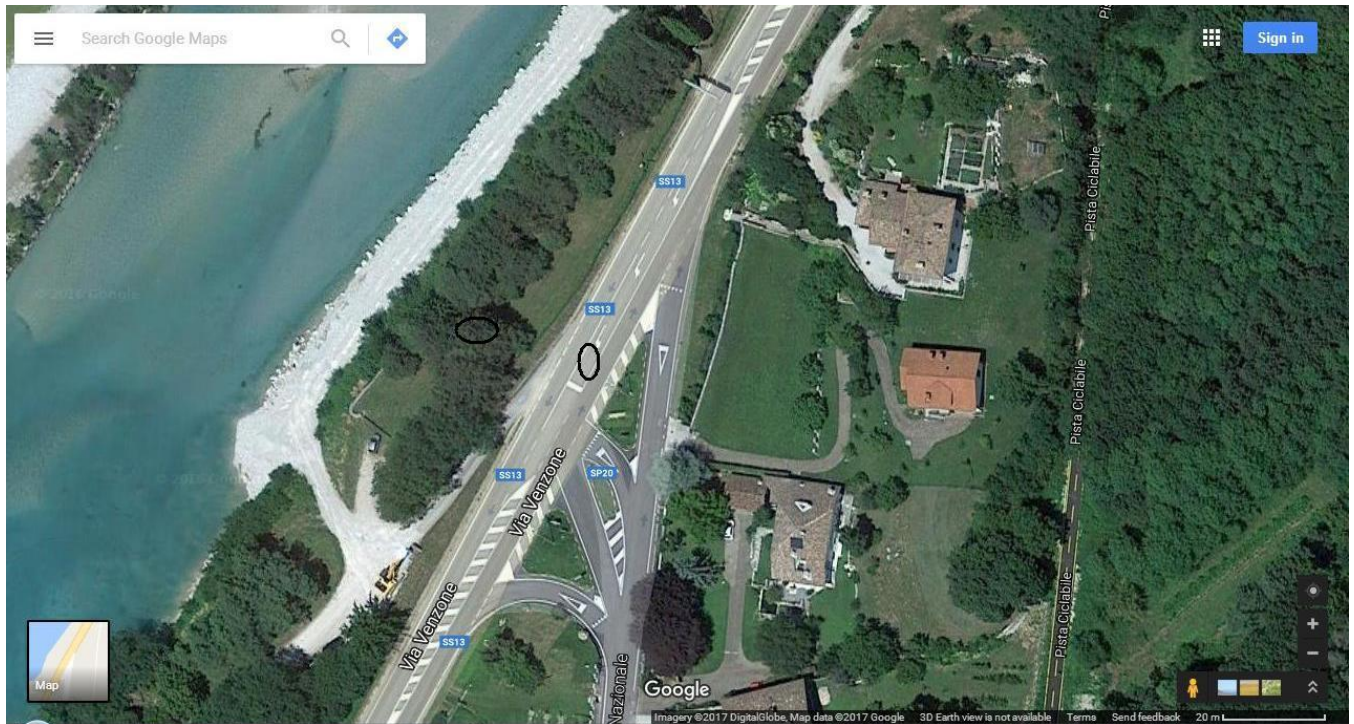
After waiting in vain for the enemy surrender (in reality the Germans had no intention to surrender but just wanted to buy time) the British noticed that the enemy troops were retreating to a defence position further north. Four tanks were seen leaving Ospedaletto and driving towards Venzone, and only two P 40 remained in position. The British tank crews fired then (on 16:00 of 3 May) on the Germans, taking them completely by surprise. Both P40 were hit several times, one caught fire. These were the last enemy tanks knocked out by 1st Derbyshire Yeomanry during World War 2.

The location

In the aerial view here below the ovals indicate the junction where the P40s were positioned (on the State Road 13) and the position from where the Shermans fired (on the Via Monte Ercole Road, actually a dirt track).



Aerial close-up of the junction. The ovals indicate the position of the two tanks when they were shot at (nr. 111 on the road, nr. 114 on the river bank):



A view of the state road as seen by the British tankers, with the position of the P40s indicated by the ovals:



The P40s destroyed in Ospedaletto

Number 114 (?):

This tank was parked on the bank of the Tagliamento river that runs along the west side of the State Road, with its front pointing east (to the direction from where the Shermans fired). The original caption of the first photo reproduced here below – taken by a British war correspondent on 4 May – reads: *“A German tank knocked out by 6th Armoured Division. A British Tommy points to a spot high up in the mountains to which our tanks made a difficult climb to overlook and destroy the enemy.”* (IWM, N.A. 24936) In the present-day photo the position from where the British tanks fired is indicated by an oval.



Another image of the same tank, probably taken later, with the Tagliamento river and Mount San Simeone in the background. Note that the British shots have pierced the front of the tank.



Number 111:

The first image shows the tank shortly after its destruction (note the aerial is still present); it seems to lay on the State Road, pointing south (in the background the slopes of Mount San Simeone are visible), confirmed by the fact that the shots have pierced it on the left side.



In this photo taken by a British war correspondent the day after the fight, on 4 May, the tank had already been moved to clear the road. Next to the tank are Major General Murray, commander of 6th Armoured Division, and his officers, consulting a map. (IWM, N.A. 24935)



The same tank in the same position, photographed from another angle, with Mount San Simeone in the background. This photo was taken later than the previous ones, as the tank has lost a section of the track skirts; the gun is now pointing at the sky. (photo Jeff Plowman)



Sources:

- War diaries of the British units
- *1st Derbyshire Yeomanry Scrapbook 1939-1947*, 1949
- Stefano Di Giusto, *I reparti Panzer nell'Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland 1943-1945*
- Daniele Guglielmi, *Il carro armato P 40*, in *Mezzi Corazzati* nr. 50, 2008

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