

## 1941: Feeling its way forward

Army Group	Army	StuG Battalions	StuG Btr
Center	4	2	-
	Pz.Gr.2	2	-
	9	2	-
	Pz.Gr.3	-	-
	z.V.	-	-
	Total	6	0
North	16	-	5
	Pz.Gr.4	-	-
	18.	1	-
	z.V.	-	-
	Total	1	5
OKH reserves		0	0
Total East		11	5
Others / Remainder		0	0
Overall total		11	5

Even though Hitler was reluctant to accept the fact, after the successes of the first couple of weeks, it was rapidly becoming clear that not everything was developing ideally. This campaign was particularly demanding, both on men and machines. The equipment frequently proved insufficiently rugged for the distances to be covered. The following extract from the War Diary of the Army Organization Branch accurately describes the situation from a technical point of view:<sup>285</sup>

»Compared to other theatres of combat, the fighting methods of the Russian are significantly more ferocious and determined. Even when surrounded he often fights to the death, even doggedly attacking moving formations and supply units far behind the advance troops that have already broken through. The majority of roads are in unimaginably poor condition, and the distances to be covered on them are substantial. Some vehicles are obsolete, having been operating since the beginning of the war. Moreover, the many French built vehicles are less able to withstand the rigors than the German ones and, in the absence of spare parts, are causing significantly more major breakdowns. Ultimately, however it is the dust, hitherto experi-

<sup>285</sup> OKH, Organisations-Abteilung (III) : Notizen zum K.T.B. : 11. August 1941

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enced only in the desert of North Africa, that penetrates everything, wearing out those engine components subject to friction, and causing an alarming increase in total breakdowns.«

The first Assault Guns were lost in May (one) and June 1941 (three).<sup>286</sup> Thereafter, the number of vehicles destroyed by the end of the year totaled 96.



StuG III Ausf C on a corduroy track in Russia / Alkett, 3. - 5.1941

In July, Sonderverband 288 [Special Operations Formation 288], the size of a reduced regiment, was raised in Potsdam <sup>287</sup> and readied for deployment in Africa. The integrated tank destroyer company included a platoon that was equipped with StuG III Ausf D; see also page 37. This Sonderverband arrived in Libya as an army unit and, in October 1942, was renamed »Pz.Gren.Rgt »Afrika«.

The beginning of November saw the Organization Branch of the General Staff planning the 1941/42 restructuring of the army. The objective was to be as prepared as possible by May 1, 1942 in order to launch a second offensive.<sup>288</sup> As it

<sup>286</sup> OKH, WaA : Waffen bezw. Gerät - in Stück - Heer - Juni [Handtabelle] : ohne Datum [7.1941]

<sup>287</sup> Tessin, Band 9, S. 23

<sup>288</sup> OKH, Org Abt 730/41 g.Kdos.Chefs. : Heeresumbau 1941/42 : 3.11.1941

That summer saw a threat for the tank troops as Hitler began to rely increasingly on Assault Guns and more recently on tank destroyers, i.e. on turretless vehicles. Evidently, the PzKpfw IV was losing popularity with Hitler and continuation of production was under threat. In a presentation to Hitler, Guderian backed up the PzKpfw IV. He listed the benefits and disadvantages of both weapons systems and concluded with the words:<sup>336</sup>

*»When the situation demands it, the Panzer IV can also be used as an Assault Gun; the reverse is never possible... Proposal: no changeover in production, however, within the scope necessary, tanks to be deployed for Assault Gun tasks.«*

Guderian succeeded in preventing the looming termination of production and the PzKpfw IV continued to be built in substantial numbers right up to the end of the war. From December 1943, as a result of the devastating bombing attack on Alkett, output was reduced somewhat; assembly of the PzKpfw IV at Krupp-Gruson in Magdeburg was re-gearred to the Assault Gun IV and the chassis for the anti-aircraft tank Flakpanzer IV.

The firing tactics employed by the assault artillery were not lost on the tank units: when firing, and also with direct fire from Assault Guns, the assault artillery used the artillery's bracketing method.<sup>337</sup> This meant that point targets generally came into effective range with the third shot already. The tanks forces, by contrast, wasted far more rounds to acquire their targets. This triggered an interesting debate when, in the fall of 1943, the Army Ordnance Office determined:<sup>337</sup>

*»The kill rates of Assault Gun battalions are frequently higher than those of the tank units even though both are equipped with the same main armament and the tanks have 360° vision.«*

It was becoming more difficult to score hits at the steadily increasing combat ranges and it was agreed that range finders would be useful, but equipping the troops would take up considerable time. Consequently, the Ordnance Office proposed that Panzerjäger [tank destroyers] and tanks should use the artillery style bracketing method when firing at longer ranges, and that training should be coordinated with the artillery:

*»As this involves the direct firing method introduced by the artillery, it would be easiest if the tank destroyer and tank units were instructed in this specific ballistic issue by the appropriate artillery services ...«*

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<sup>336</sup> Der Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen : Notizen für Führervortrag (5.9.1943) : kein Datum

<sup>337</sup> OKH, WaA Wa Prüf 1/Pak 14746/43 g. : Schiessverfahren bei Pz.Bekämpfung : 22.9.1943

stroyer units.

Consequently, on my orders, reconstitution of the tank destroyer battalions was initiated, with the conversion of 1 company per battalion to Assault Guns or tank destroyers being the first objective.

- 2.) Under no circumstances does equipping the tank destroyer units with these weapons mean a *change* in the tasking of the latter, but at most an *extension* thereof. This was already clearly established in Bulletin 75/3 "Guidelines for the Deployment and Use of Tank Destroyer Companies 7.5/IV (new)" dated 2.10.1943:

The primary task of the anti-tank Assault Gun units is the destruction of enemy tanks, the most dangerous opponent of our infantry. ...

- 3.) Consequently, the anti-tank Assault Gun units have not assumed the task of the assault artillery, but have simply become true tank destroyers....«

Deployment of Assault Guns was planned in the »Basic formation of Jnf.Div.44«. Following related discussions in 1943, deployment was now clearly defined. There were four potential equipment configurations for the tank destroyer units of the Inf Div, two of which included StuG [1. Glied.Art = 1<sup>st</sup> variant et seq of order of battle of the artillery]:

**Mögliche Gliederungsarten der Panz. Jäg. Einheiten bei der Jnf. Div. 44**

1. Glied. Art	2. Glied. Art	3. Glied. Art	4. Glied. Art
Panz. Jäg. Kp. 	Panz. Jäg. Abl. 	Panz. Jäg. Abl. 	Panz. Jäg. Abl. 
	oder 	oder 	oder 
	oder 	oder 	oder 

*Bemerkung: Fla. Kp. bzw. Stu. Gesch. Abl. zum Teil noch nicht vorhanden*

The Assault Gun situation report of July 1, 1944 noted a surplus of four StuG in the assault artillery of the Army East, with an additional 101 vehicles expected

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from allocations. In the Replacement Army, a number of battalions were waiting for their equipment:<sup>375</sup>

		Quota	Surplus	Shortfall	Comments
Under re-equipment with Replacement Army		372			12 StuG battalions
StuG Abt	209	31			
	232	31			
	236	31			
	239	31			
	277	31			
	191	31		31	
	202	31		31	
	203	31		31	
	261	31		31	
	276	31		31	
	279	31		31	
	280	31		31	
Total Effective	12 bat-talions	155		217	Of which 155 operational

In view of the Allied invasion of France on June 6, it is particularly interesting to understand the situation in that theater of operations on June 1: StuG Brig 341 and StuG Lehr Brig 902, with a strength of 59 vehicles, were under the orders of High Command West. In the course of June, StuG Brig 394 was also allocated there. Lehr-Brigade 902 was operating on the Cotentin Peninsula<sup>376</sup> and succeeded in escaping the Allied encirclement with part of its materiel intact.

The »Senior Officer for Armored Artillery« repeatedly seized the opportunity of speaking to experienced assault artillery commanders in order to have their experiences disseminated among the General Staff. His conclusions on the use of indirect fire by the StuG Brig are interesting, and the lack of armored ammunition carriers was described as highly detrimental:<sup>377</sup>

»Indirect fire with Assault Guns: Is rejected totally for StuG, approved of for Stu.Haub. Final decision is required for the

<sup>375</sup> OKH, Höh.Offz.f.Pz.Art., g.Kdos. : Sturmgeschützlage der Sturmartillerie, Stand 1.6.44 : 1.6.1944

<sup>376</sup> OKH, Org Abt I, I/17633/44 g.Kdos. : Notiz betreffend Heerestruppen auf der Halbinsel Cherbourg : 22.6.1944

<sup>377</sup> OKH, Höh.Offz.f.Pz.Art., 4349/44 geh. : Reisebericht über Besuch Sturmgeschütz-Schule am 1.6.44: 4.6.1944 und OKH, Höh.Offz.f.Pz.Art., 4500/44 geh. : Besprechung zwischen Gen.d.Art, Chef Gen.d.Art, H.Pz und Kdr.d.Stu.Gesch.-Schule am 7.6.1944 : 9.6.1944



StuG III Ausf G / An American trooper inspecting the vehicle following the Ardennes Offensive / Attachments for armor skirts modified in the field and travel clamp retrofitted / Alkett, 9. - 10.1944

On the Eastern Front, the equivalent requirement on 5.1.1945 totaled 208 vehicles; the assault artillery with its 31 brigades with the armored forces needed 74,<sup>430</sup> while the 25 panzer divisions of the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS called for 134 units,<sup>431</sup> making a total of 208 Assault Guns. Worth noting is that the number of active StuG brigades had fallen to 31.

Even though manpower and materiel resources were overstretched, Hitler, against the recommendations of the General Staff, insisted on maintaining the number of divisions, instead of lowering them and reinforcing the remaining formations with the disbanded men and weaponry.<sup>432</sup> Consequently, there was no alternative other than to reduce allocations of personnel and equipment. From the end of January, for example, the armored Assault Gun battalions of the grenadier divisions had to make do without six of their allotment of 79 trucks.

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<sup>430</sup> Der Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen : Fehl bei StuG. Gesch. Brig. Osten (Stand 5.1.1945) : ohne Datum

<sup>431</sup> Der Generalinspekteur der Panzertruppen : Panzerbedarf im Osten (Stand 5.1.1945) : ohne Datum

<sup>432</sup> Zeppelin 2516 (Fernschreiben Adolf Hitler) an die Oberkommandos aller Heeresgruppen und selbst. AOK : Stärkung der Kampfkraft der Infanterie : 12.3.1945

This measure economized on 395 trucks per armored division and 385 per panzer grenadier division, albeit at the expense of supply operations.<sup>433</sup>

Assault Gun strengths at the end of January, all units of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS included:<sup>434</sup>

Theater of war	Operational	Under repair	Under delivery	Total
Army Group East	1 803	394	434	2 631
Denmark and Norway	48	4	0	52
Western Europe	340	376	263	979
Army Group C (Italy)	265	80	17	362
Army Group F (Balkans)	17	8	0	25
Total	2 473	862	714	4 049

The level of older vehicles with Army Group East was limited to 14 StuG III L/24 (StuG Lehr Brig 920) and 24 StuG III L/43, with 26 StuG III L/24 (StuG Replacement and Training Battalion 400) and two StuG III L/43 in Denmark. Ten StuG III L/43 were stationed in Norway and another 18 StuG III L/43 in the west. The remaining vehicles reported were StuG L/48 and StuH L/28, with a few Italian-built variants located in Italy and on the Balkans.

The value attached to the StuG brigades is evident from this directive concerning the return of those brigades to the homeland facilities for refitting:<sup>435</sup>

»Dispatch of both Stu Gesch brigades has priority over all other shipments.«

Army Group North proposed »initially transferring completely exhausted units in the vicinity ... to the center of the Reich territory« while reporting, among numerous other formations and units, StuG Brig 185, 904, 909, 279 and 277, plus StuG Btr 4/920 and StuG Abt 302 (Radio Control) for refitting.<sup>436</sup>

The deteriorating transportation situation increased the difficulty of moving Assault Guns to their destinations. A memorandum of the Army Operations Branch documents these difficulties and also the ineffectual effort to provide the senior echelons of the Army with virtually instantaneous reports from unit and battal-

<sup>433</sup> OKH, Gen Insp d Pz Trp/GenStdH/Org Abt I/427/45 g. Kdos : Herabsetzung des Lkw-Solls bei Pz.- und Pz.Gren.Div. : 22.1.1945

<sup>434</sup> OKH, Gen Qu, 910 976/45 g. Kdos. : Sturmgeschützlage : 2.2.1945

<sup>435</sup> OKH, GenStdH, Op Abt, 2096/45 g.Kdos, 2. Ang. : 17.2.1945

<sup>436</sup> ObKdo HGr Nord / Ia, 1446/45 g. Kdos : Fernschreiben an OKH, GenStdH, OP Abt : 21.2.1945