

## 7th Panzer Division: Actual Organisation and Equipment

The 7th Panzer Division was formed on 18th October 1939 at Gera (to the south of Leipzig) from the 2nd Light (2.*leichte*) Division after the Polish campaign. The 2nd Light Division had itself been formed on 10th November 1938 at Gera with most of its men coming from Thuringia. At this time the division's panzers comprised the 66th Panzer Battalion only, although it possessed its full complement of two mechanised cavalry regiments (the 6th and 7th).

Despite having only 85 Pz I and II in its 66th Panzer Battalion, the 2nd Light Division played a significant part in the Polish Campaign.<sup>1</sup> Attached to the XV Corps in 10th Army, the strongest army assembled for operation *Fall Weiss*, the 2nd Light Division pushed through the Polish frontier defences in three days and rapidly advanced north-eastwards towards Kielce. During 8-12th September 1939, the XV Corps (with the 2nd Light Division) formed the southern enveloping arm of the Radom pocket, which trapped the bulk of the Polish forces attempting to withdraw eastwards south of Warsaw. The 2nd Light Division then moved north-westwards and was involved in defeating the only major Polish counterattack of the campaign (on the Bzura west of Warsaw), and the final drive to the Vistula and Warsaw; moving up behind the 10th Army's XVI Corps (1st and 4th Panzer Divisions).

On 1st October 1939 the 2nd Light Division returned to Germany and on 18th October it started to reorganise and reequip as the 7th Panzer Division. During November 1939 the 25th Panzer Regiment was formed with three battalions, using the existing 66th Panzer Battalion as its third battalion.<sup>2</sup> The tanks used were mainly Pz IIs and Czech Pz 38(t)s. Meanwhile the 6th and 7th Mechanised Cavalry Regiments were converted to the 6th and 7th Motorised Infantry (*Schutz*) Regiments, and placed under control of the 7th *Shutzen* Brigade HQ. Also the 2nd Light Division's 7th Reconnaissance Regiment became the 7th Panzer's 37th Reconnaissance Battalion and 7th Motorcycle Infantry Battalion (the latter under the 7th *Shutzen* Brigade).

On 10th May 1940 the 7th Panzer Division was assigned to Hoth's XV Motorised Corps in 4th Army (Army group A). It was commanded by Major General Erwin Rommel. The division advanced into southern Belgium and succeeded in crossing the Meuse River near Dinant, along with the 5th Panzer Division, but only after overcoming fierce French resistance. It then advanced towards Arras and was one of the principal German combat units in some of the most celebrated actions of the French campaign. These included overrunning and destroying the French 1st Armoured Division, repulsing the British counter-attack at Arras, overrunning the French 31st Motorised Division, being the first unit across the Seine River (west of Paris), and cutting off the Allied forces in Cherbourg and subsequently capturing most of the British 51st Highland Division. Unsurprisingly, the 7th Panzer sustained more casualties than any other German division during the French campaign: 42 tanks and 2610 casualties in all, including 682 killed and 285 captured or missing. However during the same period the division succeeded in capturing 97 468 soldiers (including 26 generals and admirals), and destroyed or captured 458 armoured vehicles, 79 aircraft (27 on the ground), 277 field guns, 64 anti-tank guns, and around 7300 motor vehicles.<sup>3</sup> The 7th Panzer Division's performance had earned it the well deserved nickname 'The Ghost Division'; a name which remained with 7th Panzer throughout its existence.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Including *Kleine Panzerbefehlswagen* (Pz I) command tanks. T., Jentz, Panzer Truppen, The Complete Guide To The Creation And Combat Deployment of Germany's Tank Force 1933-1942, Schiffer Military History, Atglen PA, 1996, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> The 66th Panzer Battalion didn't officially become the III./25 Panzer Battalion until 19th February 1941. However for all practical purposes it was the 25th Panzer Regiment's third battalion during 1940. G. Nafziger, The German Order of Battle: Panzers and Artillery in WWII, Greenhill Books, London, 1999, pp. 64-67.

<sup>3</sup> S. W. Mitcham, The Panzer Legions, Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, PA, 2007, p. 81.

<sup>4</sup> The name supposedly came from the fact that the Allies never knew the 7th Panzer Division's exact location during the French campaign, presumably because it moved so fast. However, Rommel's tendency to act on his own initiative,

The 7th Panzer remained in the Bordeaux region of France until February 1941 when it was transferred to East Prussia. During this time no regimental sized units were added to, or removed from, the division; although the combat power of most existing units was significantly improved. For example, the 25th Panzer Regiment retained its three panzer battalions, but each battalion had an additional light panzer company added (i.e. three light panzer companies per battalion vs normally two). In addition, a third heavy artillery battalion was added to the division's 78th Motorised Artillery Regiment, the 42nd Anti-Tank Battalion was expanded from two companies to three companies and issued with 18 5cm PaK 38 anti-tank guns, the 37th Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion's light armoured cars were replaced with the excellent French Panhard 178 heavy armoured cars, and elements of the division were armoured (carried in APCs). Like almost all the panzer divisions in 1941, 7th Panzer Division was a significantly more powerful and resilient combat unit in June 1941 than it had been in May 1940.

On 22nd June 1941, the combat, signal, transport and supply elements of the 7th Panzer Division were organised as shown in table 7th Pz D. Also shown is the actual equipment in the division on 22nd June 1941. There were a number of noteworthy TOE and equipment variations in the 7th Panzer Division's organisation at this time.

- The 25th Panzer Regiment was a large panzer unit using the 'panzer regiment with Czech tanks' TOE; authorised 239 tanks (vs normally 162 with German tanks).<sup>5</sup> In addition, the I./25, II./25 and III./25 Panzer Battalions had three light panzer companies each instead of two, which meant the 25th Panzer Regiment was authorised 305 tanks. It actually had the relatively large number of 265 tanks on strength, of which 30 were Pz IVs and 167 were Pz 38(t)s.<sup>6</sup>
- In the 7th *Schutzen* Brigade, only the 1st Company, 6th Motorised Infantry (*Schutzen*) Regiment was armoured.
- The 7th Panzer Division had the 705th Self Propelled Infantry Gun Company attached to its *schutzen* brigade.
- The 37th Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion was equipped with two armoured car companies (vs normally one). In these companies, French Panhard 178 armoured cars (designated *Panzerspahwagen Panhard 178-P204(f)*) were authorised in place of Sd.Kfz 221, 222, 231 and 232 armoured cars. In addition French Panhard 178 armoured radio cars (designated *Panzerspahwagen Panhard (Fu) 178-P204(f)*) were authorised in place of Sd.Kfz 223 and 263 armoured radio cars. There were thus 27 Panhard 178s per armoured car company, of which five were armoured radio cars. In addition, the seven armoured radio cars in the armoured reconnaissance battalion's signal platoon were replaced with cross-country radio carriers.
- The 42nd Motorised Anti-Tank Battalion had the 3./59 Light Anti-Aircraft Company semi-permanently attached.<sup>7</sup>
- The 42nd Motorised Anti-Tank Battalion had six 5cm PaK 38 anti-tank guns and four 3.7cm PaK 36/37 anti-tank guns in each of its anti-tank companies (vs normally three PaK 38 and eight PaK 36/37, respectively).

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sometimes before advising (or without advising) the higher commands, meant that OKH/OKW also had trouble fixing the division's location. It is therefore equally probable that frustrated German staff officers in the OKH/OKW christened the 7th Panzer the *Gespenster-Division* (the Ghost Division).

<sup>5</sup> Refer Part V 3 (3) a. - 'German Army Armoured, Mechanised and Motorised Units - June 1941 Panzer Divisions' for details on the TOE of panzer regiments equipped with Czech tanks.

<sup>6</sup> On 10th May 1940 the 25th Panzer Regiment had 225 tanks, comprised of 34 Pz I, 68 Pz II, 91 Pz38(t), 24 Pz IV and 8 PzBef 38(t).

<sup>7</sup> The 3./59th AA Company is treated as a separate GHQ unit for the purposes of this analysis and is not shown in table 7th Pz D.

- The 78th Motorised Artillery Regiment had one battery of 10cm sK18 guns in place of one Battery of the 15cm sFH 18 howitzers.
- The 58th Divisional Supply Battalion contained an additional motorised transport column (60 ton), designated the 15./58th.

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On 22nd June 1941 the 7th Panzer Division was in East Prussia assigned to the XXXIX Motorised Corps in 3rd Panzer Group, along with the 20th Panzer Division. Presumably for reasons of supply and maintenance, the OKH had decided to concentrate four of the six panzer divisions equipped with Czech tanks in one panzer group.<sup>8</sup> In June 1941 the 7th Panzer Division spearheaded the XXXIX Motorised Corps' advance through Vilnius (north of Bialystok), which very quickly became the northern inner encirclement arm of the Bialystok-Minsk pocket.<sup>9</sup> Urged on without respite by the various German commands, the XXXIX Motorised Corps breached the Stalin line and stormed across the Beresina River near Borisov. The corps then played a major part in defeating the 5th and 7th Mechanised Corps during the Soviet 'Lepel Offensive Operation', and pre-empted the Red Army's Reserve Front deployment along the Dnieper-Dvina land bridge by seizing Vitebsk.<sup>10</sup> Crossing the western Dvina River, the XXXIX Motorised Corps, with 7th Panzer in the lead, rapidly formed the northern arm of the Smolensk pocket.

Holding the line in Army Group Centre during most of August and through September (not doing very much), the 7th Panzer was assigned to the LVI Motorised Corps (transferred from Army Group North) in the 3rd Panzer Group. In early October the 7th Panzer Division was the most powerful armoured unit in the LVI Motorised Corps, which pierced the Soviet front north of Vyazma and formed the northern arm of the huge Vyazma pocket. The 7th Panzer Division then pressed on to Klin and the northern approaches to Moscow. As an indication of how close to Moscow the 7th Panzer Division came; on 28th November 1941 a regiment of the 7th Panzer captured the bridge across the Volga-Moscow Canal at Yakhroma. However, under rapidly deteriorating weather and supply conditions, and with no reserves available to exploit the bridgehead, the 7th Panzer was forced to withdraw back across the canal. In December-January the retreat continued back to the defensive lines at Rzhev.

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<sup>8</sup> These were the 7th, 12th, 19th and 20th Panzer Divisions in the 3rd Panzer Group, Army Group Centre. The 7th and 20th Panzer were also both equipped with French Panhard 178 armoured cars.

<sup>9</sup> The Initial Period of War on the Eastern Front; 22nd June –August 1941: Proceedings of the Fourth Art of War Symposium, Garmisch, FRG, 1987, Ed D. M. Glantz, Frank Cass & Co Ltd, London, 1997, p. 177. Fig 88.

<sup>10</sup> Refer to '12th Panzer Division: Actual Organisation and Equipment' for more on the 'Lepel Offensive Operation'.