

This story of Königs Tiger 104 & 121 is a copy of a forum post at World War Two Zone Forums, the original source:

<http://worldwartwozone.com/forums/index.php?/topic/12340-panzer-tales/page-48>

During the fall of 1944 the German Army tried unsuccessfully to stem the tide of the Allied advance through France. During this time Schwere Panzer Abteilung 501 lost nearly all its tanks. Below is a brief account of the recovery of two of those King Tigers, and their subsequent captivity.

Tiger 121 of the first Kompanie SS Schw. Pz. Abt. 501 was commanded by an Oskarführer called Zahner*. On 9 September 1944 he and his crew were falling back from Guise and at a village called La Capelle, near St. Quentin the Tiger ran out of fuel. The crew disabled the 88mm gun as well as exploding some of the tanks ammunition in the engine compartment. The Tiger stood in the road, effectively blocking it. Later, some American engineers came across the tank and bulldozed it from the road. In doing so they overturned the Tiger, leaving it lying on its turret beside the road.

Tiger 104 was the mount of HQ squad leader, Oberscharführer Sepp Franzl, among his crew were gunner Unterscharführer Hess, the loader, Panzerschütze Graf von Helldorf, radio operator Rottenführer Schrader. The fifth crew member is not known. The loader Graf von Helldorf recalled that their normal driver had been sent to the Lazarett two days earlier. Therefore the driver here was a stranger to him.** Tiger 104 had broken off from an engagement with several Sherman tanks. During this combat the tanks off-side suspension had been damaged. The crews nervousness can be gauged by the fact they fired at everything in sight. During the afternoon the tank pulled off the D981 into a field near Aux Marais, South West of Beauvais*** and began to fire on a farm building, believing it to house an anti-tank gun. When the Tiger moved off again sharply the off-side final drive failed, the tank was immobile. Franzl ordered the crew out, unaware that their movements were being observed by a group of FFI. The resistance group opened fire. Somehow all the crew did escape and were able to get back to their Kompanie by nightfall.

Franzl's Tiger stood in the field for some time, the tide of war had swept past it. The autumn was wet, and soon the 70 ton behemoth had sunk into the field up to its deck plate.

Below: one of the series of well known photographs of 104 taken during the Autumn of 1944. Note a German helmet lies beneath the massive 88mm gun. Also she has lost some of her armoured Schürzen. The hull MG34 has also disappeared!



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Above: Tiger 121 lying upturned in the field near La Capelle in September 1944. This is how it was photographed by a very jubilant Frenchman as he cycled around the area so recently liberated by members of the US 4th Armoured Division. We believe that this is possibly one of the earliest photos of 121 taken after it's loss. They clearly show how the Tigers massive 88mm gun was traversed to almost 90 degrees to the hull, thus making recovery difficult. Add to this the slope of the embankment that the tank lies on. Thanks Teddy for the photos!

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This was the situation when, on 16 December 1944 a recovery team from the British REME arrived at La Capelle via Boulogne. During their journey they had to negotiate blocked roads and blown bridges. The team consisted of two Diamond T recovery tractors and a trailer, (originally built earlier in the war for an experimental heavy tank). As 121 lay upside down the turret & gun were at an angle to the hull. Firstly the turret/gun and hull had to be lined up in order to right the tank. This was not without difficulty. The Diamond T's were fitted with tracks to avoid sinking in the mud. Once this was done winch cables were attached and using a series of pulley mechanisms, "snatch blocks" the tank was righted. The loading onto the trailer went smoothly, although all the REME equipment was strained to the limit, not ever having been designed to pull such a weight.

On 18 December, the two tractors, trailer with 121 set off for the coast. As both tractors were linked in tandem the drivers had to synchronise gear changes, in order to avoid jerking along. A system of signals was soon devised and apart from slowing for obstacles the convoy managed a steady 6-10 mph.



Above: Tiger 121 has been loaded onto the specially constructed trailer. Just visible above the "white box" on the trailer is one of the hydraulic rams that lowered down once the pull had been completed.

At Cambrai the convoy parked in the town square for the night. Later one of the team returned to find a Frenchman rummaging through the vehicle lockers. When challenged, the man launched into a torrent of explanation, which the soldier was unable to understand. A second Frenchman rode up on his bicycle and tried to explain, in broken English what his countryman was up to. While doing so the "curious" Frenchman took the opportunity to escape, using the second Frenchman's bicycle! On Christmas day the REME recovery team met their American counterparts and Tiger 121 began it's journey to America...

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The REME team arrived at Beauvais after their initial success at La Capelle in high spirits. Despite the freezing weather they believed that the recovery of Tiger 104 was going to be easy, compared to 121, (but they knew nothing of the drive failure).

The initial attempt to pull 104 from the field proved fruitless, her tracks were frozen to the ground. More cables were laid, so as to generate a greater pulling ratio, in the end a 6-1 ratio. In addition, petrol was poured onto the ground alongside the Tigers tracks and set alight. This had the desired effect and the tank moved several feet, with the off-side track locked.

Next day the same pull ratio was rigged up. Overnight Tiger 104 had become frozen to the field once more. As the tractors pulled, the towing cable became taught, then finally broke with a sharp crack! Fortunately no one was in the way, although a dog, that had attached itself to the team took flight at this, not to be seen again.

Eventually Tiger 104 was loaded onto the trailer and began its journey to the coast. The convoy of Diamond T's and trailer made its way to Calais. Once there it was loaded onto a train ferry and brought back to England. The recovery operation drew to a close on January 15 when Tiger 104 arrived at Chobham in Surrey, the home of the Directorate of Tank Design. Apart from the broken cables, to be expected in a recovery of such magnitude the Diamond T's did a steady 3 miles to the gallon.

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Above and previous picture, the recovery of 104. Both pictures show damage to the right side of the hull. Tiger 104 has been moved from the AFV Wing at the RMCS Shrivenham to Bovington in 2006. The UK's only Henschel turreted Tiger II.

*Patrick Agte's book "Michael Wittman and the Tiger Commanders of the Leibstandarte" cite Unterscharführer Heinz Buchner as commander of this tank.

** This account amended after interview with Graf von Helldorf November 2002.

*** Jean-Paul Pallud successfully located the field near Beauvais, see Rückmarsch, Then & Now. ISBN: 1-870067-57-6. It was lost on 30th August 1944.



Above; Tiger 121 on the road near La Capelle, 1944.

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Off road! a recent discovery, Tiger 121 after being rolled. Taken in 1944 by US MP the late Bert Spiese.



Tiger 121 during her journey to the coast.