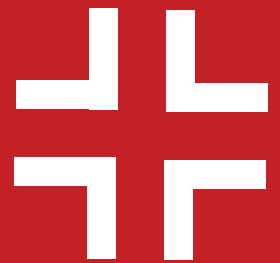




Thomas Anderson

STURMGESCHÜTZ

PANZER, PANZERJÄGER, WAFFEN-SS AND
LUFTWAFFE UNITS 1943–45



STURMGESCHÜTZ

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ESCHÜTZ

**Panzer, Panzerjäger, Waffen-SS
and Luftwaffe Units 1943-45**

Thomas Anderson



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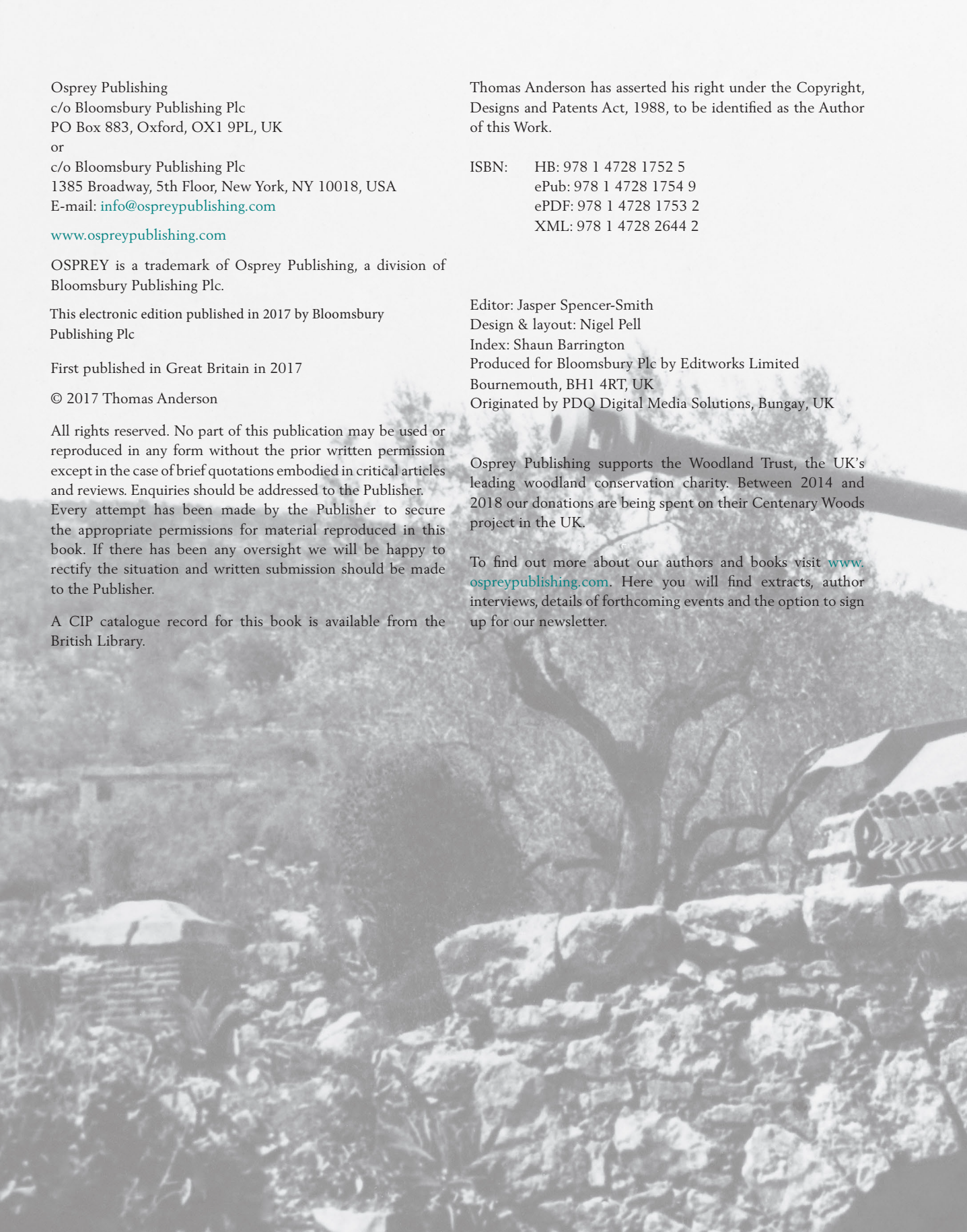
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CONTENTS



Introduction	6
chapter 1 Waffen-SS	24
chapter 2 <i>Luftwaffe</i> Field Divisions	52
chapter 3 1943 – in the <i>Panzertruppe</i>	86
chapter 4 Special Formations	124
chapter 5 Infantry Formations	156
chapter 6 Increased Production	194
chapter 7 ‘ <i>neuses Sturmgeschütz</i> ’ in 1945	228
chapter 8 Conclusion	256
Index	266



Introduction

The *Sturmgeschütz* was a genuine German invention and, although the idea of mounting a gun in a fixed superstructure was neither new nor future-looking, the type became a vital weapon in the arsenal of the Third Reich and was produced in very large numbers.

As described in my book *Sturmartillerie* (Osprey, 2016) the *Sturmgeschütz* assault gun was originally intended to be a support weapon for the assault infantry. The requirement for such a vehicle was noted in a letter, dated 8 June 1936, written by an officer of the *Generalstab des Heeres* (GenStdH – General Staff of the Army) to his superiors:

We have to ascertain that the *Panzerwaffe* and the *Sturmartillerie*, which are both similarly equipped, will follow absolutely different tactical approaches.

I.) *Panzerverbände* [tank formations, here Panzer divisions (PzDiv), author] are mixed units able to fight independently and pursue their own combat missions. These PzDiv are equipped with motorized artillery and infantry to enable success.

II.) *Panzerbrigaden* [tank brigades] is the force for the focal point of an attack. In contrast to the PzDiv, the *Panzerbrigade* is unable to operate independently.

III.) *Sturmartillerie*, it is relevant as to whether it will be produced as a tank or a self-propelled gun, or a support weapon for the infantry. It should be able to provide support fire at a minimum range of 7km as part of the divisional artillery. The *Sturmartillerie* is deployed as escort artillery to support an infantry assault by directly attacking dangerous targets. Unlike a tank formation, which attacks in large numbers, the *Sturmartillerie* will only be committed in platoon strength.

Each infantry division will have to be issued at least with one battalion of *Sturmartillerie* formed of five batteries with six assault guns each. The division should consider the removal of a light artillery battalion or the tank destroyer battalion.

Generaloberst
Heinz Guderian,
Generalinspekteur der
Panzertruppen, making a
speech to an assembly of
tank crews while standing
on the engine deck of a
Sturmgeschütz. Initially he
had vehemently opposed
the introduction of the
type, but by 1943 he was
forced to realize that the
Sturmgeschütz was vital
if the combat strength
of his armoured forces
was to be maintained.
(Historyfacts)



A *Sturmgeschütz* Ausf F/8 carrying *Luftwaffe* infantry, possibly during a training exercise. The only markings on the vehicle are the solid *Balkenkreuze* (the word is for a cross made from two baulks of timber and not a reference to the Balkans) which were applied by the manufacturer. (Anderson)

The GenStdH replied in a letter dated 16 June 1936, with these comments:

- 1) In general, we agree on the specification and tactical deployment for the proposed *Sturmgeschütz*.
- 2) It seems necessary to emphasize the difference between the *Sturmartillerie* and the divisional [conventional, author] artillery to set clear requirements for the development of the type.
- 3) It is the task of the *Sturmgeschütz* to destroy enemy machine-gun nests by direct fire; thus it is a weapon of the infantry, and must not be committed as artillery. Also as the infantry operates at ranges up to 4km only, sighting devices for indirect fire up to 7km range are not necessary.
- 4) Also it must be explored if the *Sturmgeschütz* can perform as the (currently under development) tank destroyer. Thus duplicated development can be avoided.

However, the demand for the production of such a large number of *Sturmgeschütz* was beyond the capacity of the German armaments industry. In 1939, the first phase *Mobilmachung* (general mobilization) resulted in the formation of 39 infantry divisions, five tank divisions, three mountain divisions and four light divisions. As part of this plan, the GenStdH decided

that there was a far from realistic requirement for more than 1,100 *Sturmgeschütz*.

At the beginning of *Fall Weiss* (Case White), the Polish campaign, the *Panzerwaffe* was equipped with some 3,000 tanks, but only 750 were truly of combat value. German military planners accepted the situation, and all plans to provide an infantry division with a *Sturmgeschütz* detachment were forgotten.

This was possibly instigated by *Generaloberst* Heinz Guderian (one of the 'fathers' of the *Panzerwaffe* and certainly its most influential supporter), who had identified the financial limitations. Subsequently he strongly opposed any suggestion of supplying the infantry with tanks, being convinced that the establishment of an armoured element for the infantry would weaken his creation; a battle-winning powerful and efficient *Panzerwaffe*.

However in 1940, when forces commanded by General Erich von Manstein – who supported the idea of armoured elements for the infantry – received 30 *Sturmgeschütz* a new military force was born: the *Sturmartillerie*.

Due to severe financial constrictions, *Sturmgeschütz* production commenced in late January 1940 and proceeded at a very slow rate. Over the next 12 months some 184 were produced, and a further 540 were built during 1941. Five independent batteries were established, before and during the invasion of France, possibly to trial how the type could be used

In early 1944, to allow an increase in production of the *Sturmgeschütz* it was decided to use the chassis of the PzKpfw IV resulting in the *Sturmgeschütz* IV. The vehicle has been coated with Zimmerit anti-magnetic paste and is fitted intact with *Seitenschürzen* (side skirts). Although no unit markings are visible, the vehicle is known to be from SS-PzAbt 17, part of 17.SS-PzGrenDiv Götz von Berlichingen. (Schneider)



A *Sturmgeschütz* carrying infantry advances towards Banská-Bystrica (an anti-Nazi stronghold) to attack partisan forces fighting in the Slovakian National Uprising, which began on 29 August and was put down on 27 October 1944. (Anderson)







A *Sturmgeschütz* from 24.PzDiv; this was the only PzDiv to maintain the traditions of a former cavalry division. Instead of batteries or companies, the unit had *Schwadronen* (squadrons). The vehicle appears to be new and has a chassis number (95210) stencilled on the front, identifying it as having been built by Mühlenbau und Industrie AG (MIAG). (Münch)

in combat. In the autumn of 1940, the first assault gun battalions with three batteries of six *Sturmgeschütz* each were established. Despite the original intention to provide each infantry division with a StuG battalion, these units were organized on *Heerestruppen* (army troop) level. The staff at higher command level decided that they should be deployed at the focal point of an attack, either concentrated during a major assault or divided into single batteries.

The *Sturmgeschütz*

The leading idea behind the *Sturmartillerie* was to give the attacking infantry battalions an armoured spearhead, a 'battering ram' intended to neutralize enemy infantry or anti-tank gun positions. However, it is interesting to note that before World War II began discussions were taking place as to whether the *Sturmgeschütz* could also be used as a tank destroyer, possibly replacing the dedicated tank destroyer battalion in an infantry division.

At that time the GenStdH preference was for open-topped vehicles which allowed the crew to have to a clear (but dangerous) view of the

The crew of a *Sturmgeschütz* Ausf G from 1. Skijäger-Division are wearing the standard-pattern field grey *Sonderbekleidung* (special clothing). The vehicle is fitted with *Winterketten* (winter tracks) to improve mobility over muddy or snow-covered terrain. A wooden beam, for recovery purposes, has been placed on the track cover. (Anderson)



battlefield. This was soon dropped, since the vehicles would operate near or at the front-line and under heavy fire from all types of weapon.

By 1939, the design and development of a very low-profile vehicle with a multi-angled superstructure built on the chassis of the PzKpfw III Ausf F had been completed. It was armed with a short-barrelled 7.5cm K 37 L/24 in a mounting which allowed limited side traverse.

The somewhat (at that time) heavy calibre gun had a flat trajectory ideal for attacking enemy positions with high-explosive (HE) ammunition. Combat against an enemy tank was to be avoided and only occur in an emergency.

After the launch of *Unternehmen* (Operation) Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, *Sturmgeschütz* units were compelled to attack a wider range of targets when German infantry divisions were faced by masses of Soviet tanks. The situation became more desperate when the Red Army deployed the T-34 medium tank and the KV heavy tank, in ever-growing numbers on the battlefield. German tank destroyer battalions had become depleted and could not cope; the situation began to threaten the front-line positions held by the infantry.

When available, *Sturmgeschütz* proved to be capable of defeating the superior modern Russian tanks; at close range the 7.5cm gun, when firing HE ammunition, could seriously damage the turret or destroy the running gear on a T-34 or KV. If armour-piercing (AP) ammunition was available then the gun could penetrate the side and rear armour of an enemy tank. However, the clear tactical superiority of the better-trained crews and their well-functioning radio equipment should turn out to be of greater importance in deciding many battles.

The men of the *Panzerwaffe*, including Guderian, had no choice other than to accept that the *Sturmgeschütz* was a very versatile weapon and that the *Sturmartillerie* was a valuable asset to the army. Alkett, at that time the sole manufacturer of the *Sturmgeschütz*, was ordered to increase production; around 80 were completed in April 1941, and this number would steadily be increased.

The *Panzerschock* (tank shock) became more prevalent among German forces as ever-increasing numbers of T-34 and KV tanks appeared on the battlefield. To improve the situation a number of measures were expedited, the most important being the development of a new and powerful tank (also anti-tank) gun: the 7.5cm KwK 40 L/43 (for tank use) or StuK 40 L/43 (for *Sturmgeschütz* use). The gun had a long barrel which produced a much higher muzzle velocity. In March 1942, this high-performance gun began to be mounted in the *Sturmgeschütz* and the PzKpfw IV Ausf F2 and Ausf G.

A short time after the first KwK 40-armed *Sturmgeschütz* reached front-line units it was found that it could be successfully used as a *Panzerjäger* (tank destroyer). Many *Sturmartillerie* units, deployed to support the infantry, were re-tasked to this new role and the *Sturmgeschütz* became a weapon much feared by Soviet forces on the *Ostfront* (Eastern Front).



One question, seemingly a ridiculous one, arises: What exactly defines a *Sturmgeschütz*? Is it the technical layout; the lack of a turret, or is it how it was deployed tactically? It is my opinion that combination of all these features that characterizes the German *Sturmgeschütz*.

While the original task of 'supporting an assault by the infantry' was the primary deployment for the StuG as part of the *Sturmartillerie*, assault guns were being issued in growing numbers to other services. For a number of reasons (which will be discussed later), *Sturmgeschütz* were assigned to the Waffen-SS, and also to the *Panzerjäger* detachments of *Luftwaffe* field units. By 1943 the situation with the supply of tanks became desperate: inadequate production in the Reich forced military planners to divert assault guns to Panzer grenadier and tank divisions.

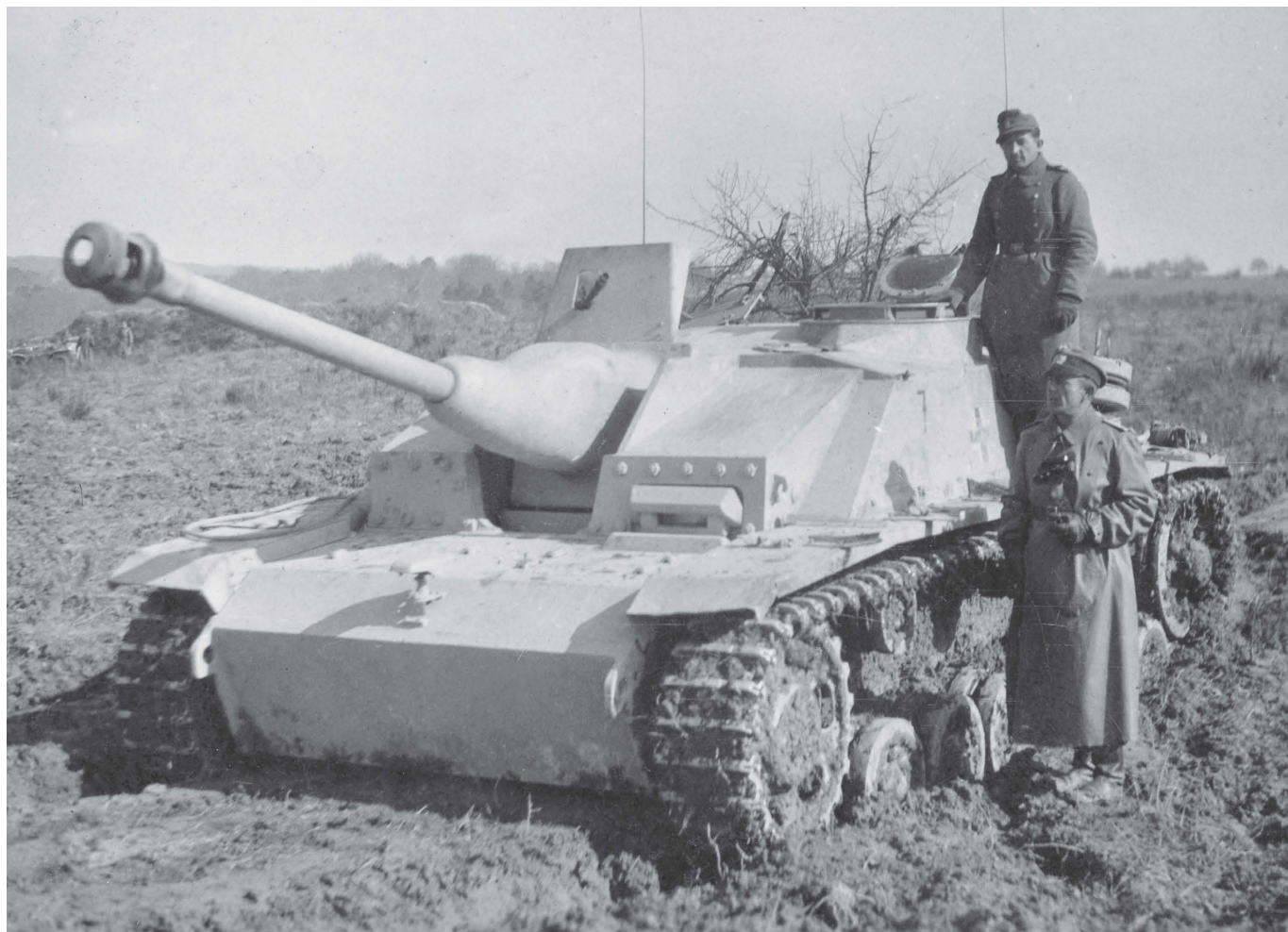
At around the same time the meaning of the term *Sturmgeschütz* would also change. As enemy equipment improved, military planners initiated the

December 1944: A *Sturmgeschütz* in a battle-damaged German town during fighting to the west of Aachen. Retreating German troops would soon set up positions in the Hürtgen Forest, in an attempt to delay the advance by US forces. The *Seitenschürzen* (side skirts), intended as protection against the Soviet anti-tank rifle. (Anderson)



Sturmgeschütz of an unidentified unit advance along a mud-covered road: The crew has fitted a large tarpaulin over the superstructure to prevent rain from entering the fighting compartment. (Getty)





A factory-new *Sturmgeschütz* Ausf G: The single numeral '7' possibly indicates that it is from a smaller unit, such as a company issued to an infantry *PzJgAbt*. The cast-metal deflector fitted in front of the cupola was added on the assembly lines. The crew has used concrete to further reinforce the armour. (Anderson)

rapid development of new weapons. Parallel to the work on heavy tanks, a *schweres Sturmgeschütz* was produced, using the chassis of Ferdinand Porsche's ill-fated design for the Tiger tank. Known as the 'Ferdinand' it was intended as a *schwerer Durchbruchspanzer* (heavy breakthrough tank), thus strengthening the offensive arsenal of the *Sturmartillerie*. The *schweres Sturmgeschütz* was assigned to five *Sturmartillerie* battalions; three existing (*StuGAbt* 911, 197 and 912) and two new units. However, all were transferred to the *Panzerjäger Truppen* (tank hunter Troop).

Adolf Hitler's obsession for a heavier tank had been temporarily satisfied. However, German engineers were compelled to design and produce ever heavier types, culminating in the 70-ton *Jagdtiger*.

During this period, at the instigation of Guderian, a time-consuming conflict of interests began in the military. While the artillery was confident of getting new heavy weapons, the new *Generalinspekteur des Heeres* persuaded Hitler to supply the new Ferdinand to the *Panzerjägertruppe*, and

thus under his control; the *Sturmartillerie* had finally lost any prospect of receiving more effective weapons.

Despite the fact that the *Sturmgeschütz* had proven to be a reliable and effective tank destroyer on the Eastern Front, continued availability of the type was put into question. To facilitate the manufacture of the PzKpfw V Panther, all production of the PzKpfw III was halted despite the effect this would have on the supply of assault guns. In medium turn, it was considered that all *Sturmgeschütz* would be produced on the chassis of the PzKpfw IV. However, these plans were not implemented.

More importantly, in late 1942 the development of a '*neues Sturmgeschütz*' (new assault gun), which was intended to replace the *Sturmgeschütz* as a tank destroyer, began. Guderian demanded that these new developments were placed under the control of the *Panzerjägerwaffe*; ultimately the new assault gun became the *Panzerjäger*. The tank destroyer units were clearly identified, and the *Sturmartillerie* had to be content with the *Sturmgeschütz*.

Thus with the Jagdpanzer IV, an improved *Sturmgeschütz*, which had an improved sloping superstructure providing in increased level of protection for the crew, entered service. Initially the 7.5cm KwK 40 L/48 gun was installed, but later versions (Panzer IV/70 [A] and [V]) mounted the 7.5cm KwK 42 L/70 gun as used for PzKpfw V Panther.

Interestingly, development of the well-known *Jagdpanther* commenced under the designation '8.8cm *Sturmgeschütz* 42', and the later *Jagdtiger* under '*schweres Sturmgeschütz mit 12.8cm Kanone*'.

Heavy bombing of the Alkett factory at the end of 1943 destroyed vital parts of the StuG production line which forced planners to reactivate earlier plans to utilize the PzKpfw IV chassis. The resulting vehicle was the StuG IV, and nearly all were delivered to tank destroyer units. The older type was designated StuG III and remained in production until 1945.

In 1944, a new *leichter Panzerjäger* (le PzJg) was developed using the chassis and running gear of the obsolete PzKpfw 38(t). This vehicle, the le PzJg 38 *Hetzer* (Baiter), was issued to *Panzerjäger* companies and some StuGBrig.

Identification

My research for this book has been based on wartime documentation only, much of which is stored in the archives of NARA and Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv and others. Original and relevant photographs are important to support the text, but the choice of such material is not without problems. Having collected thousands of images of *Sturmgeschütz* over the past decades, I have always tried to assign the vehicle shown to its respective unit; I must admit that identification has been only 20 or 25 per cent successful.

Where photographs have been found in surviving albums assembled by veterans or private collectors, clear identification can be made with much greater certainty. If a unit badge is visible the task is easy, but such

A *Leutnant* from PzJgKp 1021 in 21. *Luftwaffe Felddivision* (LwFeldDiv – air force field division) stands beside a *Sturmgeschütz* from the unit. After the crew had camouflaged the vehicle with whitewash, they welded metal rods around the commander's cupola to allow the application of concrete for extra protection. (Anderson)





distinguishing features are not always visible. Furthermore, investigation was made more complicated due to the fact that many units never used a specific emblem, or they were not applied.

If an identified unit fitted some specific alterations or modifications to their vehicles, then this can be also be used when identifying images. A fine example of this are the different types of lamp guard fitted by the workshops in some units, and these distinctive features provide reliable identification of a number *Sturmgeschütz* batteries or battalions. Unfortunately not all units introduced such modifications, or there was not time to fit them on the battlefield. For instance, lamp guards were fitted during a short period which ended late 1941.

In late 1942, a growing number of *Sturmgeschütz* were beginning to be issued to tank destroyer detachments in *Luftwaffe* and infantry divisions; later to tank units. A number of these units were equipped with only 14 or even ten *Sturmgeschütz*, making identification virtually impossible.

A *Sturmgeschütz* Ausf G from Lw-PzDiv Hermann Göring has been fitted with smoke candle dischargers. In Italy, the *Sturmgeschütz* was highly-valued by crews fighting Allied armour, but was dogged by mechanical reliability; particularly the delicate final drive units. The small box on the track cover, which was normally fixed on the engine deck, contained the track tools. (Anderson)

Thomas Anderson
July 2017



An instructor lectures personnel of a *Luftwaffe* field unit on how to recognize and attack Soviet tanks by using a scale model of each type currently in service. (Anderson)





Waffen-SS 1

From the very first beginnings of the '*Bewegung*' (the Nazi movement), Hitler relied on paramilitary units. Most noticeable of these in the 1920s was the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) – a band of thugs which provided a 'security' service during the first public appearances of Adolf Hitler – commanded by Ernst Röhm. In parallel to the SA the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) was created, a protection guard for Hitler and other leading member of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP – Nazi party). While the SS initially remained a small and elite organization, the SA quickly expanded. During the early 1930s, the tasks of the SA were quickly broadened to spreading terror to undermine public order and to intimidate dissenters. Personal animosities soon led to rising tensions between the SA leadership and the NSDAP. While Hitler was certain of seizing power by 'democratic' means, the SA preferred violence and endorsed a military coup. History shows that Hitler achieved his aim in 1932 in a quasi-democratic election, which was accompanied by almost civil war conditions. These were mainly promoted by the SA, which at that time had more than 200,000 members.

***Sturmgeschütz* for the Waffen-SS**

It is difficult to determine when exactly Hitler changed his attitude towards the SA. Despite the strong and possibly decisive support it gave, the now Führer finally decided to neutralize the organization. In the so-called 'Röhm-Coup', the SA leadership was put down in July 1934 and many, including Röhm, were executed by men of the *Schutzstaffel*.

Soon after Hitler became Führer he began to take measures aimed at depriving the Reichstag, the elected parliament, of its powers.

In Hitler's eyes the *Reichswehr* formed a last obstacle to his claim for absolute power, and although the armed forces were led by strictly apolitical officers, Hitler had an obsessive mistrust of the military.

Surrounded by SS-officers, *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler inspects one of the first *Sturmgeschütz* Auf A issued to *Sturmabatterie* Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH). Himmler was eager to assemble a political army and Waffen-SS units attracted his particular attention; many were to receive privileged treatment. (NARA)



In March 1943, SS-PzGrenDiv Das Reich (DR) was in combat in the vicinity of Kharkov. A *Sturmgeschütz* Ausf. G (from the December 1942 production batch), has the tactical mark stencilled on the glacis plate identifying it as a vehicle from 2. Batterie (StuGAbt). Note the ventilator mounted on the top of the superstructure. A *Maschinengewehr* 42 (MG – machine gun) is carried but without a gun shield. (Anderson)

In summer 1934 Adolf Hitler, as a first step, laid claim to being the supreme commander of the armed forces, and all servicemen were forced to swear an oath to their Führer. The *Reichswehr* became the *Deutsche Wehrmacht* (German armed forces) which supported Hitler and his government, but his paranoia would lead to the slow conversion of the SS to a political army – loyal soldiers devoted to their Führer. By August 1938, the armed elements of the SS had been formed as an elite division, and a year later the term Waffen-SS emerged. In a *Führererlass* (Führer decree) dated August 1938, Hitler authorized the establishment of the first fully-armed SS infantry division – Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler (LSSAH).

On 16 October 1939 a second unit, the SS-Division Totenkopf was established, and this was followed by the SS-*Verfügungsddivision* on 1 April 1940. In parallel to these units, the SS-based *Ordnungspolizei* (Order Police) was authorized to form a dedicated SS-*Polizeidivision*.

In a letter dated 17 April 1940, *Reichsführer*-SS Heinrich Himmler informed Generaloberst Walther von Brauchitsch, the commander-in-chief of the army: