

THE SUMMER OF '42

A Critical Period for the Wehrmacht in Russia

By Greg Moore

Panzer Divisions

In the summer of 1942, the German Wehrmacht had 19 panzer divisions fighting on the Russian Front. Tank losses had been heavy since the invasion in June of 1941 but new tanks were coming into service. The following is the organization and equipment of a panzer division during this critical period.

Panzer Battalion

German tank production had not been able to keep up with the losses suffered in Russia since June of 1941. None of the panzer battalions by the summer of 1942 were at full strength and many were at lower than half strength. For the summer offensive in the south, the panzer divisions involved needed to be close to full strength. The decision was made to strip tanks from the other panzer divisions, particularly the ones in Army Group Center. One battalion (out of two) was taken from each of these divisions and sent south. These battalions (plus a few new ones) were used to increase the number in each of the nine panzer divisions in the south to three battalions. Also, one panzer battalion was added to each of the six motorized infantry divisions in Army Group South. This left the panzer divisions in the north and the center woefully understrength in tanks, making them hardly better than infantry divisions for the rest of the year. Combat tanks employed during this period include the following:



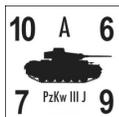
The diminutive Panzer II with its puny 20mm cannon actually had its biggest production year in 1942 since before the war started with 322 new ones built. These tanks were still mixed into most tank battalions but were used mostly for scouting and command functions. After 1942, no more were built and they quickly disappeared from front line service with the survivors converted to other uses.



Panzer 35(t)'s had all been pulled from service but the Czech built 38(t) was still being used in six panzer divisions. Hopelessly outclassed by the Russian T-34, the 35(t) was no longer produced after June of 1942. The 38(t) chassis continued to see service, however, in a variety of non-turreted tank destroyers until the end of the war.



The Panzer III with the 50/L42 gun was still the most common tank in German service in 1942 with over 2000 built to date and 500 ready to roll for Army Group South in the summer offensives. Unfortunately, it was now at a distinct disadvantage against the rapidly increasing number of T-34's and KV-I's it found itself facing. Only 251 new ones were built in 1942 with the last ones of this type produced in July.



In order to keep up with the heavier Russian tanks, the Pz III had to be upgraded. A new higher velocity 50/L60 gun gave it a much greater punch and the armor was increased as well. Only 64 were built in 1942 but many older types were converted in the field. (*note: I don't know why the designers of Panzer Leader gave this counter a speed of 9. The engine is exactly the same as the other Pz III's and the Pz IV's and nearly every source gives them all the same speed of 40 km/hr. I think this should have a game speed of 8.*)



This infantry support version of the Panzer IV with the short 75/L24 gun was still in service in all tank battalions but was in the process of being replaced by a better version. Production of this version finally ceased in March of 1942.



By 1942, Germany needed a better tank to fight the Russians with. The large chassis of the Panzer IV proved to be a good platform for upgrades. The tank was improved significantly by adding a higher velocity 75/L43 or 75/L48 gun and thicker armor. Production of this version began in March of 1942 and over 800 were built by the end of the year. This tank would become the primary German combat tank in 1943.

Schützen Battalion (in theory)

3 I 6	6 I 6	3 I 4	2 H 12	2 C(I) 4	5 C(A) 2	3 M 12	8 A 5	1 C(I) 2
RIFLE	HMG							
8 1	6 1	10 1	2 0	4 10	4 10	4 10	3 0	1 12
x 9	x 2	x 1	x 2	x 14	x 2	x 1	x 1	x 1

Schützen Battalion (the more common reality)

3 I 6	6 I 6	3 I 4	3 M 12	2 H 12	6 A 2	0 C 0	8 A 5	1 C(I) 2
RIFLE	HMG							
8 1	6 1	10 1	3 1	2 0	3 0	1 12	3 0	1 12
x 9	x 2	x 1	x 1	x 2	x 1	x 16	x 1	x 1

Even though the official organization of the infantry battalions in a panzer division called for them to all ride in armored halftracks, less than a quarter of such battalions actually did so in 1942 (and not much better for the rest of the war). One battalion (or less) in a regiment had halftracks while the other one rode in trucks. Often the one battalion had only one company in halftracks. Some regiments contained no halftrack infantry at all. The anti-tank gun had been upgraded to a 50mm version and was supplemented by the 28mm squeeze-bore AT gun. This light gun with the big punch proved to be very handy but wore out quickly and largely disappeared after 1942 due to a shortage of tungsten needed for its ammunition. In the late part of 1942, these battalions were officially redesignated “panzergrenadier” battalions although they still mostly did not have any armored vehicles.

Artillery Battalion

40 H 32	60 H 36	0 C 0
2 0	2 0	1 10
x 4	x 2	x 6

The artillery in a panzer division was still towed (the Wespe was a year away). Some captured French tanks had been converted to self-propelled artillery but few if any were deployed to the eastern front.

Panzerjager Battalion

8 A 5	1 C(I) 2	5 A 2	0 C 0	12 A 8	4 H 10	14 H 10
3 0	1 12	3 0	1 12	7 8	1 12	1 10
x 2	x 2	x 1	x 1	x 1	x 1	x 1

The job of the panzerjager battalion was to kill tanks. The 37mm AT gun that the Germans began the war with was now hopelessly obsolete against the heavy armor of the Russian T-34 and KV-I. An improved 50mm Gun was being produced and was replacing it. The 75mm PAK 40 was also in limited production in 1942 but doesn't seem to show up in panzer divisions until late in the year. In addition, many Pzjgr battalions received one company of self-propelled tank destroyers. Organization of this battalion varied greatly and seems to be different for every Panzer division. Most just included a few 50mm AT guns and a Marder II or Marder III. AA halftracks were usually included in the unit.

Tank Destroyers



The Germans had built over 200 of these early tank destroyers consisting of a Czech 47mm AT gun mounted on a Pz I chassis. At least five battalions rolled into Russia in 1941 but the first year of the war in the east had consumed most of them and the rare survivors were all pulled out of service by the end of 1942.



The flood of Russian T-34's leaving the factories had created an urgent demand for a better tank destroyer. During July and August of 1942, 170 Marder I's were built by mounting a Pak 40 75mm ant-tank gun on a French built Lorraine tractor chassis. Many of these never left France but at least five German infantry divisions had a company of them in their Panzerjager battalions in 1942.

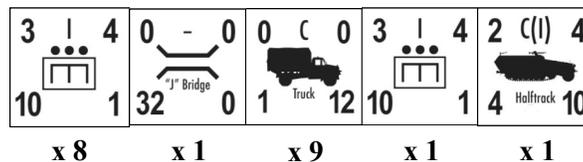


The Pz II had outlived its usefulness as a combat tank and now found itself adapted to other uses. Both the Pak 38 (76.2mm Russian) and Pak 40 (75mm German) anti-tank guns were mounted on this chassis to produce the Marder II. About 850 were built or converted, starting in April of 1942 and they first saw service in Russia in July. They were mainly found in the PzJgr battalions of panzer and panzergrenadier divisions.



The excellent Czech built Pz 35(t) was also near the end of its ability to serve as a front line tank. The chassis was not big enough to mount a larger turreted gun on the tank so it was converted to a number of useful non-turreted configurations. Both the Pak 38 and the Pak 40 were mounted on the chassis, some with the engine at the rear and some with it in the middle. This counter represents all versions of the Marder III. Just over 1600 were built or converted starting in April of 1942 and served on all fronts until the end of the war.

Panzer Pioneer Battalion



The pioneers were a vital component of the mobile panzer division. They cleared roadblocks, built bridges, and did whatever it took to keep the tanks rolling forward. The battalion was also occasionally used as an infantry battalion, usually functioning as the reserve. German engineers were trained as combat engineers and could perform a number of combat missions. In theory, one company was provided with halftracks to better enable it to advance forward into the combat area with the tanks. In practice, nearly all pioneer battalions in 1942 in the Panzer divisions had only one platoon mounted in halftracks. The battalion always included a mobile bridge. Personnel assigned to the bridge were only tasked to transport it. The manpower for actually building it came from the regular engineer platoons.

Recon Battalion

3 I 4  10 1	6 I 6  HMG 1	2 I 4  SECURITY 1	6 A 2  28 mm 0	3 M 12  81 mm 1	2 H 12  75 mm 0	0 C 0  Truck 12
x 1	x 2	x 6	x 1	x 1	x 1	x 12

8 A 5  50 mm 0	1 C(I) 2  SdKfz 10 12	3 I 4  Motorcycle 12	2 H 4  SdKfz 231/8 16	2 H 4  SdKfz 222 10
x 1	x 1	x 3	x 1	x 3

In any mobile advance into enemy territory, it was critical to be know what was in front of the division. The job of the recon was to be the eyes and ears of the division. Because getting information sometimes required fighting, the battalion was supplied with support elements to back up the armored cars and motorcycle infantry. When the Wehrmacht rolled into Russia in 1941, some battalions were equipped with French Panhard armored cars. These vehicles, built for the paved roads and level fields of western Europe, did not fare well on the primitive roads and rough terrain of Russia. By 1942, they had all been used up and replaced with German built designs. Note: The battalion should include nine platoons of motorcycle mounted infantry. In the past, I have decided to represent these troops as infantry with trucks to transport them. For my 1942 page, I have decided to represent a third of them as motorcycle units so the recon vehicles have more units while still leaving two thirds of the troops as infantry platoons in trucks. Players may choose to represent these platoons as they see fit.

Flak Battalion

20 A 20  88 mm 0	0 C 0  SdKfz 8 10	4 H 10  20 mm 0	0 C 0  Truck 12
x 2	x 2	x 2	x 2

Panzer divisions did not yet possess a permanent anti-aircraft battalion as part of their regular organization. Many Panzer divisions did however have a battalion attached to them most of the time. This formation usually included towed or self-propelled 20mm anti-aircraft guns and a battery of towed 88's.

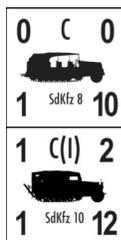
Motorized Infantry Divisions

These divisions contained only two regiments of infantry instead of the three regiments in a regular infantry division. Their advantage was that they were entirely motorized and far more mobile. For operations in the south in 1942, it was decided to add a panzer battalion to each motorized division in the south (six in all). All the battalions of these divisions looked very much the same as a Panzer division, except that nobody rode in armored halftracks in the infantry battalions. These motorized divisions were well used and saw much action in 1942. At the end of the year, they were designated as Panzergrenadier divisions and permanently contained a panzer battalion (containing mostly assault guns for the rest of the war) and rode in armored halftracks (same as Panzer divisions, more likely to be in trucks).

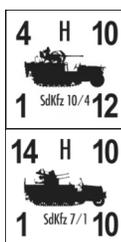
Some Final Notes

I have decided to depict all the German units for the Eastern Front as PanzerBlitz rather than Panzer Leader units. This affects mostly artillery and infantry units and players may substitute units from either game as they wish. Free downloads of units not included in either original game may be found either on my website or at imaginative-strategist.layfigures.com.

A few notes about units:



Sdkfz 8 and Sdkfz 10 are halftracked trucks. They are heavy haulers for artillery type units but are not armored. Treat them as soft-skinned vehicles the same as trucks for target purposes but treat them as tracked vehicles for movement purposes. The Sdkfz 8 will usually be seen hauling artillery howitzers, 150mm infantry guns and 88mm AT/AA guns. The Sdkfz 10 is a smaller, lighter version and is almost always the prime mover for 50mm AT guns. It frequently comes with a mounted machine gun and so has a small attack factor.



These are also halftracked trucks and should be treated the same as above. The Sdkfz 10/4 mounts a 20mm AA gun on a swivel while the Sdkfz 7/1 mounts a quad 20mm AA on a swivel. Both these weapons work equally well against air or ground units.

Also, the divisions I have depicted are configured as they were at the end of June in 1942 at the start of the summer offensives. The tank numbers and type will vary greatly during the rest of the year for some units. By the middle of this year, Panzer III J and Panzer IV F are the primary tanks in production and replacement tanks should consist mostly of these two types (with a few Pz III M's thrown in). 75mm AT guns are in limited production but should probably not show up on this front before November or so. All divisions are shown at full strength (except for the panzer battalions) but as the offensives wear on, they will become greatly diminished in strength and should be depicted as so in any scenario involving a well-used unit from this period.

By Greg Moore
gregpanzerblitz.com
September, 2013