

# THE RCEME AND TIGER #007



by Ignace Vangel

Once the tank battles of August 8, 1944 were over, many knocked out tanks and other vehicles from both sides littered the fields. Between the hamlet of Gaumesnil and the town of St Aignan were five Tiger tank wrecks from the sSS-PzAbt101, including the destroyed Tiger command tank, tactical number 007, in which the officer commanding the battalion, the enigmatic SS-Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann had been killed.

Though the tank regiments had moved on, for the recovery and repair units of the Royal Canadian Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (RCEME), the work had just begun. Within days, a RCEME Advance Workshop Detachment (AWD) was established outside Cintheaux, near the N158 highway, to recover and repair 'A' vehicles (AFVs) and 'B' vehicles (softskin) "knocked out along the Caen-Falaise road" that were needed for the upcoming advance towards Falaise.<sup>1</sup> The AWD consisted of several Light Aid Detachments (LAD) and tank recovery units with workshops located in orchards outside the towns of Cintheaux, St.Aignan and Robertmesnil.

One Tiger tank had been recovered in running condition and driven away for examination, and the recovery/repair crews had unlimited access to all the remaining Tiger wrecks in the fields outside nearby Gaumesnil, which were located within walking distances of the workshops and many trails between the worksites passed by the wrecks. As a result, the wrecks were stripped of their tracks, smaller parts and armour plate by the RCEME crews during August and early September, 1944.

The following RCEME units were recorded as being active in the Cintheaux, St Aignan and Robertmesnil area during August 1944:

- \* The Headquarters of the 3rd Canadian Recovery Company, together with crews from sections 8, 9 and 10, were moved to Cintheaux as part of the new AWD on August 12, 1944.<sup>2</sup>
- \* The No.4 Heavy Recovery Section, operated in the Caen-Cintheaux area, recovering damaged tanks in early August. It was typical of the tank recovery units operating in Normandy. The section's diary recorded it had the following equipment: "eight breakdown trucks (probably Mack heavy tow trucks), five transporters, three 7 ton transporters, one D8 tracked tractor and one universal carrier." Their diary also noted "the recovery work was

very heavy and part of the job consisted of cleaning the dead from knocked out and damaged vehicles."<sup>3</sup>

\* The 43 Light Aid Detachment (LAD) attached to the 25th Canadian Armoured Delivery Regiment recorded the unit "had moved to St Aignan and set up in another orchard" in late August and "the area was still littered with burnt equipment and burnt out tanks and many shallow graves. The weather was very warm, the flies bad and dysentery broke out."<sup>4</sup>

\* The 4th Canadian Armoured Troops Workshop moved south of Caen on August 21, 1944 to Robertmesnil, where it joined the 2nd and 3rd Canadian Infantry Troops Workshops and the 2nd Canadian Tank workshop at Cintheaux. The unit's diary noted: "The area was a good one with lots of room and level ground. At this point an intensive tank program was completed to supply armour for the drive to Falaise and 20 tanks, 5 SP and one armoured OP tank were completed in 12 days. By this time, 'A' vehicle section had modified a Sherman III with a damaged turret into an ARV (armoured recovery vehicle) which proved invaluable as time went on."<sup>5</sup>

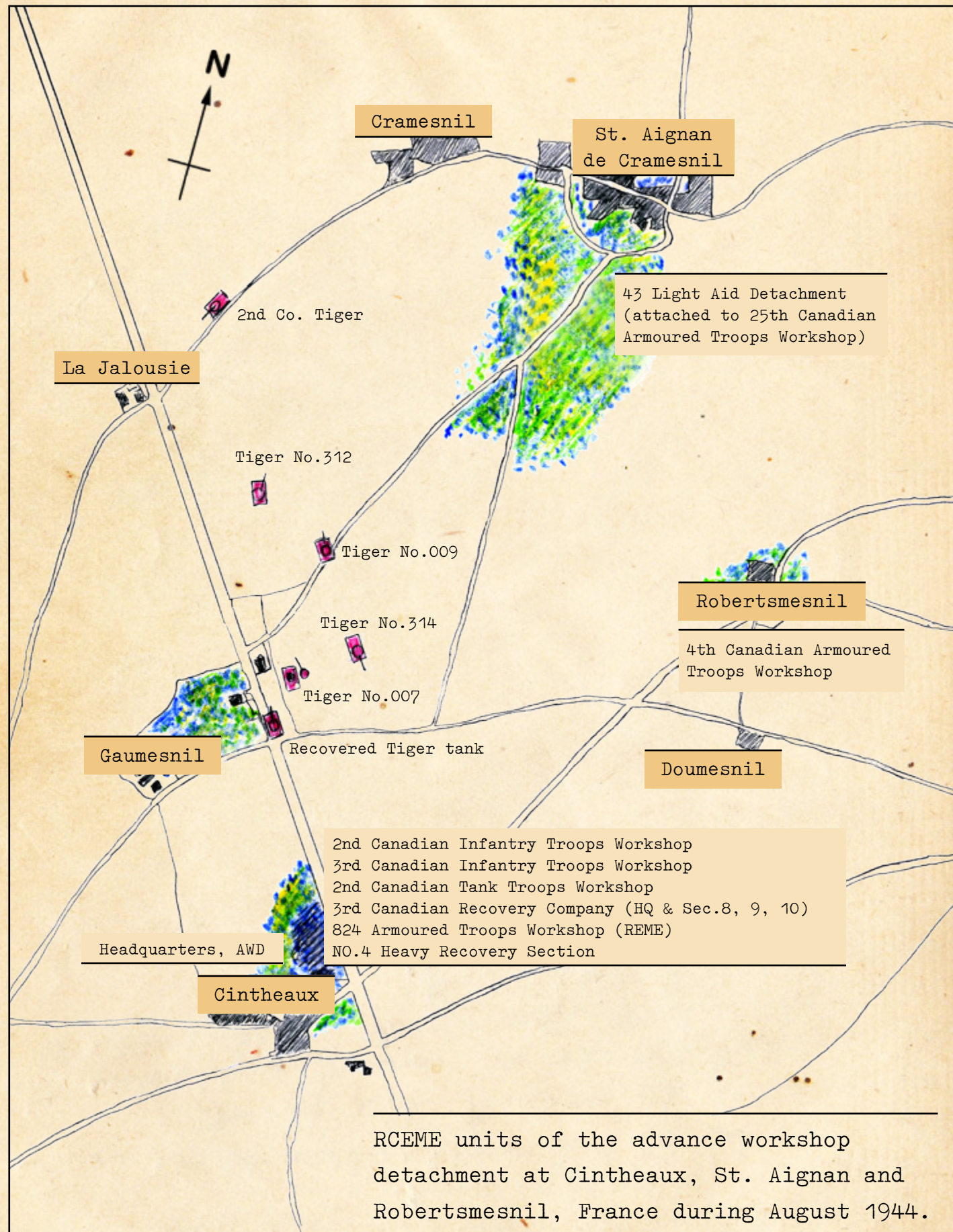
\* 2nd Canadian Tank Troops Workshop: This unit had been heavily involved in the conversion of Ram tanks or Sherman Priests into Kangaroo troop carriers at Bayeux in July 1944. Their diary subsequently recorded, "After the mopping up of the Falaise pocket, the unit was kept busy at Cintheaux, repairing tanks and other equipments which had been damaged in the Caen-Falaise area."<sup>6</sup>

\* The RCEME units at the Cintheaux AWD were joined by the 824 Armoured Troops Workshop, a British REME unit which was operating under Canadian command.<sup>7</sup>

\* The RCEME units began recovering tanks and other vehicles from the battlefield, as well as salvaging usable parts from the many wrecks. Spare parts for tanks and other vehicles were often slow to reach the front line repair and recovery units. As a result, both Allied and German tank wrecks were stripped of any potentially useful parts and pieces by the tank recovery teams. One RCEME unit reported many 'buckshee' (free vehicles which were not listed on the unit's inventory). German vehicles were being recovered and were used in their operations.<sup>8</sup>



*Sherman V tanks from the South Alberta Tank Regiment were both knocked out at Moerbrugge in Belgium in September 1944. The tracks welded to the hulls and turrets were taken from Panther tanks.*



In late July 1944, the 4th Armoured Brigade Workshop stationed at an AWD near Caen was heavily involved in the welding of tank tracks on Sherman tanks of the Division.<sup>9</sup> One of the units in the Brigade, the 42 LAD attached to the 29th Canadian Armoured Regiment (Recce), the South Alberta Tank Regiment, noted in their regimental history, "At first, in France, a considerable number of Tiger tanks were knocked out and the tracks from these proved excellent for armour protection. At least one recovery vehicle was kept busy hauling in tracks all the time." On August 15, the 42 LAD diary recorded the unit had moved south from Caen to the small town of Rouverres, northeast of Robertsmesnil.<sup>10</sup>

The South Albertan tank regiment had been one of the first Canadian tank units in Normandy to make extensive use of the tank tracks as supplemental armour on their Sherman tanks. While at Caen in July, just prior to the advance toward Falaise, the Sherman tanks from all companies of the Regiment were sent back in rotation from the front lines to the LAD/AWD workshops, where teams of welders worked non-stop, night and day to weld German tank tracks onto the hulls and turrets.<sup>11</sup> Though the 42 LAD diary entries describe "Tiger tracks" welded to the South Albertan Shermans, the photographs depict the use of the more commonly available Panther tank tracks. However, the much wider (and rarer) Tiger tracks, when available, were also used, apparently being welded mainly on the glacis plate on Sherman tanks of the South Albertan and other Canadian tank regiments.

The use of tank tracks welded to the front and sides of the hull and sides of the turret as supplemental armour was controversial due to the extra weight and subsequent wear to the tank engines and transmissions. Nevertheless, the use of tank tracks on Sherman tanks was widely practiced by the Canadian tank regiments in northwest Europe throughout the war. The diary of the 5th Canadian

Armoured Division RCEME Headquarters for March 1945 commented on the large scale welding program undertaken by the Division, which had been ordered by the Quarter Master General, 5th Canadian Armoured Division. All tanks of the Division were to have tank tracks welded to the front and sides of the tanks "to conform with the extra protection used on all tanks in this theatre." The diary also noted, "the use of tracks as supplemental armour proved highly valuable," since LAD units attached to the armoured regiments had reported that tanks "hit by enemy bazookas and 75 millimeter armour piercing shot" had escaped damage, beyond the tracks welded to the hulls being blown off by the impact.<sup>12</sup>

The existing photographs of the Tiger tanks from the sSSPzAbt101 that was lost August 8th on the Gaumesnil battlefield, show all five wrecks had been pulled off their tracks (the battle tracks on the tank wrecks were probably cut apart using cutting torches. The tanks were then pulled off the tracks by one of the recovery tractors. Only the full tracks were taken. The spare track links stored on the turret sides or across the lower front hull of the Tiger tanks were not removed.

Besides removing the tracks, the LAD scroungers stripped the Tiger tank hulks of anything they considered potentially useful in the repair of the recovered tanks. One Tiger tank, tactical number 312, located less than a half mile from the orchards at St Aignan, had the armour along the entire left side of the hull torch-cut away for use, either as supplemental armour or for covering battle damaged areas on Sherman tanks. It probably also took only a few minutes for one of the LAD welders to remove the rear mounted gun barrel rest off Tiger No.007 by torch cutting the welds on the base blocks and removing it from the top of the rear hull plate. These gun rests were taken as replacements for damaged gun rests on recovered 17-pdr Sherman tanks.



Another Sherman V tank from the South Alberta Tank Regiment with Panther tracks welded to the hull for extra protection.

The LAD crews loaded the tracks and other parts on the recovery trailers and took them to the AWD workshops. The supply of tracks and parts travelled with the LAD and was loaded on the recovery trucks and hauled to the next work site. Eventually, when the parts were of no further use, they were dumped in one of many scrap heaps left behind in the former workshop sites.

The RCEME scroungers apparently did not have any use for the outer rubber tyre or steel rimmed road wheels. The photographs of Tiger No.312 taken by Allied troops in late August 1944 show that even though the armour on left hull side had been cut away and the tank tracks had been removed, the outer rubber tyre road wheels had been left on the tank.

Even before the RCEME units had moved on, the local French farmers began to scavenge pieces from the German tanks and bury the German dead. Life was difficult for the town folk and farmers. Buildings, crops and livestock had been destroyed and many young men had been conscripted to work in Germany. Anything from the tank wrecks that was useful or considered to be valuable and had not been fire damaged or taken away by the Canadians was scavenged from the wrecks by the farmers for use, sale or barter. Though there may have been few farmers in the immediate area, the photographs of Tiger No.314 show the outer rubber tyre road wheels had been removed by someone who was able to jack up the wrecks and remove them for use as wheels on farm wagons or

other types of trailers or wagons. Similarly, Tiger tanks No.007 and No.312 would have had their rubber tyre road wheels removed by the farmers or other enterprising persons.

Though a post-August 1944 photograph of Tiger No.312 do not exist, it is very probable that this tank at a later date also had its outer road wheels removed by the farmers. The only photograph of Tiger No.007 was taken in April, 1945 from a point behind the wreck. The outer rubber tyre road wheels cannot be seen. Though some modelers persist in claiming this photograph shows the tank must have had steel-rim road wheels, this conclusion is incorrect. Tiger No.007 appears to have been one of the last tanks completed at the end of December, 1943 and was assembled with rubber tyre road wheels. The outer rubber tyre road wheels on Tiger No.007 had also been removed by the farmers by the time the photograph was taken.

However, three photographs taken in mid-1945 and 1946-47 of the March production Tiger command tank No.009 and an April production 2nd Co. battle tank, abandoned near La Jalousie, show the steel rimmed road wheels had not been removed from these two Tiger tanks. Evidently, the steel rim road wheels on these two tanks were unsuitable for use on farm wagons and as a result were left on the wrecks by the local farmers.

The photographs of Tigers No.007, 009, 312 and 314, whether taken in August 1944 or in the Spring of 1945, show all four tanks had been subjected to considerable



*After the battle in which Tiger No.314 was lost, this photos documents the removal of the outer rubber tyre road wheels. This practice was likely carried out by the local residents. The wheels were either sold for scrap or retained for farm use.*

scavenging, first by the RCEME recovery teams and later by the local French farmers. The wrecks were eventually cut up for scrap during 1948.

#### Notes On The Tiger Tanks At Gaumesnil

The following six tanks of the sSS-PzAbt101 were lost at Gaumesnil, on August 8, 1944:

1) Tiger command tank, tactical number 007: A Sd.Kfz.267 command tank completed at the end of December, 1943 and shipped to the battalion in mid-January, 1944. It was one of a small number of tanks assembled in late December to early January, 1944 using the new modified hull, turret and modified components. In mid-July 1944, this command tank was assigned to the interim commanding officer of the battalion, SS- Hauptsturmführer Michael Wittmann. It was destroyed by a 17-pdr armour piercing (APCBC) shot hitting the tank directly on the left rear turret ring. There were no survivors.

2) Tiger command tank, tactical number 009: A Sd.Kfz.269 command tank completed probably in late March 1944 and shipped to the battalion in April 1944. Assigned to the battalion signals officer, SS-Untersturmführer Helmut Dollinger. Hit in the right hull crew compartment by a 17-pdr AP shot. The tank burnt out. One crew member was killed.

3) Tiger battle tank, tactical number 314: One of four reconverted command tanks shipped to the battalion in November 1943. This tank was originally completed as a command tank in August 1943 but was reconverted back into a battle tank in late October 1943. Originally assigned to a crew in the 3rd. Co., it was taken over by the former battalion signals officer, SS-Untersturmführer 'Willi' Ihrion of the Headquarters Company before the battle. The tank was retreating southwards when hit in the left side of the turret by a 17-pdr AP shot. It then burnt out. There were no survivors.

4) Tiger battle tank, tactical number 312: The tactical number of this tank has been questioned, as the tank may actually have been tactical number 313. It was an October 1943 production tank. Commanded by SS-Oberscharführer Peter Kisters, the tank probably was hit in the right engine compartment by a 17-pdr AP shot and the tank burnt out. There is no mention of casualties.

5) Tiger battle tank, tactical number unknown: Believed to have been a 2nd.Co. tank, it was one of two tanks assigned to the Headquarters Company during the mid July 1944 revision of the battalion. The tank was shipped to the battalion in April 1944. On August 8th, this tank was taken over by the battalion operations officer, SS-Hauptscharführer Hans Hoflinger. The tank was apparently hit in the left hull by a 17-pdr AP shot, it caught fire and was abandoned by the crew. It can be seen in the aerial photograph taken the next morning that the tank was

recovered and driven back along the N158 highway, where it is seen facing southward near the intersection of the Gaumesnil-Robertmesnil crossroad. It was probably driven down the N158 highway by Canadian tank crews to Cintheaux for inspection. No casualties reported.

6) Tiger battle tank, tactical number unknown: Also a former 2nd. Co. tank attached to the HQ Company, this tank was completed in April 1944. On August 8th, this tank had engine problems, so it did not participate in the morning attack. Later in the day, during an attack west of St Aignan, it broke down and was abandoned by the crew. Recovered by an Allied tank crew, it was being driven along a country lane towards the N158 highway when it again broke down and was abandoned near the hamlet of La Jalousie. It was later noted that the tank still had a full load of ammunition on board. Believed to have been commanded by SS-Unterscharführer Otto Blasé. The crew survived.

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The photographs of the Sherman tanks of the South Alberta Tank Regiment were sourced from the book "South Albertans, a Canadian Regiment at War" with permission from the author, Mr. Donald E. Graves and Robin Brass Publications. This superbly detailed regimental history is still available from the South Albertan Regimental fund, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

The photographs of the wrecks of Tiger tanks No.007 and 314 are courtesy of Col. Wolfgang Schneider.

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