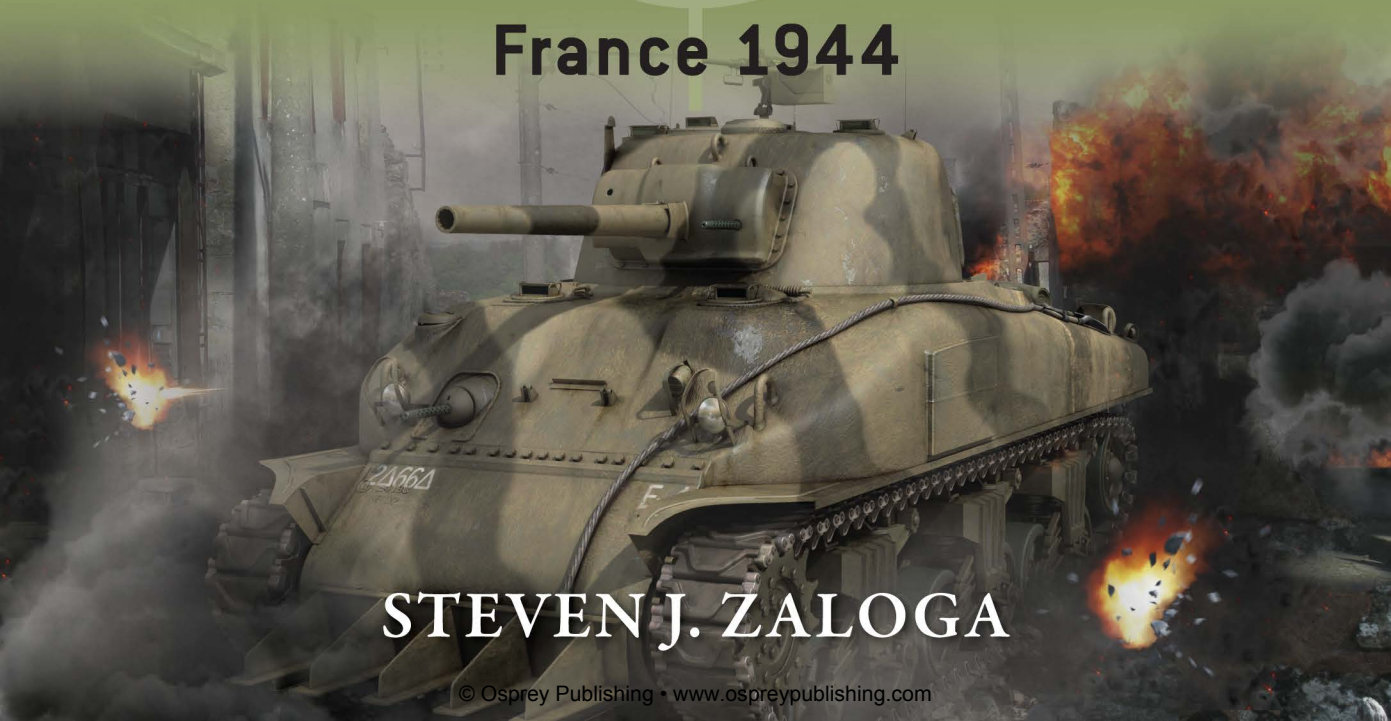

# PANZER IV VS SHERMAN

## France 1944



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# INTRODUCTION

This Osprey Duel title examines the two principal Allied and German tanks of the 1943–44 fighting, the PzKpfw IV and M4 Sherman. The PzKpfw IV was the older of the two designs, tracing its lineage back to the mid-1930s. It was originally intended as a fire-support tank to complement the main battle tank of the Panzer divisions, the PzKpfw III. This mission changed after Germany confronted the Red Army during Operation *Barbarossa* in the summer of 1941. The appearance of large numbers of Soviet T-34 and KV tanks was a technological shock to the Panzer force. These tanks were significantly better than the PzKpfw III in terms of armor, firepower, and mobility. As a short-term solution, the existing German tanks were modernized with better armor and better firepower. The PzKpfw III was inherently constrained by its narrow superstructure that prevented the adoption of a larger turret ring. This limited the power of the gun that could be fitted to the turret since a small turret ring could not endure the recoil forces of some of the newer tank guns. The PzKpfw IV had a wider superstructure and larger turret ring, and so was more easily adapted to more powerful versions of the 7.5cm tank guns. As a result, the PzKpfw IV shifted from being a supplementary tank in the Panzer divisions to being the principal battle tank. Use of the PzKpfw III gradually faded, and production of the chassis shifted from the tank version to the StuG III assault gun. The PzKpfw IV began to outnumber the PzKpfw III in service by July 1943.

The PzKpfw IV with the long 7.5cm guns underwent continual modification from the Ausf G in May 1942 to the Ausf J in February 1944. The focus of this Duel is the fighting in Normandy in July 1944, and so the variant at the heart of this discussion is the PzKpfw IV Ausf H, which was the main type in service with the Panzer divisions in France in the summer of 1944. In early June 1944, there were 758 PzKpfw IV tanks in the West out of the 2,387 in service. The PzKpfw IV remained the main battle tank

An M4A1 of F/33rd Armored (CCB, 3rd Armored Division) passes a knocked-out PzKpfw IV Ausf G, probably from 11. Panzer-Division, in Bad Marienberg on March 28, 1945, during the breakout from the Remagen bridgehead. This M4A1 is a survivor from the Normandy campaign and has a large steel plate added to the hull front, a modification on many 3rd Armored Division tanks following the capture of Köln earlier in the month.

of the Wehrmacht through 1944. There had been hopes that the larger and more powerful Panther tank would take over this role. The Panther was first introduced in the summer of 1943 at the time of the battles of Kursk–Orel but proved to be a disappointment due to technical immaturity. By the summer of 1944, many of these problems had been overcome and the Panther offered significant advantages over the PzKpfw IV in terms of armor, firepower, and mobility. However, the Panther was more costly and time-consuming to manufacture. As a result, the 1944 Panzer regiments were based around a battalion of PzKpfw IV and a battalion of Panthers. The plan to replace the PzKpfw IV with the Panther never occurred due to the limitations of German war industries and the PzKpfw IV remained the most numerous German battle tank until August 1944, the first occasion when it was outnumbered in service by the Panther.

The M4 and M4A1 Sherman tanks were developed later than the PzKpfw IV, with initial production in February 1942. The Sherman was a lineal descendant of the M2 and M3 medium tanks. While it differed considerably in its armament layout from these earlier types, it was very similar in its automotive aspects including the engine and suspension. This long lineage helps to explain why the Sherman tank proved to be a dependable design from the very outset of production, and suffered few of the teething pains typically found in new tank designs. The arrival of the M4 Sherman roughly corresponded to the arrival of the first of the long-barreled PzKpfw IV, so the designs are not so widely separated as might first seem from their production histories. When the Sherman first debuted in combat at El Alamein in October 1942, it was


The tank commander in the PzKpfw IV occupied the "throne" at the rear of the turret. An improved commander's vision cupola with the diameter increased by 100mm was introduced early in the production of the Ausf G in February 1943. The new cupola switched from a split hatch to a single-piece hatch as shown here. This is the PzKpfw IV Ausf H commanded by SS-Oberscharführer Johann Terdenge who led 2. Zug, 6./SS-PzRgt 12 (*Hitlerjugend* Division) while training near Ostend in Belgium during the winter of 1943/44. Another photograph here (on page 12) shows this same tank after its capture in July 1944.

widely regarded as the best Allied tank of the day. British tanks of the 1940–42 period had relied on the 2-pdr and 6-pdr guns which offered excellent antitank performance but poor high-explosive performance. Since the majority of tank combat involved the use of high-explosive ammunition, this was a significant drawback in combat. The American 75mm gun proved to be a more versatile weapon and became the commonest weapon on Allied tanks through the end of the war. The Sherman tank also enjoyed a reputation for excellent reliability, a very important feature in mechanized warfare and one that is often overlooked.

The Sherman design stagnated after its combat introduction in 1942–43. It continued to see combat use in the Mediterranean theater, facing the same mix of PzKpfw III and PzKpfw IV tanks that had been met in combat in North Africa and Tunisia. There were hints that the Panzer force was improving, with occasional encounters with the new Tiger tank. However, the limited number of tank-versus-tank encounters in the Mediterranean theater led to complacency in the US Army's armored force. Some steps were taken to develop a more powerful 76mm gun for the Sherman, but there was a surprising degree of reluctance to accept these into combat service. The


Prior to Normandy, the 2nd Armored Division saw its most prolonged combat action during Operation *Husky*, the amphibious assault on Sicily in July 1943. This M4A1 named *Eternity* of E/67th Armored is shown traversing the dunes shortly after landing at Gela at the start of the campaign.

first batches of M4A1 (76mm) arrived in Britain in April 1944, but they were orphans for several months because none of the armored divisions wanted the inconvenience of adopting a new version with new logistics challenges. It is worth noting that the British commanders had a fundamentally different viewpoint, and had developed their own Sherman variant with the powerful 17-pdr gun to deal with anticipated German threats that would be faced after the D-Day landings. Besides the complacency over tank firepower, US tank units were surprisingly indifferent to the need for better armor on the Sherman tank.

This Duel examines the first large-scale tank-versus-tank fighting between US and German forces in Normandy during Operation *Cobra*, that began on July 25–26, 1944. This battle started with a confrontation between the US Army's 2nd and 3rd Armored divisions against three German Panzer and *Panzergrenadier* divisions and became the largest tank engagement fought by the US Army up to this point in the war. By the end of July 1944, the First US Army deployed four armored divisions and 13 separate tank battalions with a combined strength of 1,555 tanks, about one-third of them M5A1 light tanks, plus 880 tank destroyers, and several hundred other AFVs including self-propelled artillery and armored cars. During Operation *Cobra*, they faced fewer than 300 German tanks and assault guns along a frontage less than 30km wide. To put this in perspective, Operation *Cobra* involved more AFVs than the legendary tank battle of Prokhorovka during the Kursk campaign. During the key phase of the Prokhorovka battle on July 12, 1943, about 420 German and 840 Soviet tanks and assault guns were present on a 50km sector.

# CHRONOLOGY

**1938**

**January** First issue of the PzKpfw IV Ausf A to German troops.

**1940**

**July 15** 2nd Armored Division is activated at Fort Benning, Georgia.

**1941**

**February** Start of US development of T6 medium tank.

**1942**

**February** T6 accepted for service as M4A1 medium tank; production started at Lima Locomotive Works.

**May** Initial production of PzKpfw IV Ausf F2 (Ausf G) with long L/43 gun.

**July** Initial production of M4 medium tank at Pressed Steel Car Co.

**October** Combat debut of M4A1 (Sherman II) tank during the battle of El Alamein.

**November** Combat debut of M4A1 with US 2nd Armored Division during Operation *Torch* in French North Africa.

**1943**

**April** Initial production of PzKpfw IV Ausf G with long L/48 7.5cm KwK 40 gun.

**May** Initial production of PzKpfw IV Ausf H.

**December** Final production of M4A1 with 75mm gun.

**December 30** OKH orders the activation of Panzer-Lehr-Division.

**ABOVE** During an interrogation in early July, a captured Panzer crewman from *Das Reich* mocked the US Army's negligent camouflage procedures. Prior to Operation *Cobra*, new camouflage routines were introduced. The 70th Tank Battalion as shown here fitted Sommerfeld matting to their tanks to facilitate the addition of foliage camouflage. Other units, including both 2nd and 3rd Armored divisions, confined their efforts to pattern-painted camouflage.

**ABOVE** Owing to the prevalence of Allied fighter-bombers, German tank crews maintained strict camouflage discipline. Foliage camouflage was widely used in Normandy, as in this case of a PzKpfw IV Ausf H of II./SS-PzRgt 12.

## 1944

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|---|---|
| **January** | Initial production of M4A1 with 76mm gun at Pressed Steel Car Co. |
| **February** | Start of production of PzKpfw IV Ausf J at Nibelungenwerk. |
| **July 24** | A false start of Operation *Cobra* when mission is canceled due to weather; some bombers attack anyway. |
| **July 25** | Start of Operation *Cobra*. |
| **July 26** | Initial commitment of 2nd and 3rd Armored divisions during Operation *Cobra*. |
| **July 27** | Panzer-Lehr-Division overrun and ineffective. |
| **July 28/29** | 2. SS-Panzer-Division *Das Reich* begins to withdraw, igniting a series of night battles with 2nd Armored Division. |
| **July 29/30** | A second night of fighting between the retreating 2. SS-Panzer-Division *Das Reich* and 2nd Armored Division. |

**BELOW** A set of side skirts (*Schürzen*) were added to the PzKpfw IV towards the end of Ausf G production to protect against Soviet antitank rifles. In many cases, the hull side skirts were left off since they hampered daily suspension maintenance. This is a Finnish PzKpfw IV Ausf J, one of 15 delivered in August 1944, pictured in Oulu, northern Finland on November 12, 1944. This overhead view provides a good impression of the shape of the turret skirt armor. This particular tank, Ps.221-6, is still preserved at the Finnish museum at Parola. (SA-Kuva)