

PANZER OF THE LAKE - MEUSE RIVER THEORY



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Historical Evidence

There is an abundance of documents that prove the “Panzer of the Lake”, or, at the very least, the unit it was almost certainly part of, crossed the Meuse River on that exact spot in May 1940 - more precisely on the evening of May 13th.

The first piece of evidence, being used throughout the entire investigation, is the fact that the tank has its tactical number on a rhomboid plate, which was used in 1940 by the 5. Panzer Division, being the division which the tank was likely part of, since the 5. Panzer Division's path crossed the location found (this is later proven by other evidence)..

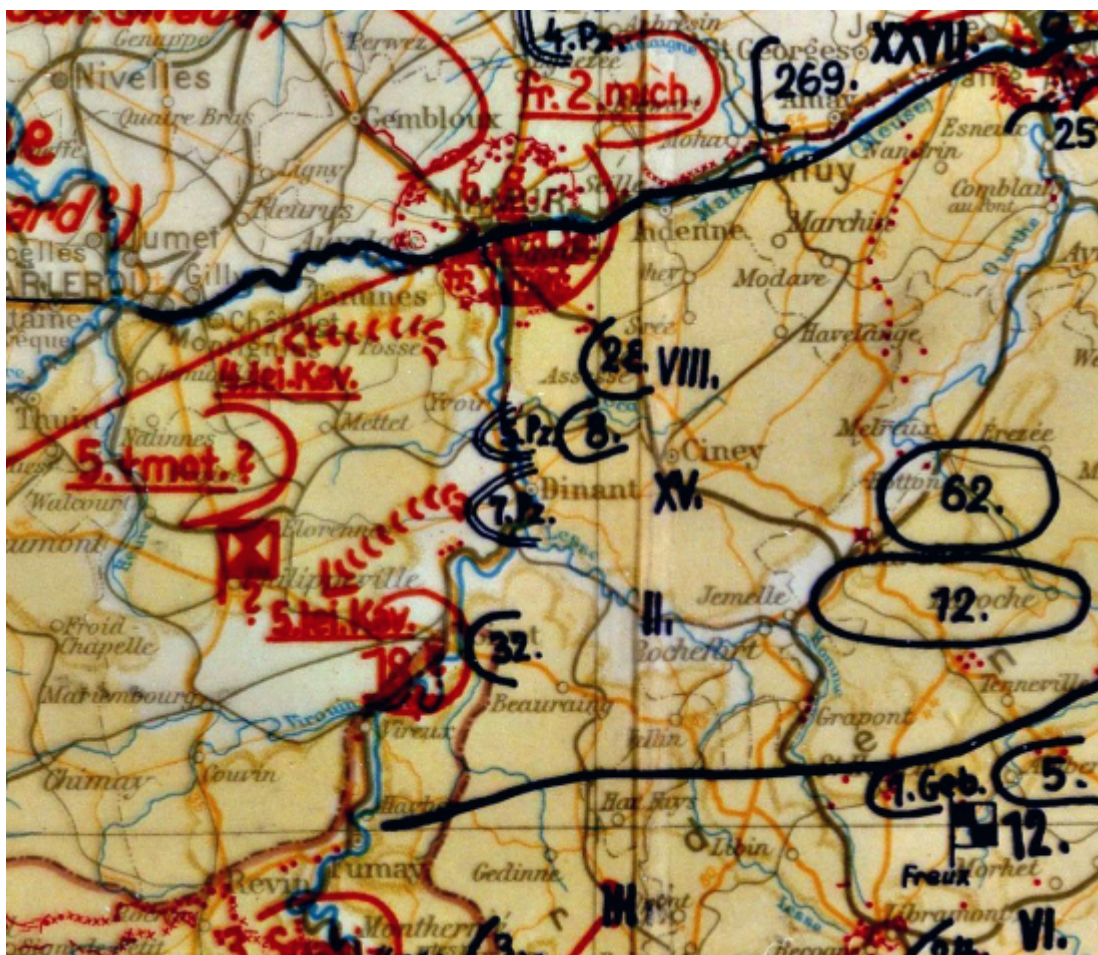


Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-124-0250-39
Foto: Hinz | 1940 Frühling

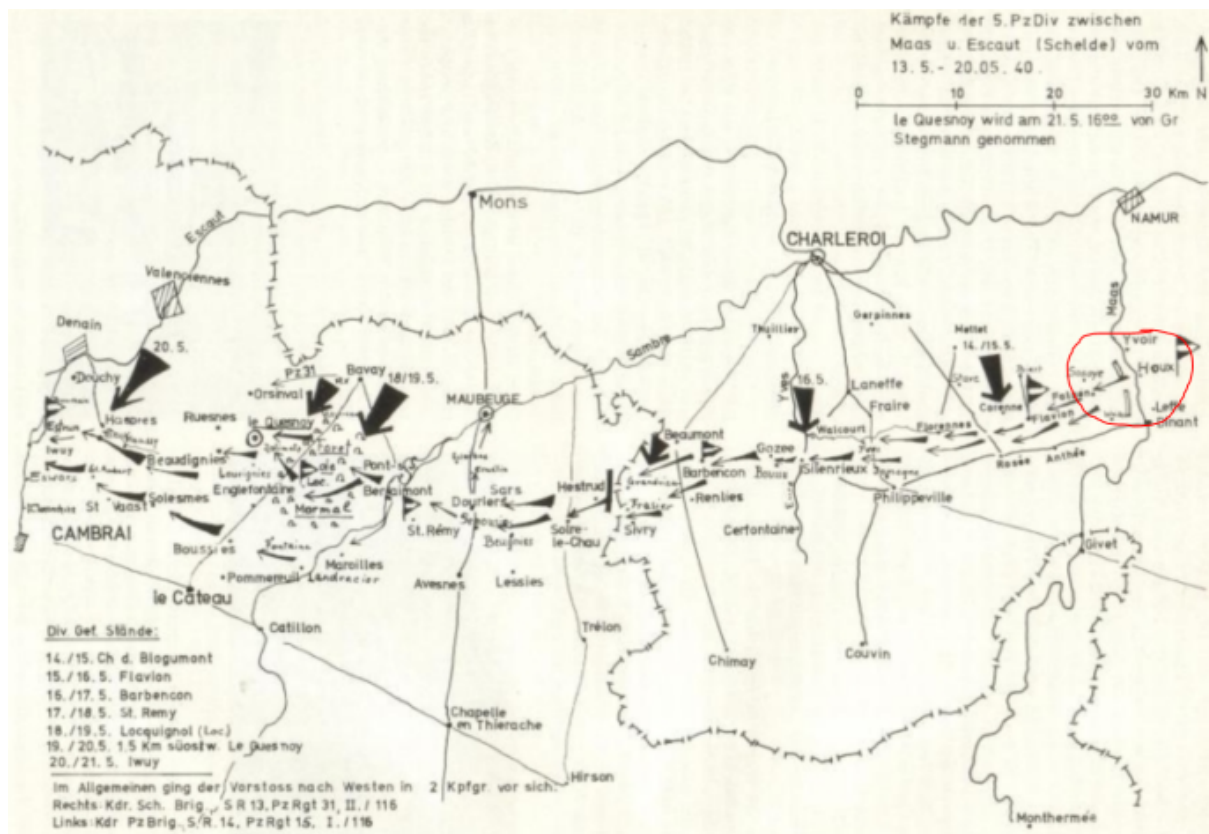
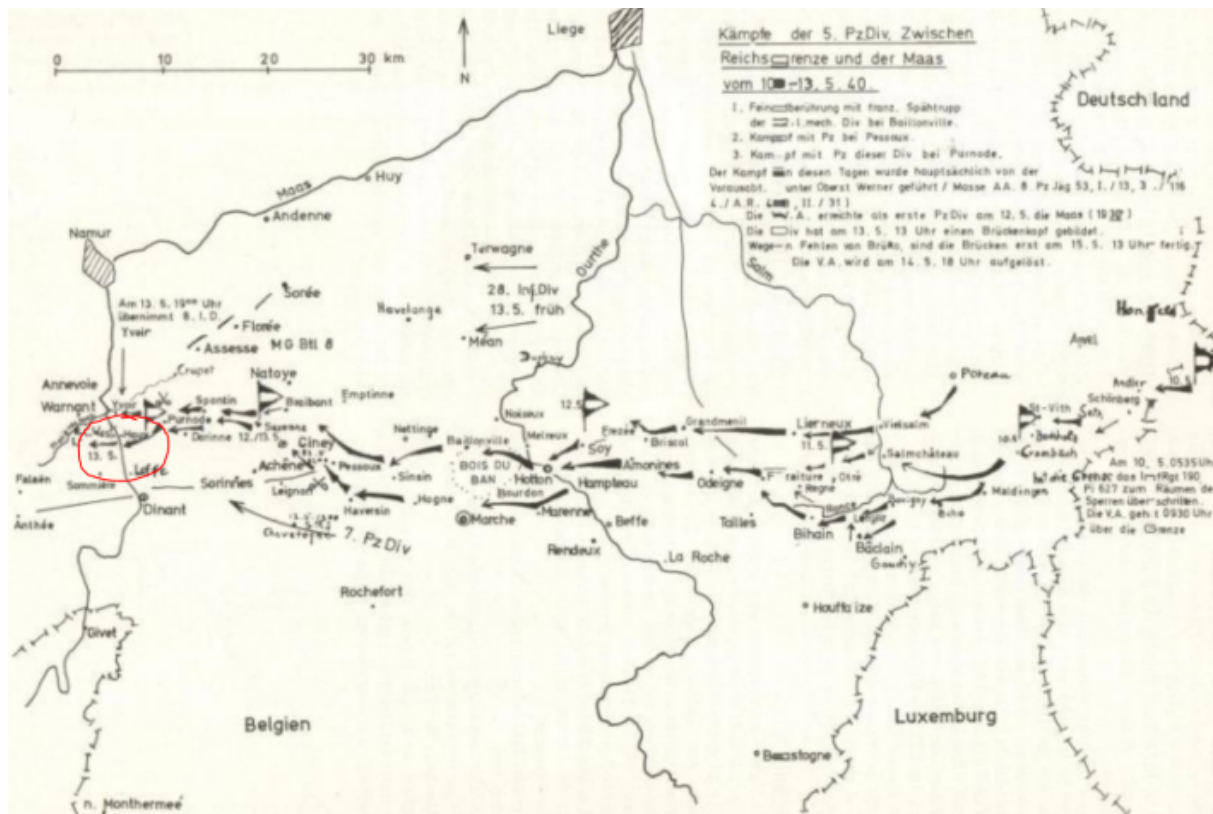
Panzer IV Ausf. C, tactical number 623, from the 5. Panzer Division. Note the rhomboid plate with the number and the small 1940 5. Panzer Division emblem above it. It is likely that this tank is from the same company as the Panzer of the Lake (this is later proven), and it might even be from the same platoon, as the tactical number on the PotL is often interpreted as 621, this however is not certain.

“During the attack on the Low Countries and France, the 4th Army, as part of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group A, invaded Belgium from the Rhineland. Along with other German armies, the 4th Army penetrated the Dyle Line and completed the trapping of the Allied forces in France.”

The 4th Army, from Rhineland to the Koningshooikt—Wavre Line (K-W line), would pass near the region of Dinant. This is further proven by a few maps showing the 4th Army (and consequently if not precisely showing the 5th Panzer Division) crossing the Meuse River in that area.



Map from the OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres, the German High Command) showing the 5th Panzer Division crossing the Meuse River to the north of Dinant (the first picture shows the signature of the map by a german officer, while the second picture shows the map itself).



Two images of a map showing the 5th Panzer Division crossing the Meuse river near Dinant.

by the French on the other side of the river. Rommel brought up tanks and flak units to provide counter-fire and had nearby houses set on fire to create a smokescreen. He sent infantry across in rubber boats, appropriated the bridging tackle of the 5th Panzer Division, personally grabbed a light machine gun to fight off a French counterattack supported by tanks, and went into the water himself, encouraging the sappers and helping lash together the pontoons.”
-Daniel Allen Butler in “The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel”

“During the construction of the bridge the pontoons were hit a number of times by enemy fire and **at least one of the pontoons sank together with a tank**. The construction was delayed and at nightfall the first tanks crossed the river. By the next morning only 15 tanks had crossed.”

-Ove Pappila in “Rommel and the German 7th Panzer division in France 1940”

This further proves that in that area, not only the 5th Panzer Division crossed the river, but at least one of the pontoon ferries mentioned earlier that would be used to cross the river was hit and sunk (this is debated, it is possible this was just an accident), leading the tank to sink with it.



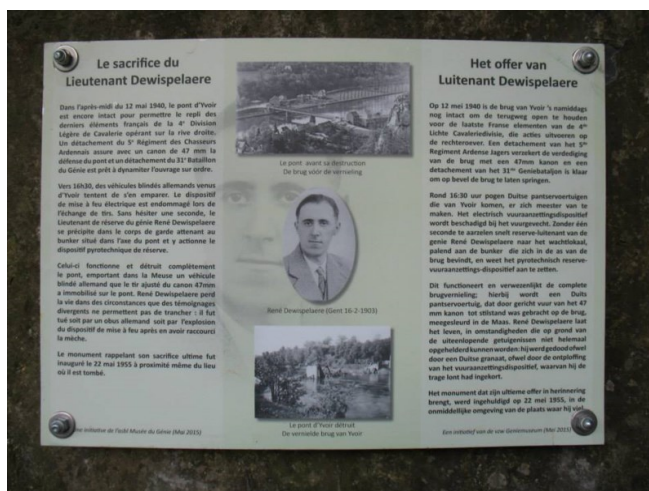
“Lt. Zobel's sunken tank.”

On May 12, 1940 at 16:45 hours the 2./H (Pz) 31 reported that both bridges (Yvoir and Houx) on the Meuse were destroyed, however the report proved be false. Around 17:30 hours the Panzerstosstrupp Zobel (tanks of the 5. and 6. Companies) reached the heights located east of Yvoir, observing that the bridge was intact. Two panzerspähwagen and one medium tank Platoon under Lt. Zobel raced to the bridge through the stream of refugees. Both recce vehicles (spähwagen) reached the bridge while a tank furnished fire support against a Belgian antitank gun across the river.

As the first recce vehicle was crossing, a Belgian sapper (Lt. De Wispelaere) blew the bridge (with the German vehicle and refugees) in the sky. De Wispelaere was killed by the fire of the German tanks in turn. The tank of Lt. Zobel got a hit on its roller drive.

In the evening of May 13, 1940 two ferries of 8 tons were built. The attempt of shifting one Pz Kw IV across failed, and the repaired tank of Lt. Zobel, fell into the river and sunk.

*“On the evening of May 13, 1940 two ferries of 8 tons were built. The attempt of shifting one Pz Kw IV across failed, **and the repaired tank of Lt. Zobel, fell into the river and sunk.**”*



The head of the Belgian engineers, Lt. Wispelaere activated the plunger to blow the explosives on the bridge. It didn't work. Using the manual backup, he blew the bridge but was killed by German fire as he did so. The first German attempt at crossing had been foiled, but more troops were approaching the river further south.

Pz.-Regt. 31	Ob.Ltn.	Haas	gefallen
Ltn.	Weigelt	Korsten	"
"	"	Graf Droste	"
U.Arzt	Dr. Wunscho	"	"
Major	Hildebrand	Christern	"
Hptm.	Meltzer	v. Vietinghoff	"
Ob.Ltn.	Wenke	Rodenhauser	"
"	Fischer	Kempf	"
"	v. Lüttichau	Schütte	"
Ltn.	Anschütz	Veigel	"
"	Gundenberger	Dr. König	"
"	v. Schmoetter	Scheertarth	"
"	Zobel	Kamin	"
"	Lösch	Dr. Kupka	"
Ass.Arzt	Dr. Gieser	Waetzold	"
U.Arzt			"
Ltn.			"
			vermißt

Field report stating Lt. Zobel (identified as “Heinz Zobel”, commander of the Panzer IV that sank with the ferry) was injured.

the bridge for demolition while a platoon of Ardennes Light Infantry and elements of a French infantry battalion screened the bridge. In the course of 12 May, formations of the 4th Light Cavalry Division, returning from the delaying action in the Ardennes, withdrew across the bridge. Although the last soldiers had already passed the bridge, de Wispelaere delayed the demolition because civilian refugees were still approaching. At that point, it was believed that the Germans were still very far away. Suddenly, at around 1725, there was a cry of alarm *Ils sont là! (They are here!)*. At that moment, one could see the first German vehicles driving from Yvoir along the road paralleling the east bank of the Meuse River. The two German armored scout cars charged toward the bridge while the following three Panzers opened fire. De Wispelaere immediately pushed the electrical ignition, but there was no explosion. Obviously, a shell fragment had damaged the ignition system that had been checked a few minutes earlier. In the meantime, the first German scout car drove onto the bridge but was stopped by a hit from a Belgian antitank gun. Immediately, a soldier carrying wire cutters jumped out of the armored car hatch to cut the ignition wire that he had spotted, but he was laid low by fire from the machine guns. However, more German soldiers were already approaching under covering fire from the Panzers. Wispelaere now left his shelter and worked the manual ignition device. Trying to get back to his bunker, he was hit by a burst from a German machine gun and fell to the ground, mortally wounded. At the same time, the explosive charge went off. After the gigantic smoke cloud had drifted away, only the remnants of the pillars could be seen. The bridge and the armored scout car on it had sunk into the water.

The men of the Werner Advance Detachment had better luck three kilometers south of the dynamited bridge at Yvoir. At this point in the Meuse River, a weir and a lock system connect an island at Houx to both banks. In spite of considerable concern, the Belgians and French had refrained from blasting Lock 5 because they were afraid that the water level would drop too much. That lock was precisely at the boundary between the French II and XI Corps, and, moreover—as will be described later—nobody really felt competent to take action for just one short but fatal moment.”

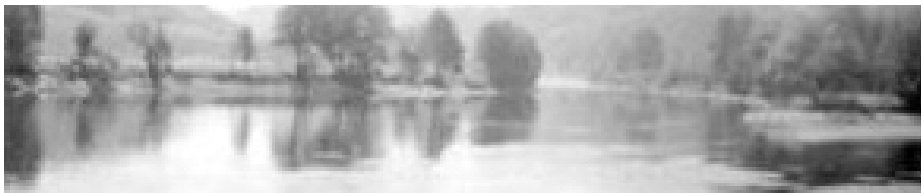
This account proves that Leutnant Zobel was part of 31st Panzer Regiment, in particular of the advanced detachment which attempted to capture the bridge at Yvoir on the 12th and then moved to Houx. It is therefore very likely that Zobel's panzer was among the ones ordered by Rommel to cross the Meuse by ferry near Houx on the evening of the 13th of May 1940, this also confirms what our other sources claim about Zobel's actions on the 12th.



Another image of Zobel's tank, you can see the destroyed ferry here, the caption states:

The panzer IV of Lieutenant Zobel of the 31. Panzer Regiment of the 5. Panzer-Division, on May 13, 1940, in Houx, as good as underwater except for the vehicle commander's cupola. Close to the west bank, at the pontoon crossing site and later site of 5. Panzer Division bridge, a 16 tonne ferry (Bruckengerat B) gave way to the approaching shoreline, likely due to the rotating movement of the panzer, which turned right when disembarking (the only possible direction to quickly leave the Meuse's shore due to the wall created by the rail line). The tank would be fished out in 1941 during the reconstruction of the bridge.

Note: Zobel is often misspelled as Zabel, a more common name



Comparison of the 3 photos we have from this angle



A photo of a panzer III crossing on a ferry in the same location (the camera is facing the opposite direction of the river)

Another piece of evidence is the following account from the book *"Dunkirk: Fight to the Last Man"* by Hugh Sebag-Montefiore. This account, as the footnotes show it is **from an interview with Zobel himself by the author.**

[48](#) My 2001 interview with the man who in 1940 was Lieutenant Heinz Zobel, and Plato, *Geschichte Der 5. Panzerdivision*, pp. 51 and 53–5.

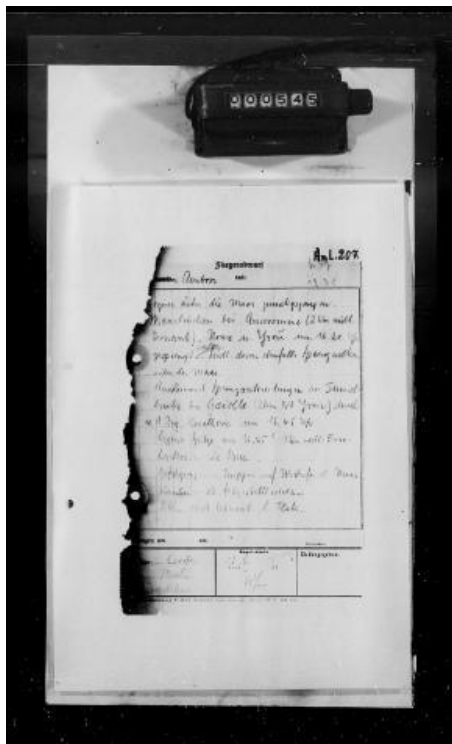
*"One such account by Sergeant Nökel, a twenty-two-year-old tank commander from the 5th Panzer Division, describes events indicative of what was going on all over the battlefield. His Panzer 3 was ferried across the Meuse at Houx notwithstanding the earlier difficulties in sending tanks across the river: **a Panzer 4 tank toppled off its ferry into the river with one member of the tank crew inside. He survived by jumping into the water before the tank sank,** but after that incident many of the 5th Panzer Division's heavy- and medium-weight tanks had to cross at the bridge built in the 7th Panzer Division's sector near Dinant."*



Picture of a pontoon ferry next to the location of the tank, serving as extra evidence that pontoon ferries were used on the location.



Screenshot depicting the building that appears on the background of the previous picture, proving it was taken there



This message, from 12th of May 1940 appears to be the message that contained the incorrect intelligence about the Yvoir bridge having been blown up.

"We cannot give you the exact position but that tank is as you mention is a panzer 4 D. It was part of Panzer-Regiment.31 – 5.Panzer-Division. From what we know it was under command of lieutenant Zöbel ."

- "Musée municipal de Sedan" (Local Museum of Sedan) about a Panzer IV D lost crossing the Meuse River

Zobel, Heinz

Date of birth: June 20th, 1914 (Konradswaldau/Silesia, Germany)
Nationality: German (1933-1945, Third Reich)

Biography

Promotions:

January 1st, 1938: Leutnant;
 October 1st, 1941: Oberleutnant;
 January 1st, 1943: Hauptmann;
 June 1st, 1944: Major im Generalstab (RDA: -14d-).

Career:

October 1st, 1935: Panzer-Regiment 2;
 September 1st, 1939: Zugführer, II. Abteilung, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 May 15th, 1940: Kompanieführer, II. Abteilung, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 July 15th, 1941: Adjutant, II. Abteilung, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 May 1st, 1942: Chef, 7. Kompanie, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 December 15th, 1942: Führer, II. Abteilung, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 ? Kommandeur, II. Abteilung, Panzer-Regiment 31;
 February 26th, 1943: Lazerett;
 July 6th, 1943: Führerreserve OKH;
 October 26th, 1943: 44. Generalstabsausbildung (46. Infanterie-Division/6. Armee);
 May 22nd, 1944: Kriegsakademie;
 November 1st, 1944: Führerreserve OKH;
 December 20th, 1944: Ib, 14. Panzer-Division.

Source: tracesofwar.com

Knowing the tank was being commanded by Lt. Heinz Zobel, proves that the tank was part of II. Abteilung, 31st Panzer-Regiment of the 5th Panzer Division. Because the only companies using the Panzer IV ausf. D were 3rd and 6th company, and Lt. Zobel was Kompanieführer of II. Abteilung (2nd battalion), the tank must have been part of 6th company (1st battalion consists of companies 1 - 3, 2nd of companies 4 - 6.)

In conclusion, evidence available proves that on May 13th 1940, German troops crossed the Meuse River near Houx using pontoon ferries, Zobel's tank was among the ones to attempt the crossing, his tank (a panzer IV ausf. D) fell in the Meuse after the ferry sank, how this occurred is still certain. Maps confirm that the 5th Panzer Division crossed the river at that exact location. Documents confirm without doubt that Leutnant Heinz Zobel was in very close proximity to this location at the time.

Documents about casualties and tank losses also confirm our findings, Leutnant Zobel was wounded on the 13th, while the 31st Panzer Regiment reported 4 Panzer IVs lost in May 1940.

The panzer of the lake, a Panzer IV ausf D with its tactical numbers on a rhomboid plate, is consistent with the 5th Panzer Division and the 31st Panzer Regiment in May 1940.

The location of the crossing is not only proved by the documents but also by the pictures, which are an exact match to the modern StreetView photographs. The two photographs, the first one captioned "Der Versunkene panzer Von Lt Zobel" (Supposedly from the book "Geschichte Der 5. Panzerdivision", which is unfortunately nearly impossible to obtain) and the following picture with the broken ferry are a perfect match with the photos of the Panzer of the Lake outside of the water, which we now believe were taken in 1941 when the tank was salvaged.

All this evidence leaves very little doubt as to what happened on that day.

The soldier



Available evidence suggests the soldier in the photo is a Pioneer/Tank recovery crew, holding a Kar98k and wearing an EM/NCO'S Drill & Work uniform, more commonly known as "Drillich".

His role is proven by the presence of pontoon ferries on the Meuse river, used by the 5th Panzer Division. That is also proven by his uniform, which, as evidence suggests, was used during work to prevent damage to their standard woolen uniform.

The rifle he holds is from his standard Pioneer equipment. This evidence is supported by pictures of soldiers wearing their Drillich uniform while having their standard infantry equipment.

"The 15-man Pionier squad represented the basic fighting element of the battalion. While equipped with standard infantry weapons they also used demolitions, flamethrowers, three-man and seven-man inflatable assault boats, stocks of barbed wire, anti-tank and anti-personnel mines, and smoke candles and grenades."

-Major Erich Schnee in "The German Pionier: Case Study of the Combat Engineer's Employment During Sustained Ground Combat"

This evidence strongly indicates Pioneers were equipped with standard infantry equipment, including a Kar98k like the one seen in the picture



Picture of soldiers wearing their Drillich attire while carrying their standard infantry equipment, including a Kar98k

Panzer durchqueren eine Furt bei Bouillon. Die Semoy, Pioniere bei Vorarbeit zum Bau einer Brücke. LKW mit Material	
Herstellung: am: 12.5.40 Ort: Bouillon von: H.F.	
M 92/30a Negativ-Nr.	Ähnliche Bilder (Film) Stelle: Sign:

In this image a pioneer can be seen wearing his reed-green drillichhosen on the outside of his boots- proving that this is not a major discrepancy in the original photo.

Pionier units

The divisional Pioneer (from 15 April 1940, Panzer Pioneer) Bataillon was much more than just an engineer unit, since it included both sappers and assault engineers. In September 1939, 1. to 3. Panzer Divisions' Pionier Bataillone 37,

counterparts, but the use of barrels and canisters (later to be known as 'jerrycans') greatly eased and speeded refueling operations in the field.



38 and 39 were at full strength, with their three motorized Pionier Kompanien and their Brücken Kolonne K ('bridging column K' - the K being a small girder bridge with a maximum load of 16 tons and a maximum length of 76m). The unit's established strength was 820 (22 officers, 2 Beamte, 83 NCOs and 713 other ranks), its weapons included 678 rifles and 27 light MGs, and its vehicle allowance comprised 78 motorcycles, 43 staff cars, and 117 lorries. 4. Panzer

Text stating that Pioneers received rifles (most likely being the Kar98k)



This picture shows a group of combat engineers preparing a pontoon bridge using the same uniform. The picture also shows one of the soldiers with a helmet and a knife from his standard equipment

“By noon on May 13, Pioniere completed an eight-ton ferry and crossed twenty anti-tank guns to the west bank, however to maintain the tempo of his divisions advance, he needed armor and motorized units across the river. Rommel personally ordered the ferry converted to a heavier sixteen-ton variant to facilitate the crossing of the light Panzers and armored cars. Simultaneously, the Pioniere began construction on a bridge capable of crossing the division’s heavier Panzers and motorized units.”

-Major Erich Schnee in “The German Pionier: Case Study of the Combat Engineer’s Employment During Sustained Ground Combat”

This serves as additional proof, stating that german Pioneers were the ones to build the pontoon ferries and bridges used to cross the Meuse river.

The only factor that remains without explanation is the missing cleaning rod in his gun, which is practically impossible to explain certainly with concrete proof. Any of the possible reasons for it can be true, one of which is the soldier simply losing it.



An example of the early version of the Drillich

"The tunic (Drillichrock) and trousers (Drillichhose) were easily washable and were issued as a fatigue uniform with the intention of keeping the soldiers woolen service uniform in good condition. Produced from an unbleached denim or herringbone twill material, they were intended for use during activities such as work details, weapons cleaning, drill practice and so on."

"To complete the look, an M34 side cap and equipment belt was also worn. The trousers also had two pockets built into them."

Being used for work details to upkeep their woolen uniform, this explains the uniform that was used by the Pioneer.

"Due to the impracticalities of white in the field, a 'reed green' model came into production during the French campaign, which was eventually replaced mid war by the denim or 'HBT' field uniform which was produced in the same material, but based on the woolen service tunics with 4 pockets with flaps, insignia and shoulder straps."

This also explains the lack of any insignia, shoulder straps, or any other detail on his clothing. The Drillich was meant to be simple, and used in order to prevent damaging the standard combat uniform, thus not receiving any insignia or shoulder strap until mid-war. The "mixed" look of his uniform (early pants with tunic from the Battle of France) was also fairly common, being plenty of evidence that soldiers would use the uniform as available.



In this image, soldiers working have different combinations of early and late Drillich versions.



The soldier sitting down near a raft has the same clothes and knife, which is part of his standard equipment

The Location

The location was found to be the Meuse River, near the village of Houx, in Namur, Belgium. (Coordinates: 50.29092467073664, 4.893099128823844)

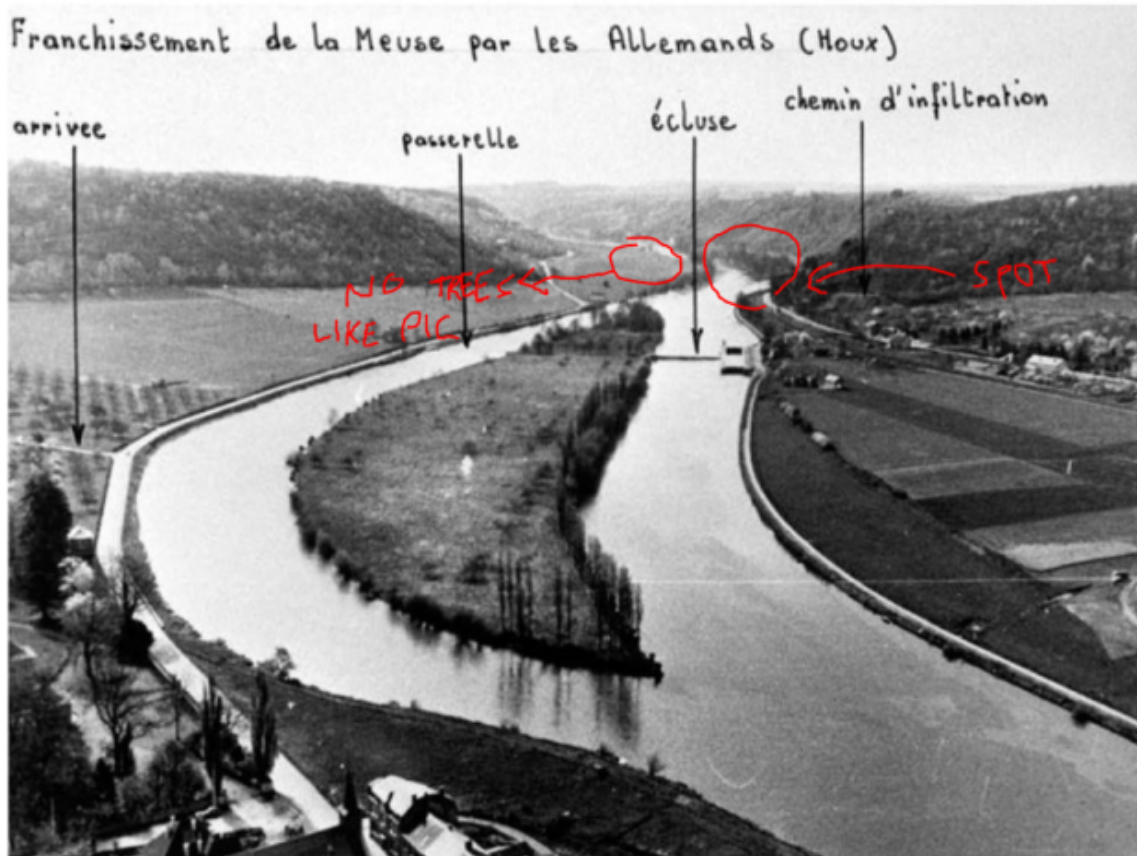


Screenshot showing the location of the tank



Comparison of the original photo and the most recent image available of the location (July 2020, Google Street View)

Many key factors match in the images, those including the overall terrain and topography of the place, such as the two hills visible in the background of the picture (top right and top left), the tree types that look similar (such as the pines on the left side of the river from the camera's perspective, visible clearly on the reflection on the water), and the course of the river, including the similar width as well as the junction before the river curves left. Due to the construction of quays, the original shoreline is no longer visible.



Wartime picture of the Meuse river at Houx and an image of how it looks nowadays. Comparing the two shows key factors, such as the hills and the course of the river, stayed the same.



Original photo and picture of the location overlaid in order to show the similarities between the chosen locale and the river as portrayed in the given images

The time



All the evidence leads us to believe this photo was taken in 1941, when the tank was recovered. The tank has been in the river for over half a year

There are no traces of it after that.

The team

Main writers / developers of the theory

- Miller786#9839 - Finding the location and researching
- Thallez_#6063 - Writing the document and researching
- DynCoder#1896 - Writing, researching, translation and photo analysis
- Rohnski#0485 - Initial evidence of the 5th Panzer Division crossing at Houx and research on the soldier's uniform.

Contributors

These people helped with research about subjects surrounding the PotL:

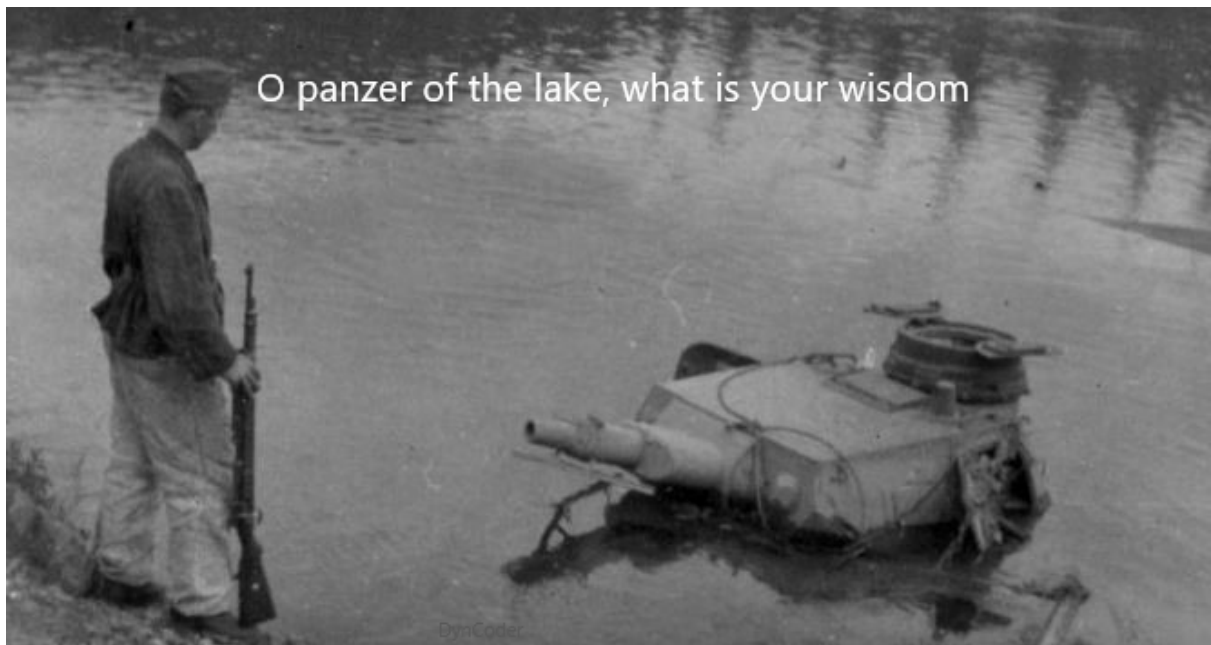
- Lord Quintus - Providing sources and categorizing the Panzer Companies
- Clausewitz#0231 - Providing the map from the OKH as well as field reports for the entire 5th Panzer Division (Lead archivist and God-Emperor of Microfilm)
- mpikoul#3174 - Minor edits to the report and marshalling of the translation team
- Rasputin#4976 - Providing evidence leading to the definitive proof
- Kaze Shadow#7009 - Information on Lt. Zobel and contacting local museums for information
- [85] lee#4381 - Information on Lt. Wispelaere

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These people helped by translating German field reports:

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A big thanks to all the people who helped us confirm this theory in whatever way they could, we wouldn't have gotten this far without them



For feedback or questions you can contact us at:
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