

The Myth of Tiger 131

Introduction

Despite the many thousands of words which have been written about Bovington Tank Museum's prize exhibit, Tiger 131, aspects of the tank's history remain shrouded in mystery. Some attempts to explain how it came to be abandoned in Tunisia in 1943 have been, to say the least, controversial. The traditionally accepted version of events is outlined in the '*Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual*' published by Haynes¹. However, the Tank Museum's Curator, David Willey, appears to accept that the tank's history is far from clear when he writes in the Introduction "...for any errors and myths that we add to or perpetuate in this book, my apologies". As the evidence presented in this paper will reveal, the accepted account of Tiger 131's abandonment and capture is in fact the greatest myth of all.

Tiger 131 is famous because it was the first Tiger tank to be captured intact by the western Allies and is now the only running Tiger tank in the world. According to the accepted account, the vehicle was abandoned on Djebel Djaffa, Tunisia, after a fight with the Churchill tanks of 48 Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) on 21 April 1943. In the account, the Churchill tank of Lieutenant Peter Gudgin and that of a fellow Troop Leader were knocked out by Tiger 131 before it was itself abandoned following a lucky shot from another Churchill which jammed the turret and panicked the crew. Peter Gudgin was subsequently invalided back to England where, by a tremendous coincidence, he was transferred to the School of Tank Technology responsible for evaluating Tiger 131. Thus, Tiger 131 and Peter Gudgin became intimately connected: the man was reunited with the machine which almost killed him. His story is recounted so frequently it has become almost self corroborating, yet it contradicts the evidence.

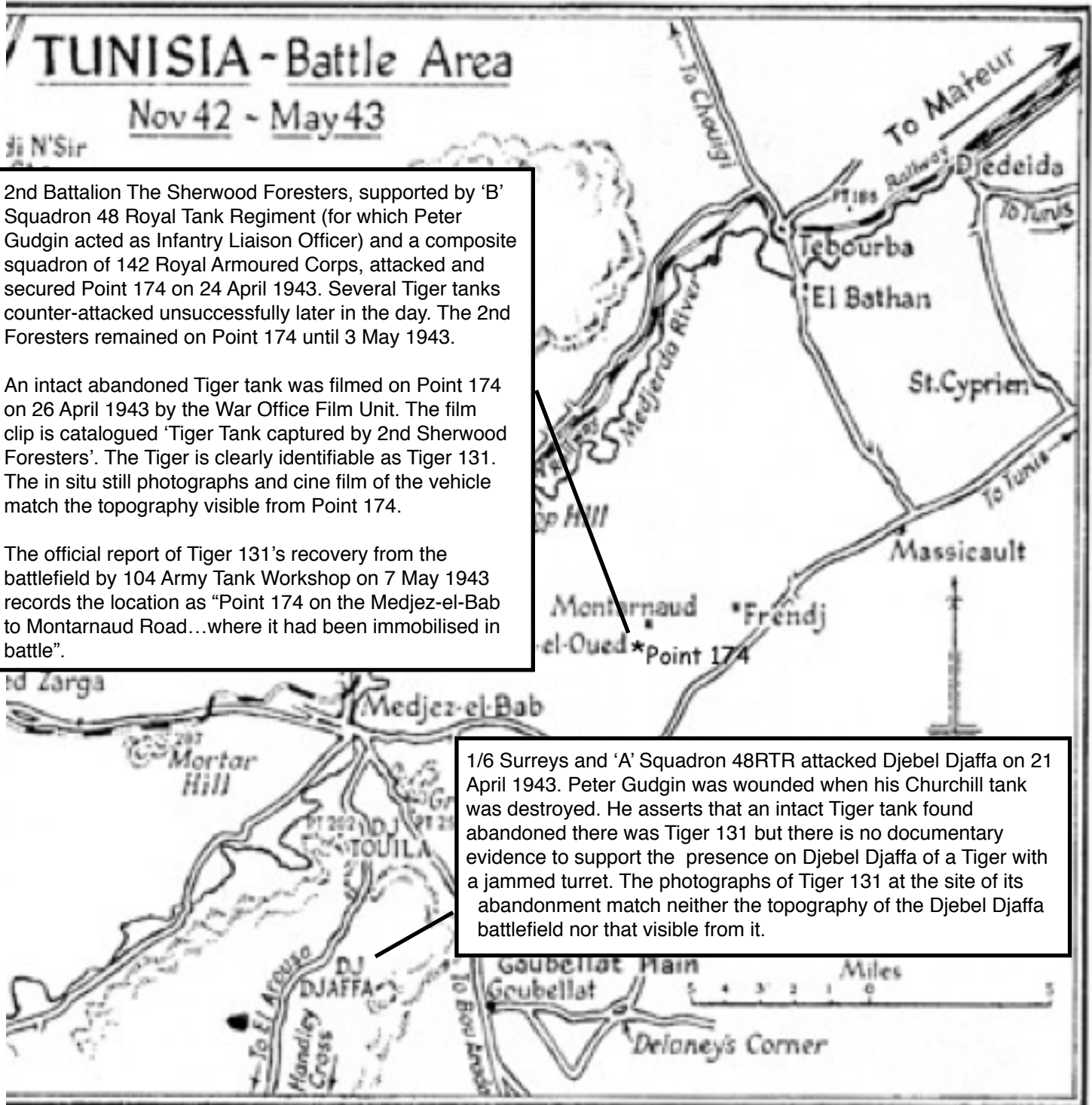
As the evidence will show, Tiger 131 was in fact abandoned on 24 April 1943 some ten miles away from Djebel Djaffa during the fight for a hill known as Point 174 (part of a feature called Gueriat el Atach) by 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters. The Foresters were supported by two tank squadrons under command of 142 Royal Armoured Corps (RAC). Disentangling the truth from the myth after so many years is not straightforward so to aid understanding a summary of timings, locations and evidence can be found below. The evidence indicates that in recalling events relating to the capture of Tiger 131, Peter Gudgin inadvertently conflated two actions in which he had participated. As the soldier and military historian Robert J Kershaw has said, "Combat is an intensely personal, emotional and confusing experience. Events can often be misinterpreted, often by the individuals who enacted them".² That said, Peter Gudgin was a well respected author and member

¹ *Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual* : Fletcher, Willey, M.Hayton, Vase, Gibb, D.Hayton, Schofield published by Haynes 2011.

² p.8 *It Never Snows In November - The German View of Market Garden and The Battle of Arnhem September 1944* : Robert J Kershaw published by Ian Allen 1994.

of the museum community and it is certainly not the intention of this paper to impugn his reputation.

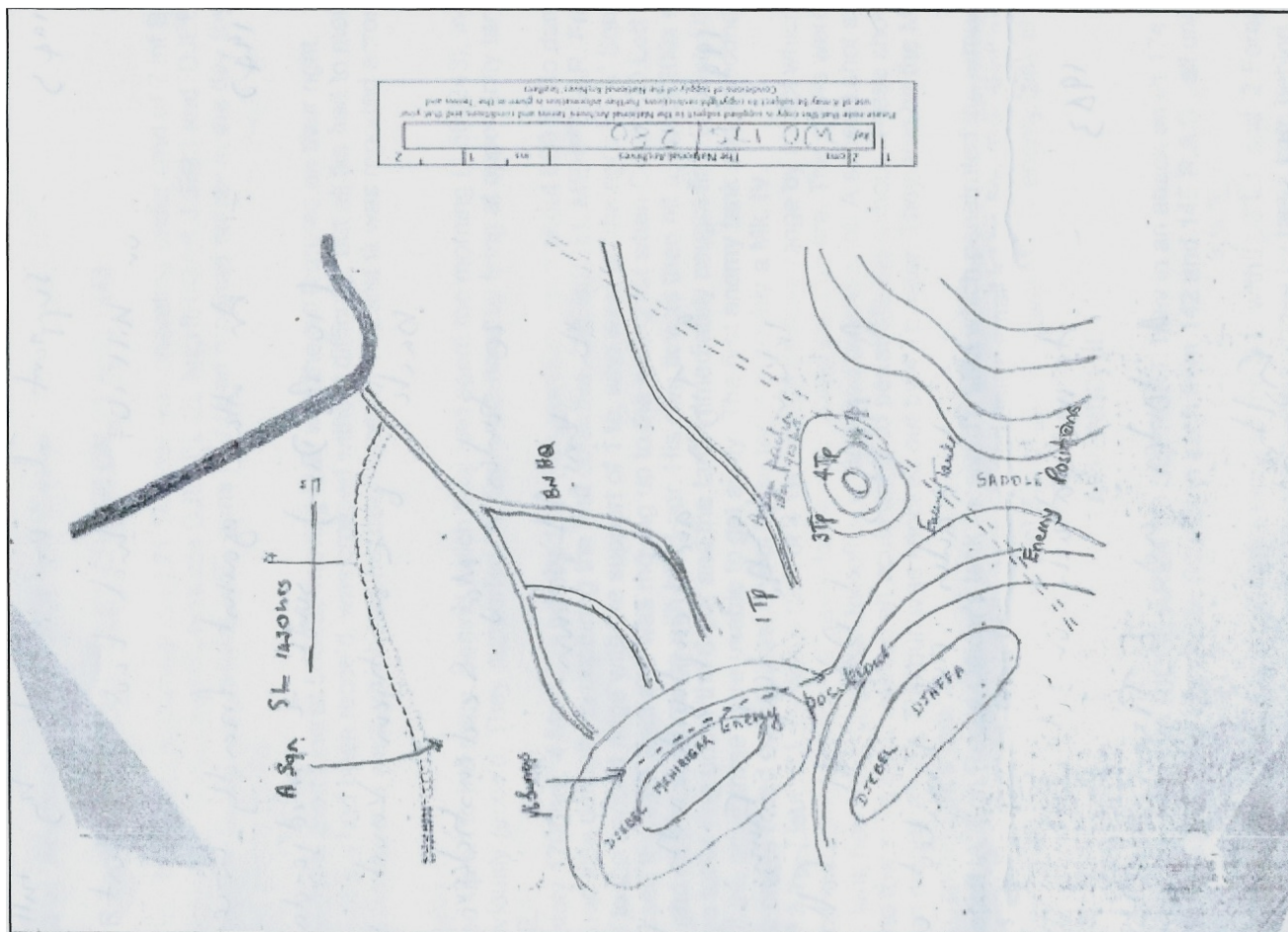
Summary of timings, locations and evidence



The traditionally accepted account of Tiger 131's abandonment³

According to the accepted account, Tiger 131 was on Djebel Djaffa, Tunisia, on 21 April 1943 when the German positions there were attacked by an infantry battalion, 1/6th Surreys, supported by the Churchill tanks of 'A' Squadron, 48 RTR. The war diary of 48 RTR⁴ records the attack in some detail and includes a sketch map of the action which is reproduced below.

The tanks of 'A' Squadron crossed the start line moving north-eastwards with the hillside of Djebel Djaffa on their right. After crossing a dry riverbed which had been reconnoitred previously, they encountered a second dry riverbed hidden from view in a field of corn and the tanks had to move over to their left flank in order to get across. After successfully negotiating this obstacle, the tanks discovered yet another dry riverbed which the vehicles of 2, 3 and 4 Troops crossed, leaving 1 Troop to support the 1/6 Surreys who were by then advancing onto the slopes of



³ Drawn from : the war diary of 48RTR; *The Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual* published by Haynes 2011; The Tank Museum Podcasts 13 and 14 - Capturing the Tiger Parts 1 and 2; *The Tiger Tanks* by Peter Gudgin published by Arms and Armour 1991; and *With The East Surreys in Tunisia and Italy 1942 - 1945* by Bryn Evans published by Pen and Sword 2012.

⁴ WO 175/280 National Archive.

Djebel Djaffa. Shortly afterwards the tank of Captain Lott, the commander of 3 Troop, was hit and burst into flames. Only Lott and one of his crew managed to bail out, both mortally wounded. The remaining tanks of 3 Troop knocked out two German tanks but, further to their left, the tank of Lieutenant Gudgin, the commander of 4 Troop, was hit by a round which went down the length of the vehicle and set the engine on fire. Gudgin and two others bailed out but his driver and co-driver were unable to open their hatches. Under machine gun fire, but screened by the tank of Gudgin's sergeant which had drawn up alongside, Gudgin succeeded in crowbarring open the jammed hatches to release the trapped men. Elsewhere, another German tank and an anti-tank gun were put out of action at the cost of two Churchills disabled. Meanwhile, the infantry attack on Djebel Djaffa had also run into stiff opposition. Despite a withering fire, the Surreys pressed on and were within twenty yards of the summit when it became suicidal to advance further. Laying down smoke for cover, the Surreys pulled back having lost 42 killed, including their commanding officer. However, the Germans had had the worst of it and, thinking that the smoke barrage heralded a decisive final push by the Surreys, they too withdrew. The next morning the Surreys again scaled Djebel Djaffa's slopes expecting a hail of enemy fire. This never materialised and they took the hill unopposed.

Speaking in 2009, Gudgin describes how, on returning to Djebel Djaffa two days later to examine his burnt out tank, he saw the Tiger tank to which he attributed its destruction⁵:

"I was able to see the Tiger tank for the first time and I was absolutely horrified by its size and by the size of its 88mm gun. I mean it was nearly twice the weight of my Churchill. The gun was getting on for twice the calibre because I had a 57mm and this was 88mm and the projectile it fired was about twenty pounds and mine was six pounds. Well the kinetic energy of that, you know, they could knock us out at 2000 yards and we couldn't knock them out at 600 unless we were very lucky. And we had been lucky because one of our shots, and I don't know whose it was, I don't think it was mine, hit it. It hit the gun mounting, ricocheted onto the gun mantlet and from there into the turret ring and just jammed the turret." ⁶

In his book, Gudgin asserts that the abandoned Tiger he saw on Djebel Djaffa was the vehicle which was later shipped to England for evaluation, Tiger 131:

"My personal experience of the Tiger started on 21 April 1943, when my Churchill IV and that of a fellow troop leader were knocked out by one, together with its covering Pz Kpfw III and IV, belonging to 504 Heavy Tank

⁵ The 48 RTR war diary does record that a Tiger tank, not damaged at all seriously, was found on Djebel Djaffa the day after the action.

⁶ Tank Museum Podcast 14 - Capturing the Tiger Part 2.

Battalion. This particular Tiger was in turn put out of action by another of our tanks, but was so little damaged (the lucky telling shot had jammed the turret) that, on capture the following morning, it was found to be almost fully serviceable. After being repaired and refurbished by 104 Army Tank Workshop REME [Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers], it was put on exhibition in Tunis where it was examined by HM King George VI, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and other VIPs, prior to its shipment to UK in September 1943 for detailed examination and testing... In the meantime, I too had been evacuated to UK, in my case to convalesce, prior to joining the School of Tank Technology (STT) a wing of the Military College of Science, at Chertsey... I was attached to the STT staff as part of the examination team; imagine my surprise when I was joined there by the Tiger responsible for my presence in UK.”⁷

Weighing the evidence

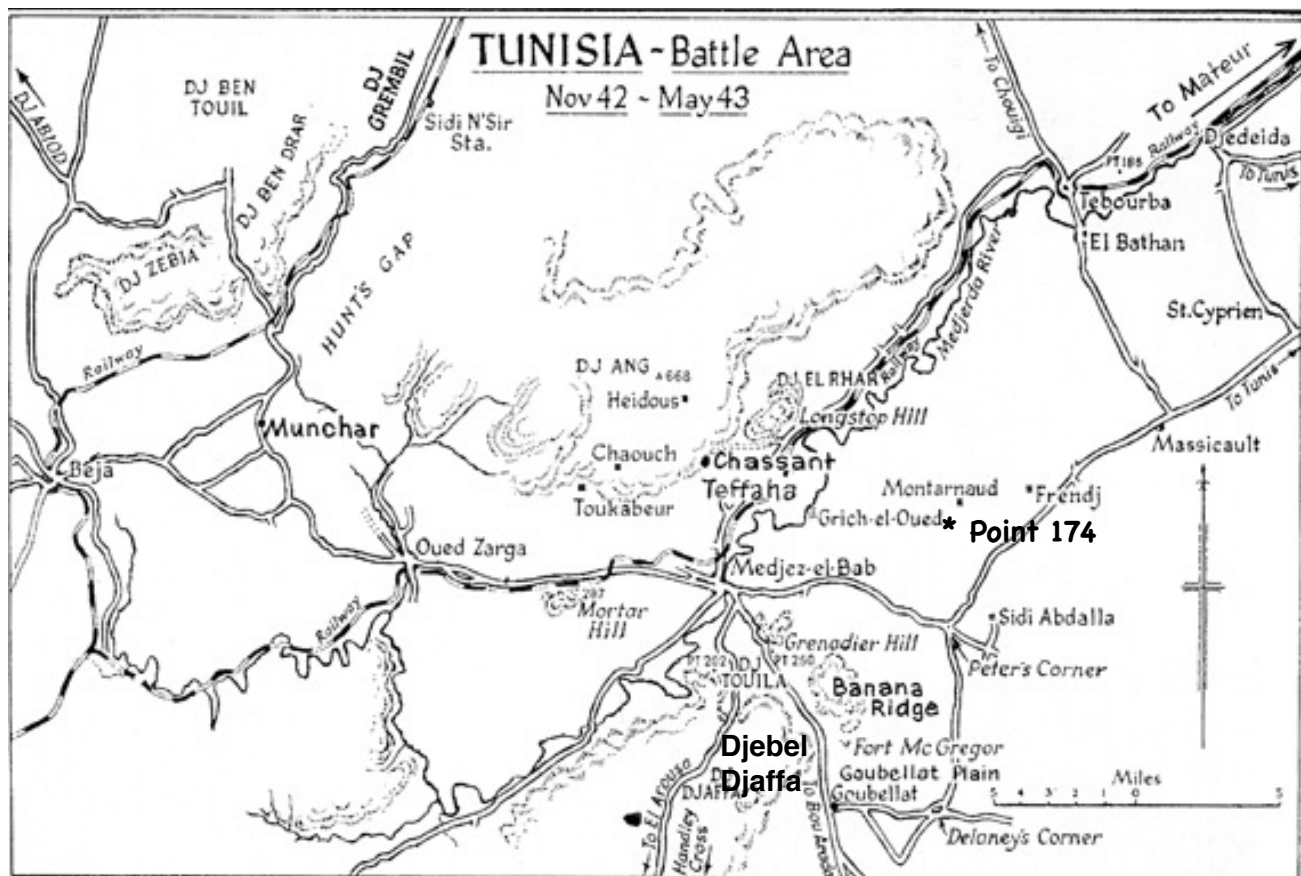
According to the *Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual*, Tiger 131 was found abandoned on Djebel Djaffa at a location referred to as Point 174⁸, the clear inference being that Point 174 formed part of the Djebel Djaffa battlefield. However, this inference is incorrect. The term “Point 174” denotes a hill feature 174 metres in elevation and all the terrain forming the Djebel Djaffa battlefield exceeds that height. The fact is that Djebel Djaffa and Point 174 are different locations with markedly different map references. The 48 RTR war diary records the map reference of ‘A’ Squadron’s fight on Djebel Djaffa as 590230. Coincidentally, the same war diary also provides the map reference of Point 174 since ‘B’ Squadron 48 RTR supported an attack there by the 2nd Sherwood Foresters on 24 April 1943. The map reference recorded, 690370, tallies with that in the Sherwood Foresters’ war diary.⁹ A military map¹⁰ used by the Allies during the Tunisian campaign locates the two map references some ten miles apart; Djebel Djaffa is south of Medjez el Bab while Point 174 is north east of Medjez el Bab and south west of Montarnaud. As the military map is much too large to be reproduced in full here, the two locations are shown on the sketch map of the Tunisian battle area below.

⁷ p.7-8 *The Tiger Tanks* by Peter Gudgin published by Arms and Armour 1991.

⁸ p.33 *Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual* published by Haynes 2011.

⁹ WO 175/521 National Archive.

¹⁰ Tunisia 1:50,000 Sheet 27 Medjez el Bab. Geographical Section General Staff No. 4225 Published by War Office 1942. University of Texas Archive. It can be viewed here http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/ams/tunisia_50k/txu-pclmaps-oclc-6540922-medjez-el-bab-27.jpg

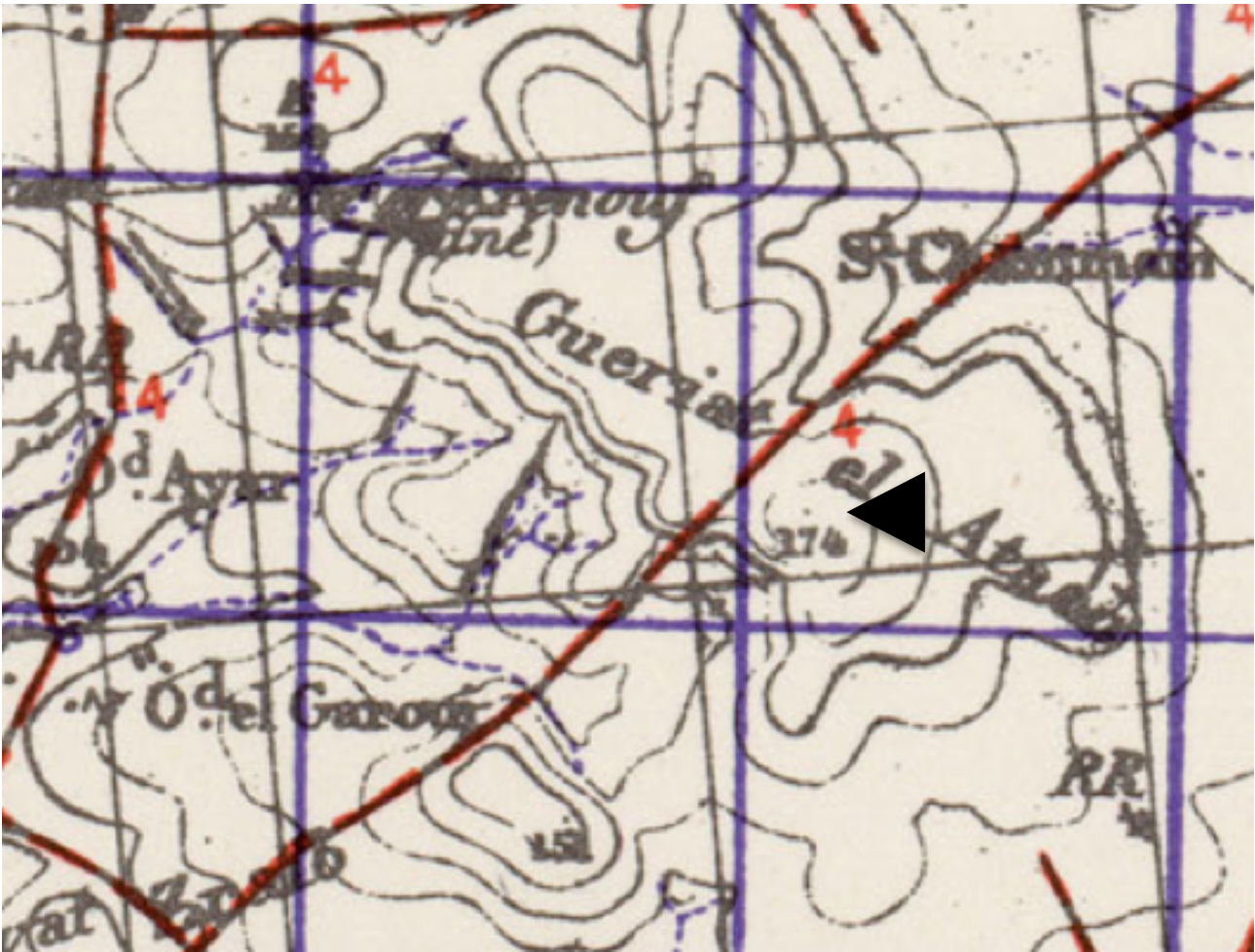


The respective topographies of Djebel Djaffa and Point 174 can be seen in the following extracts from the military map:

Djebel Djaffa



Point 174 (arrowed)



It is immediately apparent that the two locations are very different in appearance. The slopes of Djebel Djaffa are covered in scrub whereas Point 174 appears barren and traversed by the Medjez el Bab to Montarnaud road (which the map legend denotes as a track). This is significant because the photographs of Tiger 131 at the site of its abandonment (see pages 16 and 17) show the vehicle sitting in an open landscape: self evidently not the Djebel Djaffa battlefield. Asked to examine the photographs, David Byrden, owner of the tiger1.info website, carried out a Google Earth based comparative analysis of the horizon shown in them and concluded that there is a high degree of correlation with the topography visible from Point 174. However, as good as Google Earth renditions are, the definitive evidence that the photographs were taken on Point 174 is provided courtesy of Mustapha Ben Rejeb, a Tunisian agronomist. Recently, he took a photograph on Point 174 which David Byrden then compared with the newsreel shot on 26 April 1943 by the War Office Film Unit (see page 12). His comparison of the respective landscapes shown in the photograph and the news reel demonstrates a match.¹¹

¹¹ <http://tiger1.info/EN/131-captured-where.html>

Understanding from the map references and photographs that Djebel Djaffa and Point 174 are locations some ten miles apart is key to disentangling the truth of Tiger 131's abandonment. Further clarity comes from a vital document which identifies precisely where Tiger 131 was abandoned. This is a report dated 19 September 1943 written by Major A D Lidderdale. Lidderdale was the Commanding Officer of 104 Army Tank Workshop, the unit which recovered Tiger 131 from the battlefield.

Lidderdale's report is in the Tank Museum's archive and is reproduced at Annex A.¹ It clearly records that the vehicle was recovered on 7 May 1943 from "Point 174 on the MEDJEZ-EL-BAB to MONTARNAUD ROAD" [emphasis in original]. This leaves no room for doubt as to the location because, as mentioned above, that road passes directly over Point 174, east of Medjez el Bab. Neither is there any doubt that the vehicle recovered there by Lidderdale was Tiger 131: the chassis and turret numbers of the vehicle recorded by him in his report match those of the Tank Museum's Tiger.

Whilst Lidderdale's report resolves one issue by identifying the correct location of Tiger 131's abandonment, it leaves us with another one requiring examination. Surprisingly, Lidderdale's report contains two amendments which, as will be shown below, were made by Peter Gudgin in 1987, forty-four years later. The two amendments are easily identified; Gudgin's typeface being very different to Lidderdale's. Originally, Lidderdale's report had begun with an entry dated 7 May 1943 recording Tiger 131's recovery from Point 174. However, Gudgin inserted above this a new entry dated 21 April 1943 stating that Tiger 131 had been immobilised in action by 'A' Squadron, 48 RTR, 21 Army Tank Brigade (Gudgin's Squadron). He also amended the entry for 7 May 1943 to change the unit to which Lidderdale had attributed Tiger 131's demise from 25 Tank Brigade to 4 Troop, 'A' Squadron, 48 RTR, 21 Army Tank Brigade (Gudgin's Troop). Neither amendment withstands scrutiny. As Lidderdale records, Tiger 131 was lost on Point 174 and 'A' Squadron, 48 RTR could not have been there on 21 April 1943 as Gudgin contends because the regiment's war diary has it fighting on Djebel Djaffa, ten miles away on that date.

Lidderdale's report came into possession of the Tank Museum under cover of a letter from him dated 7 November 1987. This letter¹³ is reproduced at Annex B. In it, Lidderdale explains that he recovered Tiger 131 from Point 174, was then responsible for preparing the vehicle for its inspection by King George VI and other VIPs in Tunis, subsequently accompanying it on its journey to the UK and remaining with it there until his reassignment to other duties in December 1943. Lidderdale explains that he visited the vehicle at the Tank Museum on two

¹² Document E2007.1751.1 Tank Museum Archive.

¹³ An attachment to the Tank Museum's press release dated 29/1/13 in response to the publication of *Catch that Tiger* by Botham and Montague, published by John Blake 2012.

occasions. During his second visit, in 1982, he queried why the formation sign of the unit he believed responsible for Tiger 131's demise (25 Tank Brigade - which he had ordered painted on Tiger 131 in 1943) had been painted out. He was told that there had been an error of attribution of the formation responsible for knocking out the vehicle and that Peter Gudgin could provide the explanation. Subsequently, Lidderdale and Gudgin developed a strong relationship. So strong in fact that, as the letter reveals, Lidderdale allowed Gudgin to amend his personal copy of the report of Tiger 131's recovery from Point 174. As his letter demonstrates, Lidderdale accepted the amendments because he thought that Gudgin had fought Tiger 131 on Point 174 on 21 April 1943:

"I accept unreservedly, the corrections which Peter [Gudgin] has made and which have enabled a wrong attribution to be put right...He was there at the time, I only later." ¹⁴

So, in accepting Gudgin's amendments, Lidderdale discounted the information he had recorded whilst recovering Tiger 131 from Point 174:

"My information that No.131 had been knocked out by a Churchill tank of 25 Tk Brigade was recorded in my notepad in the course of a meeting with DDME [Deputy Director Mechanical Engineering] 5 Corps and an officer of 25 Tk Brigade Workshop REME while I was at Point 174 for the purpose of recovering No.131 from where it had been immobilised in battle." ¹⁵

And, after corresponding with Gudgin, Lidderdale gained an entirely different understanding of the circumstances in which Tiger 131 had been knocked out on Point 174:

"As I now understand it, in the action No. 131, the Mk IV and the Mk III were immobilised and abandoned and the tanks of the Tp Leaders of both 3 [Capt. Lott] and 4 Tps [Lt. Gudgin] brewed up but No. 131 was probably knocked out by another Churchill of 4 Tp." ¹⁶

To ensure that he had properly understood what Gudgin had told him, Lidderdale asked Gudgin to check his new understanding of the action on Point 174:

"I am sending a copy of this letter to Peter for him to bless it, if it passes his close scrutiny or amend it, if necessary." ¹⁷

¹⁴ Lidderdale's letter to the Tank Museum dated 7 November 1987.
Tank Museum Archive E2007.1751.8

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ *ibid.*

That Gudgin did not take this opportunity to correct the fallacy that the the Djebel Djaffa battle had taken place on Point 174 implies he believed Djebel Djaffa and Point 174 to be the same place. There is a plausible explanation for Gudgin having this conviction. He had participated in 'A' Squadron's attack on Djebel Djaffa on 21 April 1943 and three days later, as the Infantry Liaison Officer for 'B' Squadron,¹⁸ he had witnessed the attack on Point 174 during which, as will be shown below, Tiger 131 was captured. Consequently, it is conceivable that the passage of time, and perhaps the trauma of the head wound he received on Djebel Djaffa, served to conflate the two events in his memory. As the results of modern psychological studies show, the misremembering of events, particularly traumatic ones, by war veterans is not uncommon. Neither is it unusual for veterans to impart a strong conviction to their memories of combat. For example, Richard Holmes, when interviewing Falklands War veterans for his book *The Firing Line* "was conscious of the way in which a carapace of accepted fact hardened almost before my eyes"¹⁹ Whatever the case, Peter Gudgin is no longer here to speak for himself and I do not question his integrity. That he rescued his trapped crew from their blazing tank under fire on Djebel Djaffa shows he was a brave soldier; as indeed were all Allied tankers given the often unequal battles they were called upon to fight.

Of course, the question remains as to why the Tank Museum appears to have accepted Gudgin's story at face-value. As mentioned above, Gudgin was responsible for evaluating Tiger 131 following its arrival at the School of Tank Technology in Chertsey. In this capacity, he wrote a number of detailed technical reports about the vehicle and became a leading authority on its design and construction. After the war, Gudgin had a number of other military assignments before becoming a Senior Tank Technology Instructor at Bovington. His duties there included a supervisory role in the management of the Tank Museum where Tiger 131 had recently been deposited.²⁰ Given his reputation and long association with the vehicle, it is understandable that the Tank Museum would defer to him about its history. Gudgin's continuing association with the Museum and Tiger 131 in later years, coupled with the Museum's growing international profile, served to ensure that his account of Tiger 131's capture became ubiquitous.

What happened to Tiger 131 on Point 174?

Lidderdale's report states that Tiger 131 was recovered from Point 174 on the Medjez-el-Bab to Montarnaud Road on 7 May 1943 but when, and under what circumstances, was it captured? Point 174 was one of two key features on Guriat el Atach, the other being Point 156 further to the west. Gueriat el Atach was attacked twice. The first, unsuccessful, attack was made on 23 April 1943. The second, when it was finally taken, took place the following day when a composite

¹⁸ The Tank Museum Podcast 14 - Capturing the Tiger Part 2.

¹⁹ p.155 *Firing Line* by Richard Holmes published by Jonathan Cape 1985.

²⁰ *Tank Times* February 2012 edition published by the Tank Museum.

tank battalion under command of 142 Royal Armoured Corps (RAC) supported the attack by 2nd Sherwood Foresters against Point 174 and the attack by 1st King's Shropshire Light Infantry against Point 156. A description of the Foresters' attack, which was their first in Tunisia, is set out in the history of the battalion written by Capt. W. A. Masters. His account is worth quoting in full:

"On 23rd April [1943] the Divisional [1st British Infantry Division] attack was launched as planned. Limited success at the cost of heavy casualties was achieved by the Guards Brigade and similarly by the 2nd Brigade. The North Staffords, who captured Point 174, were driven off by a counter-attack and the hill changed hands several times during the course of the day.

"The next day [24th April] the other two Battalions of 3rd Brigade, the Foresters and 1st KSLI [King's Shropshire Light Infantry] were ordered forward to capture Point 174 and an adjacent feature to the left. The KSLI captured their feature [Point 156] with fairly heavy casualties.

"At 1400 hours, the 95th [2nd Foresters] moved over the start line in the lee of Point 151 – just short of 174 – in extended order with D Company right forward, B Company left forward and A and C Companies in reserve following some two hundred yards behind. The forward companies moved over the top of Point 151 in good style and advanced into the valley between that feature and Point 174.

"At the foot of 174 they were met with a minefield and barbed wire covered by heavy artillery and mortar fire and machine gun fire in enfilade. During the temporary hold up which followed, the Commanding Officer, Lt. Colonel Pye, went forward to investigate and ordered a further barrage from the Divisional Artillery (which together with the Battalion Mortar Platoon had covered the 95th forward with smoke and high explosive up to this stage) onto the summit of 174.

"Immediately the wire was cut in several places, the forward platoons infiltrated through and the advance was resumed. At this point Lieut. A. St. J. M. Brachi of D Company, walked up the hill in front of his men, engaging enemy machine gun posts on his own. This valiant officer was killed when attempting a lone clearing of a machine gun post on top of the hill.

"Following this example, the 95th regardless of very heavy casualties, charged the top of the feature under the direct leadership of Colonel Pye (who was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for this action) took the remaining enemy prisoner and consolidated.

"Three hundred yards down the gentle slope of the other side were the squat figures of six Tiger tanks which forthwith, and for the remaining hours of daylight, harried the Battalion with machine gun and short range open sight HE fire. Subsequently, a number of Churchill tanks made a late arrival on the

hill for the attack and engaged the enemy armour. They met with little success against the Tigers, which were in hull-down positions, and several Churchills were knocked out. At nightfall, however, the enemy tanks withdrew from positions which would have been dangerous to them by night and the German artillery took over the job of making the Foresters uncomfortable.

“No further counter-attack was undertaken by the enemy and the Battalion spent the next six days patrolling forward and holding the hill under heavy shell fire.”²¹

Although neither Masters nor the Foresters’ war diary mentions the capture of Tiger 131 on Point 174, the loss of the vehicle during the Foresters’ attack is evidenced by a cine film in the Imperial War Museum archive.²² The film was shot by the War Office Film Unit on 26 April 1943 and the IWM catalogue entry is “*Tiger tank captured by 2nd Battalion Sherwood Foresters after fighting west [sic] of Medjez el Bab*”. As mentioned previously, David Byrden undertook a Google Earth based comparative analysis of the horizon shown in the film and determined that it had been shot on Point 174. There is no doubt that the vehicle in the film is Tiger 131 because it exhibits the damage sustained by the vehicle and has a step welded to the hull front to enable the crew to better access the hull deck. This field modification is unique to Tiger 131. The film also shows a number of shells bursting on the position which tallies with the Foresters’ war diary entry for the date of the filming; “enemy shelling continues but with less intensity”. It also tallies with the Tank Museum’s contention that the shrapnel damage to Tiger 131 occurred most probably after it had been abandoned.²³ In any event, the vehicle must have been abandoned during the Foresters’ attack since that was the last time Point 174 changed hands. If Tiger 131 had been lost during the previous day’s fighting (23 April 1943) which left the Germans in possession of the hill, the Germans would surely have recovered the vehicle themselves, given that it was in running condition, or destroyed it.²⁴

As mentioned earlier, the attack against Gueriat el Atach was supported by a composite tank battalion under overall command of 142 RAC, a 25 Tank Brigade unit. It comprised an ad-hoc Squadron from 142 RAC and ‘B’ Squadron 48 RTR, both of which supported the Foresters’ attack against Point 174, and an ad-hoc Squadron from 145 RAC which supported the KSLI against Point 156. Both 48 RTR and 145 RAC were 21 Tank Brigade units.

²¹ p.8-9 *The Story of the 2nd Battalion The Sherwood Foresters 1939-45* by Captain John W A Masters published by Gale and Polden Limited Aldershot 1946.

²² Film AYY 402/3 Imperial War Museum - *Dust; Feeding at the Front; Tiger Tank*. War Office Film Unit.

²³ p.37 *Tiger Tank Owners’ Workshop Manual* published by Haynes 2011.

²⁴ Major Roper of 142 RAC claimed to have knocked out a Tiger tank on Point 174 during the evening of 23 April 1943. 142 RAC war diary WO 175/282 National Archive.

The 48 RTR war diary records the attack against Point 174 in terms which seem overly positive given other evidence:

“It was a 2nd Echelon attack, the infantry being put onto the objective supported by tanks from behind. This was successful and quick and practically no ammunition was expended. Immediately a series of counter-attacks with tanks were put in by the enemy. All together 6 enemy tanks were destroyed including at least 2 Pz.Kw. Mk.III. One Pz.Kw.Mk VI [Tiger] was damaged. Enemy infantry showed little fight and many were captured.”²⁵

The war diary of 142 RAC²⁶ describes the fight for Point 174 as a much more intense affair. It records that several Churchills were lost in the approach to Point 174 (which may explain why Masters said the tanks arrived late) and that having occupied the crest, the Foresters were severely counter-attacked by infantry and tanks such that they had great difficulty in holding their positions. Indeed, such was the ferocity of the fight that afternoon, the Foresters won five Military Medals.²⁷ That the battle was indeed protracted and hard fought is also supported by a six page after-action report²⁸ written by Major C A Joss, commander of ‘B’ Squadron 48 RTR. His report describes a battle which raged to and fro all afternoon involving repeated German counter-attacks by infantry. Describing how ‘B’ Squadron supported the Foresters fighting on Point 174, he says:

“While all this was going on, 9 and 10 troops and myself were on Point 151 watching the top of 174....Shortly afterwards Captain RAND saw an aerial mast moving along the ridge of 174. He put his gun onto it and informed the rest of 9 Troop. The tracks appeared and the tank was identified as a Mark. VI [Tiger]. As we had to be absolutely sure that this was a German tank, he told his Troop to hold their fire until the whole turret was visible, but one of 10 Troop opened fire so Captain RAND gave the order to open fire also. He was rather nervous of opening fire as there was one of our infantry carriers just below the Mark VI and at 1000 yards he thought an under might hit the carrier. This unfortunately happened but the Mark VI disappeared and came up again in a different position and was hit. The crew bailed out and were shot by our infantry.”²⁹

²⁵ The Germans on Point 174 showed anything but “little fight” given that the Foresters’ attack came perilously close to stalling and left 68 of them dead or dying (5 Officers, 20 NCOs and 43 Privates: CWGC records) and 109 wounded (3rd Infantry Brigade war diary WO 175/191 National Archive). This amounted to about 40% of the Foresters’ fighting strength.

²⁶ WO 175/282 National Archive.

²⁷ Medal Citations WO 373 series National Archive.

²⁸ “*Report for War Diary of an action during the Tunisian Campaign in which ‘B’ Squadron, 48 R Tanks took part*” Major C A Joss OC ‘B’ Squadron 48 R Tks. WO 175/280 National Archive.

²⁹ Tiger 131 exhibits a large number of .303 round strikes to its front and sides.

Tantalising as this account is, David Byrden has examined the relative positions of Point 151 and the site of Tiger 131's abandonment (see page 16) and concluded that the latter would have been out of view of Major Joss' tanks. A later sighting of an abandoned Tiger may be a better candidate for Tiger 131.

Major Joss' report describes how, some time after firing at the Tiger, he ordered 9 and 10 Troops forward from Point 151 onto Point 174. As Sergeant Cummin moved his tank onto Point 174 he suspected that an abandoned Tiger was sheltering observers spotting for German mortars which at that time were firing incessantly on the Foresters' positions :

“Lt. Kingsford and 10 Troop, who advanced with 9 Troop, all arrived on 174 without incident and started changing positions and coming up to turret-down to observe. It was at this juncture that Sgt. Cummin's tank, coming up to engage a Mk VI [Tiger] some 500 yards to the front (which was stationary and apparently abandoned but which he thought might still be used by the enemy as a mortar observation point) was hit by an 88mm shell fired from a position about 2000 yards away in the direction of MONTARNAUD.”

If the Tiger seen by Cummin was Tiger 131 and it was already abandoned when 9 and 10 Troops arrived on Point 174, it begs the question, who disabled it? It could not have been disabled by a tank shooting from the flank because the telling shot had ricocheted down the length of the barrel as it faced forward. Given the vehicle's facing when found, it is apparent that the shot came from Point 174.

The only other tanks of 48 RTR which appear to have got onto Point 174 was a half squadron under command of Captain Chadwick. Major Joss, on Point 151, reports them moving onto Point 174 from Point 144, further to his south east, before 9 and 10 Troops had been ordered forward. As soon as Chadwick's tanks came up to the south eastern crest of Point 174 they saw five enemy Mk.IV tanks at 400 yards range, advancing broadside on. Taking the Germans by surprise, they quickly destroyed three and damaged the other two. Although it is possible that a Tiger could have been misidentified as a Mk.IV, the shot which disabled Tiger 131 could not have been fired from its flank.

Of course, 142 RAC was also fighting in support of the Foresters. Its war diary says that a composite Troop under Major Lyne managed to get onto Point 174 during the afternoon but it does not record what targets they engaged.³⁰ However, the possibility that they disabled Tiger 131 cannot be discounted and it is interesting that Lidderdale said he was told 25 Tank Brigade had disabled Tiger 131 when he

³⁰ Several tanks of 142 RAC firing from Point 151 did engage a Tiger on Point 174, which then took cover behind a knocked out Churchill. However, this event is unlikely to have been Tiger 131's demise given the issue of sight lines from Point 151 to the site of Tiger 131's abandonment identified by David Byrden.

arrived on Point 174 to recover the vehicle (142 RAC was a 25 Tank Brigade formation).

In any event, the shot which disabled Tiger 131 must, at some point, have come from one of the tanks on Point 174 because an examination of the damage sustained by the vehicle for the *Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual* (p.37) concluded that the turret had been jammed by a 6 pounder tank round. However, it is interesting that the confusion of battle actually resulted in another account of Tiger 131's demise being accepted. Desperate to be rid of Tiger 131 which was harassing them from close range, it seems the Foresters succeeded in turning a captured anti-tank gun on the vehicle, subsequently claiming a hit. The claim is evidenced by a document found in the archive of Bovington Tank Museum which attributes the demise of Tiger 131 to an anti-tank gun captured from the Germans. It is a captioned photograph released by the Ministry of Information and printed in the *Daily Sketch* of 11 May 1943.³¹ The photograph shows an infantryman observing from cover in front of Tiger 131 (the same photograph features at the top left of page 26 of the *Tiger Tank Owners' Workshop Manual*) and carries the caption:

"From a ridge captured in the advance on Tunis, a British soldier watches the retreating enemy. Nearby is one of Germany's much vaunted monster 'Tiger' tanks. It was knocked out by our gunners - using a German anti-tank gun which we had captured complete with ammunition."

That the "gunners" mentioned in the caption were actually Foresters is evident from the absence of any Royal Artillery units on Point 174 at the time. No doubt the Foresters' claim went unchallenged because their supporting tanks left the scene after the battle while the Foresters remained on Point 174 for six days during which time the vehicle was examined, filmed and photographed.³²

Tiger 131 remained on Point 174 until 7 May 1943 when it was recovered by Lidderdale. The delay was due to fierce fighting between 24 and 29 April 1943 and, in its aftermath, the large number of British tanks which required recovery and repair. Lt. Whatley REME, who assisted Lidderdale with the recovery of Tiger 131, won the Military Cross for recovering 12 disabled Churchill tanks in the vicinity of Point 174 between 29 April and 6 May 1943 whilst under fire.³³

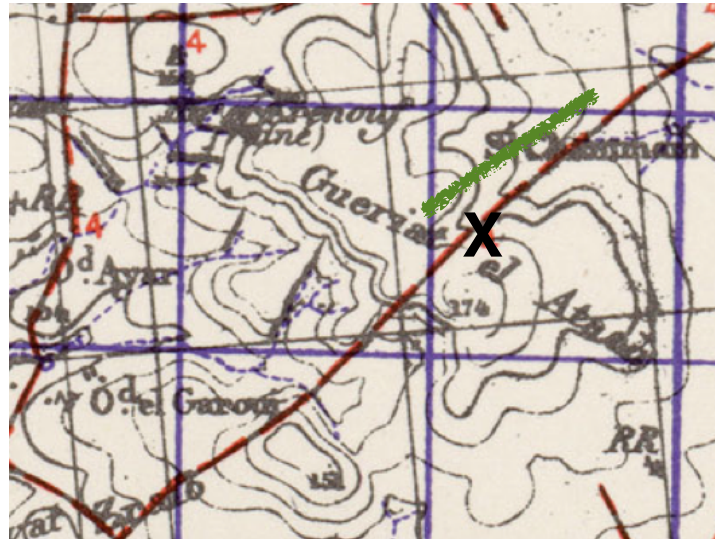
³¹ Tank Museum Archive 623.438.3.(43)

³² In view of the report that Tiger 131 had been disabled by a captured anti-tank gun, Bovington Tank Museum re-examined the damage sustained by the vehicle. The re-examination corroborated the result of the original examination for *The Tiger Tank Owners' Manual*.

³³ WO 373/2/193 National Archive.

Locating Tiger 131 on Point 174

Masters says that the Tiger tanks which harassed the Foresters on Point 174 were positioned some 300 yards down the reverse slope. However, David Byrden's analysis of the photographs, below, of Tiger 131 at the site of its abandonment fixes the location somewhat closer, around 200 yards from the crest.³⁴ The approximate position is marked with an X on the map extract below:



The photographs show Tiger 131 sitting in a shallow valley, the far shoulder of which dips gently down. This is clearly evident from the map contours across the green line north of the X on the map above. The second photograph also shows the surface of the Medjez el Bab to Montarnaud road. This can be seen between the rear wheel of the lorry and the righthand track of Tiger 131.



³⁴ <http://tiger1.info/EN/131-captured-where.html>



Interestingly, David Byrden's analysis of the cine film shot on Point 174 on 26 April 1943 reveals that Tiger 131 was sitting on the crest of the hill near the Foresters positions at the time of the filming.³⁵ Therefore, it appears that at some point during the two days following its capture the vehicle was driven, or towed, up the hill from the site of its abandonment.

Afterword

The question remains as to why the capture of Tiger 131 by the Foresters was ever lost to history. So much is obvious: the events on Point 174 were not well documented. The Foresters' war diary devotes little more than three lines to them and the citation for Lt. Col. Pye's DSO³⁶ naturally focuses on his part in the action rather than the action itself. Also, Masters does not appear to have been with the battalion during the events in Tunisia and his account was written whilst on active service in Palestine in 1946 without, he says, access to detailed records of the campaign. Nevertheless, how could the battalion's capture of Tiger 131 have been forgotten? An explanation may lie in the record of the unit later in the war. It sustained 200% casualties in the process of fighting in Tunisia, in the attritional

³⁵ <http://tiger1.info/EN/131-captured-where.html>

³⁶ WO 373/1/407 National Archive.

battles for the Anzio beachhead and in the subsequent struggle up the spine of Italy to the Gothic Line. Consequently, when Masters wrote his account only a small number of Foresters then serving with the battalion would have known anything about the fight for Point 174 and the abandonment of a German tank may not have held any great significance for them. But, whatever the reason, there can now be no doubt that Tiger 131 was abandoned on Point 174, some ten miles from Djebel Djaffa. Neither can there be any question that the vehicle was captured during the battle there on 24 April 1943.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the valuable assistance of David Byrden. He very kindly published the initial version of my research on his excellent website, tiger1.info and carried out the Google Earth analysis verifying that Tiger 131 was abandoned on Point 174. In this connection, I would also like to express my gratitude to Mustapha Ben Rejeb for taking the trouble to visit Point 174 and photograph the area. I would also like to thank Nik Wyness and Stuart Wheeler of the Tank Museum for all their help.

Dale Oscroft
September 2017

daleoscroft@gmail.com

List of Annexes

- | | |
|---------|---|
| ANNEX A | Lidderdale's report of the recovery of Tiger 131. |
| ANNEX B | Lidderdale's letter to the Tank Museum dated 7 November 1987. |
| ANNEX C | Author's Note : The motivation for the research |

Copy No. 1 of this Report was handed by the Author to DME in second week October 1943.

Copy No. 2 was retained by the Author to show heads of Defects in DTD and elsewhere.

Copy No. 3 was handed to DTD Enemy Vehicle Intelligence Sec who made it available to STG.

Panzerkampfwagen (Pz.Kpfw.) VI H, Model H1

dkr 43. W.A.D. 198. TANK No: 131.

TURRET No: 230639.

CLASSIS No: 250122.

- 21/4/43 TIGER 131 of No.1 Coy, 504 Heavy Tank Bn., under command 501 Heavy Tank Bn., immobilized in action by A Sqn, 48 RTR of 21 Army Tk Bde.
7/5/43 Recovered from Pt 174 on MEDJIZ-EL-BAB to MONTARNAUD Road by D.S. tractor of 104 Army Tank Workshop R.E.M.E. under direction of Maj. A.D. Lidderdale R.E.M.E. and with the assistance of Lt. R. Whatley and A.Q.M.S. Shaw of 25 Tk. Bde. Workshop R.E.M.E., the tank having been immobilised in battle by 4 Troop, A Squadron, 48 RTR, of 21 Army Tk Bde. Restored to working order by 104 Army Tank Workshop R.E.M.E.
- 14/5/43 Examined by D.C.I.G.S. and Lt. Gen. Anderson. Recognition Film made.
24/5/43 Driven under own power to 12 Port Workshop Det., TUNIS.
2/6/43 Inspected by Mr. Winston Churchill, Mr. Anthony Eden, General Sir Alan Brooke, General Alexander and Lt.Gen. Anderson.
18/6/43 Inspected by H.M. the King accompanied by Sir James Grigg.
29/6/43 Driven to port of LA GOULLETTE for shipment.
3/8/43 Shipped in LCT 568 to BIZERTA arriving same day.
6/8/43 Transferred to "Empire Candida".
9/8/43 Left BIZERTA for BONE arriving following day.
11/8/43 Discharged BONE.
20/9/43 Left BONE S.S. Ocean Strength.

IN THE FIELD.

19 SEPT. 1943

Annex B

Lidderdale's letter to the Tank Museum dated 7 November 1987

Director/Curator,
The Tank Museum,
Bovington Camp,
Wareham, Dorset,
BH20 6JG

7.11.87.

Dear Colonel,

TIGER TANK No. 131

In March this year, our mutual friend John Gilman told me that you would like to have a sight of an Album of photos of No. 131 which I had put together in 1943. I should explain that as O.C. 104 Army Tank Workshop REME from formation in 1942 to disbandment after the Tunisian Campaign it fell to me to recover No. 131 from Pt 174 in the Atlas Mountains where it had been immobilised in battle. In view of it's importance to Allied Intelligence and Tank Design authorities, I had to safeguard No.131 against souvenir hunters and other perils, while searching for and gathering-in spare units and parts to enable it to be restored to working order, whereupon a recognition film was made. It then became part of my duty to parade No. 131 for such VIP visits as that of the Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary & CIGS on 2.6.43. and of H.M. K.G. VI a fortnight later. In preparation for these visits, I received an order from 1st Army via DDME 5 Corps that the 1st Army Crusader Shield sign and Brigade Diabolo should be painted on No.131 as the Tank had now been taken on the strength of 1st Army. This was done and No.131 was considered properly dressed when wearing those formation signs on those occasions.

Before leaving North Africa, I prepared a Preliminary Technical Report on the layout and equipment of No. 131 with dimensioned drawings and diagrams, copies of which, on my arrival in UK were handed to DTD and to our first DME Gen Rowcroft. I hope that General Rowcroft's copy may have found it's way into the archives at the REME Museum at Arborfield, but Peter Gudgin has made a copy for you, which I enclose. As you may know, I remained in command of No.131 until handing it over to the authorities at Chobham for detailed examination and test in which I took part up to the point where a further Preliminary Report was issued under the title "Preliminary Report No.19 Pz Kw VI (Tiger), Military College of Science, School of Tank Technology. November 1943."

My orders included the task of presenting No. 131 to the Prime Minister as a gift from Commander 1st Army, Lt Gen Sir Kenneth Anderson. My crew of 2 ex 104 Army Tank Workshop REME and I paraded No. 131 on Horseguards Parade in November 1943 with the gun covering the garden entrance to No. 10 Downing Street. We were received by a charming Lord Croft who apologised for the PM being indisposed and unable to receive it in person. We were not to know until later that the PM was seriously ill in Marrakesh at the time. Lord Croft was Chairman of the Army Council. No 131 duly returned to Chobham.

Having completed my task with No.131, I was in December 1943 appointed Assistant Director of Tank Design, Special Devices Branch, with responsibility for Armoured Assault Equipment, AVREs, Flail Tanks and the like.

Many years later I had the pleasure of my first visit to Bovington and was delighted to find No.131 in very good condition, obviously well cared for and still bearing 1st Army and Bde formation signs.

Some 5 years ago, I paid a return visit and was so disappointed to see that the formation signs had been painted out that I questioned Col. Hill. He didn't tell me why they had gone but said there had been an error of attribution of the formation responsible for knocking out No.131. He went on, most helpfully, to give me the name and address of Peter Gudgin, who, he said, could give me chapter and verse.

It was one of those things on my list to do, but when John Gilman mentioned your interest, it became one of those things which HAD to be done. I therefore put the problem to Peter and have received the most willing, expert and generous help as a result. In addition, Peter has undertaken the correction of text and the copying of photos so that there is a complete set for your Museum and, at my suggestion, a complete set for the REME Museum at Arborfield.

My information that No.131 had been knocked out by a Churchill tank of 25 Tk Bde was recorded in my notepad in the course of a meeting with DDME 5 Corps and an Officer of 25 Tk Bde Workshop REME while I was at Pt 174 for the purpose of recovering No.131 from where it had been immobilised in battle.

I accept, unreservedly, the corrections which Peter has made, and which have enabled a wrong attribution to be put right.

I am all the more pleased that some of the information which I have been able to make available to Peter has been of some help to him in the compilation of his forthcoming book on the Tiger.

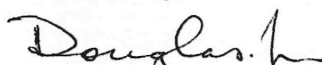
It is only right that in the action against No.131 and it's attendant Mk IV and Mk III, it should be Peter, Troop Leader 4 Tp, who should have the opportunity to set the record straight albeit 44 years on.

As I now understand it, in the action, No.131, the Mk IV and the Mk III were immobilised and abandoned and the tanks of the Tp Leaders of both 3 & 4 Tps brewed up but No.131 was probably knocked out by another Churchill of 4 Tp.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Peter for him to bless it, if it passes his close scrutiny or amend it, if necessary. He was there at the time, I only later.

As soon as I receive Peter's blessing, I will send a copy to your opposite in the REME Museum at Arborfield and a copy to John Gilman to let him know that the circuit has been completed.

Yours sincerely,


A.D. Lidderdale

Enclosures :- 1. (Preliminary) Report Pz Kpf Wg VI by Maj. A.D. Lidderdale REME 19.9.43.

2. Photorecord Tiger Tank 1943 by Maj. A.D. Lidderdale REME.

The reader may be curious to know what prompted the research set out in this paper. It was simply to solve a puzzle.

My father, John Oscroft, served with the 2nd Battalion The Sherwood Foresters from June 1942 to October 1946. Although he had to be prompted to say much about his war service I was always very interested to listen to his reminiscences. One which has stayed uppermost in my memory is that of how the Foresters captured an intact Tiger tank with a jammed turret following the Battalion's first set piece attack in Tunisia. He described the event in some detail. The start line was on the reverse slope of a somewhat lower ridge than the objective so the Foresters had to advance down into a valley and up the other side in order to reach the Germans dug in on the crest. He also told me that the position had been taken previously by another Battalion which had then been forced off by a German counter attack. He was therefore quite anxious about the forthcoming attack but was heartened when he heard that it would be supported by tanks. In the event, the tanks did not show up and the attack went in without them. He told me that the whole affair was a terrible baptism of fire with heavy casualties sustained in the approach to, and fight for, the German positions. One thing which always touched me is my father becoming a little emotional about one of the most popular of the Foresters' officers, whom he described as of Italian descent and possessing a fine baritone voice, being found dead in a German trench when his platoon reached it. (I now believe this officer to be the brave Lt. Brachi mentioned in Masters' account of the battle). After ejecting the Germans, the Foresters dug in and prepared for the inevitable counter-attack. Subsequently, a number of Tiger tanks approached the Foresters' positions. Having the dubious honour of carrying a PIAT³⁷, my father was ordered to creep forward and engage the nearest one. After getting as close as he dared he took aim and fired, only to see the bomb strike a glancing blow on the turret and bounce off. As he then saw the turret begin to traverse in his direction, he decided to get his head down. Fortunately, at this point the tank was hit and, much to his relief, he saw the crew bail out. When my father got back to the Foresters' positions he was told that the shot had come from a French '75'³⁸ which the Foresters had taken from the Germans in the fight for the hill. He learned later that the shot had

³⁷ Projector Infantry Anti-Tank. The PIAT launched a 2.5 pound bomb using a powerful spring and a cartridge in the tail of the projectile. It had a maximum effective range of about 100 yards. The PIAT had a significant advantage over other infantry anti-tank weapons of the period in that its lack of muzzle smoke or back blast helped conceal the location of the firer but this was countered by, amongst other things, its severe recoil, the difficulty of re-cocking the weapon and problems with ammunition reliability. British infantry units in Tunisia began re-equipping with the PIAT towards the end of the campaign.

³⁸ On the face of it, it seems odd that the Germans should have a French '75'; the weapon was introduced into French service in 1897 and was a stalwart of WW1. However, an armour-piercing round was developed for the gun between the wars to provide a basic anti-tank capability and several thousand of the weapons fell into German hands with the fall of France. As the Germans wasted no time employing them as a stop-gap until their own anti-tank gun production caught up, it is possible that a French '75' may have been involved in the battle for Point 174.

jammed the turret. The Foresters remained in their positions for a number of days during which my father saw the tank being examined by what he assumed were technical experts. He always joked that the obvious excitement shown by the 'boffins' when they inspected the inert monster did not compare with his own 'excitement' when it was not quite so inert. After leaving the site of the battle my father never heard of the Tiger again. He passed away in 1982.

There the story lay until my wife and I were on holiday in Dorset in 2012 where we happened to pick up a Tank Museum leaflet and decided to see a Tiger tank first-hand. My surprise and excitement at finding that the Museum's Tiger 131 had been abandoned in Tunisia after sustaining a jammed turret was tempered by discovering that the Foresters did not feature in the account of its capture. This presented a puzzle as I knew my father had not been a man given to embellishment. That puzzle has now been solved and the crucial role of the Foresters in the capture of Tiger 131 revealed. And although the Foresters' captured anti-tank gun did not, as my father had believed, fire the shot which disabled the vehicle, the evidence does show that it was credited with doing so at the time. This is another curious twist in the history of Tiger 131 which makes the circumstances surrounding its capture even more intriguing.

I am now writing a detailed account of the two-day battle for Guriat el Atach drawing on primary sources in the National Archive.