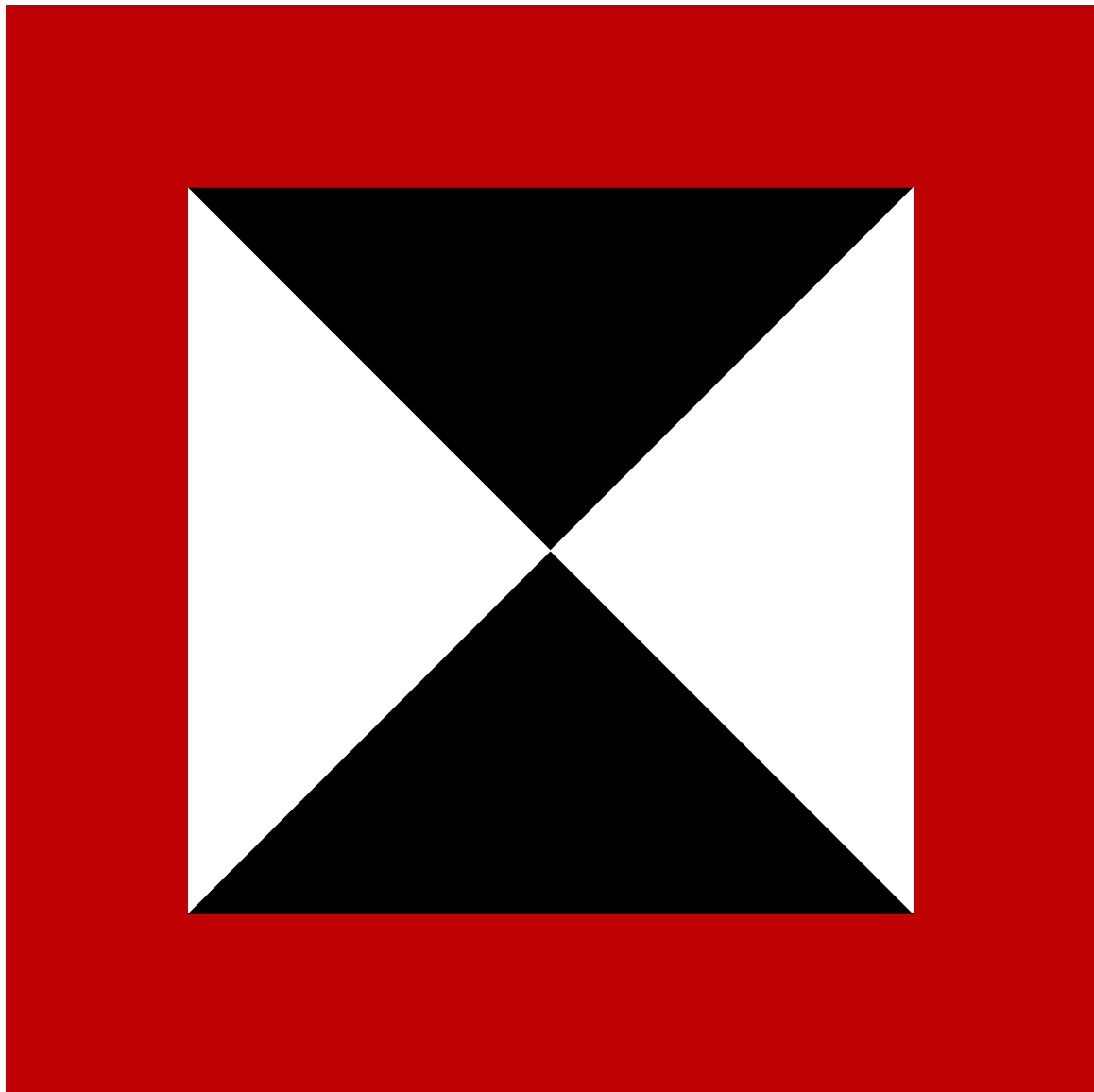


The story of a Normandy battle field find radio rack

Panzergruppe West - Raid on la Caine - Hill 112



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Introduction

Most people will be familiar with the story that on D-day the Germans failed to release Hitler's Panzer reserves despite repeated pleas from the German commanders including Field Marshall Rommel. The Panzer reserves in question were more formally known as Panzergruppe West and were under the command of General Geyr von Schweppenburg who reported directly to Hitler. Rommel and von Schweppenburg did not see eye to eye about the placement and deployment of the Panzer reserves before D-day. General Geyr von Schweppenburg set up his HQ in La Caine, about 20 km southwest from Caen.

Having failed to intervene on D-day this highly mobile Panzer army was now planning to counterattack the allied invasion and was concentrating its forces west of Caen to sweep north and then west along the invasion Coast. Geyr von Schweppenburg's HQ location was identified through an "Ultra" intercept and consequently attacked and destroyed in an air raid on 10 June 1944¹.

With the Panzergruppe West HQ in disarray, Montgomery (who knew of the German offensive intentions through the "Ultra" intelligence) continued to force the Germans to commit their Panzer reserves in defensive actions around Caen, robbing the Germans of any offensive potential and so protecting the invasion beaches from counterattack.

Hill 112, about 8 km north of La Caine, subsequently saw some of the most intense fighting in the Normandy campaign. Operation Epsom (26-30 June 1944) was launched over the Orne river with the key objective to draw the newly arrived German II SS Panzerkorps into action. Operation Jupiter (10-11 July 1944) focussed again on Hill 112, trying to dislodge the German defence from these strategic heights. During and in between these major battles, Hill 112 was subject to some of the most intense artillery bombardments of WW2.

Panzergruppe West commanded the I and II SS Panzerkorps under Sepp Dietrich and Paul Hausser. The key German units fighting on and around Hill 112 were the 9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen" on the left, the 10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg" in the centre and the 12th SS "Hitlerjugend" on the right flank.

Discovery of a radio frame

Early in 2016 a local historian excavated a bomb crater on the former battlefield on Hill 112 in Normandy. The bomb crater sat right on the front line, a few hundred metres from the current monument on top of Hill 112. It was usual for bomb craters to be filled in after the war with the debris of the fighting, so not unusually the dig yielded a mixture of German and British ammunition and scrap. Finally, at a depth of 4 metres, a large piece of scrap emerged which forms the basis of this story.

The piece of scrap was identified by another local historian as a German radio rack of an unknown kind. Being a keen collector and researcher of German radio equipment, I was contacted if I could shed some more light on the find.

¹ 2nd Tactical Air Force Vol.1. Spartan to Normandy June 1943 to June 1944. - Shores / Thomas.

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overall size 128 x 60 x 60



Figure 1: The radio rack as it emerged from a bomb crater on Hill 112.

Finding a WW2 German radio frame of any description is unusual, as most were scrapped after the war along with their vehicles.

The size and configuration of the radio mountings pointed at the rack originating from a German half track. Typically radio racks in German half-tracks (the Sd.Kfz.250 and Sd.Kfz.251 series) used tubular steel but further research confirmed that it was indeed a German radio rack of a late war type, specifically used in half-tracks of the type Sd.Kfz. 251, Ausf. D.

The radio frames used in late war Sd.Kfz 251 Ausf. D used simpler angular profiles. A surviving Sd.Kfz 251/3 Ausf. D found in a river in Poland illustrates a similar construction to the rack found on Hill 112.

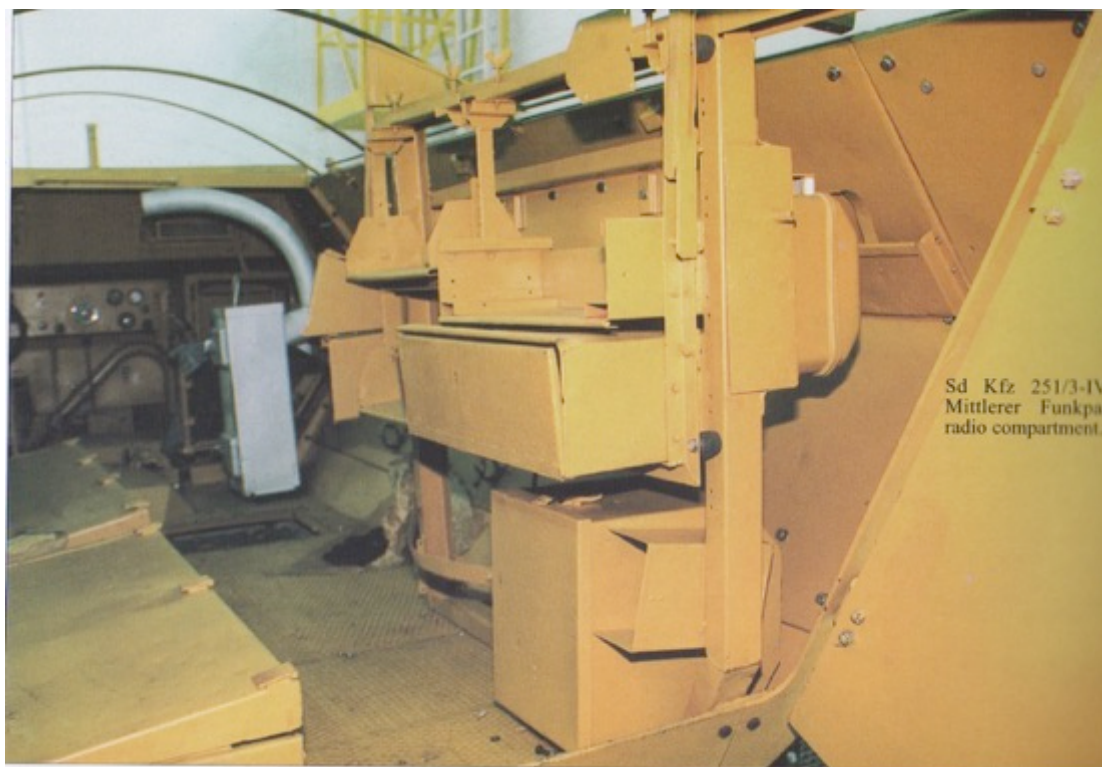


Figure 2: Radio rack in a Sd.Kfz 251/3 Ausf.D surviving in Poland [© Sd Kfz 251 in Polish museums -Janusz Ledwoch]

Closer inspection of the frame found on Hill 112 revealed the radio configuration that once was held by the frame.

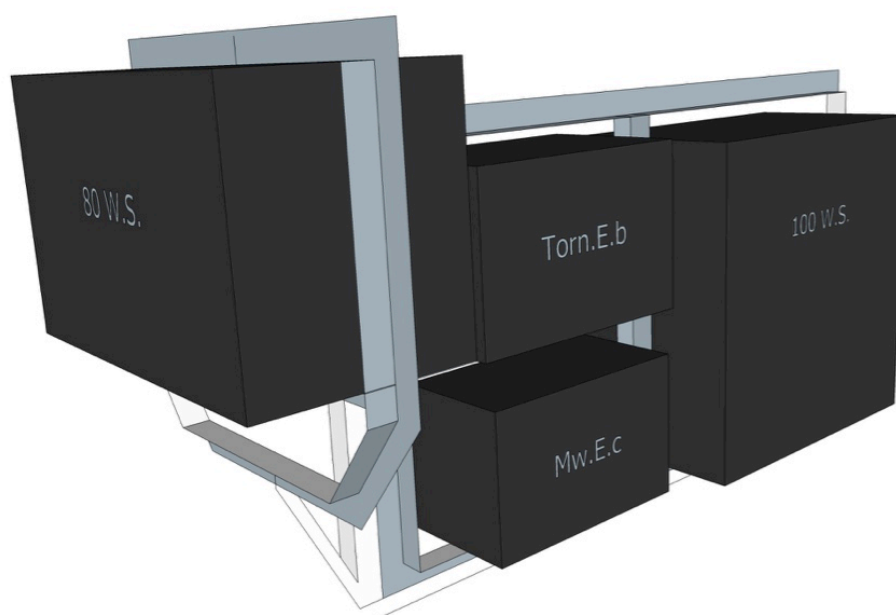


Figure 3: Reconstruction of the radio configuration

On the front was a medium wave 80 Watt transmitter (80 W.S.), on the right was a long wave 100 Watt Transmitter (100 W.S.) and in the centre were two receivers, a wideband receiver "Torn.E.b" and a medium wave receiver "Mw.E.c". These radio sets were named the Fu11SE100 (100 W.S. + Torn.E.b) and Fu12SE80 (80 W.S. + Mw.E.c)



Figure 4: A period photograph of a Sd.Kfz. 251/3. Note the placement of the 80 W.S. on the front side of the radio rack. The absence of a frame antenna indicates that the remaining radio configuration was probably different. [© www.worldwarphotos.info]

This combination of radio sets is rather unusual and provides a clue as to which vehicle the radio rack may have come from. It was an armoured half-track known as the Sd.Kfz.251/3 IV, which was the successor to the Sd.Kfz 251/6. In the summer of 1944; both denominations for the vehicle can be found in period documentation.

Kriegsetat 44														
Panzerarmee-Funkkompanie (Panz.A.Fu.Kp.)														
No. der Zeile	Stellungsgruppe	Hauptabteilung												
		a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i	k	l	m	n
1		a) Gruppe Führer												
2	K	Kompanieführer	1				1							
3	O	Unteroffizier, Funkmeister		1			1							
4		Kompanietrupp												
5	O	Unteroffizier, Führer (auf Krad mit Seitenw.)		1			(1)						(1)	
6	O	Sanitätsunteroffizier		1			1							
7		Mannschaften												
8	M	Funker (sugl. Halber auf 10. Krad 350 cm)			5		(5)						5	
9	M	Kraftwagenfahrer für Pkw.			2		2							
10	M	Schreiber			1		1							
11	M	Zeichner			1		1							
12		leichter Personenkraftwagen, gl (4stlig)									2			
13		Summe zu a) Gruppe Führer	1		3	9	4	3			2		6	(1)
14		b) 1. Zug												
15		aa) Zugtrupp												
16	Z	Zugführer	1				1							
17	M	Mann, Kraftwagenfahrer für Pkw.			1		1							
18		leichtes Maschinengewehr						(1)						
19		leichter Personenkraftwagen, gl (4stlig)									1			
20		bb) Nachrichtenabteilung												
21		1. Kommandofunktrupp 100/80 Mw (gp)												
22	O	Unteroffizier, Funker, Tr.Führ.		1			(1)							
23	M	Mannschaften, Funker (1 sugl. Kw. Führ. für gp. Kw., 1 sugl. Kw. für gp. Kw., 1 sugl. H. G. Schütze)			4	3	1							
24		mittlerer Personenkraftwagen (Sd.Kfz 251/3)						(1)				1		

Figure 5: Table of Organisation and Equipment of the radio company of model 44 Panzer Army headquarters such as "Panzergruppe West". The radio troop is marked as a "Kommandofunktrupp 100/80 Mw (gp)" and the vehicle is listed as a Sd.Kfz 251/3 " [KStN 946 - NARA Publication T78]

It is worth noting that the document in figure 5 comes from the slightly later "Kriegsetat 44" Tables of Organisation and Equipment (TO&E's), which shows two Sd.Kfz. 251/3 IV's in the unit. This type of organisation was due to be implemented in the summer of 1944 but due to the heavy fighting few units could complete this reorganisation during the Normandy battles. It is almost

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certain that most SS Panzer units, including the higher headquarters were only allocated a single vehicle of this type. It also emerged that several units even lacked the vehicles they were due when they mobilised to the Normandy front.

So we can safely assume that the panzer formations at division, corps and army only had at most one Sd.Kfz. 251/3 IV armoured half-track equipped with the Fu11SE100 and Fu12SE80 radio installations: The commander's "Kommandofunkwagen"! Likewise, General Geyr von Schweppenburg probably had one such vehicle available at his HQ of "Panzergruppe West".

Administratively, the vehicles were the responsibility of the radio company of the formation. The radio company would provide the driver and four operators for the radios in the vehicle. The vehicle was available for use by the commander as a mobile command post.

In the case of Panzergruppe West, the communication vehicles at the la Caine HQ belonged to the Panzergruppen-Nachrichten-Abteilung 676, a unit newly formed in the summer of 1944.

At this point it is useful to consider the antenna configuration used by the "Kommandofunkwagen. Early in the war, most vehicles equipped with the medium wave command radios of either 30 or 80 watts used a characteristic frame antenna. This could be found on both Sd.Kfz.250 and Sd.Kfz.251 radio half-tracks of earlier types. By 1944 the frame antennas were largely replaced with a simple star antenna; the "Sternantenne D". Cheaper and less conspicuous it also proved to be a more effective antenna than the old type frame antenna.

It is certain that all late war production armoured halftracks equipped with the medium wave radio sets would have been equipped with the new Sternantenne D.

However the 100 W.S. -being of longer wavelength and higher power- could not use the Sternantenne D. It would need a 9 meter telescopic mast with a larger star antenna which could only be deployed when the vehicle was stationary. To operate the Fu11SE100 radio set on the move, the vehicle would still require a frame antenna. For this reason the Sd.Kfz. 251/4 IV probably was the only Sd.Kfz.251 Ausf.D fitted with frame antenna, making the vehicle easily recognisable.

The use of Heinz Harmel's Kommandofunkwagen in the Hill 112 area is well documented:



Figure 6: Sternantenne D



Figure 7: Heinz Harmel in his Kommandofunkwagen during the battles for Hill 112. Note the large frame antenna for the 100 W.S. [© Bundesarchiv]

So what was the radio rack of a Panzer commander doing in a bomb crater on Hill 112? The shortlist of potential vehicles from which it could have come is not too long:

1. Command Vehicle of Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg (Panzergruppe West)
2. Command vehicle of Heinz Harmel (10th SS Panzer Division "Fruendsberg")
3. Command vehicle of Willi Bittrich / Thomas Müller / Sylvester Stadler (9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen")
4. Command Vehicle of Kurt Meyer (12th SS Division "Hitlerjugend")
5. Command Vehicle of Paul Hausser / Willi Bittrich (II SS Panzer Korps)
6. Command Vehicle of Sepp Dietrich (I SS Panzer Korps)
7. Command Vehicle of Heinrich Eberbach (Panzergruppe "Eberbach" successor to "Panzergruppe West")
8. Command Vehicle of Theodor Wisch (1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler")

So can the rack itself provide some answers?

Impact damage on the radio rack

A closer inspection of the rack revealed impact damage on at least two locations. The 80 W.S. has at least one (possibly two) bullet entry holes in the back and a large exit hole in the bottom of the case:



Figure 8: 80 W.S. case showing the approximate impact angle.

The 80 W.S. was hit from quite a high angle from the rear right side of the vehicle

The 100 W.S. was also hit:



Figure 9: Approximate trajectory of bullet hitting the bottom tray of the 100 W.S. rack.

On the 100 W.S., the bullet entered the rear of the support tray for the 100 W.S. and dented the bottom of the tray. The bullet did not have enough energy to exit through the bottom. The 100 W.S. would definitely have been put out of action by

this damage. Again the trajectory was from a high angle (albeit lower than on the 80 W.S.) from the right rear of the vehicle.

Both bullet entry holes measured approximately 20 mm. This provides strong indications that the vehicle was hit by cannon fire from the air during a strafing attack. The differing angles suggest that the two transmitters were hit during different passes.

The rack is also slightly bent which cannot be explained by the strafing. There is no evidence of significant shrapnel damage and it would have been protected inside the armoured vehicle from the effects of a nearby blast. The excavation work was conducted carefully enough not to have bent the rack so there must be another explanation

The rack is covered in several places by a tar deposit. A lot of tar was found in the casing of the 80 W.S. so at first I thought this might have come from capacitor blocks in the transmitter, which melted in a fire. There was however far too much tar in the box and also several sections outside the box were covered. When the rack was found in the bomb crater it looked like somebody had poured tar over it, as several puddles of tar were found during the excavation.

So how could the rack have ended up in a bomb crater on Hill 112 covered by tar? The following theory cannot be proven but it does demonstrate motive, means and opportunity:

The German pioneers of the 9th SS Panzer Division (responsible for building defensive earthworks etc.) would have been scouring the surrounding area for suitable materials to use to build up the defences on Hill 112. They would have come across the debris of the rack somewhere in their rear area and would have recovered it to take to Hill 112.

The radio rack would have been useful to reinforce the roof of a dugout. The rack, some wooden boards and a meter of soil on top would have built a strong roof for a small dugout on Hill 112. The weight of the soil on top and any vehicles moving over it may well explain why the rack is slightly bent.

In the years following the war, the area was de-mined and reconstruction of the roads was commenced. During the reconstruction of the D8, running over the summit of Hill 112, the workers may have stumbled into the remains of the dugout and dumped the radio rack into the bomb crater. A few days later, road workers used the same bomb crater to dispose of some tar, perhaps after cleaning their tarmacking machine.

The information available to date allows us to create an order of likelihood for each vehicle:

1. Command vehicle of Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg

On 10 July, the RAF attacked Geyr von Schweppenburg's HQ in la Caine, some 8 km behind Hill 112. 61 B-25 Mitchells bombed the area while 40 Typhoons conducted strafing attacks and fired rockets. Typhoons were fitted with 20-mm cannon, which are a prime suspect for the damage inflicted on the radio rack.

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It is reported that "Although the château was not badly damaged, the nearby orchard, in which the HQ vehicles were parked, was thoroughly bombed and communications equipment was destroyed"².

Geyr von Schweppenburg was wounded and eighteen members of his HQ staff including Geyr's chief of Staff, General Major von Dawans, were killed during the attack, putting his HQ out of action and frustrating the German counterattack on the beaches.



Figure 10: Gravestone of Gen. Major von Dawans, the highest ranked officer killed in the La Caine raid.

The Panzergruppen-Nachrichten-Abteilung 676 was a newly formed unit at the time of the attack, it is likely that it had just received new equipment of the latest standard, including a Sd.Kfz.251/3 IV Ausf.D

So there is a distinct likelihood that Geyr von Schweppenburg's Kommandofunkwagen was one of the vehicles destroyed during the attack. The damage on the rack certainly ties in with an aerial strafing by a Typhoon.

² Air Ministry (1947). *The Landings in Normandy*. The Liberation of North-West Europe: Operation "Overlord" III. no isbn/oclc. London: RAF Air Historical Branch Records (AIR 41/24 typed manuscript).



Figure 11: Hawker Typhoon with the typical black and white invasion stripes used during the Normandy battle. Note the four 20mm cannon protruding from the wing. (© www.Globalaviationresource.com)

The site of the La Caine attack is some 8 km behind Hill 112, well within the divisional range of the 9th SS Panzer Division. This proximity and the likelihood that the Kommandofunkwagen of Geyr von Schweppenburg was destroyed in the la Caine attack makes it the most likely source of the radio rack.

2. Command vehicle of Heinz Harmel

The use of a Sd.Kfz. 251/3 Ausf.D by Heinz Harmel -commander of the 10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg"- during the battles for Hill 112 is well documented. Figures 10 and 11 show the vehicle in use. Below another sideways view, the sloping rear of the late war Ausf. D can just be recognised:



Figure 12: Harmel's Kommandofunkwagen in Normandy. Part of the tactical number "211" is visible on the side. The complete marking was probably "N211" denoting the first vehicle in the first platoon of the second (radio) company of the Signals regiment. [© Bundesarchiv]

There is an anecdote describing a conference in an armoured command vehicle by Harmel and Bittrich on 6 August near Haute-Perrier³. This provides weak evidence that Harmel's command vehicle survived the battles around Hill 112

There is no clear anecdotal or documented evidence about what happened to his vehicle. Had it been destroyed during the Hill 112 battles I would expect some evidence to have emerged. The close proximity of its operational area to the burial site however still makes it a credible candidate.

3. Command vehicle of Willi Bittrich / Thomas Müller/ Sylvester Stadler

As commander of the 9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen", Bittrich was replaced by Thomas Müller as commander on 30 June who in turn was replaced by Stadler on 10 July. Although there is some anecdotal evidence of the use of a Kommandofunkwagen by the commander of the 9th SS Panzer division, no evidence of the destruction of a Kommandofunkwagen has emerged. The close proximity to its potential operating area makes it a possible but weaker candidate.

4. Command vehicle of Kurt Meyer.

No photographic or anecdotal evidence of the use of a Kommandofunkwagen by Kurt Meyer has emerged but the relative proximity of it's potential operating area makes it a potential candidate. On 1 June, a strength report from the 12th SS

³ Jean Luc Lelou . "10. -SS-Panzer-Division". Editions Heimdal ISBN 2 84048 125 1

Division reports "Fehl von 11 SPW bei SS-Pz. Nachr.-Abt. 12"⁴ so it is not clear if the division even received its Kommandofunkwagen.

5.6. and 7. Command vehicles at Corps level and "Panzergruppe Eberbach"

No photographic or anecdotal evidence has emerged of the use of a Kommandofunkwagen at these headquarters. Being a relatively static battle, there would have been little reason for a corps/army commander to use a mobile headquarters for visits to the divisional headquarters near Hill 112. There are some indications that Sepp Dietrich used a Steyr 1500 "Kommandeurswagen", it is likely that Paul Hausser, Willi Bittrich and Heinrich Eberbach also preferred this more convenient mode of transport.

8. Command vehicle of Theodor Wisch

No photographic or anecdotal evidence of the use of a Kommandofunkwagen by Theodor Wisch has emerged. Wisch's operational area was relatively far removed from Hill 112. The Vehicle returns of the 1st SS Panzer division state that they had zero Sd.Kfz.251/6 on 1 July 1944⁵ so it is almost certain the division lacked its Kommandofunkwagen during the battle for hill 112.

So there is a good argument to be made that we have found the radio rack from Leo Geyr von Schweppenburg's command vehicle, destroyed on 10 June. Research will continue in the hope that further evidence will emerge.

What is certain is that the radio frame dug out from Hill 112 came from the command vehicle of one of the key players in the Normandy campaign. Its connection to the German command structure during one of the major battles in WW2 alone makes it an important relic.

If indeed we accept the most likely provenance, the radio rack is a unique relic of the la Caine raid. It possibly ended up where it did as a direct result of the code breaking in Bletchley Park linking it to one of the great success stories of WW2.

Wrecked and discarded, the rack may have subsequently served to provide shelter in the forward German defence line during the Hill 112 battles, providing testament to the gritty determination of the German defenders.

^{4,5}M.Wood & J.Dugdale. Orders of Battle. Waffen SS Panzer Units in Normandy 1944. Books international. ISBN 0 9528867 0 7

Recreation of the Kommandofunkwagen radio rack

Rather than clean and patch up the radio rack, the decision was taken to keep the rack in it's original condition and create a copy of the rack to the exact measurements. This recreation was helped by the discovery of a similar radio rack in a different region of Normandy. Even though the radio configuration of this second find differed from that of the Kommandofunkwagen rack, it provided accurate measurements of the the support rack to which the Hill 112 rack was once fitted:



Figure 13: Another rack found in Normandy included the support frame,; the frame found on Hill 112 would have been fitted to an identical support frame.

All the power supplies and auxiliaries for the radios were found to fit exactly to the fixtures on the support rack. The radio rack itself was fitted to the support rack with rubber buffers, the remains of which can be seen on the vertical beams of the support rack. A box welded to the bottom right of the support frame was found to fit a GG400 generator. All this information allowed us to recreate the completeradio installation as fitted to the Kommandofunkwagen.

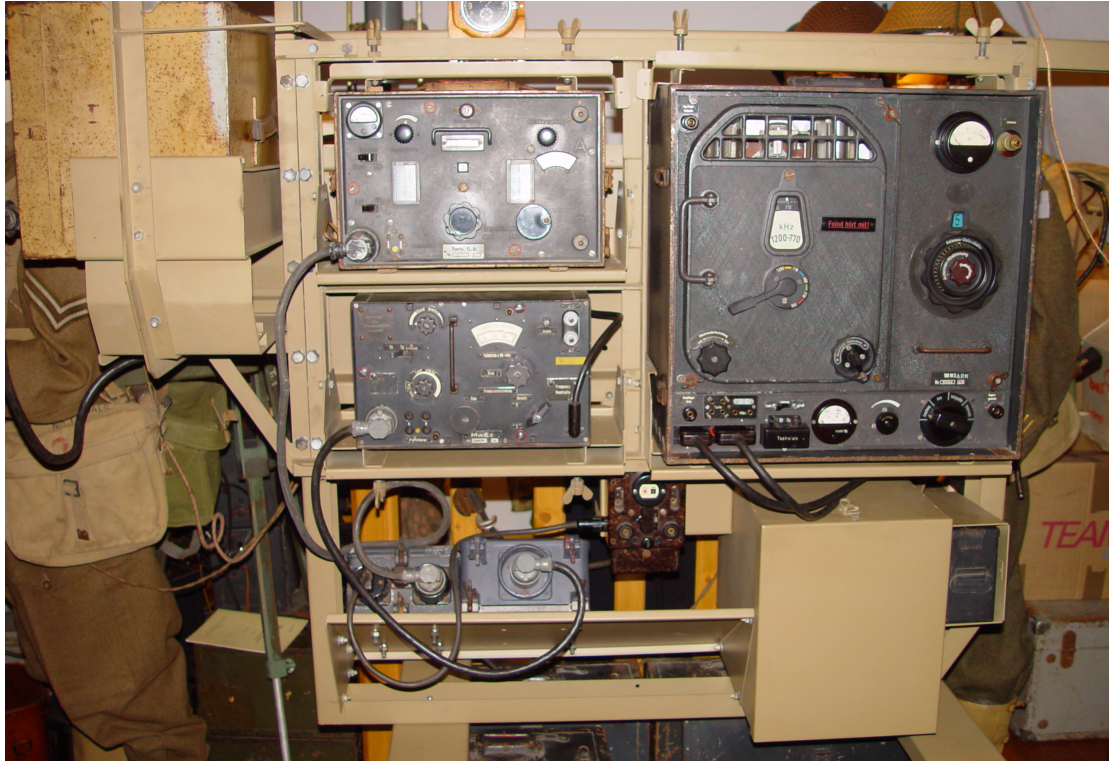


Figure 14: Front view of Geyr von Schweppenburg's Kommandofunkwagen radio installation. The front view shows the Torn.E.b and 100 W.S. of the Fu11SE100 and the Mw.E.c of the Fu12SE80, the 80 W.S. is soon from the side on the far left of the picture.

The radios are held in place by metal profiles tightened by the large wing nuts visible above and below the frame. The power supplies are fastened to the support frame (receiver power supplies below the radios, transmitter power supplies on the back of the frame).

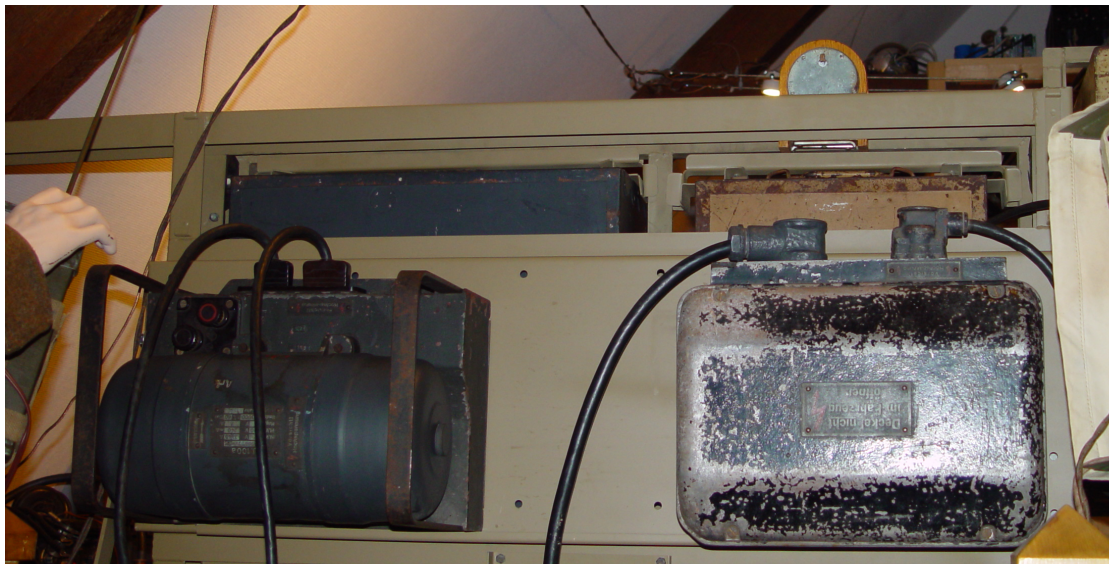


Figure 15: Rear view of the radio installation showing the power supplies for the two transmitters.

The power supplies slot into a ridge below and are fixed by two bolts at the top. The following photograph shows the storage box of the GG400 generator. This generator would be placed outside the vehicle when stationary to provide power for the radios, sparing the vehicle's batteries.



Figure 16: Detail of the storage box for the GG400 generator.



Figure 17: Left 3/4 view of the radio installation, showing the position of the 80 W.S. transmitter of the Fu12SE80.



Figure 18: Right 3/4 view of the radio installation. The front view shows the Torn.E.b and 100 W.S. of the Fu11SE100 and the Mw.E.c of the Fu12SE80, the 80 W.S. is soon from the side on the far left of the picture.

The radio frame is designed to be configurable for different radio installations; by moving the position of the baseplates for the radios, different sized radios can be accommodated. The 100 W.S. takes up the whole right hand side of the frame; if a smaller 30 W.S. is fitted an additional box could be fitted underneath the transmitter as in Figure 2.

The FU11SE100 installation was used for medium range communication, its messages would be enciphered using enigma machines. Potentially the story goes full circle, was it an Enigma message transmitted from Geyr von Schweppenburg's Kommandofunkwagen that gave away the position of his Headquarters?

Despite the uncertainties that remain in this story, the original relic and the recreated radio installation help to tell a powerful story about Geyr von Schweppenburg's Panzergruppe West, the role that Bletchley played in breaking the Enigma codes and the ensuing raid on la Caine. The impact of Hitler's Panzer reserves remains one of the great strategic "what if's" of D-day and the battle for Normandy. Now a discarded relic from the la Caine raid, the rack continued to play a role in the ensuing battles on Hill 112. Here it lay forgotten for over 70 years until its discovery and subsequent reconstruction.