

Sturmartillerie – Spearhead of the infantry

By Thomas Anderson

Osprey Books (2016), £30.00/\$45.00

Review by Jonathan Aird

Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1 : The Birth of the Sturmartillerie

Chapter 2 : Sturmartillerie: Creation and organisation

Chapter 3 : Assault in France

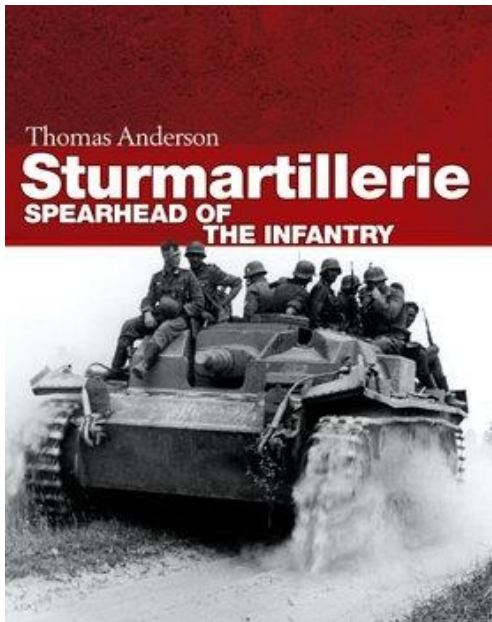
Chapter 4 : The Balkans and Barbarossa

Chapter 5 : To the gates of Stalingrad

Chapter 6 : Stalingrad and beyond

Chapter 7 : Sturmgeschutz : Questioning the concept

This is one of Osprey's non-series volumes, it is a solid hardback book running to 288 pages. And it is comprehensive in its analysis of the subject. The Sturmartillerie concept was a simple



one of infantry needed close-in artillery support. An increasingly mechanised infantry would therefore need mechanised artillery support. The issue being that a mechanised artillery vehicle that is capable of accompanying infantry into battle looks a lot like a tank. There was a dispute over who should crew such vehicles if they were to exist and which command structure would they come under of that is, would they be infantry heavy weapons or would they be part of a tank regiment? The introduction takes the reader through the arguments that, eventually, led the German army to adopt mobile mechanised artillery within the structure of an infantry division. Chapters 1 and 2 then elaborate on the early years of use, with Chapter 1 answering the obvious questions as to what the vehicles should look like: how big, how fast, what size guns, how are they to be supplied? The eventual answer was the adoption of the Panzer III chassis as the basis for the majority of the

Sturmgeschutz vehicles of with a limited traverse 7.5cm main gun. The kinds of rounds envisaged for use and the armour penetration of anti-tank round are described along with several photographs of the internal layout of the gun and the loading practice. This is, as one would expect from an Osprey, a feature of the book of hardly a page lacks a black-and-white photograph showing the various vehicles in development and later in operation. These latter in particular show the plethora of support vehicles from refuelling lorries of all types to the stop-gap Munitionsschlepper (ammunition resupply vehicle) built from a re-used Panzer I in lieu of an originally planned, but in short supply, half-track vehicle.

The following chapters discuss the combat use of the vehicles and can be summarised as continuing success and utility of even where, as in the invasion of France, combat reports are

few, there is the implied evidence of the continuing demand to increase the numbers of such vehicles available ó up until the second year of the Russian campaign and the rather large shock of the T-34 and other new Soviet tanks. At this point, the story changes to a need to up-gun and up-armour the Sturmartillerie with additional changes in usage being forced on the weapon system. The originally envisaged mobile artillery with some anti-tank capability found itself being redesignated into a tank destroyer role, albeit it was initially under-gunned for this activity. Later, there is a recognition that there is also a competing need for a larger assault gun, leading to the manufacture of Panzer IV-based vehicles with a hefty howitzer ó and almost at the same time the development of a dedicated light tank hunter based on the P38t chassis ó leading to the well known Hetzer. All of these changes are again accompanied with a plethora of photographs, several of which show vehicles bogged down in Russia, bringing home the reality of the depth of clinging mud that was often to be encountered. However, where the climate was a little more favourable, and the threat of more powerful enemy armour was not present, the Sturmgeschutz soldiered on until the final defeat in 1945.

The chapter on evaluating the concept raises many interesting points ó not least the final one that the concept rapidly fell from favour post-WWII. The greater flexibility of a vehicle with a large turret eventually won out over a vehicle which had the advantages of some weight saving and which was more economical to manufacture and also benefitted from a very low profile. As the opposition became tougher and better armed, these advantages were continually lessened.

This is a hefty tome which includes all the information that anyone is likely to require on the history and use of these vehicles. There is plenty of information on production numbers, deployments, vehicles actually still in service at any given point and even rates of ammunition consumption. If there is one thing lacking ó and for an Osprey this is surprising ó it is colour: not even a single plate showing camouflage schemes and comparisons over time on equipment and layout. There are, however, complimentary New Vanguard titles which cover these aspects.