

DUEL AT DESSAU

3AD's "Super Pershing" vs. Germany's "King Tiger"
WWII's two most powerful tanks meet in a historic encounter

Top Photo: The "Super Pershing" T26E4-1 (originally designated T26E1-1) is shown at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, in early 1945, shortly before being shipped to the 3rd Armored Division inside Germany via England. Additional armor plating and other modifications were made in Germany. Bottom Photo: German King Tiger, or Tiger II.



3AD soldiers above in 1945: Staff Sgt. Joseph Maduri of Massachusetts, commander of the Super Pershing, is shown in portrait at right and in middle of group photo. Corporal John P. Irwin of Pennsylvania, the tank's gunner, is at right in the group. Crewman at far left is believed to be "Pete" (last name not yet known). Not in the photo are the two remaining crewmen, whose names are not yet known (Photos from the Maduri family)

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on April 21, 1945

A Spearhead One-on-One Tank Victory

by Website Staff

Only three days before the 3rd Armored Division's final combat action of WWII, a Super Pershing of the 33rd Armored Regiment met and defeated the most powerful and most heavily armored German tank of the war - the legendary 77-ton King Tiger, also known as the Tiger II or Tiger Royal. It would be the first and only meeting between a King Tiger and the Super Pershing, a modified standard M26 Pershing weighing 53 tons - an almost "secret" tank that, to this day, remains largely an enigma to military historians.

Only two Super Pershings were ever built, and the 3AD had the only one in the European Theater - an experimental version with its remarkably long barrel. Arriving very late in the war (March, 1945), it was field tested and modified inside Germany and subsequently saw about ten days of actual combat action, beginning several days after the Battle of Paderborn and ending with the Battle of Dessau on the Elbe River.

The Super Pershing (aka T26E4-1) was equipped with a new long-barreled T15E1 90mm gun that was designed to out-perform the German high-velocity 88mm on the King Tiger. This new U.S. gun had successfully penetrated 8.5 inches of armor at 1,000 yards at 30 degrees. Even more remarkable, it had penetrated 13 inches of armor at 100 yards. The special 90mm ammunition had produced a muzzle velocity of 3,850 feet per second, or some 600 feet per second faster than the 88mm of the King Tiger. But in testing, the new 90mm also proved to have amazing range and accuracy.

Army ordinance technicians (in the U.S. and Europe) had been anxious about getting the new tank into combat, hoping to match it against a King Tiger. But by April, 1945, German armor west of Berlin had dramatically thinned out, not to mention an extreme shortage of fuel, and the odds of spotting the monster German tank were slim. But in Dessau on April 21, "luck" would befall the Super Pershing crew commanded by SSgt Joe Maduri, a veteran 3AD tanker in his tenth straight month of combat.

The 3AD had begun a four-pronged attack on the city, which was heavily defended. Division armor were finally able to enter the city slowly after numerous concrete tank barriers were destroyed. With 3AD tanks fanning out, and 36th Infantry riflemen following, the Super Pershing reached an intersection and began to round a corner to its right. Unknown to its crew, a King Tiger had apparently been waiting in ambush at a distance of two blocks or roughly 600 yards away, and in the same direction that the Americans were turning into.

At this distance, easily within its capability, the Tiger fired at the Super Pershing. But its infamous high-velocity 88mm shell, of the type that had destroyed so many American tanks and vehicles during the war, went high and was not even close. Gunner Cpl John "Jack" Irwin, only 18 years old, responded almost instantly with a round that struck the Tiger's huge angled glasis, or front plate. But the shot, a non-armor-piercing high explosive (HE) shell, had no effect. Ricocheting off the armor, it shot skyward and exploded harmlessly. The Super Pershing had been loaded with an HE only because Irwin had been expecting urban targets, such as buildings, personnel, and light anti-tank guns. "AP!", he shouted to his loader "Pete," which meant an armor-piercing shell would be next.

Maduri and crew then felt a concussion or thud on the turret. It was never known if this shot came from the Tiger, or from some other anti-tank weapon. In any case, no serious damage

was done - probably a lucky glancing impact. In the next instant, Irwin aimed and fired a second time, just as the royal monster was moving forward and raising up over a pile of rubble. The 90mm AP round penetrated the Tiger's underbelly, apparently striking the ammo well and resulting in a tremendous explosion that blew its turret loose. With near certainty, the entire crew was killed.

But there was no time to examine their "trophy." A battle was raging, and the Super Pershing continued down the street, passing the lifeless and burning King Tiger. Tough fighting still lay ahead, as German bazooka, Panzerfaust, and machine-gun fire came from windows and doorways.

The encounter with the King Tiger had been "short and sweet," lasting less than twenty seconds. It may not have been the titanic "slug fest" that could have occurred on an open field, but it was an overwhelming victory for the quick-reacting Super Pershing crew. The battle for Dessau would end completely on the following day, but not without the Super Pershing destroying another German heavy tank (believed to be a 50-ton Panther Mark V) with two shots. The first disabling its drive sprocket, and the second round completely penetrating the tank's side armor. That apparently set off an internal blast, again probably from stored ammo. And, still in Dessau, that was followed by Maduri and crew forcing the commander of a German medium tank to surrender without firing a shot. For the German crew, out of ammo for their main gun, the intimidating "look" of that long-barrel 90mm gun that must have destroyed any remaining will to fight or flee.

[Note: Sources include the book **Spearhead in the West** (1945 version); the book **Death Traps** by Belton Cooper; and the book **Another River, Another Town** and personal writings by John P. Irwin.]

More background on the "Super Pershing"

In mid-March, 1945, fresh from gunnery trials in the United States, a modified Pershing T26E1 arrived at the Maintenance Battalion of the 3rd Armored Division. In his book **Death Traps** (see feature story in this same website section) Belton Cooper writes, "Having already lost several of the new [Pershing] M26's [aka T26] to high-velocity German anti-tank guns, we knew that its armor was still inferior to that of the Mark VI Tiger."

Cooper writes, "Anyone standing behind an M4 Sherman could see the projectile go out and curve down slightly as it sped toward the target. This new high-velocity gun was entirely different. When we fired the first round, we could barely see the projectile. It appeared to rise slightly as it struck the target. This was an optical illusion, but the effect was awesome. When it hit the target (a knocked out German tank-destroyer/assault gun), sparks shot about sixty feet into the air, as though a giant grinding wheel had hit a piece of metal."

Cooper described how, despite the 3AD maintenance crew painstakingly and very creatively adding seven tons of weight in additional armor to the Super Pershing, its highest speed had only been dropped by about five miles an hour. Its 550-horsepower engine had proven itself. Cooper felt that the tank's maneuverability and firepower had it marked for great success in combat. "We realized that we had a weapon," Cooper writes, "that could blast the hell out of even the most powerful German Mark VI Tiger."

But, finally, on April 4, 1945, between the Weser River and Northheim, the Super Pershing was to fire its gun in anger. Cooper writes, "Some of the German units that had fallen back from the bridgehead set up a few isolated strong points along our route. One such position on a wooded hill ... opened fire as the column passed. The Super M26, in the forward part of the column, immediately swung its turret to the right and fired an armor-piercing shot toward an object on the forward slope of a wooded hill about fifteen hundred yards away [over three-quarters of a mile]. A blinding flash of sparks accompanied a tremendous explosion as debris shot fifty feet into the air ... The unknown object was a tank or self-propelled gun; had it been a half-track or other vehicle, the flash would not have been as large ... The rest of the column let go with a deluge of tank and automatic weapons fire, and the Germans soon broke off the action ... we didn't know what the Super M26 hit ... no one was anxious to go over and check it out."

Some days after the above event, the Super M26 was transferred to a new crew with the 33rd Armored Regiment, where more of it's great potential would be realized, if only weeks before WWII would end.

<http://3ad.com/history/news/super.pershing.1.htm>