

Introduction

The name Operationszone Adriatisches Küstenland (OZAK, Operation Zone Adriatic Coastline) designated during the German occupation, between September 1943 - May 1945, a large area that included the north-eastern border regions of Italy and parts of present Slovenia and Croatia.

The German Panzer units that operated in that area are a nearly unknown subject and one on which the available documentation is extremely scarce and fragmentary, in particular regarding the operations in which they were employed. Although the OZAK was secondary war theatre, separated from the main battlefronts until the last phases of the conflict, it saw a fairly large presence of Panzer units (or units supported by armoured vehicles). There were several reasons for this, among which:

- strategic communication lines, connecting the Reich with the south-western (Italy) and south-eastern (Balkans) war theatres, passed through the region, and it was necessary to guarantee their protection;
- a well organised and tough-fighting resistance movement, both Italian and Yugoslav, conducted a fierce guerrilla war in the region; it represented a constant threat for the German rear, and in particular for the communication lines;
- an Allied landing, aiming at circumventing the main Italian front, was a concrete possibility that forced the Germans to maintain in permanence forces in this area, ready to intervene.

This study is an attempt to put together the traces left by these units, in the hope that further research will contribute to creating a more complete picture.

The term "Panzer" is used here in a wider meaning, to include not only tanks in strict sense, but also self-propelled guns, armoured cars, AFVs in general. Therefore not only Panzertruppe units are dealt with, but also all those units that employed armoured vehicles, such as: Sturmgeschütz-Abteilungen, Panzerjäger-Abteilungen, Aufklärungs-Abteilungen, Polizei-Panzer-Kompanien, Panzer-Grenadier-Regimenter, etc.

The 2. Pz.Sich.Kp. has also been included, although it never was in the OZAK, because of its links with the units operating there, and also with a view to giving a better picture of the little-known history of Pz.Sich.Kp. and Panzer units in Italy in general. Also covered are units of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana (RSI, Mussolini's state in Northern Italy) that used armoured vehicles in the OZAK under German command.

The Italian names are used also for places which are now in Slovenia or Croatia; in appendix a table gives the correspondent present Slovenian or Croatian name.

As the reader will realise, there still are several gaps and unclear points in the history of these units. Despite the efforts made to verify all sources and confront data, some unclarified points are still present, in particular regarding the units' equipment. The author thanks in advance all those who will be able to provide additional information.

The author can be contacted through the publisher or at the e-mail: sdigiusto@hotmail.com