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# German Infantryman (2) Eastern Front 1941–43



David Westwood • Illustrated by Elizabeth Sharp

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## Author's dedication

Once more, to my friends Jason and Stephanie von Zerneck in New York for their indulgences whilst my wife and I stayed with them, especially for a moment on the Brooklyn Bridge when I personally felt as cold as a *Landser* before the battle of Moscow in December 1941.

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## Author's note

All photographs are courtesy of Jason von Zerneck / Angelray books.



FRONT COVER **During the Russian campaign the German Army did not have a specially designed winter uniform. Here we see signallers laying land lines in the snows before Moscow. The absence of any winter camouflage was significant, allowing the Russians to see and shoot at the Germans. Often troops stole sheets, but these soon got filthy and were as bad as the uniform for visibility. (courtesy of Jason von Zerneck / Angelray books)**

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# GERMAN INFANTRYMAN (2) EASTERN FRONT 1941-43

## INTRODUCTION

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The fall of France and the withdrawal of most of the British Expeditionary Force in May and June 1940 left the Germans in control of most of north-west Europe. They had occupied Czechoslovakia and Austria bloodlessly. They attacked and, with Russian help, conquered Poland. They then successfully invaded Norway, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Denmark and France and placed them under military and civilian control. This gave Germany, with Poland in the east to the Russo-German demarcation line, command of the whole north-western European continental coastline from the eastern Baltic to the Spanish border on the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1940 and up to April 1941 Britain stood alone in Europe: in the Mediterranean Germany soon took Yugoslavia, Greece and the important strategic island of Crete. In North Africa, however, the Italian Army was not doing too well, so Hitler sent German troops and a German general – Erwin Rommel – to put things in order.

Hitler made some half-hearted moves towards preparing for an invasion of Great Britain, but when the *Luftwaffe* failed to gain air superiority, the invasion was postponed and, although threats were maintained, there was no serious intention in Hitler's mind to mount an invasion. In any event his navy could not make up for the failure of the *Luftwaffe* to defeat the Royal Air Force.

Hitler had always had the east in mind. He was convinced that the German Reich needed to expand; that this expansion would be at the expense of sovereign nations was of no consequence to him. Russia had entered into a pact with him in August 1939, just before the invasion of Poland, securing his invasion against Russian reprisals and actually opening the back door to a Russian invasion of Poland. This had given him the opportunity to get the Polish campaign out of the way before the Western powers could react and intervene.

In late 1940, after his successful invasion of western Europe, Hitler turned his attention back to the east. The German general staff was coming increasingly under his complete control, and it was told to prepare plans for an invasion of Russia. Despite obvious objections to the prospect of a two-front war (rarely argued, and never convincingly, in conferences with Hitler) a strategy was prepared. As planning progressed the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW – Supreme Armed Forces Command) began to hope that the campaign would be as swift as those already undertaken in Poland and the west.

The sudden imposition of a further campaign in the Balkans in April 1941 threw the timing of the Russian operation out of balance, but also confirmed the growing belief among the Germans that the Russians

would be defeated as quickly as every other army the Germans had fought against up to then. This presumption became a credo: the German armed forces would defeat Russia in a matter of two or three months. Unfortunately for the average *Landser* the Russians had not been told, nor, ominously, had the Gods of Russian weather.

Preparations for the invasion took months, and despite warnings from Richard Sorge (the Russian spy in Tokyo) and Winston Churchill, Stalin was unwilling to accept that the Germans had designs on Russia. His lack of military preparation led to a situation on 21 June 1941 where Russian commanders were afraid to open fire on the invading Germans without approval from above. The only effective approval had to come from the very top, and Stalin, for some days, was incommunicado.

## **INFANTRY REGIMENT ORGANISATION, 1941**

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The German infantry regiment in 1941 was little changed from that which went into Poland in 1939. Divisions consisted (with the exception of Wave 15 divisions and later) of three infantry regiments, each of three battalions. The regimental organisation was a mirror, on a small scale, of the divisional organisation, in that every regiment had an infantry (and field engineer) component, an artillery component and anti-tank elements, together with all the services needed to supply the teeth arms with ammunition, food, water and the myriad other items needed to keep the regiment effective in the field.

Regimental headquarters included the commanding officer and his staff officers, a supply train (including the regimental medical officer, the vet, the armourer, the blacksmith and the field kitchen) which was partly motorised. Under the command of this HQ were the field engineer platoon, the mounted reconnaissance platoon (abolished September 1939), the intelligence platoon (including signals platoon) and the band (acting as stretcher bearers in battle).

The three battalions of infantry were themselves divided into three rifle companies, a machine-gun company, infantry engineer platoon, supply troops and a pack train. The regiment also had the following under its command: an infantry gun company, an anti-tank company (from March 1940 known as *Panzerjäger*) and a light infantry supply column.

All regimental vehicles were horse-drawn with the exception of the machine-gun company in each infantry battalion. All rear services (butchery, bakery, postal services, ammunition trains etc.) were dependent upon horse-drawn wagons. Thus the German Army that marched into Russia (as opposed to the armoured and mechanised units which drove) could proceed at approximately the same pace as a Roman legion nearly two thousand years earlier. This fact alone was to contribute to problems that were never effectively resolved.

### **Horses**

Each infantryman in the German Army was familiar with the platoon horse; this beast went everywhere with the platoon, pulling the platoon cart into which packs were loaded together with any extra items that

An infantry horse stable in Germany. Each stall (left) has the horse tack hung on the partition, ready for use. The saddles shown are the standard German Army *Armeesattel 25* issued for all draft horses. The horse driver could sit on his horse to control it, as did the artillery horse drivers.

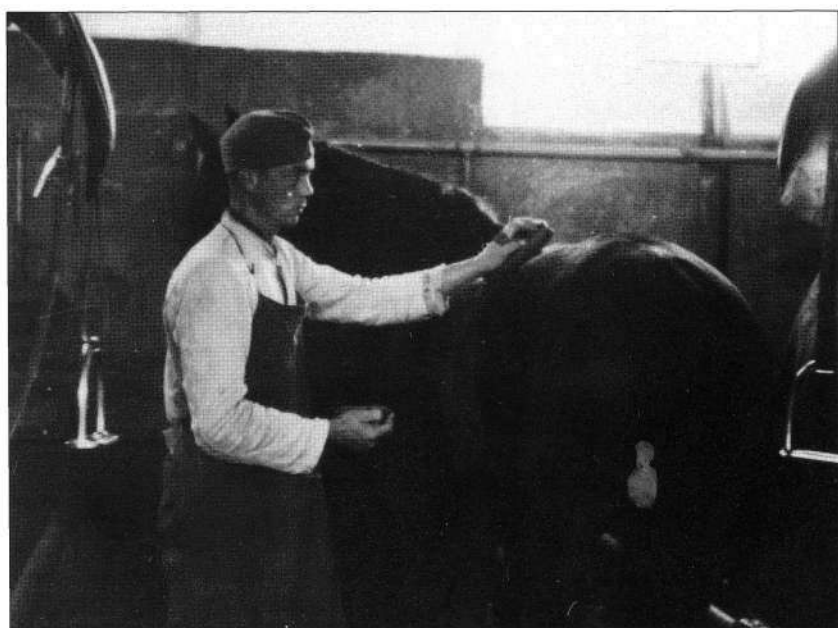


soldiers could manage to load. Often the carts in the west had carried the booty of the conqueror, for example: French wines, Dutch cheeses, Belgian chocolates. In the east, however, the wagons carried the bare essentials, for there was little loot to be had, and warm clothing soon became more important than any fine wine. The German Army went into Russia with over 700,000 horses, yet only a few thousand tanks.

In every company eight horse-drawn wagons were needed for movement, plus a further company wagon at regimental level to carry extra (heavy) company equipment. These eight wagons were used as follows: three one-horse wagons to carry the machine guns and mortars for the three heavy platoons of the company; two four-horse wagons: one for ammunition, one for the field kitchen (later reduced to

a two-horse wagon); and two two-horse wagons for back packs, and one two-horse wagon for rations.

This meant that a number of men (21 in all, including NCOs in charge) spent the majority of their time looking after horses and driving wagons. The wagons themselves were of good design, but the concept, in a so-called mobile army, was archaic. The other problems that arose for the German Army in Russia were the vulnerability of the horses to the intense cold, and the need for constant



Grooming was an essential daily task. Note the apron worn by the groom, and the two saddles to left and right.





The infantry wagon with two horses, driver and two seated men. The *Gefreiter* is in charge of the wagon and its horses. This is the Hf.2 version; the later Hf.177 metal wagon was so heavy it earned the nickname 'horse murderer'.

supplies of fodder for the animals when the army itself was desperate for ammunition, clothing and other supplies. Furthermore the horses were very easily injured.

Training for horse handlers was less intense than that for cavalrymen, but involved acquiring a basic ability to ride, the care of the horse in the field, and dietary training to ensure that the animals were fed and cared for and so were able to pull their loads.

### Rations

The German Army, like all others, had ration scales laid down for both men and horses. However, once the Russian campaign had started, ration supplies were often erratic, and the men in the field had to scavenge for themselves. Quite often the horses became food, especially during the siege of the encircled 6 Army at Stalingrad.

The following is an intelligence report on ration scales. It applied whenever possible, but was never more than a guide when means were in short supply:

#### 'a. Human rations scales

The daily ration quantity (*Portionsatz*) is the amount of food consumed by one man for one day. It consists of three meals, the noon meal amounting to one-half of the total, the evening meal to one-third, and the next morning's breakfast to one-sixth. The Armed Forces High Command has laid down an over-all plan specifying the maximum amount of any ration item that may be served. The amount depends upon two factors: the duty class of the man receiving the ration, and the component class of the particular item being served.

'There are four main types of rations served to troops. Ration I (*Verpflegungssatz I*) is for troops committed to combat, for those that are recuperating from combat, and for troops stationed in Norway north of 66° North. Ration II is for occupation and line of communication troops. Ration III is for garrison troops within Germany. Ration IV goes

to office workers and nurses within Germany. Hospital cases may fall within any of these classes depending on the seriousness of the cases.

The most important items of the component classes are as follows:

- (a) bread;
- (b) meats, soy bean flour, cheese, fish, and eggs;
- (c) vegetables;
- (d) puddings and milk;
- (e) salt, mustard, vinegar, and other seasonings;
- (f) spices such as pepper, cinnamon, and cloves;
- (g) butter, lard, marmalades, fats, and bread spreads;
- (h) coffee and tea;
- (i) sugar;
- (j) spirits and wines;
- (k) tobacco.

Substitute issues may be made within a component class but not among different component classes. Thus the daily maximum allowance of vegetables for a soldier is 60 grams of dried vegetables, or 1,200 grams of kidney beans, or 400 grams of salted vegetables, or equivalent quantities of any of about 30 other substitutes. It is not possible to predict which items will be served on any given day. The following chart, however, sets forth a likely breakdown of these maximum ration allowances.

#### ‘REPRESENTATIVE BREAKDOWN OF MAXIMUM RATION ALLOWANCES IN GRAMS PER DAY

Item	Ration Class	Duty Class (weights in grams)			
		Ration I	Ration II	Ration III	Ration IV
Rye bread	(a)	700	700	700	600
Fresh meat with bones	(b)	136	107	90	56
Soy bean flour	(b)	7	7	7	7
Headless fish	(b)	30	30	30	30
Fresh vegetables and fruits	(c)	250	250	250	250
Potatoes	(c)	320	320	320	320
Legumes	(c)	80	80	80	80
Pudding powder	(d)	20	20	20	20
Sweetened condensed skimmed milk	(d)	25	25	25	25
Salt	(e)	15	15	15	15
Other seasonings	(e)	3	3	3	3
Spices	(f)	1	1	1	1
Fats and bread spreads	(g)	60	50	40	35
Coffee	(h)	9	9	9	9
Sugar	(i)	40	35	30	30
Supplementary allowances	(i)	2	2	2	2
Total Maximum Ration in grams		1,698	1,654	1,622	1,483
Total Maximum Ration in lbs		3.74	3.64	3.57	3.26
Wine (in summer) (quarts)	(j)	.026	.026	.026	.026
Cigarettes (pieces)	(k)	7	6	3	2

#### **b. Special types of human rations**

(1) March ration (*Alarmverpflegung*). The march ration is a cold food ration issued for not more than three or four consecutive days to units in transit either by carrier or on foot. It consists of approximately 700 grams of bread, 200 grams of cold meat or cheese, 60 grams of bread

spreads, 9 grams of coffee (or 4 grams of tea), 10 grams of sugar, and 6 cigarettes. Thus it has a total weight of about 987 grams.

(2) Iron ration (*Eiserne Portion*). An iron ration consists of 250 grams of biscuits, 200 grams of cold meat, 150 of preserved vegetables, 25 of coffee, and 25 of salt. Total weight is 650 grams without packing and 825 grams with packing. An iron half-ration is composed of 250 grams of biscuits and 200 grams of preserved meat: thus its total weight is 450 grams without packing and 535 grams with packing.

(3) Combat Package (*Grosskampfpäcken*) and Close Combat Package (*Nahkampfpäcken*). The Germans have begun to use these types of ration for troops engaged in combat. They include chocolate bars, fruit bars, sweets, cigarettes and possibly biscuits.

#### 'c. Animal rations

An animal ration is the amount of food consumed by one horse, draft ox, dog, or carrier pigeon for one day. The quantity of an animal ration allowance (*Rationssatz*) depends on the type of animal, the area in which it is serving, and the content of the ration it is being fed. Horses, for instance, are divided into four groups: draft horses of the heaviest breed, draft horses of heavy breed, saddle horses and light draft horses, and small horses. On the Eastern Front, draft horses of the heaviest breed receive a maximum ration allowance of 5,650 grams of oats, 5,300 grams of hay, and 5,750 grams of straw (including 1,500 grams of bedding straw). The allotments to other horse groups are proportionately less. On fronts other than the Eastern Front the allotments for all horses are generally smaller. In addition, substitutes such as preserved forage, barley, corn, etc., may change the ration weight. If the horse is being fed an iron ration, it is given a single item such as oats or hay or straw.

#### 'd. Rations in the field

Local stores obtained by purchase or confiscation play a greater part in the supply of rations in the field (*Feldportionen* for men and *Feldrationen* for animals) than is the case for any other class of supply. It is part of the German planning principle to live off the land as much as

**An essential supply – straw for the horses. Here two wagons stand in light snow, with two smaller wagons ahead. The troops are still well enough dressed for the weather. The photograph was taken in November 1941 on the way to Moscow.**







Trucks and a *panje* wagon and pony en route for Moscow in December 1941. The small Russian ponies were very capable in snow, as was the wagon. The trucks are still operational, but will soon be stopped by much deeper snow.

possible and to obtain only the remaining requirements from stocks procured through channels. The Germans fully appreciate the difficulty of employing such methods during periods of combat and do not count upon local stores during operative periods. Usually a normal reserve of about 10 days' rations for each man of an army is maintained within the army. The rations consist of full and iron rations, although the latter may be eaten only upon the receipt of special orders.

#### 'Rations carried in an army for each man

	Full rations	Iron rations
With the man	—	1 (half)
On a combat vehicle	—	1
In the field kitchen	1	1
In the unit ration train	2	—
In the division train	1	—
In the army dumps and train	a total of about 3	

Another view of a *panje* wagon with two ponies. The men are still well wrapped, but spring has arrived and now the horses will have to cope not with snow but with the mud from the melted snow.

Ordinarily there are two full and two iron horse rations carried either on the horse or in unit supply columns. Other rations are carried by the army and the division.





For staff planning purposes, the weights of rations are computed by the Germans as follows:

Type of rations	Weights (grams)	Weight (pounds)
Human rations:		
Standard ration with packing	1,500	3.3
Iron ration with packing	825	1.82
Iron half-ration with packing	535	1.18
Horse rations		
Standard ration	10,000	22
Iron oat ration	5,000	11
Iron hay ration	5,000	11
Iron straw ration	2,500	5.5'

**A train-load of hay baled and ready for the Eastern Front is seen in Pozen station in the spring of 1942. Many thousands of train-loads like this were needed every month just to feed horses, rather than carry food, clothing, ammunition and men.**

This report was published at the latter end of the war, but the information was current throughout World War II. Actual amounts supplied varied from full rations to nearly nothing, particularly during the last days of the battle of Stalingrad.

## **MARCHING**

Troops of the infantry thought that the campaigns in the west had been arduous, and that they had seen all they needed to see of the long roads to the front. However, in Russia the roads were even longer, and went on seemingly for ever. The infantry's complaints were exaggerated by the fact that the armoured and mobile units (of which there were surprisingly few for a so-called modern army) sped ahead from the start of the operation, and the infantry following behind were almost constantly engaged in marching to catch up with them.



**A Gulaschkanone in the field. Here the field kitchen is in a farmyard, with a pile of chopped timber behind it to be used as fuel. Procuring fuel for cooking and heating was a perpetual problem during the campaign.**



Sleep, when it came, was often no more than a short break. One soldier complained: 'The hour and a half's sleep had done more harm than good. It had not been easy to awaken the dog-tired men. Our bones were cold, muscles stiff and painful and our feet were swollen. We pulled on our field boots only with great difficulty.' Another soldier noted: 'Sleep was a precious and often elusive commodity. Personal equipment was pulled on and all straps and accoutrements secured. Unnecessary clothing would be placed in packs and handed across to be ferried by the light infantry supply column (the *Tross*). Some companies marched as many as 50km in one day.' One veteran calculated a single step covered 60cm – men took shorter or longer paces, but this was the average – so 50km meant an estimated 84,000 paces.'

Infantry everywhere have to carry their day-to-day requirements of food, ammunition and water with them, and another *Landser* commented: 'I don't know exactly how heavy our equipment is, but in addition to all of it there was a thick woollen blanket, an ammunition box that could drive one crazy and that lamentable packet with the hooks in it I should have sent back.' (The last reference is to a parcel from home containing boot hooks.)

Even when there was a chance of a full night's sleep, other matters could take away that inviting prospect: 'We only had a little sleep. Once, when we finally managed to secure accommodation in a barn, our section was assigned to sentry duty, and we spent yet another night in a soaking meadow.'

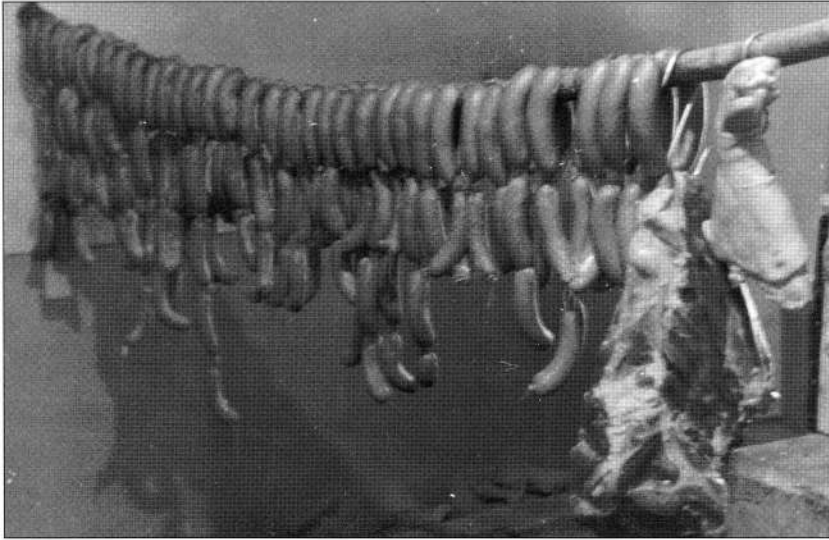
The infantry were constantly being rushed, trying to catch up at three miles per hour units that could travel at five times that speed or more. Meals were consequently short:

Breakfast was a hasty affair, perhaps a cup of tea or ersatz coffee with bread, butter and some jam or a can of liver sausage. After the order 'prepare to move', there was still time to crack and drink a raw egg. Companies would then begin to form up on the road in the half-light of dawn. At first, soldiers strode energetically along the route, with rifles properly slung as the sun slowly rose. Within an hour or two rifles and weapons were festooned haphazardly about the body. Fingers began to worry absentmindedly at swinging helmet rims fastened to belts or dangling from rifles.

Once on the march conditions were bad, as Artillery *Oberleutnant* Siegfried Knappe observed: 'Our feet sank

**The field butchers are seen flensing a pig, probably a spoil of war. Field butchery units were attached to all German Army units, and they prepared all flesh for troop consumption.**





**The pig, a few hours later. Most of it has been converted into sausage, a good long-lasting food, edible hot or cold. The cuts to the right are for the butchers' and cooks' personal consumption!**

into the sand and dirt puffing dust into the air so that it rose and clung to us. The horses coughing in the dust produced a pungent odour. The loose sand was nearly as tiring for the horses as deep mud would have been. The men marched in silence, coated with dust, with dry throats and lips.'

Perhaps the worst factor of this constant movement was the boredom: 'the repetitious rhythm of the march had produced a mask of monotony on every face; a cigarette would dangle in the corner of the mouth. Smoke would not be inhaled, the aroma would simply waft around the marching soldier.' Another soldier remarked:

As we marched, low hills would emerge from the horizon ahead of us and then slowly sink back into the horizon behind us. It almost seemed that the same hill kept appearing in front of us. Kilometre after kilometre. Everything seemed to blur into uniform grey because of the vastness and sameness of everything. ... Fields of sunflowers stretched for kilometre after kilometre after weary kilometre.

Indeed, the boredom became such that, 'We wished that the Russians would make a stand – anything, a battle even, to relieve the painful monotony of this ceaseless, timeless tramping. It was 11p.m. before a halt was called at a big farmhouse. We had covered close on 65km that day!'

The sheer physical toil of the trudge to the east was exacerbated by the damage to men's feet:

Nobody can convince me that any non-infantryman can imagine what is taking place here. Think of the most brutal exhaustion you have ever experienced, direct burning sunlight, weeping sores on your feet – and you have my condition not at the end but at the beginning of a 45km march. It takes hours before your feet become insensitive to the painful wounds at each step on these roads which are either gravel or sand at the edges.

**Another spoil of war falls prey to a signaller's axe. All soldiers take advantage of local fauna, and these two men are looking forward to a good meal – although the photographer will also want feeding.**



The seeming endless vista that spread in front of these weary men led to many comments:

This land is endless, beneath an endless sky with roads trailing endlessly into an incalculable distance. Each village and town seems just like the one that preceded it. They all have the same women and children standing dumbly by the roadside, the same wells, the same farms. ... If the column comes off the road and moves on a compass bearing across fields, we look like lost world circumnavigators seeking new coasts beyond these oceans.

Another remarked that, 'The immense space was so vast that we had many soldiers who became melancholy. Flat valleys, flat hills – flat valleys, flat hills, endless, endless. There was no limit. We could not see an end and it was so disconsolate.' Another letter home said: 'There is no identifiable objective in terms of space across countryside stretching ever further away. Even more depressing, the enemy is becoming even more numerous, even though we have offered up huge sacrifices.'



**The field kitchen has been installed under cover, and as there is no enemy activity, soldiers collect food for themselves and some of their companions. Each man carries the bottom can of his mess kit, so soup is probably on the menu.**

The conditions were worsened even more during the first months of the advance by the fine dust produced as the men marched: 'we were all covered in a light yellow coating'. Even the motorised troops commented that on a 'further drive at speed into the darkness, the dust was often so thick that one could hardly see the vehicle in front any more'.

The Russian summer was cursed:

Heat, filth, and clouds of dust were the characteristic snapshot of those days. We hardly saw any enemy apart from the occasional drive-by of enemy prisoners. But the country had totally altered after we crossed the Reich border. Lithuania gave us a little taste of what we were to find in Russia: unmaintained sandy roads, intermittent settlements and ugly houses which were more like huts.

Even when there were a few moments of rest, problems still arose: 'For the time being I am in a safe spot. If only I had some water to wash myself! The dirt and the dust cause my skin to itch and my beard is growing longer and longer. Wouldn't you like to kiss me now! I am sure you can see the dirt on the paper on which I write.'

Further weather complications came with the autumn and spring mud – the *rasputitsa*. The mud prevented movement: no man, horse or vehicle (even tanks) could cope with the two feet of mud that was produced by the first vehicles over any stretch of track. The Germans installed corduroy roads – log roads – but these soon sank under the mud, and constant efforts had to be made to re-lay more and more logs. Then came the winter, bringing temperatures lower than those experienced by even mountain troops. To add to the misery, the German Army in 1941 stood in the snow and ice in the remnants of the same uniforms they had worn when they started the move to the east in July.



**Cigarettes and beer, two of the treats that were on issue regularly at the beginning of the campaign in Russia. The container catching the drips is a food can which could be carried on a man's back and held enough to feed a whole section.**

## THE EARLY FIGHTING

The Germans had gained much experience of making river crossings from their campaigns of 1939 and 1940. One man wrote: 'One boat after the other slid into the water. There were excited cries, splashing and the howling of assault boat engines. Not a shot from the other bank as blood-red flames dance in the water. We jump on shore and press forwards.'



As the crossing took place, 'the sky was filled with bursting shells of every calibre. It was an awful roaring, exploding, crackling and howling as if hell was actually about to come on earth.' Even the attacking soldiers were intimidated: 'An uncanny feeling came over us all,' one NCO admitted, but the infantry were as usual up to the job: 'They had their sleeves rolled up, hand-grenades stuck in belts and machine pistols hanging from their necks or rifles at the ready.'

However, even though progress was often rapid, the infantry had the task of mopping up after the tanks had gone further forward. During one attack:

... it soon became clear between 05.30 hours and 07.30 hours that the Russians were bitterly fighting especially hard behind our forward attacking companies. Infantry operating with the 35 to 40 tanks and armoured cars based inside the citadel began to form a defence. The enemy brought his sharpshooting skills to bear, sniping from trees, rooftop outlets and cellars in multiple engagements, which soon caused us heavy losses among officers and NCOs. As the infantry moved forward, the morning darkness was filled with the sounds of shouting, the crack of rifle shots, the short bursts of machine guns, and the shattering crashes of hand-grenades. The rifle fire sounded like the clatter of metal-wheeled carts moving fast over cobblestone streets. Our infantry overran the barbed wire the Russians had erected on each side of their no-man's land and stormed the guard towers and pill-boxes the Russians had built immediately beyond the death strip.

Morale among the men was high – after all, this was the army that had smashed armies in the west with little or no delay. One man was recorded as saying:

I tell you in advance that in four to five weeks' time the swastika flag will be wafting over the Kremlin in Moscow, and that moreover we will have Russia finished this year and Tommy on the carpet. ... Ja ... it is no secret, when and how, that we will be in Moscow within four weeks with our as yet undefeated Wehrmacht. It is only 1,000km from Suwalki as the crow flies. We only need to conduct another Blitzkrieg. We only know how to attack. Forward, onward and again forward in concert with our heavy weapons raining fire, cordite, iron, bombs and shells – all on the heads of the Russians. That's all it needs.

But the reality of the campaign was not long in coming. Many of the men had fought in the west, but casualties there had not been excessive, even for the enemy. In Russia, however, the mounting local resistance was already causing problems and the dead began to pile up – initially Russian dead. 'Suddenly all heads switched to the right. The first dead of the Russian campaign lay before our eyes like a spectre symbolising the destructiveness of war. A Mongolian skull smashed in combat, a torn uniform and bare abdomen slit by shell splinters. The column drew up and then accelerated ahead, the picture fell behind us. I sank back thoughtfully into my seat.'



The weather is getting worse but these men have bread, wine, coffee and shelter, as well as one Russian field cap to keep them going. The hay bales are for the horses, so this is probably a wagon crew at rest.

One factor that was to have an increasing effect on the ability of the Germans to manoeuvre in Russia was the roads. They were in the main no more than tracks, for hardly any Western-style paved routes had been laid. Instead the troops marched along dusty tracks, and the problem worsened 'because of the poor maps, on which usually only the main roads were drawn'. It was these roads that were to turn into glutinous mud in the autumn rains and the spring thaw, making movement almost impossible.

Those who had not taken part in the operations of 1939 and 1940 were soon gaining battle experience, and one wrote: 'Yesterday I participated in my twelfth attack. Some of these attacks were more difficult than others. With twelve attacks under my belt, I have now caught up with the boys who had a head start in France! You can imagine that I'm very proud of this achievement.'

**The rough guide to eating on campaign in Russia! Two men eat straight from a frying pan, having halted their reconnaissance vehicle for a break. As it is summer, life is a little easier.**



## OPERATIONS

When the German Army went over the border in the morning light of 22 June 1941, they soon realised that 'tactical surprise of the enemy has apparently been achieved along the entire line. Troops were caught in their quarters, planes on the airfields were covered up, and ... enemy groups faced with unexpected developments at the front inquired at the HQ in the rear what they should do.' However, the Russian soldiers were not all giving up at their first sight of the enemy, and in one instance:

Although the tanks could see no infantry in the open, the Soviet infantry remained hidden in the cornfields. German infantry trying to winkle them out were also invisible. And then the awful work began – hand-to-hand fighting took place in the weak light of dawn. The fields were infested with enemy riflemen. Every metre of ground was fought over. The Soviet soldiers did not give up. Even hand grenades did not bring them out of their hiding places.



**Horses and men together pulling a Hf.177 wagon up a slight incline in Russia. The load was too much for two horses, and help was often needed, adding to the physical demands made on the marching infantry.**

The Russians, like the Germans, had large numbers of horses in the field, and:

The most dreadful [sight] was the horses completely bloated and eviscerated, with their intestines spilled out and muzzles bloodily torn off. Overall there hung the stench of destruction: a disturbing mixture of the abattoir and putrefaction pervading the air with a stagnant decadence over our column. The worst was a pig gnawing with noisy relish at a horse carcass, because we realised the logic of the food chain meant we would one day taste some of this horse flesh ourselves.

This was to become a common experience later in the campaign.

Fear and despair were widespread among the German troops: 'During attacks, when the Russians charged or when we advanced, we would be extremely fearful and uneasy. One didn't know whether one would survive the next minute.' Furthermore, one soldier wondered:





**A typical road in Russia during the summer. The truck is reasonably stable but the staff car behind is slewing badly as it skids in the deep dust. This dust got everywhere, and engines were very quickly ruined.**

In how many fields and woods and ditches were German soldiers dying, waiting for help that would not come – or that would be too late when it did arrive. Surely, I thought, the army could have made better arrangements to deal with the hellish mix of confusion, terror and despair that was left behind by the relentless forward march of our storm troops. The organisation of the fighting troops and the paraphernalia of war seemed to have been worked out with amazing precision, but there appeared to have been a criminal disregard of the necessities behind front line troops. Surely it would even have been better to advance more slowly if it would have given us time to find and treat our wounded and bury our dead.

These last observations were to be cruelly magnified in the later stages of the campaign, when supplies were reduced to below survival level, and men were forced into desperate measures just to survive. Military supplies – ammunition, explosives, weapons – were short and medical supplies often failed, as did food deliveries to the field kitchens which were such an integral part of the daily lives of the millions of men on the Eastern Front.




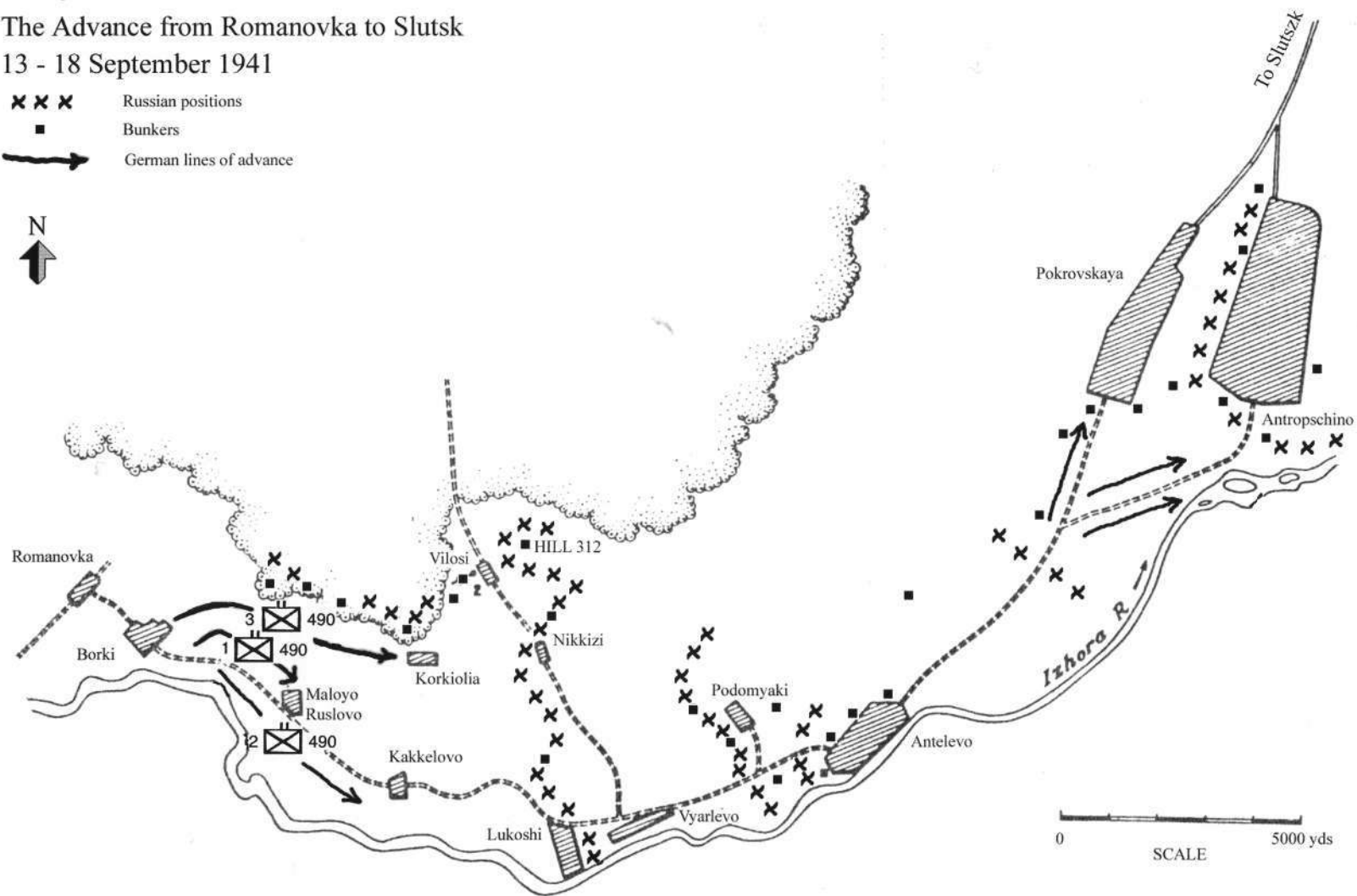
**The Pripjet Marshes. Here water and midges combined to drive men nearly insane, and to rot their feet. Sometimes men waded through country like this for days, never finding dry land on which to rest and change. Added to these problems were the Russian partisans.**

## Hill 312

The Advance from Romanovka to Slutsk

13 - 18 September 1941

- x x x Russian positions  
 ■ Bunkers  
 German lines of advance



## FIELD OPERATIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN

The following descriptions of actual fighting are taken from reports published after the war, but compiled from after-action reports from the troops themselves:

'After its lightning advance through the Baltic States during the early days of the Russian campaign Army Group North arrived at the gates of Leningrad, where the Russians fiercely contested every inch of ground. During the late summer of 1941 the Germans were slowly forging a ring of steel around the strongly fortified city. In mid-September the 490 Infantry Regiment (269 Infantry Division) was given the task of eliminating Russian centres of resistance approximately 16 miles south of Leningrad in the area north of the Izhora River between Romanovka and Slutsk. In the path of the regiment's advance stood an unknown number of Russian bunkers and defence positions established on the hills dominating the Izhora Valley. These positions had to be neutralised in order to secure the German lines of communication during the attack on Slutsk. Late on 13 September the Regiment crossed the river south of Gorky and spent the night in that village. The attack against the Russian-held hills north of the river was to start the next day, with I and II Battalions advancing along the river valley and III Bn protecting the flank to the north [see map, p.20].

'Very little was known about either the country or the Russian fortifications in the area. The German maps, as well as previously captured enemy maps, were either inadequate or inaccurate. For this reason, the commander of III Battalion decided to conduct careful terrain reconnaissance before attacking. The reconnaissance took the entire morning, and it was not until noon that the attack of III Battalion

**Spring brought the snow melt, and here two *panje* wagons negotiate a flooded area. The weather was still cold, and unless groomed the horses would soon develop frost sores on their backs and legs, which were extremely difficult to cure.**



against the Russian bunkers east of Gorky finally got under way. Attached to the forward elements were three demolition teams equipped with flame throwers and shaped charges. Only a few minutes were required to dispose of the first Russian bunker. While the engineers were preparing to attack the next bunker, two Russian howitzers west of Vilosi came into action.

'The regimental artillery was on the alert and destroyed the two howitzers and a nearby ammunition dump. By 1600 the demolition teams had captured the second bunker and were preparing to attack a third, which they presumed to be the last. Half an hour later this bunker was in German hands. The engineers were just about to withdraw when I Battalion, advancing further to the south, discovered two additional bunkers, one of which was about 1,000 yards southwest of Vilosi. The demolition teams destroyed both bunkers in short order, thus paving the way for III Battalion's advance toward Hill 312 northeast of Vilosi. Continuing its attack, III Battalion made some slight gains in the late afternoon of 14 September, but halted at 2015 after darkness set in and withdrew to Vilosi for the night. The other two Battalions had made only little headway during the day, and spent the night of 14–15 September at the eastern edge of Vyarlevo. During the night Russian aircraft scattered bombs over widely separated areas including positions held by their own troops.

'The seizure of strongly fortified Hill 312, scheduled for the next day, promised to be an arduous task. Although H-hour had originally been set for 0600, the attack had to be postponed until afternoon because the morning hours were needed for thorough ground reconnaissance by two patrols sent out by III Battalion.

'One of the patrols, led by Lieutenant Thomsen, was to reconnoitre the hills between Korkiolia and Lukashi to determine whether and in what strength they were occupied by the Russians. The second patrol, under Sergeant Ewald, was to reconnoitre the area north of Hill 312 to determine the enemy's disposition and strength, and to probe for weak spots in his defence.

'Thomsen's Patrol was stealthily advancing southeastwards from Korkiolia when it was suddenly intercepted and pinned down. In the ensuing exchange of fire the patrol was able to identify a number of Russian bunkers and field positions and to relay the necessary target data to III Battalion headquarters. A short time later these Russian strong points were destroyed by the accurate fire of the regimental artillery. After having completed its mission, Thomsen's Patrol returned to battalion headquarters.

'By noon no word from Patrol Ewald had been received by the commander of III Battalion. Since he could not postpone the attack on Hill 312 any longer, he ordered Lieutenant Hahn, the commander of Company I, to seize the hill.

'At 1230 Hahn assembled the assault force, which consisted of 1st Company plus a machine gun and a mortar platoon, a demolition team consisting of two engineers equipped with flame throwers and shaped charges, and an artillery observer. Since Sergeant Ewald's patrol had not returned, only the two platoons led by Lieutenant Borgwardt and Sergeant Timm were available for the attack. In extended formation, the assault force advanced through the woods west and northwest of Vilosi





and reached a point north of Hill 312 apparently without attracting the enemy's attention. From there, Lieutenant Hahn identified a bunker on top of Hill 312 and two positions on its northern slope. The fortifications were held in strength. Before he was able to conclude his observations, the enemy spotted the Germans, fired on them, and pinned them down.

'The artillery observer attached to the assault force called for direct howitzer fire, whereupon the bunker received two hits which, however, appeared to do little damage. Hahn reported the situation to battalion headquarters and was ordered to continue the attack.

'Borgwardt's and Timm's Platoons were to skirt Hill 312 and approach its base through the dense thicket that extended southward from the forest edge to the hill. Borgwardt went to the right, Timm to the left. The latter was to support Borgwardt's advance up the hill and then dispose of the obstinate bunker on the crest of the hill as soon as Borgwardt entered the two slope positions. While the two platoons were moving out, the attached machine gun and mortar platoons went into position at the edge of the forest north of Hill 312. The howitzers gave the signal to attack by firing six rounds at the enemy bunker on top of Hill 312. Company headquarters personnel had to act as covering force since an enemy relief thrust was to be expected at any time.

'Again the fire of the howitzers failed to put the bunker out of action. While the shells were exploding on and around the bunker, Borgwardt's men stealthily worked their way up the hill, creeping toward the two Russian positions whose occupants' attention was diverted by machine gun and mortar fire from the edge of the woods north of the hill. Borgwardt's Platoon suddenly broke into the positions and caught the Russians completely by surprise.

'While Borgwardt's men were engaged in seizing the two positions, Timm's Platoon followed them up the hill and captured the bunker with the help of the engineers, whose flame throwers and shaped charges

**An interesting local adaptation of combined draft force. Two horses lead two oxen to move a limber and a 10.5cm *leichte Feldhaubitze 18* in the growing mud. Guns were always difficult to move in the mud and snow because of the narrow rims on their wheels. Only later were rubber tyres introduced generally.**

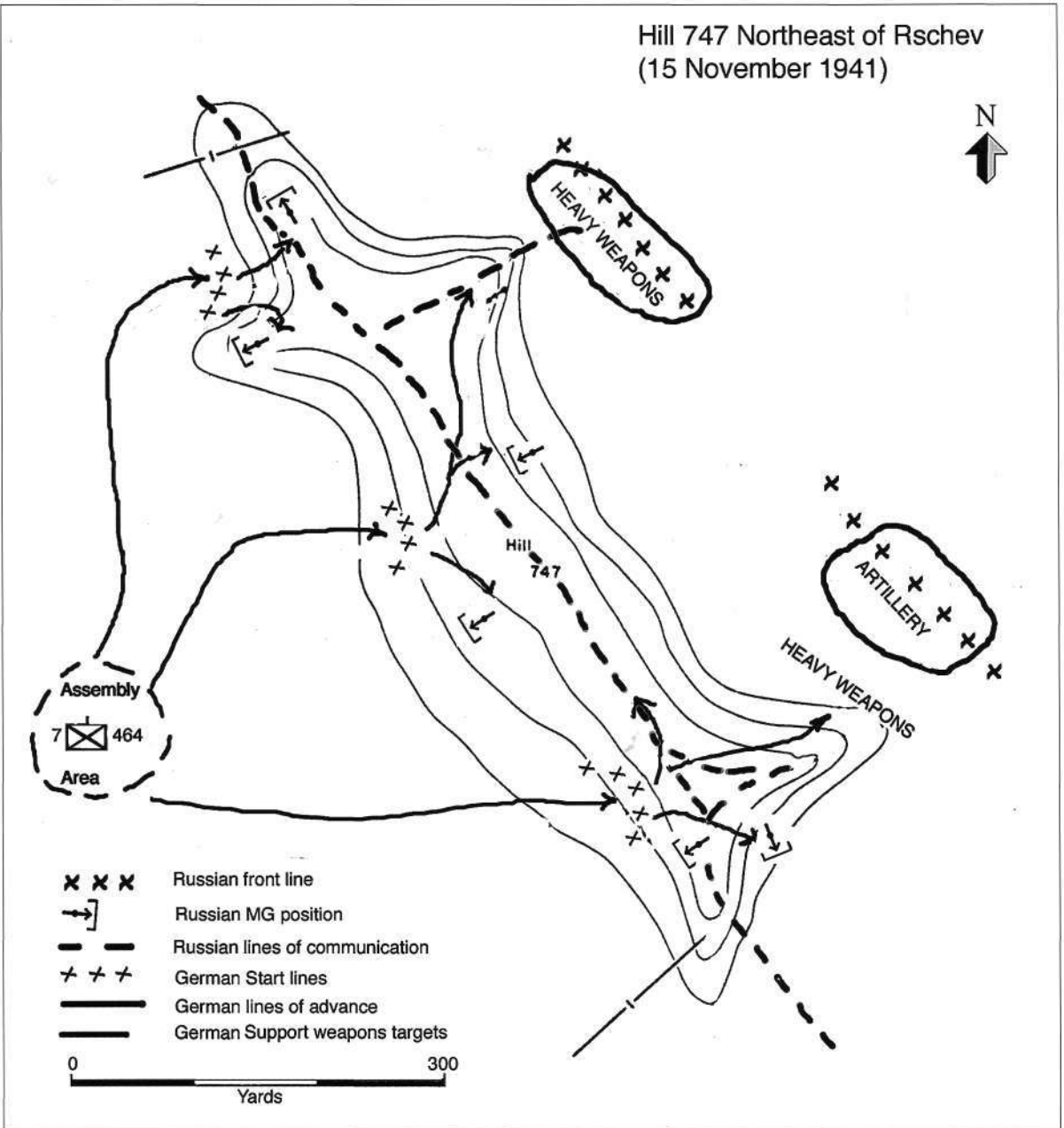


**The river has broken its banks, but the Horch V-8 car has no problems. Infantrymen, however, would have faced another day with wet feet and an increased toll on their strength getting through the water.**

succeeded where the artillery had failed. Just as the operation seemed to have been brought to a successful conclusion, the personnel who had remained at the edge of the forest north of Hill 312 were attacked from behind by a force of about 50 Russians. Hahn ordered the newly arrived Ewald's Patrol to hold off the Russians while the rest of the assault force followed the elements that had captured the hill. Upon arriving at the summit they immediately set up their weapons, opened effective fire on the Russians, and repulsed their attack.

'From the top of the hill, Hahn saw I Battalion, now no longer subject to flanking fire from Hill 312, penetrate the Russian positions west of Nikkizi. He immediately established contact with the battalion commander and made preparations to defend the hill against a potential Russian counterattack. This precaution had to be taken, for within the hour the artillery observer on top of the hill noticed Russian forces assembling for a counterattack in the woods north and northeast of Hill 312. However, the Russians lost all enthusiasm for an attack after the German artillery lobbed a few well-aimed shells into their midst.'

Hill 747 Northeast of Rschev  
(15 November 1941)



**7th Company counter-attacks during a snowstorm,  
November 1941**

This action is typical of the fighting in the late autumn of 1941, when Russian resistance began to stiffen west of Moscow and the ill-equipped German troops had to summon all their energy to continue the advance towards the Russian capital:

'In November 1941 464 Infantry Regiment of the German 253 Infantry Division was occupying trenches about 60 miles northeast of Rzhev. On the regiment's right flank was Hill 747 [map, above]. Since the hill afforded an extensive view of the German rear area, the Russians had



**A Russian village showing that only light traffic has been through this mud.**

made repeated attempts to capture it in an effort to undermine the position of 464 Infantry Regiment. The hill had changed hands several times, but was now occupied by the Germans. The presence of heavy weapons including assault guns, as well as reports of repeated reconnaissance patrols, gave rise to the belief that the Russians were preparing for another attack against the hill. Accordingly, the regimental commander withdrew 7th Company from the sector it was holding and committed it on the regiment's right flank.

'After reporting to battalion headquarters around noon on 15 November, Lieutenant Viehmann, the commander of 7th Company, accompanied by his platoon commanders, undertook a ground reconnaissance. A heavy snowfall set in. As the group was returning from the reconnaissance mission, submachine gun and mortar fire was heard from the direction of Hill 747. The company commander attached little importance to this at the time. However, upon arriving at the battalion observation post he learned that the Russians had taken advantage of the snowstorm and had seized the hill without artillery or mortar support in a surprise raid. An immediate counterattack by German troops failed to dislodge the Russians.

'Viehmann thereupon received orders to recapture the hill in a surprise attack to be launched at 2200 hours. Regimental headquarters attached a medium mortar platoon and a light howitzer platoon to the company and promised artillery support. Viehmann formed three assault parties and moved them into jump-off positions close to the Russian line under cover of darkness. The rifle company to the right was to divert the attention of the defending force at the time of the actual attack, while the unit to the left was to support the attack with its fire. Artillery and heavy weapons were to open fire on specified areas at prearranged flare signals.

'The German assault parties occupied their jump-off positions without attracting the attention of the defending Russians. The party in the centre, led by Viehmann, was only about 35 yards from the nearest





The first snows of winter and this truck has only a six-inch layer of snow. The engine, however, is frozen solid by the  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  temperature of the previous night. German lubricants failed to work at really low temperatures, and one remedy was sunflower oil, of which there was an abundance in Russia in the summer.

Russian position. Close observation of the Russian defences and the actions of individual soldiers indicated that a German attack was not anticipated. The Russian sentries were shivering from the cold and were by no means alert. Rations and supplies were being drawn. Not far from Viehmann's observation point a Russian squad was unloading furs and felt boots from a sled.

'At 2200 hours the German assault parties, shouting loudly, broke into the Russian position. The attack confused the Russians, who dropped everything and attempted to make their way to the rear. Their escape, however, was prevented by the two assault parties that, at the beginning of the attack, had skirted either side of the hill and severed the Russian lines of communications. Unaware of the fighting, the Russian heavy weapons and artillery remained silent throughout the attack. When the signal flare went up, the German artillery and heavy weapons opened fire, laying a barrage on the Russian-held side of the hill. Two Russian machine guns covering each flank put up fierce resistance before being silenced in the hand-to-hand fighting.



Company headquarters troops with a pack horse. The cold is getting worse, but in winter 1941-42 all the men have for protection is their normal uniform, although the man on the left has added a towel, and another already has a blanket around his shoulders.

'After 45 minutes Hill 747 was completely in the hands of the Germans; their former front line had been reoccupied and communications established with adjacent units. About 60 prisoners, 7 medium mortars, 5 heavy machine guns, 3 antitank guns, and large quantities of ammunition were taken. In the morning 70 Russian dead were found on the hill. Of the five German casualties, only one was severely wounded.'

### **Holding out against Russian armour**

In early December 1942 II Battalion of 132 Infantry Regiment reached the Kergachi Hill area, where it was to remain until the reduction of the Stalingrad pocket (see map, p.25). Although available maps indicated that the Kergachi Hills dominated the area, the country was actually fairly level, so exposing the battalion to enemy observation. The hills, whose elevation averaged 400 feet, did not appear very prominent on the vast plateau west of the River Volga. There were no trees, shrubs or inhabited localities that might have provided the defending force with adequate cover or concealment:

The Battalion's situation with regard to strength is illustrated by 7 Company. Of the 55 men who had departed from Verkhne-Buzinovka, only 25 remained fit for combat. The company was subsequently reinforced by 30 men from a veterinary unit, a few riflemen from the disbanded 376 Infantry Division, and 26 Rumanians, so that its strength in early December approximated 90 men. 7 Company was committed on II Battalion's right flank and ordered to defend a 500-yard sector. The German FDL [Forward Defence Line] was established as an almost straight line of trenches. Each section, consisting of 6 to 10 men, occupied 3 to 4 trenches situated close to one another for mutual support. Each strong point had a machine gun, of which

**The scene in a Russian village not far from Moscow. The sledges are local transport, pressed into service by the Germans, desperate to get supplies forward to the fighting troops. Wheels were useless in sub-zero temperatures on ice, but the sledge was quite effective.**



7 Company had a total of six. Approximately 60 yards behind the FDL the Company Commander emplaced his 3 light mortars. Ammunition was a critical item. During the first week of December each man was allotted 400 rounds, but this allowance had to be cut to 80 rounds during the following week.

II Battalion occupied a particularly important sector since the Kergachi Hills blocked access to the Rossoshka Valley from the northwest. By driving through this valley the Russians could split the pocket in two. It was therefore not surprising that the Battalion soon became involved in some of the bitterest fighting in the pocket.

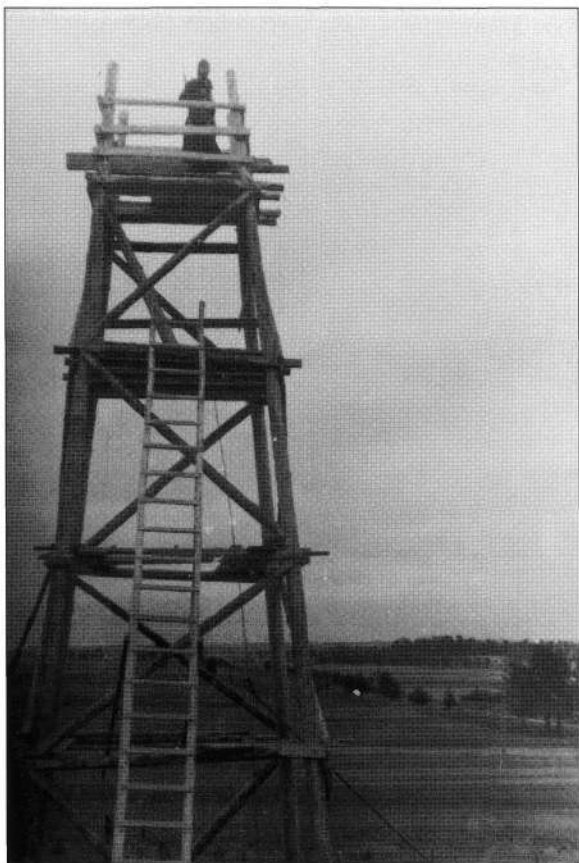
#### **'a. The First Day**

During the night of 3–4 December the noise of engines and tracked vehicles coming from the valley north of Hill 440 betrayed the assembly of a Russian armoured force. Ammunition shortage limited the German artillery's interference with the enemy concentration to weak harassing fire. At dawn the following morning, while a dense fog blanketed the area, 40 T34s accompanied by a few KVs were seen driving directly toward II Battalion's position. From then on things began to happen with incredible speed. Within a few minutes the Russian tanks overran 7 Company's FDL and drove the adjacent 5 Company from its positions. Some Russian infantrymen, moving up behind the armour, occupied the trenches formerly held by 5 Company and fired into 7 Company's flank, while others made a frontal attack against 7 Company's FDL.

'The Russian armoured force fanned out and broke through the German lines in massed formation. About 10 tanks drove to II Battalion's HQ, overran the heavy weapons of 8 Company dug-in in the vicinity, smashed the Battalion's communication centre located in a bunker, and took up positions in a depression east of the road leading to Bolshaya Rossoshka. Ten other tanks stopped near 5 Company's former HQ and kept the country west of the road under fire. Another group of 10 tanks roved across the depth of 7 Company's battle position, while the remaining tanks tried to annihilate this by rolling over the trenches and firing at everything in sight.

'7 Company was in an extremely precarious situation with enemy armour and infantry to its front, on its left flank, and in its rear. A steady stream of fire poured from the tanks as they crisscrossed over the trenches. Only on its right did the company still maintain contact with friendly elements. Despite the many adverse factors, 8 Company held out until evening. This was possible because the ground around the narrow, carefully dug trenches had frozen so hard that the walls withstood the pressure of the Russian tanks. Russian infantry, advancing hesitantly and halfheartedly, was pinned down at a distance of 200 yards by bursts of machine gun, aimed rifle, and well-placed artillery fire from I Battalion sector on the right. Two of the T34s were destroyed by German riflemen who fired shaped charges at the tanks just after they had rolled over a group of trenches. As a result, the other Russian tanks became more cautious in their movements.

'Despite the tremendous superiority of the Russian forces, 7 Company still held its position at 1500, as darkness was settling over the area. The majority of the Russians withdrew to Hill 440 and established a



**A wooden watch tower being built to overlook Russian positions far to the east. These towers were built during the German advance, but never during the retreat. They were rarely built in the open like this one; rather they were installed at the edges of woods and inside tall trees for camouflage.**

hedgehog defence. During the night the left-wing platoon of 7 Company emerged from its trenches and attacked the Russian detachment that was occupying the trenches formerly held by 5 Company. Without firing a shot the German platoon took the Vodka-happy Russians by surprise, overwhelmed them, and reoccupied 200 yards of the former German FDL. In the early hours of 5 December a German reserve Battalion which had shrunk to only 80 infantrymen together with 8 Mark IV tanks moved up and assembled approximately 1,300 yards south of Hill 440. At dawn that German force counter-attacked northward astride the road leading from Bolshaya Rossochka to Samofalovka. This counter-attack was no less successful than the Russian operation of the preceding day. At the very outset six T34s were put out of action. The Russian forces on Hill 440 withdrew to the north and II Battalion reoccupied all its former positions. Some one hundred prisoners and a sizeable quantity of supplies and equipment fell into German hands.

‘Thus ended the first engagement near Hill 440. Once again an experienced infantry unit had demonstrated that a seemingly hopeless situation can be mastered provided the men do not give way to panic.

#### **‘b. The Second Russian Attack**

On 8 December the Russians launched another powerful attack at the same point, but this time they announced their intentions with a one-hour artillery preparation. The situation developed in a fashion similar to that of 4–5 December. Again a strong combined arms team, this time with infantry mounted on tanks, penetrated the weakly held German FDL south of Hill 440. Although accurate German small-arms fire did inflict heavy casualties on the tank-mounted Russian infantry, II Battalion was overrun and isolated, except for one contact point on the right wing. Despite heavy odds the Battalion held out until nightfall brought an end to the enemy attack. The German counter-attack the next morning jumped off from the ravine near I Battalion’s HQ and drove the Russians from the former German positions. Five Russian tanks were destroyed during this action.

‘On 11 December weaker Russian forces launched one more attack against II Battalion’s FDL, but during their approach they were stopped by two German tank destroyers stationed at the exit of the ravine in I Battalion sector.

‘The situation then remained unchanged until after Christmas. In II Battalion’s sector the Russians limited their operations to minor diversionary attacks, their main effort being directed against I Battalion. Their repeated attempts to break through the German positions were, however, unsuccessful, even though on many occasions the Germans averted disaster by only a narrow margin.’





Troops constructing an underground shelter. Made of wood, these shelters were almost identical to the dugouts of World War I. They were used whenever there was time and timber available to construct them.

### **Infantry succeeds where tanks failed, December 1942**

'Toward the end of November 1942 the German Fourth Panzer Army, with headquarters at Zimovniki, due east of Rostov, was responsible for organising and directing the relief attack on Stalingrad. By 27 November, under the command of the LVII Panzer Corps, the reinforced 6 Panzer Division was moving toward Stalingrad via Kotelnikovo, while advance elements of 23 Panzer Division were preparing to join the advance. In the steppe north of Kotelnikovo the Russians had deployed a cavalry corps on the right and an infantry corps on the left in order to protect the approaches to Stalingrad. Behind these two corps and north of the Aksay River loomed the powerful Russian Third Tank Army, often called Tank Army *Popov* after its commander.

'During the first half of December the German relief force steadily battled its way north-eastward. With 200 tanks and self-propelled assault guns, 6 Panzer Division, with 23 Panzer Division covering its right flank, overran the Russian cavalry and infantry corps, and by 12 December forward elements crossed the shallow river bed of the Aksay against only weak opposition and established a bridgehead opposite Zalivskiy.

'About 8 miles north of the river the Russian tank army was concentrating its forces in the town of Verkhniy Kumskiy. When 6 Panzer Division continued northward and drove into the village during the afternoon of 12 December, the Russian armoured forces reacted violently. A furious tank battle ensued during which the village repeatedly changed hands in the following 24 hours. When it became apparent that the Russians were gradually concentrating numerically superior forces, including motorised infantry and scores of anti-tank guns, the Germans quickly withdrew to the Aksay. The Russians, however, had suffered such heavy tank losses that they did not pursue, but rather contented themselves with establishing defensive positions along Ridge 490, which stretched across the steppe about 2 miles south of Verkhniy Kumskiy.

'By 16 December the two panzer divisions had repaired most of their disabled tanks. On orders from the army, an armoured task force composed of elements from both panzer divisions was to launch a flanking attack against the Russian-held ridge. The entrenched Russian motorised infantry forces were to be rolled up from east to west.



**A raised machine-gun position. As winter approached the Germans raised trenches so that the fire position for the weapon would be just above the height of the snow when it had fallen. Note the timber reinforcement of the position prepared well in advance.**

‘Composed of one tank regiment and one armoured infantry Battalion of 6 Panzer Division and one tank company of 23 Panzer Division, Task Force *Huehnersdorff* (named after its commander) moved out from Zalivskiy and ascended the gentle slopes of the Aksay Valley via Klykov. After reaching the eastern end of the enemy-held ridge the tanks began to move westward along the crest of the ridge without encountering opposition. The Russian infantrymen, hiding in their deep and narrow trenches in groups of two to four men, let the tanks pass over them. However, as soon as the German armoured infantry at the tail end of the column had passed them, the Russians fired anti-tank grenades at the lightly armoured vehicles at point-blank range, inflicting heavy losses.

‘Repeatedly, the tanks had to stop and come to the assistance of the armoured infantrymen who tried to flush out the Russian nests of resistance. But even the tanks were ineffective against the Russian infantrymen, who were so well concealed by the tall, brown steppe grass that they could not be discovered by the tank crews or infantrymen from their armoured vehicles. In most instances the German soldier was hit by a bullet before he ever got close to his hidden opponent. German planes were as powerless as the tanks, whose ineffectiveness in this situation was only too obvious. Although the lead tanks were able to reach the opposite end of the ridge by mid-afternoon, the majority of the Russians were still in their positions. Having failed in its task and having suffered considerable losses, the task force had no other choice but to return to the bridgehead.

‘This experience induced the commander of 6 Panzer Division to revise his plans for the next day. Not tanks but infantrymen on foot would have to dislodge the enemy from the ridge. He formed an assault force that same night (16–17 December) and assembled it north of the bridgehead directly in front of the armoured artillery regiment.

‘The left wing was formed by the seasoned 6 Armoured Reconnaissance Battalion, the right by the 1 Armoured Infantry Battalion of 114 Infantry Regiment (Motorised). The two Battalions were reinforced by engineer assault detachments, flame-thrower teams, and mine-clearing details. The tanks and remaining armoured infantry elements were assembled in the rear between Zalivskiy and Klykov,



Marching



*E. Sharpos*



Field kitchen – the gulasch cannon



1

4

5

3

2

E. Sharp 02

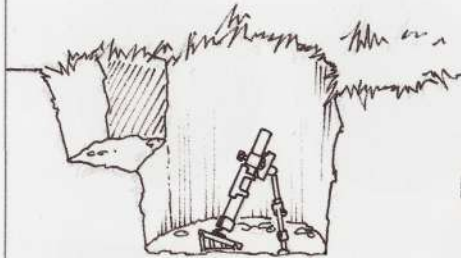


German infantryman, 1941

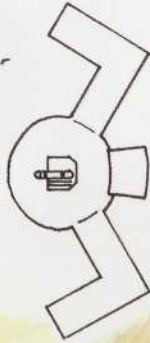




Field defences

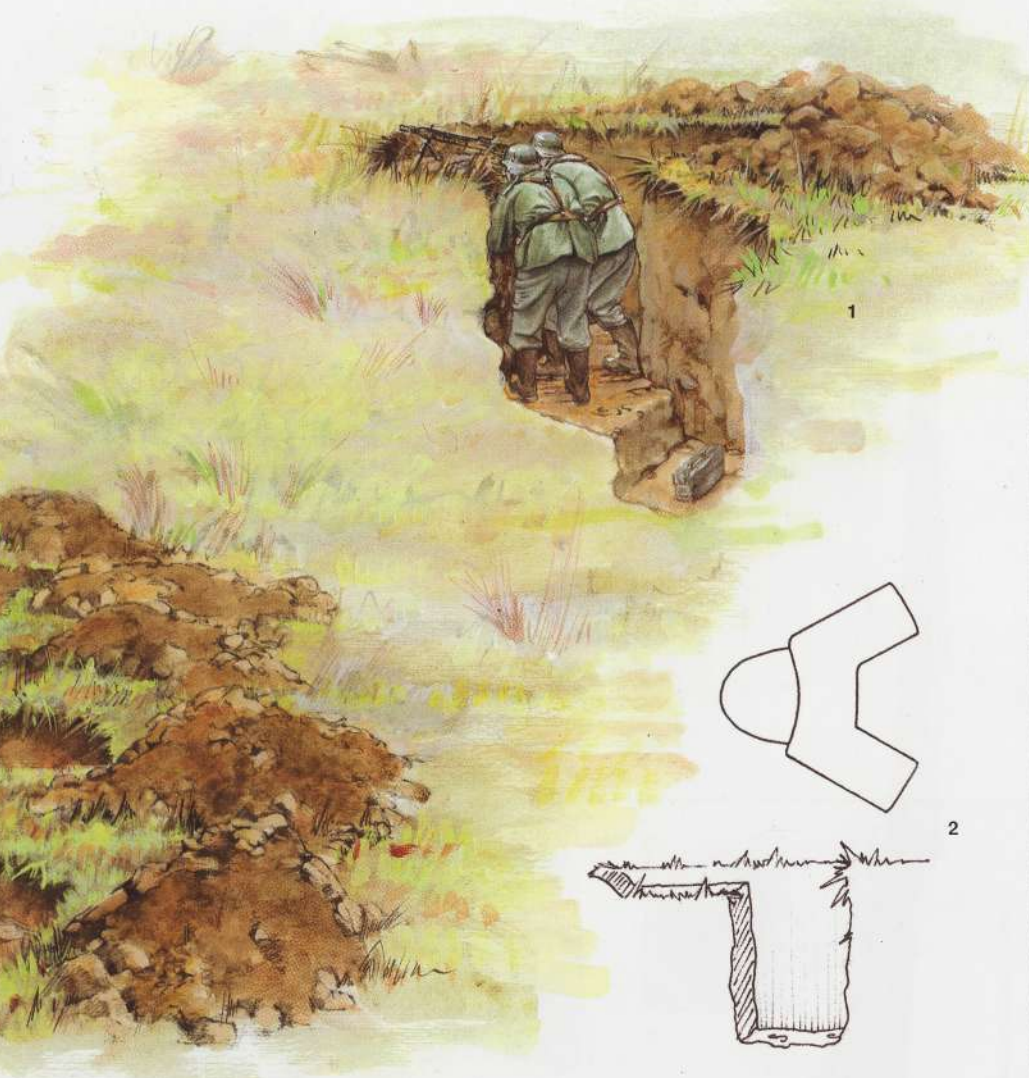


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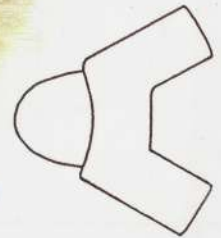


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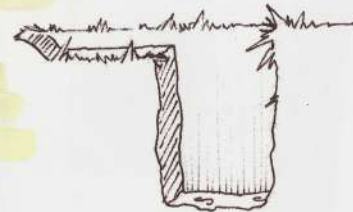
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1



2



The MG42





Infantry anti-tank weapons



*E. Skafos*



Fixed observation posts





German army winter clothing and camouflage



where they stayed in reserve, ready to follow up the assault force.

'At 0800 hrs on 17 December the massed guns of the artillery regiment opened fire. As the hail of shells came down on the ridge it obliterated the Russian observation post. The dried-out steppe grass burned fiercely and reddish clouds of dust enveloped the whole ridge, depriving the Russians of all visibility. After a short time, however, the fires died out because a light snowfall prevented them from spreading. Meanwhile, the first German assault wave moved up to the ridge. When a signal flare was fired to indicate it was entering the Russian defensive positions, the artillery fire was shifted. The assault detachments had opened a gap at the centre of the ridge. The difficult task of ferreting out the enemy force dug in on the ridge had thus begun.



**A 15cm Kanone 39 firing in support of an attack. This heavy field gun was designed by Krupp for a Turkish order, but when war came the guns were bought by the German Army. Their mobility was severely restricted in mud and snow.**

'Several squadrons of German dive bombers, flying in relays, came over and headed in the direction of Verkhniy Kumskiy, where they bombed Russian artillery positions, silencing one battery after another. Directly overhead, German Messerschmitts and Soviet Ratas tangled in dogfights, during which three of the Russian fighters were shot down near the ridge. Paying little heed to the air action, the assault forces fanned out from the initial point of penetration and moved forward. Machine gunners and sharpshooting riflemen stalked the hidden Russians, and fired well-aimed shots at anything that moved. Whenever Russians from a nearby trench returned the fire, they were silenced by a hand grenade. The fortified positions were neutralised by the flame-thrower teams. Whenever a particularly fanatical Russian force could not be flushed out by the assault troops, they fired a flare to pinpoint the target for the German artillery and mortars.

'By noon the Reconnaissance Battalion had cleared all enemy forces from its operations area, and an hour later the armoured infantry battalion had done likewise on the eastern part of the ridge. An attack on Verkhniy Kumskiy could now be planned. Reconnaissance patrols reported that the village and the slopes facing it to the north were occupied by strong Russian forces. As the patrols approached Verkhniy Kumskiy, they encountered hostile fire from all directions. German reconnaissance planes identified numerous anti-tank guns and dug-in tanks along the outskirts and in well-concealed positions in the hills. Russian tanks were observed to be

**Smolensk burns – a typical scene as the infantry arrived at towns. They then had the problem of fighting through the fire, smoke and rubble against increasingly effective Russian defenders.**





moving toward the village from the west.

'During the rest of the afternoon the Russian positions and gun emplacements in and around the village were shelled by German artillery. Until night-fall, dive bombers, flying in waves, made low-level attacks against tank concentrations, dug-in tanks, and batteries of anti-tank guns. After darkness the armoured infantry units resumed their northward drive. With special assault detachments leading the way, infantrymen felt their way along routes that had been reconnoitred during the daylight hours. The smouldering ruins of bombed and shelled houses in the village illuminated the area and facilitated orientation. Like phantoms, the assault detachments crept up to the first houses and observed Russian field kitchens preparing rations. This was the ideal time for a surprise raid.

'Upon a given signal the German assault detachments stormed the village from three sides. Seized by panic, some surprised Russians ran for their lives. Many were too stunned to move and were taken prisoner as the German infantrymen pursued the disorganised remnants into the hills to the north. The Russian tanks tried to make a dash to the north in order to escape the approaching German tank-demolition teams, but many failed to get started in time and were destroyed. Scores of Russian anti-tank guns and disabled tanks, as well as a great store of heavy equipment, fell into German hands.

'The Russian stronghold of Verkhniy Kumskiy was thus taken by the Germans with negligible losses. Where a task force of almost two tank regiments had failed the day before, an armoured reconnaissance and an armoured infantry battalion achieved a decisive success. Without this success, the relief attack on Stalingrad would have bogged down much earlier than it eventually did, and the men in the pocket would have lost all hope.'

### **II Battalion's final struggle in the Stalingrad pocket, January 1943**

The third and final phase of the operations along the periphery of the Stalingrad pocket began immediately after Christmas 1942. At that time the pocket had a diameter of approximately 22 miles. The life expectancy of the encircled 6 Army depended on its ability to defend this perimeter. If the Russians succeeded in breaking through the German



**The dust of the march. An infantry column of trucks and wagons moves eastwards during the summer of 1942. The scenery is endless, the dust all-pervading.**

**Infantry halt in a cornfield whilst advancing towards Stalingrad via Serotinskaya in July 1942. The army was doing what it did best, but this would be the last summer of victory for the Germans. These troops are dressed just as they were in France in 1940, and are fit and well.**





**A German 81mm mortar trench. The sides of the trench are supported by fascines. In the communication trench a mortar man brings more ammunition, and the section commander checks his map. In the rear is a covered stretch of the communications trench.**



ring at any point, they would split the encircled army into smaller pockets, capture the remaining airfields, and thus cut off the supply by airlift. Ration and ammunition dumps would fall into their hands, and the German resistance would crumble. Although sporadic fighting might continue, such isolated German resistance would merely have nuisance value and could be eliminated in the course of mopping-up operations.

This explains the ferocity with which both sides fought to gain a decision. The stakes were high, and the Germans needed cool-headed leaders. Whereas German unit commanders could envisage the possibility of a voluntary withdrawal during the first and second phases of the encirclement, defence in place was mandatory during the third. At this stage Russian front-line propaganda took over. On New Year's Day Russian psychological warfare teams went to work. Night after night loudspeakers blared forth speeches by disaffected Germans speaking from a studio in Moscow, who read appeals, ostensibly from German mothers and wives, imploring their loved ones to give up the fight. German prisoners, who had been confined in model Russian camps, were sent back across the lines to their former units to report the excellent treatment they had received.

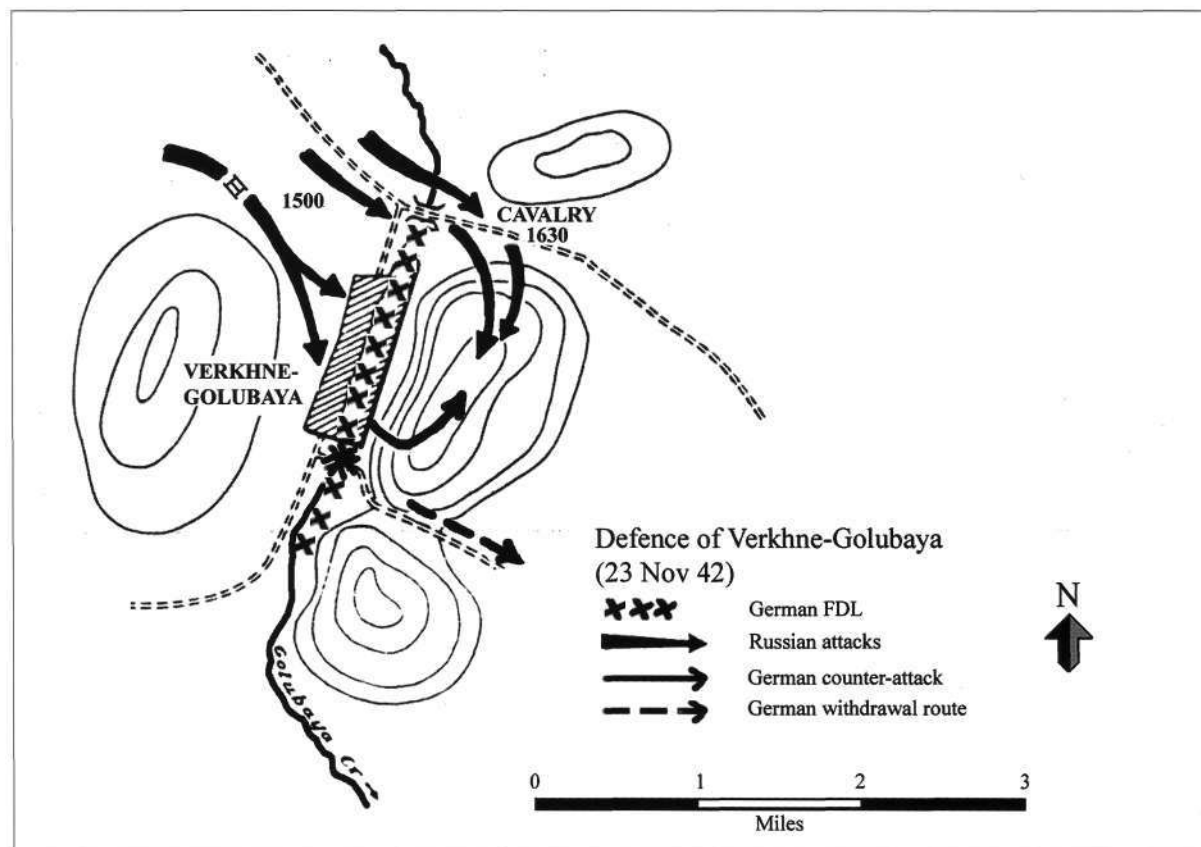
'The prospect of relief from the outside had meanwhile grown dimmer. Nevertheless, the men in the pocket refused to give up hope, even though there was every indication that 6 Army was doomed. Living conditions in the pocket went from bad to worse. The German infantry had to stay in their trenches, exposed to snow and rain, extreme cold, and sudden thaw. Again and again the rations had to be cut. At first every man was issued one-third of a loaf of bread per day, then a quarter,

and later a fifth. This monotonous diet was occasionally supplemented by a few slices of sausage and a meat broth obtained by boiling horse meat. Only the wounded were given half a bar of chocolate and some brandy immediately after evacuation to revive their spirits.

'Constant Russian pressure resulted in a steadily growing number of casualties. II Battalion's combat strength diminished gradually. When the Russians resumed their large-scale attacks early in January 1943, the Battalion had only 3 officers and about 160 men left. In mid-January the adjutant was killed in close combat during a German counter-attack. On the following day the Battalion commander committed suicide as the result of a nervous breakdown. On 19 January the Battalion's last remaining officer, a platoon commander of 7 Company, launched a final desperate counterthrust and led the last 13 men of the Battalion to their death. A few days later, at the beginning of February 1943, the battle of Stalingrad came to an end.'

### II Battalion's stand at Verkhne-Golubaya, November 1942

When a pocket is formed the situation of the encircled forces is usually confused. The individual units are temporarily on their own, facing almost insurmountable difficulties. In such situations a determined and resourceful leader who does not hesitate to improvise and resort to ruses will be able to inflict heavy losses on the enemy, gain valuable time and preserve the combat strength of his unit for further action. The two



units described in this next report had been fighting previously, and were now marching from one battle to their next:

‘The two Battalions marched through the entire night. At 0200 on 21 November the Company Commanders were ordered to inform their men that the German 6 Army had been encircled. While heavy snow was falling, the battle-weary troops halted along the road on which drifts were beginning to accumulate. The men realised the seriousness of the situation but were not dejected. The idea that the ring around the 6 Army might not be broken did not occur to them at the time.

They knew that difficult days and weeks lay ahead, but their confidence remained unshaken. On 22 November there was only isolated small-scale fighting, during which the two Battalions withdrew to Verkhne–Golubaya where they arrived at 2300. Orders received from higher headquarters stipulated that the village was to be defended and that the enemy advance was to be delayed at Verkhne–Golubaya at least until the following evening.

‘At this time 6 Army headquarters attempted to tighten its control over all German units in the Stalingrad pocket. In its effort to direct the employment of every unit, 6 Army occasionally issued orders that went into too much detail and did not take the local situation sufficiently into account. The commander of II Battalion, for instance, had selected the gently ascending hill west of Verkhne–Golubaya for establishing a defence position. Regimental HQ, however, ordered him to move his unit to the east bank of the Golubaya stream, as unfavourable a line for setting up a defence position as could be found in that area [see map, p.44]. The section of the village west of the stream obstructed the Battalion’s field of fire. The manoeuvring space between the houses lining the east bank of the river and the steep slope adjacent was only about 200 yards in width. Also disadvantageous was the 800-yard gap between II Battalion and the nearest German unit, which was positioned northeast of the village. By noon of 23 November reconnaissance patrols had established contact with that unit, but the gap remained open.

‘A Russian force, consisting of 2 infantry battalions, 10 T34 tanks, and two troops of cavalry approached Verkhne–Golubaya around noon. II Battalion was exhausted from the recent fighting and hasty withdrawal and, despite the fire power delivered by its heavy weapons emplaced on the hills to the east, was unable to prevent the Russian infantry from gradually infiltrating the western section of the village.

‘Toward 1500 the 10 Russian tanks emerged from behind the hill situated west of Verkhne–Golubaya and drove straight toward the village. The Germans destroyed four, but the other six managed to penetrate the western section. In the fight that followed II Battalion sustained extremely heavy losses. At dusk the German riflemen and machine gunners were handicapped by poor visibility, whereas the Russians were able to observe every German movement against the light background of the steep, snow-



**Signallers get on net during a halt in the advance. The radio is a T FuG k used by the artillery with a weight of 45 pounds. Its aerial lies to the right of the photograph, probably in the best position to send and receive in this location.**



**A posed photograph of an 81mm mortar firing. The observers watch as the crew duck their heads. The bomb nearest to the camera is marked 'Ub' which means it is a practice projectile. What is interesting is the rear view of the belt equipment.**

**Infantry advance through smoke in scrub country not far from Stalingrad. The troops are approaching a bank that runs along their front, which may well be the first sign of the Volga flood plain that lies ahead of them.**



covered slope behind the village. The struggle soon developed into a fire fight across Golubaya stream. Two Russian tanks that had ventured too close to the stream were knocked out by German tank demolition teams which had to wade through the icy water to accomplish their task.

'The situation reached a critical stage around 1630, when about 120 Russian cavalrymen out-flanked the German positions from the north and rode toward the hill east of the village, thus threatening to cut the escape route of the German units still holding out in the village and of the heavy weapons section on the ridge of the hill. The commander of 7 Company, the right flank unit and a Battalion staff officer, who happened to be at the company's HQ at the time, were the first to realise the danger. They took immediate action without awaiting orders from Battalion headquarters. Having assembled every man they could find, they led their group to the top of the hill by the quickest route without taking cover or using concealment. On the hill the detachment of about 30 men was hastily organised for a counterattack. The supply of ammunition was pitifully low. There were only 8 to 10 rounds of rifle ammunition per man, a machine

gun with 80 rounds, 2 submachine guns with 20 rounds each, and a total of 6 hand grenades.

'No time could be lost, since the enemy was closing in fast. The German detachment advanced in extended formation. The Russians, dismounting at the foot of the hill, started to move up. Darkness was falling when the clash occurred, the opposing troops having got to within 20 yards of each other. Shouting at a given signal, the German detachment fired a few rounds and threw the six hand grenades in the direction of the enemy. The Germans then took cover and directed well-aimed small arms fire at the enemy. The Russians, surprised by the suddenness with which the Germans struck, suffered considerable losses since they had advanced in close formation. The initial random fire led them to believe that they were facing a strong German force, while the deliberate fire that had followed pinned them down and helped the Germans to save their ammunition.

'This resolute German counterthrust, carried out by a few men without an adequate supply of ammunition, had succeeded in intercepting the Russian enveloping movement. Both officers and six of the men were wounded, but reinforcements and ammunition reached the detachment on the hill within the hour. Under the protection afforded by the detachment, the Battalion was able to break off the engagement in Verkhne-Golubaya that same night and withdraw to the southeast without further incident.



'The last week of November was marked by several minor engagements similar to the one at Verkhne-Golubaya. During their gradual eastward withdrawal across the Don toward Stalingrad, the German units repeatedly became involved in bitter fighting that flared up suddenly. In the process they slowly drew closer to one another and began to form a continuous front. The troops were subjected



to extreme hardships, spending cold nights without sleep, making difficult marches without adequate rations, and fighting without sufficient ammunition against a far superior enemy. Often the soil was frozen so solid that the men were unable to dig in. This difficult period was the acid test of whether or not a unit had *esprit de corps* and discipline. Some newly organised divisions, which had recently arrived from Germany, showed early signs of disintegration. Men who lost their leaders discarded their weapons, plundered ration dumps, stole alcohol, and staggered aimlessly over the snow-covered paths. Stragglers and isolated service troops roamed around as fugitives from discipline.

'On the other hand, the older, seasoned regiments – and they represented the majority – continued to give a good account of themselves, even after their officers had become casualties. Those NCOs who had participated in innumerable engagements since the crossing of the Bug River in June 1941 formed the backbone of resistance. In units that still had their officers the comradeship between officers and enlisted men became closer than ever. The Company Commanders did their best to provide the men with food and shelter and set an example of endurance and courage. Once 6 Army assumed control over all personnel in the pocket, it disbanded those units whose fighting value was doubtful and distributed their personnel, as well as any excess service troops and stragglers, to reliable regiments, where high morale and strict discipline prevailed and which could exercise a beneficial influence on the troops assigned to them.'

**Troops break through a fence during the early fighting around Stalingrad. As was usual in German section tactics the light machine gun (here an MG34) is at the front of the section, followed by the riflemen.**

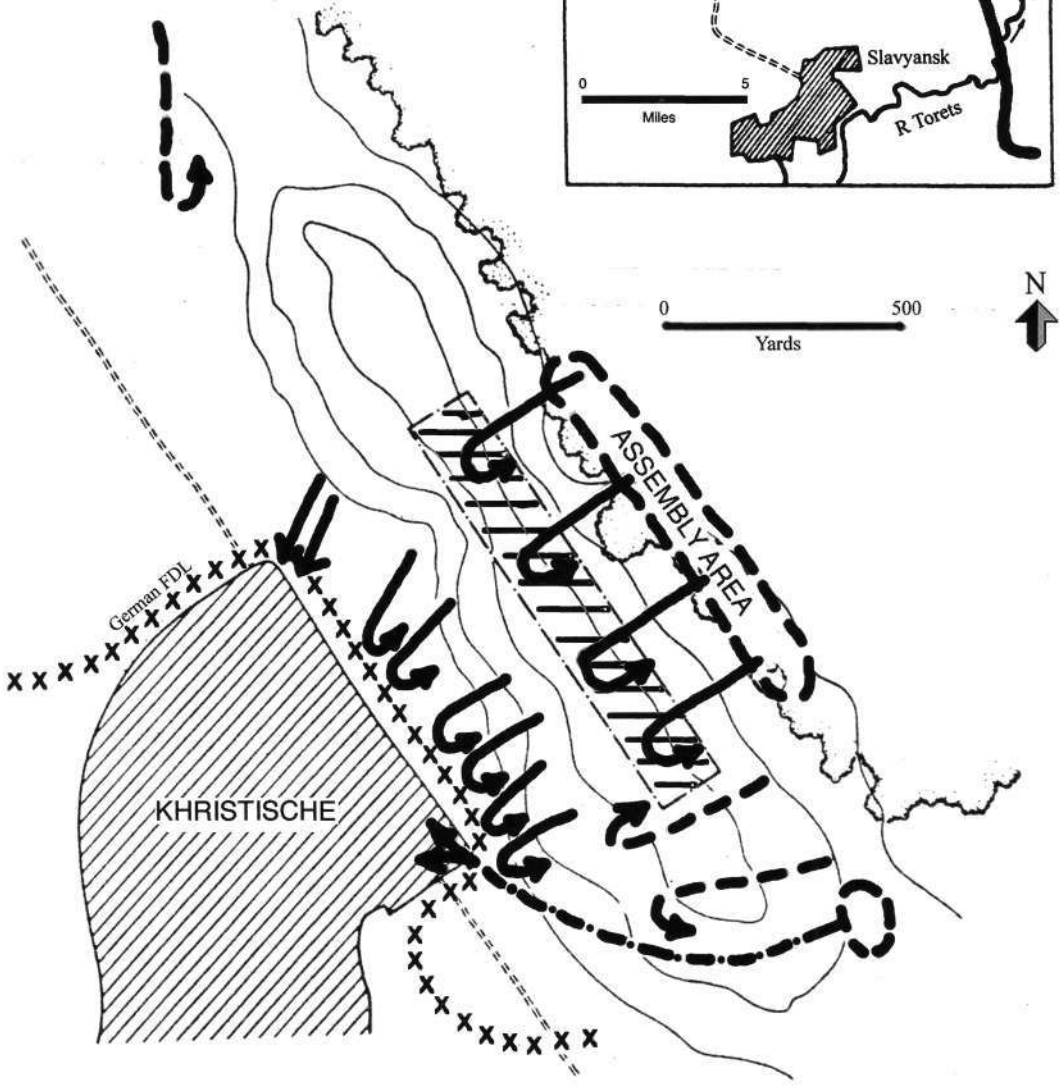
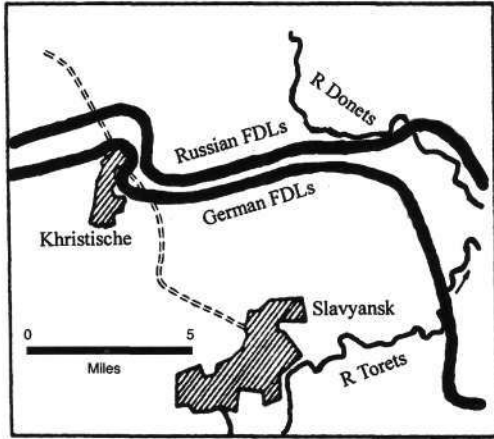
## THE HORRORS OF WAR

### Morale

Despite the high morale of the German troops as they went into Russia, none of them could look upon this new campaign with total optimism, and, 'On day one during our first break one of the company's soldiers shot himself with his own rifle. He put the rifle between his knees, placed the muzzle in his mouth and squeezed off. For him, the war with all its pressures was at an end.' This was an isolated event early on in the campaign, and another soldier was quite jubilant, writing home:

# Defence of Khristische 23 - 27 Jan 1942

-  Russian Recce Pts
-  Russian attacks, Ni 24/25 Jan
-  Russian attacks, Ni 25/26 Jan
-  German artillery zone



'Yesterday I knocked off a Russian tank, as I had done two days ago! If I get in another attack, I'll receive my first battle stripes. War isn't half as bad as it sounds and one thing is plain as day: the Russians are fleeing everywhere and we follow them. All of us believe in early victory!'

However, in time the troops began to encounter stronger, more organised resistance and, after an enemy attack: 'Half dead with

exhaustion, we squatted down in our trenches, semi-intoxicated with feverish nerves. Slowly, very slowly we quietened down. Hunger and thirst afflicted us again.' The situation was just as bad during the advance: 'Every single [enemy] wounded man had to be fought to a standstill. One Soviet sergeant, unarmed and with a severely injured shoulder, struck out with a trench spade until he was shot. It was madness, total madness. They fought like wild animals – and died as such.'

The troops began to take on the look of the eternal experienced combat soldier:

The faces of the youngsters exude the same image as First World War veterans. Long beards and the filth of these days make many of them look older than is the case in reality. Despite the pleasure at sudden Russian withdrawals, one notices this change in the faces of the soldiers. Even after washing again and shaving the chin – something difficult to describe – is from now on different! The first days at Yartsevo have certainly left an impression.

Another soldier wrote:

Today is Sunday, but we didn't notice. We are on the move again some 50km north-eastwards. At the moment we are part of the Army reserve – and high time – we have already lost 50 in the company. It shouldn't be allowed to continue much longer otherwise the burden will be really heavy. We normally have four men on the [anti-tank] gun, but for two days at a particularly dangerous point, we only had two. The others are wounded.

Another *Landser* wrote: 'Any fool knows you have to have losses, you can't make omelettes without breaking eggs, but we were going to fight on to victory. Besides, if any of us did stop a bullet, it would be a hero's death. So hurrah, over the top, come on, charge, hurrah!' One has to wonder if this was actually irony rather than a statement of general belief.

Psychological pressure builds up as the soldier approaches the front. The first visible indication is often the men's reaction to the sight of the enemy's dead. Many young soldiers had never seen a corpse before. Werner Adamezyk, with a 150mm artillery battery near Minsk, became morbidly fascinated at his guns' handiwork: 'The repulsive scene caused me to shake; nevertheless, I found the guts to walk around,' he said. 'What I saw then was even more cruel.' War quickly stripped away the veneer of propaganda. Foxholes around him were filled with dead Soviet soldiers. 'I shuddered and turned around to walk back to the truck,' admitting, 'the reality of death was just too much to take.' He was troubled. What he had witnessed contradicted earlier briefings that suggested the Russian soldier was 'poorly trained and not very much inclined to heroism'. Indeed, 'It became clear to me that they must have been willing to fight to the very end. If this was not heroism, what was it? Did the communist commissars force them to fight to the death? It did not look like it. I did not see any dead commissars.'

The sight of one's own dead is, initially, a severe shock, but:

In time you even get used to that. You just don't really take it in at all when there are more and more who are dead but they are all in German uniform. So in the end you come to reckon yourself on a level with all those others, Russians or Germans alike, lying dead in their various uniforms; you yourself then turn into just one of the creatures who never really did live, you are just another lump of earth.

The real horror of war is, perhaps, the normality and constancy of death:

Then one day, you're right up against it. You are chatting with one of your mates when suddenly he folds up. Just settles in a heap, and is stone dead. That is the real horror. You see the others stepping over him, just as anybody steps over a big stone he doesn't want to catch his heel on, and you see your mate's death no differently from any of the others that are dead – those whom you've already learned to think of as never really having lived, as being just lumps of earth. That's when you get the horrors and after that it is always a nightmare; it never, never stops, the real fear of being wiped out, the fear of merciless nothingness, the fear of thinking any moment you may be one of those who never were living creatures.

The 8th Company of *Schützenregiment* 11 was badly mauled in a Russian ambush and lost 80 men. 'The wounded *Kameraden* were worked over by the Russians with gun barrels until they were dead.' The writer, a man named Proller, depersonalised the enemy with anti-Russian comments. Like many German soldiers, he was surprised to encounter Russian women in uniform. Inside a Russian pocket they came upon 'women, completely nude and roasted,' who 'were lying on and beside a destroyed Soviet tank. Awful.' He indignantly concluded, 'it's not people we're fighting against here, but simply animals.'

Other correspondence also bears the stamp of the German propaganda machine: 'Hardly ever do you see the face of a person who seems rational and intelligent. They all look emaciated and the wild, half crazy look in their eyes makes them appear like imbeciles. And these scoundrels, led by Jews and criminals, wanted to imprint their stamp on Europe, indeed on the world. Thank God that our Führer, Adolf Hitler, is preventing this from happening.'

Realistic views were noted, however, and one man wrote: 'We are deep in Russia in the so-called "paradise" which calls upon [German] soldiers to desert. Terrible misery reigns here. People have been unimaginably oppressed for two centuries. We would rather all die than accept the torment and misery these folk have had to put up with.'

### **Atrocities**

Over-confidence upon meeting an allegedly 'inferior' foe, based purely on racist criteria, bred a contempt during the early stages of the campaign that was soon punished. At the end of June 1941, 9 Infantry Regiment was wood clearing around a road north-east of the city of Bialystok, near the village of Krynki. A young *Panzerjäger* (anti-tank) lieutenant, despite warnings to the contrary, arrogantly insisted on



pushing ahead of the road clearance through woods probably infested with Russian soldiers. The *Panzerjäger* platoon pressed on and was barely out of sight of the supporting German infantry before the vehicles were heard to stop. Inhuman shrieks of pain soon rent the air, interspersed with shouted commands in Russian. Major Haeften, the infantry company commander, ordered a hasty assault to rescue the ambushed anti-tank platoon. The lead platoon led by Feldwebel Gottfried Becker encountered a scene of carnage they 'could only gradually, very slowly, allow to sink in'. They were sickened by what they saw. 'Here and there a body jerked convulsively or danced around in its own blood.' The nearer the rescuing troops approached to the macabre scene, the greater their appreciation of the atrocities visited upon the wretched *Panzerjäger*. 'The majority of the German soldiers had their eyes gouged out, others their throats cut. Some had their bayonets stuck in their chests. Two soldiers had their uniform jackets and shirts ripped apart and their naked stomachs slit open, glistening entrails hung out of the bloody mass. Two more had their genitals cut off and laid on their chests.'

The attitude of the average infantryman was that he 'wanted to stay in between. You might say that wasn't a crime. But if some people say that most Germans were innocent, I would say they were accomplices. As a soldier I was an "accomplice".' Yet they were constantly assailed by sights of a form of warfare redolent of the Thirty Years' War, not a 20th-century conflict. The reaction of the troops who came across the results of the massacre of the *Panzerjäger* was described:

German soldiers 'stumbled as if in a trance' onto the road to survey a scene of utter desolation. 'The swine,' muttered one soldier while another retched into the road; a third man stood and stared, his body shaking as he silently wept. News swept quickly through the division. The regimental commander had objected to the Commissar Order (ordering summary execution of Soviet political officials), but the next political commissar captured was handed without scruple to the military police and shot.

There were many other incidents. On 1 July 1941, nine days after the start of the campaign, 180 German soldiers belonging to 35 Infantry Regiment, 119 Infantry Regiment and some artillerymen were captured in a sudden Russian counter-attack on the Klewan-Broniki road in the Ukraine. They belonged to two motorised infantry formations which blundered into a superior Soviet force of one and a half divisions and were overwhelmed. The prisoners, most of them wounded, were herded into a clover field alongside the road and ordered to undress. Gefreiter (lance-corporal) Karl Jäger hurriedly began to pull off his tunic having 'had to hand over all valuable objects, including everything we had in our pockets'. Prisoners were generally compliant in this initial phase of capture, in shock and concerned for their lives. The wounded soldiers had difficulty undressing. Jäger recalled a fellow NCO, Gefreiter Kurz, struggling to undo his belt because of an injured hand. To his horror he saw 'he was stabbed behind in the neck so that the bayonet came out through his throat'. Shocked, the other soldiers frantically removed their tunic jackets. Another severely wounded soldier was



The horrors of war here exemplified by two dead draft horses caught in an artillery bombardment. The limber and gun they were towing were also destroyed. This sight was common, even in the west after the Allied invasion.

kicked and clubbed around the head with rifle butts. Totally cowed, the German prisoners were shoved north of the road in groups of 12 to 15 men. Many were half-naked and 'several completely naked', recalled Jäger. Oberschütze Wilhelm Metzger said, 'the Russians ... grabbed everything we had, rings, watches, money bags, uniform insignia, and

then they took our jackets, shirts, shoes and socks'. Private Hermann Heiss had his hands roughly tied, like many others, behind his back. They were then forced down into thick green clover by the Russian soldiers.

Heiss described how, 'A Russian soldier stabbed me in the chest with his bayonet, at which point I turned over. I was then stabbed seven times in the back. I did not move any more. The Russians evidently assumed I was dead. ... I heard my comrades cry out in pain and then I passed out.'

'Suddenly the Russians started to shoot at us,' said Private Michael Beer. Bursts of automatic and machine-gun fire swept through the separated groups of tied-up and semi-naked German prisoners. Karl Jäger, led north of the road, started with surprise as shooting broke out among the groups following behind. 'Panic reigned after the first shots, and I was able to flee,' he said. Hand-grenades were tossed in among groups of officers and NCOs who had been singled out for special treatment. They suffered appalling injuries.

The next morning soldiers and Panzers from the 25th Division combed through the field: 153 half-naked bodies were found, their pale white skins pathetically outlined against a background of lush green clover. One group of 14 soldiers had had their genitals hacked off. Among the corpses was a severely wounded Hermann Heiss. He was comforted by German soldiers. Glancing around the scene of total devastation, he 'saw the head of my comrade who had screamed out in pain was split open. ... Most of the others were dead or later died of their wounds. There were only 12 survivors.'

### Field hospitals

This first report details the experiences of a German Army main dressing station during the winter of 1941–42 in Russia. There is no better place to study the fighting man than when he is wounded – as well as having fought the enemy, he now has to conquer fear and pain. This report by the soldier Hawickhorst also details the conditions in which the men fought and their carers attempted to save lives and alleviate suffering:

'The winter had come, with frost that made the roads firm. The wheels rolled over the frozen ground, but the food did not arrive. A cutting wind blew. Earmuffs were on hand, the only piece of winter clothing that had arrived to date.

“The division was in contact with the enemy again. That meant for us: set up bandaging stations, treat and transport the wounded. We set things up in a couple of wretched huts. An old woman offered cooked potatoes; we could dig in. Why tighten the belt more and go hungry as long as there were such hospitable people in Russia?

“The weather changed, the snow melted and water dripped from the roofs. The vehicles were standing in the mud again. Questions plagued us. Could we stand much more of this kind of warfare? Without regular supplies? Without winter clothing? Rough days were before us. We sensed it and wondered: Is there any purpose to advancing farther and farther to the east?

“The division was in battle and suffered heavy losses. All the rooms in the school that we had occupied were full. Once again an overcrowded dressing station! Suffering faces stared at us; complaining and begging or silent and detached, the wounded lay on the straw. Only at night did a groan resound through the room now and then. The easier hours were long since over.

“We doctors and medical orderlies saw what we thought was the greatest misery in this war. Fear and suffering were concentrated around us. Sometimes it almost seemed as if someone wanted to hold us responsible for all this misery. We did what we could.

“The division faced fresh Siberian regiments. The right flank was open, and it would not have surprised us if Mongolian faces had suddenly appeared in the doorways. It sounded ridiculous when we read in the arriving newspapers what the “Reich Press Chief” had said a few weeks ago: “The military decision in the eastern campaign has already been made!” At home they must believe that the war had all but ended victoriously. But we felt that the worst hours were still to come.



**Minesweeping was a constant task for the field engineers in the German Army, as the Russians always mined roads if they had time. The equipment is a Frankfurt 40 detector. At the rear is a light anti-aircraft position.**



**On the road to Moscow. Some friends stand near the road sign in Autumn 1941, but they never made it to Moscow.**

'The arrival of wounded men did not let up. The fighting strength of the infantry had dropped to about fifty men per company. The lack of winter clothing became more and more noticeable. It snowed again, and the frost grew heavier. The coldness penetrated to our bones. Our noses and ears turned white and we began to rub them so they wouldn't fall off.

'The enemy attacked again with strong forces. The division had to form a defensive front. The HV station [*Heeresverbandplatz*: Army Dressing Station] was fully occupied again. The number of wounded arriving grew ever greater. We had to treat more than 500. Means of transporting them out were not available. Our activity consisted mainly of bringing food and straw, treating and caring for the wounded. Thankful eyes looked at us. It was also our job to strengthen their confidence and convince them that too hasty transport would only increase their suffering. Understanding, they nodded their bandaged heads.

'Wounded who arrived spoke of the superior numbers of the enemy, of the ineffectiveness of our own weapons. The situation was serious, critical, there was no doubt of that. The pressure of the enemy increased.

'Get ready to move out immediately. Load the wounded into empty transport.' This order did not surprise us.

'It had grown dark when we left the village. We fought our way through snowdrifts. Ravens and crows accompanied us, they smelled carrion. The sky glowed red. Detonations rang through the night. A rush to the rear began. The severe cold and the high losses forced the German division to retreat.

'The operating groups with the surgeons remained at work. The men of the stretcher bearer platoon were among the last who saved themselves from the enemy. Don't leave any wounded behind, was the word. They were brought along on sleds. That meant that we threw all our unnecessary equipment in the ditches.

'On the road there was wild confusion. You saw insignia of the most varied divisions and service arms. Tank crews came along on Russian sledges; their tanks had run out of gas, or they were left somewhere, shot up or burned out. At bridges and crossroads there were crowds. There was screaming, complaining and cursing. Cars were stuck in ditches, tanks were burning, smoke rose to the heavens. Sometimes you got the impression that it would be better to go back than to go ahead. It seemed as if even the horses knew what was going on. One soldier sang, "Long is the road back to the Fatherland" [the German version of "Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag"].

'We suspected that the retreat was supposed to stop at the Oka river. There a defensive line was supposed to be formed; divisions equipped with winter clothes were supposed to be there, ready to relieve us, so it was said. A lot was said – and hoped.

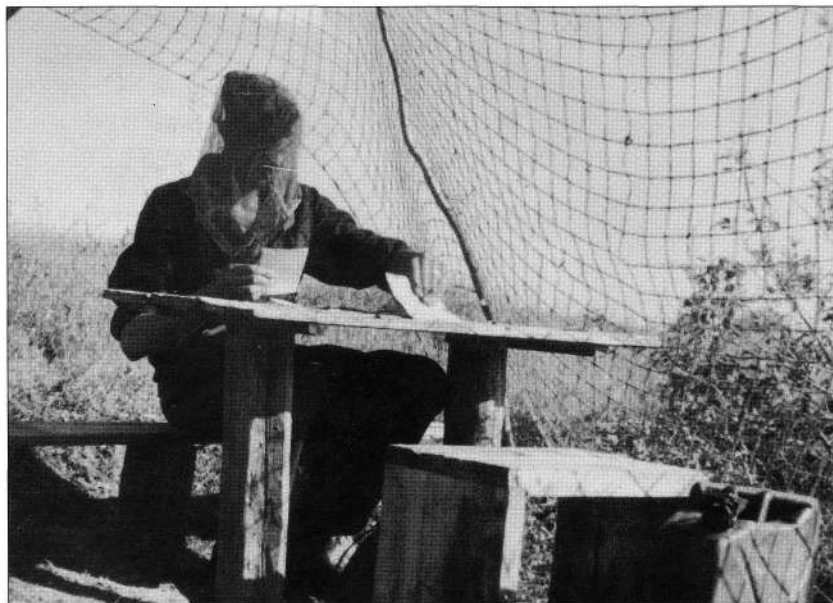
'The Wehrmacht report brought only news of "local combat action", of "straightening the front" and "shortening the front as a result of moving into winter quarters". At home they had no idea what it was like on the front. The enemy was hard on our heels. Men talked of Cossacks who swung their sabres and split skulls open. Wounded men with sabre cuts had arrived at the main bandaging station. So it must be true.

**The winter of 1942 comes and at last camouflage equipment is issued. Here an infantryman poses on skis with an MP 40, before going out on patrol. With toe bindings and *langlauf* skis this man is equipped for long-range penetration towards enemy lines.**





‘The enemy attacked again. His pressure kept getting stronger; in the middle of the division’s sector he had broken into our positions. What was waiting for us? The Oka position was to be held at all costs, it was said. There the news was heard that the enemy had already crossed the river. Could we get out of this hell? “Sunday morning – without worries,” said the man on the radio, but it was easy for him to talk. We, on the other hand, were witnesses of a drama known only to those who were actually living it. The seriousness of the situation was no longer disguised. The tension grew, the next hours had to bring a solution.



**Midges everywhere: ‘in summer the dust and midges contrive to make life hell’. The company clerk checks his paperwork.**

‘The 29th of December was a critical day, but also a day of confirmation. In the early morning hours, all the sledges were used to transport the wounded. The village was under shell fire. We loaded in haste. The operating group, which had remained behind at the main bandaging station, took care of the wounded. The surgeon, Dr. Abderhalden, son of the renowned physiologist, who worked in St. Gallen, Switzerland, after the war, stayed at the operating table to the last minute, then he and his crew directed the loading of the patients onto the sleds that arrived. The enemy had already established itself in another part of the village. The dressing station was under machine-gun fire. When the last wounded had been taken away to safety, our crew retreated. The surgeon was the last German soldier to leave the place. The German Flak guns, which had taken positions in the valley, took the village under fire and held the enemy back long enough for the operating group and the patients to reach a fairly safe place.

‘On the next day the village was recaptured. Along with forces of the 4th Panzer Division, we drove the enemy back across the Oka.

‘The thermometer showed more than thirty degrees below zero in those January days of 1942. Our infantrymen did the incredible in the defence and again in the counterattack. It was reported that enemy cavalry could be expected from the west. Every village had to be built up into a support point. While making holes in the ground, we came upon positions that had been built by the Soviets in October. What a grotesque development that was! We had driven the enemy far back into his own land, thrown him back to the east, and now we were defending ourselves in his old positions and awaiting him from the west.

‘The main battle line showed a bowlike curve. At night, muzzle flash flared up from all directions, and behind us Flak guns disturbed the quiet of the skies. We began to feel that we were in a pocket and exposed to the ups and downs of the course of fate.



**The company radio operator in his trench listening in to the net. Operators spent long hours just listening for signals, especially when radio silence was imposed. When a signal did come, it would have been important, and this man's job (and that of his assistant, seen with his head down) was to ensure that no such signals were missed.**

'The situation in front of the division's sector was strengthened, and a positional war began. Proper latrines could now be built. We also found time for writing down an experience report: 'As opposed to the Russian instructions, the Germans received no information that concerned meeting the needs of the medical service and the care of wounded. The responsibility of making the proper care of the sick and wounded by medical units possible is borne not only by the medical corps in the field but also ultimately by the highest military offices.'

'Why should the high command not be reminded of such facts? We did not want to give criticism, but felt such a suggestion was necessary. We knew, of course, that the activity in hospitals, at dressing stations, and all the actions of the medical corps did not at all influence the military operations that were going on. Our work remained more or less inconspicuous and was always the same. In advance, attack, pursuit, defence or retreat – one always saw the same scenes of suffering at our HV stations. The war taught us to endure hard times, and yet we maintained our feeling hearts. In the first weeks of the campaign, we still saw the joy of a gained victory in the faces of the wounded. But in retreat, many miserable pictures of depression, sorrow and anxiety came into view. Just don't leave us behind, they told us with their eyes. The

German soldier was brave, including in bearing his pains. They often lay still by the hundreds at our main bandaging stations, much too tired and fought out to complain or groan. Patiently they bore their sorrows, the operations and the changing of bandages. With thankful eyes they looked at the doctor and the medical staff. For us those looks were the reward for our constant service.

'When it smelled of powder smoke, blood and ether, and the operating table was shaken by nearby shell hits, when the bullets flew and the iron splinters flew around our noses, the wounded had to be rescued from the minefield and carried over a rise in the enemy's sight and fire – whoever survived here, he too was a brave medical soldier. We had become the infantry's best friends and the wounded men's loyal helpers.'

Another soldier wrote in his war diary of his experiences from the moment he arrived at a front line dressing station:

'The former schoolrooms used for this collection station presented an infernal picture of dirt, stench, and groans. Layers of lice covered the filthy blankets. For five days my swollen bluish-black feet were treated with ichthyol ointment dressings, a rather painful procedure. I felt miserable, attributing it to the enormous exhaustion. On

December 16, I suddenly developed high fever and severe diarrhoea with vomiting. I was transferred to an isolation room for infectious patients, and the physician initially could not diagnose my illness. Since my temperature continued to rise and I was unable to retain any food, some Russian prisoners had to carry me to the section for infectious diseases in the field hospital. Nearly unconscious, I was unable to even lift my head as I was deloused and bathed – for the first time since how long ago? The head physician himself repeatedly examined me without reaching a definite diagnosis. However, they suspected typhus fever, which was usually lethal.

‘On December 19, I became totally deaf, not hearing the slightest sound. In addition, I had overwhelming nausea, even after consuming the smallest amount of food. Dextrose and strophanthin injections kept me alive, but the doctors had probably given up on me. Agglutination tests finally established a diagnosis of paratyphoid fever type A.

‘In my apathy, I did not perceive that it was Christmas time again, and the days passed by while I slumbered in an impenetrable darkness. On Christmas Day, a band played outside our building, but I only felt the trembling percussions and thought it was one of the frequent air raids. Only when the band entered our room did I finally understand what was going on.

‘But the angel of Christmas came to me, too, in uniform. A pastor entered, making his rounds and hesitatingly came to my bed. We recognised each other: he had been an assistant pastor in my hometown. We were well acquainted and had even gone skiing together. We could communicate only with signs, but it seemed to me the rediscovery of a forgotten, distant world seeing someone who knew me and my parents. I was no longer just an unknown soldier.

‘All around me, my comrades died, one after another. One morning the soldier next to me, emaciated like a skeleton, shuddered one more time and died. I looked at his pale face and the few miserable possessions on his bed. I reached across and took his small mirror, since I had not had one for a long time. An emaciated skull with an unkempt beard and dull, feverish eyes stared at me, just like the one in the bed next to me. My hand sank weakly.

‘Gradually, however, there seemed to be a spark of life and the beginning of a will to survive. My feverish dreams sometimes showed me the face of a girl; in my pocket there was a precious letter that I could read with closed eyes. I forced myself to eat, every day a little more. I became more alert and even my hearing gradually improved. Only the severe chills returned every evening. Thus passed the last days of 1942. Outside, snow was falling. How were my comrades doing in the hills near Thapse? I knew that I would not have survived if this disease



**A field engineer inserts a T. Mi. Z. 42 igniter set into a Tellermine 42. These anti-tank mines were very effective against the Russian T34.**



had struck me out there. Life had given me another chance, and I wanted to use it.

'Pastor Foerster came to see me several times. He gave me some precious writing paper, and I was able to again send a letter to my parents to let them know that I was still alive. By his face, however, I saw that the overall situation was not good. He did not talk about it and probably was not allowed to do so. He also did not dare to write to my father, whom he knew well: he considered me lost.

'Unfortunately, on my twentieth birthday I was transferred to Maikop. The general retreat was beginning, and the infirmaries had to be moved out of the danger zone. A heavy open car without doors or windows carried me through the icy winter air, and this rough and cold ride caused a severe return of the fever. On January 17, Maikop had to be evacuated, too. I was transported to Krasnodar via Ijsti-Labinskaja. Hundreds of us, all patients with typhus or typhoid fever, vegetated in cold barrack rooms without food and with minimal care. Only a few Russian girls offered some care to this large number of gravely ill patients. I gratefully remember their kindness.

'During the night of January 22/23, I had another severe relapse of fever, with chills and severe abdominal pain. I thought I was dying. And during that night Krasnodar had to be evacuated, too. My pains caused me to groan loudly in my febrile delirium. The medics, too, thought that I was dying. Nevertheless, I was transferred to the railroad station, again in an open car. We were laid down on straw in a freight car. One medic had to take care of three cars full of critically ill patients. There was no more food. It was the last hospital train able to escape from the Caucasian front via Rostov, as I was told later. The cars were unheated and the rattling of the train hurt me greatly. Most of those lying around me perished, one following another in death. During the initial five days we had nothing whatsoever to eat. At every short stop, the medic jumped out of the wagon to get some water after hacking a hole into the ice. This was our only liquid. Again I was so weak that I could not even lift my head. The fever chills made me feel hot in that eastern winter cold, and often I cried out loud while in severe pain. Near Rostov, we came under Russian artillery fire and an air raid on the railway station of Rostov destroyed the hospital train near ours, on the next track. We were not hit.



**The scene on a quiet day at the start of the battle for Stalingrad. A German soldier stands among the rubble created by an artillery barrage. The snow has started, and the desolation of the whole picture is clear.**

'Later, when the train crossed the wide Ukraine, we had left behind us death and immediate danger. Even my fever decreased and gave way to the cold and apathy. During the stops, we now received warm tea and soup – incredible! In those days was the tenth anniversary of the Nazi party's assumption of power – in my opinion a memorable date. At Dnjepropetrovsk there was another air raid on the railway station – our farewell from the front. Due to the macabre situation at Stalingrad and at the Caucasus front, all military hospitals were overcrowded and, therefore, our train was rejected everywhere and moved on. On February 5, we arrived at Przemyśl, where our trip came to a temporary end. We were carried out of the train, more dead than alive.

A small, wiry medic took my skeletal body of less than ninety pounds in his arms to the clearing station. Then I was taken to the reserve military hospital of Przemyśl. I could not believe my eyes when I saw white beds and German Red Cross nurses; when I felt the warmth of heated rooms and the odour of warm food, I did not dare to believe it, but it was true: the front, death, and the endless and horrible Russia were behind me.'

### *Rasputitsa and ice*

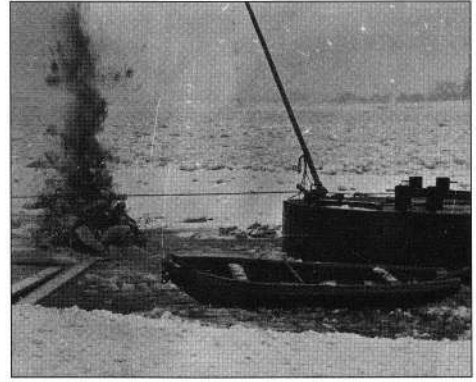
The weather conditions have been mentioned before, and there is a wealth of material relating to it. However, some quotations from those who experienced the problems will clarify just how depressing, if not frightening, these conditions were to the soldier in the field, who began to feel as if not only the Russians but the very earth was against him.

Mud appeared as soon as the weather cooled after the summer and the rains began. Soon men were 'seeing up to 24 horses used to pull a single gun'. The gun's crews 'with coats smeared in wet mud up to their hips, had been in this mud bath for days without taking their boots off. ... Often it appeared a vehicle had hopelessly sunk in the mud ... a sharp easterly wind brought with it the sound of grumbling artillery fire.' One soldier said, 'there was hardly ever an opportunity to get the mud off' although it did serve admirably as camouflage.

'There's no point in trying to move during the day,' said one *Landser*, 'the mud would not allow it.' By the time that last comment was written, the nights had turned cold, and he continued, 'we can only make it during the night, when the earth is frozen hard'. Infantry Unteroffizier (corporal) Pabst, on the road to Kalinin, said, 'my boots were still so wet this morning I could only get into them in my bare feet', and this of course spelled out another danger – trench foot. So, added to the wet and cold, there was the constant fear of foot rot.

Added to these discomforts was the soldier's ubiquitous foe in these conditions: lice. 'Lice were the scourge of the Eastern Front, an irritant contributing to ill-health and cumulative psychological depression. Painstakingly plucked off the body, they could only be killed with certainty by cracking them between fingernail and thumb after they were gorged with blood.'

But the real terror was in the winter: ice, snow and the sub-zero winds against which in that winter of 1941–42 the German soldier had little protection. 'We are only nearing our final objective step by step in this icy cold and with all our troops suffering from the appalling supply



**This was as far as 6 Army got. A remarkable picture of the ice on the Volga and a small calibre shell exploding in front of German troops. At some points the Volga was not too wide so the far shore could be seen. The barge and boat in the picture were the target of the shell.**

situation,' wrote General Heinz Guderian. He added: 'The supply situation was bad: snow-shirts, boot polish, underclothes and above all woollen trousers, were not available. A high proportion of the men were still wearing denim (lightweight) trousers, and the temperature was eight degrees below zero!'

'The wind was forever howling and blowing in our faces,' wrote a German machine gunner, which caused 'ice to crystallise all over our faces, in front, behind, and on the nose'. As men crossed frozen marshes one reported: 'My gloves were so wet I could not bear the ache any longer' (his hands were frost-bitten). 'I could have wept with pain as I bound my useless hand with a handkerchief. I plodded forward, babbling incoherently. ... It was a cycle of non-ending misery.'



**Rasputitsa, the mud of the autumn and spring. The two Russian ponies cannot progress and the driver is asking for advice. He was told to unload and walk. The mud is about 15in. deep.**

## THE REASONS FOR FAILURE

The main reason for the failure of the German Army to achieve its initial aim of defeating Russia within a few months was partly geographical: the sheer size of western Russia could not be controlled by what was a relatively small army. Added to this were the weather problems: in the summer it was just the dust to contend with, but in the autumn this became mud, mud which deepened as every foot or wheel or track ground it finer, mud which clogged up everything from gun barrels to tank tracks. The mud got into the food, soaked clothing, sucked at the very boots the men wore as they marched.

And then it froze. Although the early frosts enabled troop movements again, as the winter progressed the cold became so intense that sentries could only stand guard for ten to fifteen minutes. Weapons froze, as did engines, and so, most importantly, did the men and the horses. Food was cold when it arrived at the forward positions, frozen solid by the time it reached the men; hay was rendered useless because of the cold. The cold was the greatest enemy the Germans had to face, and they faced it in the winters of 1941–42 and again in 1942–43 with inadequate clothing. For camouflage in the snow they stole bed sheets; for protection from the cold they took Russian boots and jackets – that is if they could get the body wearing them to soften sufficiently to get the clothing off.

The German Army in those winters was reduced to a beggar's army, constantly living off the land, appropriating anything that would stem the cold, and fighting an enemy that was seemingly impervious to the cold and growing in strength, ability and confidence every week. And, whilst the German Army manpower situation became increasingly worse, the Russians brought more and more men into the fight. They started to push the Germans back.



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Secondary sources consulted include *The MG-42 Machine Gun* (Moose Lake, n.d.), Gander and Chamberlain's *Small Arms, Artillery and Special Weapons of the Third Reich* (MacDonald and James, 1978) and *Combat* (Vol. 1) from Pictorial Histories of Missoula, Montana.

## COLOUR PLATE COMMENTARY

### A: MARCHING

The horse and the *Landser* were almost inseparable throughout World War II. Here infantry and their platoon cart march side by side on the long road east. The cart is the two-horse Hf. 177 with pneumatic tyres. The horses are Pomeranian draft horses, well known for their strength, although even this type of horse found the wagon too heavy when fully loaded, and many times the hitch had to be augmented by man power or by additional horses or oxen. Even the slightest incline was enough to stop the horses, and the wagon was condemned by the men as a 'horse killer'. The whole platoon would be involved in helping to pull the wagon up slopes, using two long ropes attached to either side of the wagon.

The men are advancing during the early part of the campaign, but they have learned the lessons from Poland and the campaign in the west, and only carry what they need for immediate battle action. Each man would carry his personal weapon and ammunition, and his bayonet and entrenching spade. However, to ensure ammunition supply for the light machine guns in every section men would be detailed to carry a box of machine-gun belted ammunition.

They carried little extra, and all their personal equipment (washing and shaving kit, changes of clothing and spare boots) would be on the platoon cart. For eating they carry just their mess kit, water bottle and a spoon will be tucked into a pocket. Soldiers rarely carry knife or fork, relying instead on a spoon for all eating. They do however always have their water bottles with them. The gas-mask container was seen, but it often no longer held a gas mask, but was used for iron rations, sweets or cigarettes as it was relatively water proof and easy to get at. Some of these men have unloaded everything except the necessities for fighting.

The medical experiences are taken from Buchner, *The German Army Medical Corps in World War II* (Schiffer) and Kern, *War Diary 1941-45* (Vantage Press, NY). Other quotations are taken from the exceptional work by Robert Kershaw, *War Without Garlands* (Ian Allen, 2000), as well as Stephen Fritz's *Frontsoldaten* (University Press of Kentucky, 1995). Reference was also made to *Die soldatische Tat*, a propaganda book (Witteck, 1942) and Knappe and Brusaw, *Soldat* (BCA, 1993).

The battle reports come from a special reprint of an American after-war publication which has been edited with redrawn and coloured maps published by [www.germanforces.org](http://www.germanforces.org) under the title *German and Russian Tactical Operations 1941-45*. These reports cover the whole war, focusing on small-unit operations and are accompanied by a separate volume of 52 maps, which illustrate in colour the actions detailed in the text volume.

### B: FIELD KITCHEN - THE GULASCH CANNON

Food has always been of paramount importance to soldiers, especially in the field. The German Army was allowed three meals a day, with breakfast and the evening meals often being eaten in the field, due to the need to be on special alert at dawn and dusk and to avoid cooking fires giving positions away to the enemy.

The main meal of the day for the German soldier was the midday hot meal. This was prepared, often on the march, by the company cooks who travelled with the *Gulaschkanone* or, as it was officially known, the *Feldkuche* (seen in the background). The field kitchen was horse drawn and consisted of a large cooking pot into which the ingredients would be thrown. The kitchen served hot stews (hence *Gulasch* cannon). Bread was supplied by regimental bakeries which were centralised.

The regimental butchery prepared meat for the field kitchens which was issued as it became available. This was then further cut up if necessary and put, with water (plus beer if available) together with any vegetables to hand and barley or oats to thicken the consistency, into the pot.

The pot was heated by a wood-burning fire beneath it, and was of sufficient capacity to feed one infantry company with a nourishing hot midday meal. This was supplemented with bread, wine or beer (either issued or won). Sausage was often cooked in boiling water and each man would receive a length of whatever had been recently slaughtered - more often than not pork was the main meat for sausage, although beef and horse were eaten frequently.

The man on the left (1) is lifting a 10-man food can, used to get hot food to individual sections. The man sitting (2) cuts bread from a fresh loaf whilst his mess tin is on the ground to his right (3). The man standing (with helmet [4]) is eating from his mess tin. The head cook on the right (5) is looking pleased with the way the food is being received.

Cooks were often some of the best fed men in the German Army, and many soldiers made sure that they shared extras

such as wine and spirits with their company cooks so that any extra portions that were available went to those who looked after the cooks. The cooks too, when circumstances dictated it, had to fight, and in Stalingrad every cook, together with drivers, horse handlers, company clerks and storemen, all got their share of battle against the Russians.

### **C: GERMAN INFANTRYMAN, 1941**

Infantrymen in 1941 were similarly equipped to those in 1939, but, as noted above, there was a tendency to carry less in the field. The man on the left (a) is dressed in the standard infantry uniform, and carries the Kar 98k 7.92mm rifle (1), standard for the German Army throughout World War II.

The man on the right (b) wears the shelter quarter issued to every man. It could be used in a number of ways, one of which was as a rain cape, as it is seen here. The cape was more effective than any other issued to armies of the time, in that it had over 60 buttons and 30 button holes, letting the individual choose how he wanted to wear it. It could also act as a single weather shield if propped with sticks or vegetation, and could also combine with three others to make a very effective four-man tent.

Also shown: (2) a clip of five rounds of 7.92mm ammunition for the rifle, (3) a complete set of belt kit, (4) the standard army belt buckle, (5) a set of three leather ammunition pouches, each capable of holding fifteen rounds in clips, (6) the standard German water bottle, (7) and (8) the issue German Army gas mask and container, (9) front and back of a tin of issue concentrated chocolate and (10) the knife, fork, spoon and tin opener which were standard issue to troops.

### **D: FIELD DEFENCES**

The German Army had a wealth of experience to draw on in the construction of trenches. Trench works extend from the shell scrape which just protects one prone rifleman to complex underground diggings to offer cover to divisional headquarters.

In the field every infantryman had been taught that digging in was absolutely essential as soon as he stopped marching. In the advance into Russia this drill was often disregarded, and casualties from Russian artillery soon began to tell.

Individual riflemen would dig their own trenches, as would the mortar teams, and the machine-gun crews. To the rear the artillery would dig gun pits, and even tanks were dug in. The aim of this field engineering was firstly to protect the men and their equipment from enemy fire, and secondly to protect from observation. The siting of trenches is a military art in itself, and on the endless flat expanses of Russia it was difficult to conceal the excavations.

Whenever possible trenches were dug on the sides of slopes, and the forward slopes were occupied during the daytime whilst the rear slopes were occupied at night. To ensure that the enemy did not creep into the forward trenches during the night alarm posts were set up as well as listening posts.

The two trenches shown here would eventually have been linked up by a communications trench if the unit stayed for more than a few days. This meant that the men would not be exposed to observation or fire whilst moving about within the position. Further rearward trenches would also be dug leading to latrines, headquarters, ammunition reserves and to the field kitchen.

A mortar trench (1) needs depth, to get the weapon under cover, but must not be so deep that the muzzle blast when firing is contained within the trench, otherwise the crew will all

suffer burst ear drums. It must be round in shape to allow for 360° traverse of the weapon, and it must be roomy enough to allow the crew to operate the weapon. There must also be storage for ammunition (in a safe location away from the mortar tube itself) and there must be communication with rear areas. Mortar trenches are built, because of the nature of the weapon, to the rear of the front line. Normally they would not be nearer than 500m. They cannot have overhead cover because of the way the weapon fires.

Machine gun trenches (2) were a fundamental part of frontline German trenches, just as they had been during World War I. The machine gun was to break up enemy attacks as soon as they came within range of the weapon, reducing the risk of the enemy actually penetrating as far as the front line and breaking into the trench line itself.

They were used in direct fire roles for shooting the enemy in the open approaching the front line, and for protection of minefields and barbed wire entanglements set up in front of the trench line. They were also set up on tripods or between stakes at night so that they could fire on fixed lines. Certain approaches from the enemy side were evident to the experienced soldier, and they were designed to be swept by machine-gun fire at night. During the day the aiming points would be established so that at night fire could be brought onto specific approach routes at will.

Although not shown, overhead cover would have been set up over the trenches to cover them, their occupants, and their purpose from aerial reconnaissance. This factor was of little importance as the advance into Russia went on into 1942, but it became far more significant as the Red Air Force began to take control of the air above the battlefield.

### **E: THE MG42**

The MG42 (a) was the replacement for the earlier MG34 machine gun of the German army. The MG34 is described in detail in Warrior 59: *The German Infantryman (1) 1933-1940*. The weapon was in design before the start of the war, but experiences in Poland and France made it quite clear that the MG34 was far too well made. Its tolerances were an engineer's dream, but an infantryman's nightmare. The weapon stopped with alarming regularity, due to feed problems and to dust or mud in the mechanism. Because it was so extremely well made, it was unsuited to the rigours of the warfare practised during the period.

The MG42 was designed to operate in quite awful conditions: it fired in mud, water, snow, heat and dust. As long as the machine gunner handling it knew how to maintain his weapon, about the only time it refused to fire was when the metalwork of the action was frozen. The ingenuity of the Germans then solved even that problem, with the aid of sunflower oil, which lubricated the working parts at sub-zero temperatures.

The weapon was a belt-fed fully automatic machine gun. The barrel change was extremely simple, effective and quick. It fired at a rate of between 800 and 1,200 rounds per minute but some have felt this was too high a rate of fire for a battlefield machine gun. The Germans did not subscribe to that theory.

The gun weighed 11.6kg with its bipod, was 123cm in length, with a barrel length of 53cm. The weapon has a workmanlike look to it which has rarely been equalled, and its feed mechanism has been taken into later weapons such as the American M60 and the FAL and GPMG machine-gun designs.

This, with the earlier MG34, was the first true general purpose machine gun. It could be used by one man on the battlefield, and

the rate of fire was sufficient to win any local fire fight, even against light machine-guns of other nations. It could also be installed on a tripod (b), when it could engage targets indirectly by means of aiming posts and a dial sight. It also had an automatic traverse system built into the tripod so that at night the weapon could fire on fixed lines and traverse automatically, covering the whole of its arc with a regular bullet pattern.

The weapon is also shown stripped. The parts of the gun are as follows: 1, gun body; 2, barrel; 3, breech block; 4, feed mechanism and cover; 5, pistol grip and trigger housing; 6, cocking handle; 7, rear cover; 8, butt; 9, bipod; 10, sling; 11, recoil booster and nozzle and barrel guide sleeve; 12, recoil spring.

These weapons may be seen in various museums, but the best collection is at Royal Armouries, Leeds ([www.armouries.org.uk/leeds](http://www.armouries.org.uk/leeds)).

## F: INFANTRY ANTI-TANK WEAPONS

The infantryman has a marked dislike of tanks, mainly because they have the ability to get close to him, and to kill. Once tanks became part of the battlefield after World War I, all armies developed anti-tank weapons, but the Germans failed to develop enough. Since the German Army had some very good tanks (the PzKpfw III and IV) it is surprising that they failed to come up with really effective anti-tank weapons for the infantry.

To survive tank attacks, infantry must be able to disable if not destroy armour. The 7.92mm Panzerbüchse 38 anti-tank rifle (4) issued to the German army would have penetrated World War I armour, but failed miserably in World War II against anything other than soft-skinned vehicles. The same can be said for the rifle grenade (2), fired from the *Schießbecher* rifle attachment (3) and aimed by the sight attachment (1).

One weapon that was effective against standard armour such as that of the T34 Russian tank was the *Haft Hohlladung* 3kg anti-tank charge (6), which was a strongly magnetised shaped charge mine. The issue hand grenades, even when grouped into sixes as the *gebaltte Ladung*, were equally ineffective. This had a pull detonator which the man in the main illustration is about to pull, firing the fuse.

However, land mines did work, and apart from laying mine fields, the Germans also had some rather dangerous anti-tank methods which used these weapons. The Teller mine series (5) were designed as anti-tank mines. They weighed between 6 and 9.75kg, and were filled originally with TNT, later with Amatol. Essentially they were fired by the pressure of the tank crushing the igniter as it rolled over the mine. German infantry however often placed these mines on one side of a road attached to a cord. When a tank came down the road they pulled the mine under the tank's tracks. Effective, but not safe if the man pulling got too close.

## G: FIXED OBSERVATION POSTS

In winter fighting underwent a total change from the summer and the *rasputitsa* period. Although vehicles could move along the roads and in towns, in the country, where the infantry were, conditions were often so bad that movement across country through deep snow was impossible. Equally, the cold itself had such a deleterious effect upon men that they sometimes shot themselves rather than stay out in temperatures as low as 40°C below zero. The wind chill factor led to sentries being physically incapable of staying outside for more than 15 minutes, and weapons, vehicles and food froze, followed soon after by men and horses.

However, in his usual methodical manner (and backed by a lot of instruction and help from the Finnish army and German

mountain troops) the average *Landser* was able to build himself a shelter which was also militarily effective.

The artillery watch tower in this plate would have been constructed at the edge of a tree line, and would have had wind and snow breaks built in. The aim of the tower was to watch across the snow or the ice for enemy movement. The observer on the higher platform made his reports through the telephone operator one level down.

However, watch towers need protection, and the position shown in the lower illustration is built to withstand the worst of the rigours of winter. It has a roof for weather and ballistic protection, and is built high enough so that once the snows come it still has a clear field of fire from its observation windows. Built of cut log, it would be warm inside, the home to three or four men at least. Bunks would be built below the observation level, and with trench heaters and hot food life was not as terrible as it was in the forward positions. The men inside would have at least one machine gun for local protection.

Such positions were built all along the defensive winter lines, and particularly in the more static positions in the far north. The camouflage which would normally conceal these installations has been omitted.

## H: GERMAN ARMY WINTER CLOTHING AND CAMOUFLAGE

Stalingrad – the place where the German 6th Army was defeated. These men are illustrated in three different styles of winter clothing, ranging from the basic to the slightly more effective.

The campaign in the east was intended to end by Christmas 1941, with the German Army warmly ensconced in Moscow, Leningrad and elsewhere, not digging in or rather building up in open plains amid sub-zero blizzards, ice and snow. This miscalculation left the Germans in the front line outside Moscow facing adequately equipped Russian troops in nothing more than their summer uniforms, greatcoats and whatever else they could beg or steal.

1. The man on the left is dressed in the standard uniform, and has made some attempt to conceal himself from the enemy. Stolen sheets provide some vestige of cover, but dirt from trenches, weapons, explosives, mud and food have contrived to make him look more like a refugee than a member of a proud fighting force.

The main problem, noted by the Finns early on in the war, was that the Germans had studs going into the soles of their boots. In sub-zero conditions, these studs have no grip and worse, they conduct the cold straight into the wearer's feet. This man has wrapped sacking round his boots in the vain hope that this will keep him warmer.

2. The man in the middle is slightly better dressed, but like everyone in Stalingrad, lack of food and sleep contrived to render him less and less effective as a soldier. However, as a sniper he has to wait for long periods in the cold, and has been issued with a winter camouflage uniform, a fur hat and some sensible boots. He carries a Kar 98k with a telescopic sight and a winter trigger, so that he can fire the weapon without putting bare skin onto the trigger, where it would freeze solid.

3. The man on the right has a much better sheepskin coat, together with kapok trousers, good boots and a fur hat. He also has had the sense to relieve a Russian soldier of his sub-machine gun, for Russian machine-guns were far better at operating in the cold conditions, unlike the German issue MP38 and MP40, which froze repeatedly.



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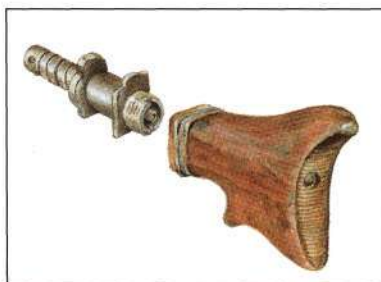
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