

Warrior

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# German Infantryman (3) Eastern Front 1943–45



David Westwood • Illustrated by Elizabeth Sharp

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## Author's Dedication

In memory of the late Dr David G. Chandler, formerly Head of the Department of War Studies, R.M.A. Sandhurst.





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# GERMAN INFANTRYMAN (3) EASTERN FRONT 1943-45

## INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1943, German forces were no longer the undisputed masters of the battlefield. In North Africa they were being pushed back into an enclave in Tunisia, facing defeat by the combined Allied forces, and in Russia they were on the back foot after Stalingrad. The battle of Stalingrad had been a resounding defeat for both the German 6 Army, which had been surrounded and subsequently surrendered, and for the German General Staff, which had seen the tide of war reversed, with the Russians beginning an offensive in November 1942 which was to end in Berlin in May 1945.

However, the quality of the German soldier was to have a significant effect on the Russian front. The fighting qualities which were so obvious in the advance and in *Blitzkrieg* were to be equally valuable in the fighting retreat which the Germans conducted over the whole of the eastern front in the two years it took the Russians to reach the German capital.

Basic training in Germany always emphasised the need for rehearsal and practice, and although the training period was shortened as the situation grew worse, the German soldier proved himself adept at fighting the interminably long rearguard action. In Germany efforts were continually being made to try to stem the Russian advance, but the sheer size of the Russian Army and its never-ending reserves of manpower, coupled with its growing expertise, made the final result inevitable.

Improved weaponry was seen by the Germans as one way of making up for the manpower shortages becoming increasingly apparent in the German Army. The MG42 machine gun was a great improvement on the MG34, having far fewer stoppages due to dust and dirt, and in the winter the use of sunflower oil also reduced the freezing-up of this and other weapons. A significant step forward was also made in rifle technology: the appearance of Russian semi-automatic and self-loading rifles resulted in experiments which eventually produced the MP44. This rifle (see colour plates and commentaries) fired a practical battlefield round, was semi-automatic, and had a 30-round magazine. Unfortunately for the average *Landser*, issue was more often than not to the *Waffen-SS* troops rather than to line infantry, and the Kar 98k was still the standard rifle for most infantrymen.

Leave on the eastern front was welcomed, and the Germans tried to ensure a reasonable rotation system. These men are on their way out, as is shown by the smiles on their faces. All soldiers travelled with weapons to assist in guarding their leave transport against partisan attack. The journey was long, and those on leave often spent more time travelling than at their destinations.



Support weapons were little modified in themselves, but some units benefited from the development of the assault gun (*Sturmgeschütz*), tracked guns which were sometimes also armoured. These guns were issued as a substitute for the more complicated tanks, and as support artillery they were of great value in the field. Some versions were fitted with anti-tank guns – such weapons were singularly useful against the mass tank attacks of the Russians, as long as they were supported by infantry.

Air support steadily waned for the Germans, and the sight of large numbers of *Luftwaffe* aircraft opening an attack were only a memory in 1943, 1944 and 1945. Most aircraft were either defending Germany against the increasing strength of the Allied air offensive, or, on the eastern front, suffering from spares or fuel shortages. Russian ground-attack aircraft were far more in evidence.

The Russians had surprised the Germans initially by their total lack of coordination in defence; by the spring of 1943 another Russian Army had appeared, one which was hell-bent on recovering the land taken by the Germans in such brutal fashion, and with few qualms about the way it achieved that objective. The appalling German racial attitude towards the Russians was about to reap its harvest, and ordinary Russians and troops left behind during the German advance led to increasing numbers of partisans, whose combat methods were unforgiving.

Partisan warfare during the Russian campaign was vicious, with neither side giving any quarter. Needless to say, the Russians learned quickly from early failures, and soon the Germans were faced with a rear-area security problem which grew until they were waging war not only on their front-line but also in their lines of communication at the rear. Nowhere seemed safe. The war in Africa was, in direct contrast, a war between soldiers alone; in Russia it seemed to every German that he had to fight the Russian Army, the Russian people, the Russian weather, never-endingly.

The tactical examples chosen for this book all exhibit the various characteristics of the fighting from 1943 to 1945, and the small-unit tactics that evolved. The fighting retreat was nothing new, but to carry out such a retreat for over two years was quite remarkable; that it happened was due to a very great extent to the fighting qualities of German infantry who fought until they could fight no more.

## ANTI-PARTISAN WARFARE

German reports noted that: 'Partisan operations do not conform to any hard and fast tactical doctrine or principles that have general applicability. The partisan fighter is unpredictable and unscrupulous. His



Rest and relaxation were almost as rare as leave on the eastern front. Here a section takes some time off in front of their section dugout. This is a well-made home, with overhead protection against shell and bomb attack, but it has yet to be finished with even more earth overhead. Personal laundry is on the table in the foreground, together with a practical scrubbing brush.





**Russian prisoners. The man in the centre is searching his companion for head lice. Life was not free of parasites for either side.**

weapons are usually simple in design and limited in number. They achieve deadly effectiveness in the hands of a tough, crafty group of individuals who operate almost entirely independent of normal logistical support. Proficient in camouflaging their activities, these men spread a reign of terror over the civilian population of their own country.'

Those German troops engaged in anti-partisan warfare would concur with the 'reign of terror' assessment. The experience of fighting the partisans was often horrific and exhausting, as this German soldier's account testifies: 'We tramped through scrub and bushes for about two weeks, in water most of the

time. It was pointless to try and get our boots dry. We had sporadic contacts with the partisans. One episode from that time upset me terribly. The Russians had captured one of our reconnaissance patrols, four men. Three of them were old hands and they quickly scampered off and were gone, leaving an 18-year-old behind them dead on the ground. I was only 19 myself at this time. The Russians had not only killed him but absolutely massacred him. His whole brain hung out of his smashed skull. We also went on night marches, hunting the partisans. Once, when we came to a clearing, partisans suddenly jumped out of the wood and started firing at us. We returned the fire, of course. But one of our sergeants was hit in the neck and killed.'

The principal tactical lessons learned by the Germans in their first encounters with partisans in Russia were, according to official documents:

1. Partisans give no quarter and it is therefore a mistake to employ second rate or weak forces against them. If casualties are to be held to a minimum and time is to be saved, the anti-partisan forces must be as strong as possible and equipped with weapons, such as tanks and guns, that are not available to the partisans.
2. In order to encircle partisan forces, a tight ring must be thrown around the entire area. Russian partisans did not continue a hopeless engagement, but attempted to disperse, to disappear individually from a pocket, or, if necessary, to break out, and reassemble in a previously designated area. If partisan elements slip through a cordon too weakly manned, they are certain to resume operations in another location after a short while.

How these lessons were applied can be seen in a specific anti-partisan operation conducted in June 1943.

#### **Attack on a partisan headquarters (June 1943)**

By early 1943 the partisans were directing their activities mainly against the major railway lines used to move supplies from Germany to the

Russian front. Partisan attacks on moving trains and extensive demolition of tracks, bridges and tunnels at times almost halted traffic on the railway routes Warsaw–Gomel–Bryansk and Minsk–Borisov–Smolensk.

German anti-partisan operations had developed a definite pattern. As soon as the location of a partisan force became known, it would be attacked simultaneously from several sides. Dawn was the preferred time for such raids. However, these tactics were successful only if the partisans did not learn beforehand of German intentions. After Stalingrad, the partisans increased in numbers and improved their organisation and intelligence system. More and more frequently the Germans, when closing in on one of their strongholds, would find no partisans at all.

Early in June 1943 the Germans obtained information that the partisan HQ planning the attacks against the rail line in the Borisov sector had its headquarters at Daliki, about 16km (10 miles) south of Lepel. The partisan force at Daliki was no ordinary group, but the nerve centre for a large partisan area of operations with a well-organised system of communication. It was unlikely that the Daliki staff would not learn about a German advance from several sides. The German commander in charge of the Borisov district therefore decided to entrust the destruction of the partisan headquarters to a bicycle-mounted infantry battalion that had been temporarily withdrawn from the front and made available for anti-partisan operations. The reinforced battalion consisted of four companies, a headquarters with attached signal platoon, and a motorised supply column; 1, 2 and 3 Companies were equipped with bicycles, 12 light machine guns, and six light mortars each; 4 Company, the heavy weapons company, was motorised and had 12 heavy machine guns and six 37mm anti-tank guns.

On 24 June Major Beer, the battalion commander, issued the following order to his subordinates:

1. The battalion will carry out an anti-partisan operation in the Berezina Valley, 20 miles west of Lepel.
2. The battalion, less 3 Company, will move out at 0700 on 25 June and proceed toward Berezino. On the night of 25 June battalion headquarters and the signal platoon will establish an HQ at Wily; 1 Company will stop in Sloboda; 2 Company in Gadsivlia; and 4 Company in Anoshki.
3. Billeting parties will precede the march columns. After the units have arrived at their new quarters (about 1600), billeting parties will report to the battalion command post in Wily at 1900 and proceed via Lepel to Berezino where they will obtain billets for 26 June from the local commander.
4. At 0700 on 26 June the battalion will assemble just north of Wily and proceed via Lepel to Berezino.



**A corporal stands guard. Note the map case on his left hip, which suggests he is a traffic guide as well.**



**Two men using a light electric chain saw. The equipment weighed 50kg (111lb), had a cut of 1m (3ft 3in), and could cut at a rate of 6.4m (21ft) per minute.**

was a fabrication on my part to hide our real objective: a raid on the Borisov area partisan headquarters, reportedly located in Daliki.'

The company commanders were not too surprised. If the objective had been stated in battalion orders, partisan agents would have informed their headquarters in Daliki long before the Germans could have reached the village. Beer continued: 'Let's look at the map. When I was ordered to capture the partisan HQ, I tried to develop a plan that would achieve surprise. In this situation I believed that to bring up my four companies during the night and then attempt to break into Daliki from four sides would be impractical. I am convinced that the partisans would have learned of our movement. The distance from Borisov to Daliki incidentally is about 30 miles and I am even more certain that they would have found out about our assembly at night. We would have found Daliki deserted. I would have liked to use a small motorised force of one or, at most, two companies, moving at top speed from Borisov to Sloboda. From there they could have turned right and driven along the cart road to Daliki. The advance elements could have raced right into the centre of Daliki, while the rear elements sealed off the village from the south and east, toward the swamp area. That would have been a real surprise! For such an operation, however, we would need cross country vehicles.

'The solution, therefore, was to simulate a normal march movement, such as is frequently made from Borisov to Lepel, with the partisan centre in Berezino as the obvious objective. In order to strengthen the impression of a routine movement, I ordered the battalion to spend last night at a stop over point on our march route directly opposite Daliki. For the same reason I requisitioned billets in different villages in the usual manner, whereupon the billeting parties were ordered to proceed to Berezino. They are arranging for billets there right now, and not until tonight will they know that their efforts were wasted. All these measures are calculated to prevent the partisan leaders from becoming suspicious, and to induce them to remain in Daliki. I am convinced that they were informed last night that the battalion is moving into the Berezina Valley.'

Beer looked at his watch and said: 'It is now 0900. Rest your men until 1100. Nothing must point to the fact that we have a different objective. Until that time our objective continues to be Berezino. At 1100 the battalion will turn around and drive back over the same road



we followed this morning, maintaining the same order of march. The three cart roads leading to Daliki will be assigned as follows:

1 Company will take the road from Wily through Svyaditsa,

2 Company will turn off at Sloboda,

and 4 Company will take the road from Gadsivlia.

Battalion headquarters will proceed with 4 Company.

There will be no intermediate halts, no reconnaissance. The common objective is Daliki.

'I believe that the partisan leaders will try to escape into the swamps south and east of the village. Therefore I have ordered 3 Company to take up positions at the adjacent edge of the swamp at 1100. Yesterday, as you know, this company remained in place when the battalion moved out and in the afternoon 3 Company was loaded without its bicycles onto six tarpaulin covered trucks and moved to Gorodok, where it remained overnight. 3 Company is carrying only small arms such as pistols, carbines, submachine guns, and rifles equipped with silencers. Early this morning the Company left Gorodok for Lepel. About 11 miles north of Anoshki, at a point where the forest borders the road, the column stopped, allowing the personnel to detruck, whilst the empty trucks were driven on through Lepel to Berezino. My orders to the Company Commander were to stop for only 30 seconds and keep the motors running.'

Beer spread an aerial photograph of the Daliki area on the table and continued: 'Using this photograph as a map, 3 Company was ordered to march by compass due east through the woods and moors, and, after crossing the Essa River, to advance or rather wade into the swamp southeast of Daliki. It will hide in the middle of the swamp. No patrols will be sent out since the Company must remain unnoticed. At 1100, when the battalion turns around, 3 Company will occupy time on the fringe of the swamp facing Daliki and a portion of the forest just east of Ivan Bor. However, when the other companies enter Daliki, it will refrain from attacking, its mission being to capture the partisan leaders when they try to escape. Everything else is secondary.

'I would gladly have spared 3 Company the march through the wet forest and moors, the crossing of the Essa, and the stay in the swamp, where they will be half devoured by insects. There is a cart road running north toward Liski about 5 miles east of the Borisov-Lepel road, but I believe that this cart road is used as a route of communication between the partisan headquarters and its subordinate units in the forest around Borisov. I have no doubt that an advance along this road would have been reported immediately to partisan headquarters. That is why I ordered 3 Company to take the more difficult route.

**A captured Russian 76.2mm gun pressed into German service in 1944. The gun was used for anti-tank work, and renamed the 7.62cm *Feldkanone* 288 (r). It weighed 1,120kg (2,468lb) in action, fired a 6.21kg (14lb) shell at a muzzle velocity of 680mps (2,230fps), and had a range of 13,000m (42,650ft).**



'In my estimate, we shall encounter our first resistance at the farm houses in Liski, Podrussy, Pospach, and Ivan Bor, which form a semicircle around Daliki. I am certain that an important partisan headquarters such as this one would not depend solely on close-in security. Any resistance encountered at these farms must be crushed without delay, and for this purpose 4 Company will detach two anti tank guns each to both 1 and 2 Companies. At 1200, gentlemen, I want to see you and your companies enter Daliki. Are there any questions?'

After asking a few questions the company commanders returned to their respective units in order to brief their platoon leaders. At 1100 the battalion turned around and retraced its route of three hours earlier.

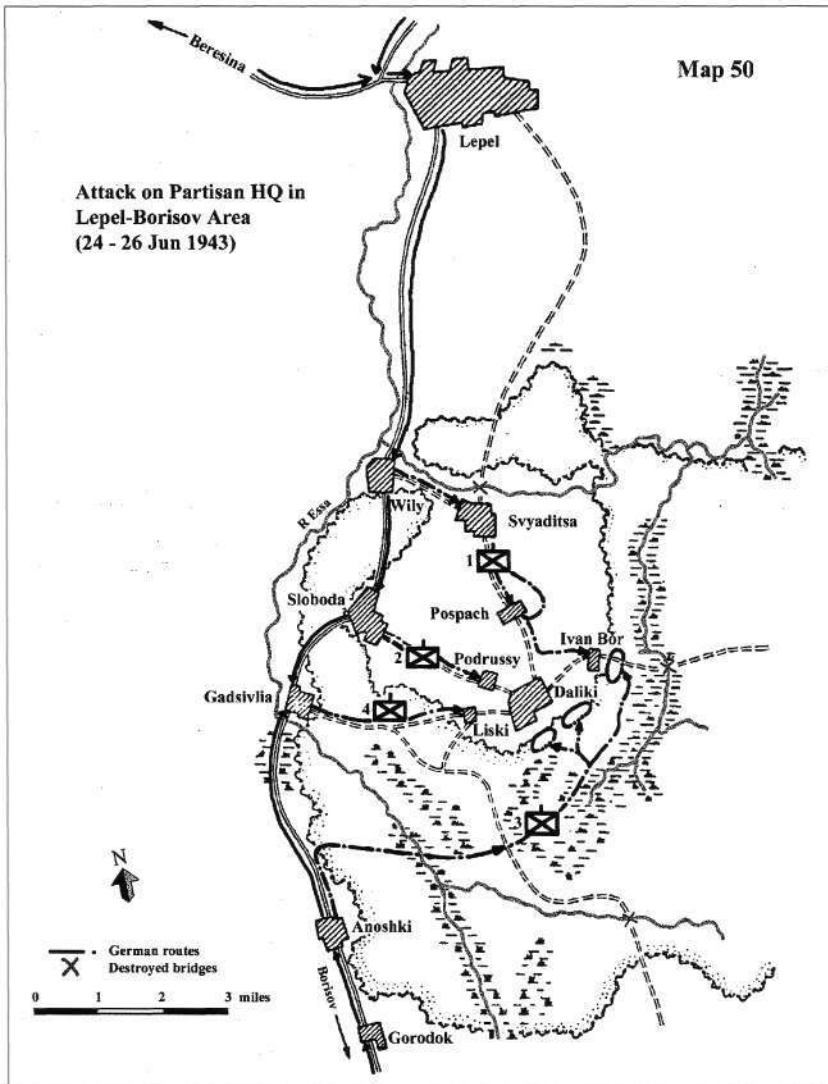
At Wily, 1 Company turned off and proceeded through Svyaditsa. The leading elements were almost in Pospach when a machine gun opened fire from there, forcing them to take cover. As the company anti-tank guns were being brought up, a second machine gun in Pospach opened fire. While one platoon, together with the anti-tank guns, delivered frontal fire on the partisan machine guns, the two other platoons moved through the woods just east of the village in order to envelop it from the rear. Despite the Germans' attempts at encirclement, the partisans managed to get out, but most of them were cut down as they fled across the open country toward Ivan Bor.

It was close to 1300 when 1 Company resumed its advance; 2 Company, too, was delayed by resistance in Podrussy and 4 Company was the only one to enter Daliki according to plan. The platoon of 3 Company nearest Ivan Bor became heavily engaged with the partisans withdrawing from that village. Meanwhile, 1 Company pushed on, but before reaching Daliki it received an order to turn off toward Ivan Bor and to take it from the west. The company used its entire firepower including 12 machine guns, six mortars, and two anti-tank guns, but the partisans in Ivan Bor held out to the last man, very few having been able to get away. It was subsequently learned that when the Germans attacked Pospach, about 20 members of the partisan HQ withdrew southward from Daliki and ran up against some 3 Company men hiding at the edge of the swamp. When asked to surrender, the partisans opened fire with their submachine guns, and in the ensuing hand-to-hand fighting the entire group was killed.

An attack against the headquarters of a partisan force was always hazardous because a headquarters had a more extensive intelligence system, including closer contact with the local populace, than the ordinary partisan group. If a large force was assembled for an attack on a headquarters, it could be expected that the partisans would learn about the impending operation and would avoid

**German infantry in a Russian house. Whenever possible soldiers occupied civilian houses, barns, outbuildings and factories for comfort as well as protection. This was particularly important in the bad-weather months. This trio of men is resting in the evening.**





Attack on a partisan HQ in the Lepel-Borisov area.

an encounter by timely withdrawal. If the unit to carry out the attack was small, its approach might remain unnoticed. However, it would lack the strength to overcome even the partisan security and covering detachments, and would furthermore be unable to seal off the area to prevent the escape of the leaders. If the leaders of a partisan force were able to escape, the operation would be considered a failure, even if all the other personnel were captured or killed.

A possible solution was sometimes found in the employment of a flexible force organised for swift and effective action. Such a force needed vehicles that could move rapidly over long distances and across difficult country. It had to have self-propelled guns and sufficient machine guns to knock out security and covering forces, and an assault echelon to raid the headquarters proper and seize the personnel. The force also required armoured vehicles, flame-throwers, mortars and ground-support aircraft, and, finally, enough troops to seal off possible escape routes.

In many areas, the countryside of European Russia was not suitable for motor vehicles and self-propelled guns. The attack on the partisan



headquarters described above occurred in a sector where forests, swamps and waterways denied the movement of strong forces. In general, partisans preferred to rely on natural country obstacles that could not be surmounted at any season of the year, rather than on customary military security measures.

## WINTER COMBAT

After they had liquidated the Stalingrad pocket, the Russians launched a powerful counter-offensive which quickly carried them westward. At the beginning of February 1943 Soviet tanks took Slavyansk against virtually no German opposition, since the entire sector had been stripped of German troops except for a few service units. In an effort to stem the tide XL Panzer Corps, including two Panzer and one infantry divisions, was moved up from the south and ordered to drive the Russians back across the Donets River.

The German soldiers would not only face the Russian onslaught, but also the typical Russian winter weather which prevailed in the Konstantinovka area south of Slavyansk. Blankets of deep snow covered road and countryside alike, and the temperature reached a low of  $-45^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-49^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) at night. Such conditions alone were enough to tax the fortitude and hardiness of even the fittest German soldier.

The 679 Regiment, 333 Infantry Division, forming part of the XL Panzer Corps, had not seen previous combat in Russia. Upon detraining at the railhead in Konstantinovka at 0400 on 12 February, the soldiers of III Battalion received orders to launch an immediate attack toward Kramatorskaya. The troops assembled, and the forward elements started to move out without delay. At 0800, after having advanced barely a mile east of the Torets River, the German advanced guard ran straight into an oncoming Russian tank force. After a brief clash the unfortunate German detachment was annihilated and the advance party routed.

Tank vs infantry combat was a truly unnerving experience, even for veteran soldiers. The former eastern front infantryman Günter Koschorrek has left a striking account of what it was like to face a Russian T34 attack at close range:

The famous 'eighty-eight'. This version is the Flak 36 model designed for anti-aircraft work, but used as an anti-tank weapon from 1940 onwards. It was capable of knocking out all Allied tanks at ranges up to 2,700m (8,858ft) with its muzzle velocity of 980mps (3,815fps) when firing an AP shell. The rings on the barrel indicate the number of kills the gun has made. It is mounted on the four-wheel *Sonderanhänger* 201.



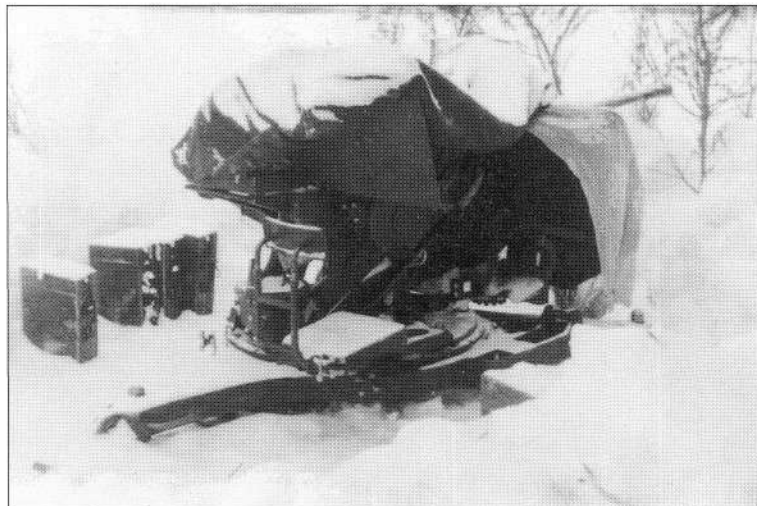
'A harsh metallic shot, and a tank shell explodes exactly where my machine gun once stood. Frozen dirt and hot splinters rain down over my head. There is a loud ringing in my ears and it feels as if my eardrum has just been perforated. The acrid powder is sucked into my nose and fills my lungs. But I live, and so does Swina – I can hear his convulsive coughing behind me. And there it is again – the rattle and the roaring as steel tank tracks grind squealing on their rollers. A deathly noise! I

press myself like a worm on to the ground. In the trench everything goes dark: the steel monster is parked directly on top of me, blocking out the daylight. Now the sharp steel tracks are tearing up the edge of the trench. Frozen blocks of dirt fall on to my back and half cover me. Will the monster bury me alive? I remember soldiers telling me that tanks have turned on top of trenches until the men below could no longer move and suffocated in the dirt. A hell of a way to die!'

For the main body of III Battalion, which was just then moving out of Konstantinovka, the sudden turn of events caused them to waver. The regimental commander realised that he had to act immediately. The overall situation was none too favourable since II Battalion was not due to arrive for 12 hours and I Battalion would take at least another 24 hours. When the regimental commander discovered that a self-propelled gun was undergoing repairs in Konstantinovka, he immediately commandeered it. Realising that the danger of encountering enemy tanks was greatest east of the Torets, he chose the road running along the west bank as the new axis of advance.

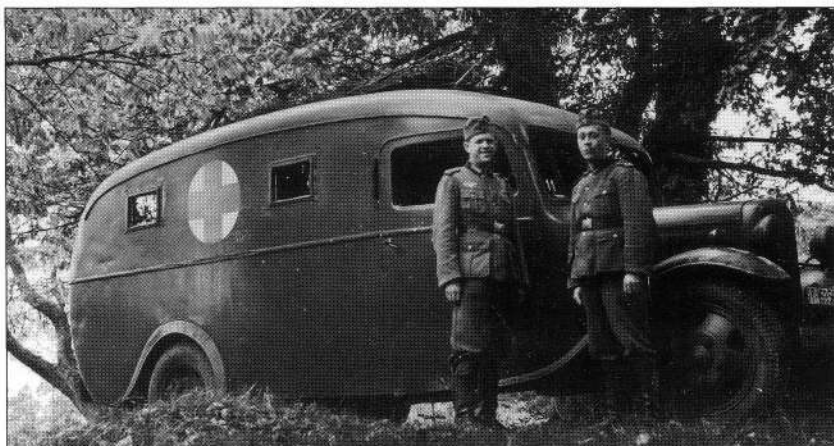
The regimental and battalion commanders mounted the assault gun and proceeded to lead the advance northward. The men were heartened by the sight of their two commanders speeding northward along the new route without encountering enemy opposition. They quickly regained confidence and, falling in behind their leaders, moved forward with new courage. Against light enemy resistance the soldiers fought their way to Alekseyevo-Druzhkovka, and during the night II Battalion, newly arrived, closed up and moved into the same town.

On 13 February, as a result of this experience, the regimental commander decided to use II Battalion as the lead element in order to condition the men to combat in Russia. In an effort to simulate greater strength, all motorised vehicles were ordered to follow the lead battalion in plain view of the enemy. This deception could be used only because enemy interference from the air was not expected. Toward evening II Battalion arrived at Krasnotorka without major incident. During the night, however, the unfortunate soldiers suffered heavy casualties from



**An interesting photograph of the 2cm Flak 38 mounted for ground operations. The 2cm AP/HE round weighed 330gms (12oz) and had a muzzle velocity of 830mps (2,720fps), and the 300gm (10oz) HE round a muzzle velocity of 900mps (2,950fps). It was a widely used weapon, although most were vehicle-mounted. It was particularly effective against infantry and soft-skinned vehicles.**

A German field ambulance.



frostbite when the battalion commander, who was unfamiliar with the severe Russian winter weather, ordered sentries to be posted in the open outside the village. The deception, however, had been successful, judging by an intercepted Russian radio message in which the enemy command was warned that strong German motorised formations were advancing toward Kramatorskaya.

The regimental commander moved I Battalion, the last one to arrive, to Toretskiy with orders to capture Krasnotorka the next day. At dawn the men of I Battalion crossed the river, passed through Druzhkovka, and moved into a hollow about 3km (2 miles) south of Krasnotorka. The cross-country march in deep snow was exhausting because the motorised equipment constantly bogged down and had to be pulled out by recovery vehicles. Nevertheless, the battalion arrived in its jump-off position by 1000.

The situation facing the battalion commander was exasperating. Ahead of him lay strongly defended Krasnotorka, from where a few enemy tanks were firing in his direction. Between him and his objective loomed a vast expanse of snow that was more than 1m (3ft) deep. Despite promised support from a medium artillery battery, a direct frontal assault on the town was bound to fail and involve heavy casualties. From a long way off the Russians could observe the individual German soldiers inching their way forward, their silhouettes clearly outlined against the white background, and could pick them off at will. Although the regimental commander shared his apprehensions, he knew that the attack had to be launched and Krasnotorka had to be taken: 'The only landmark that broke the monotony of the flat landscape was a high, snow-covered fence extending for about two miles along the right side of the road from the turn to the village. This fence, which actually looked more like a wall of snow, might conceal the troops while they worked their way toward the objective in single file, hugging the fence until they reached Krasnotorka. Although far from an ideal solution to the problem of carrying out a frontal assault on the village, this plan was the only apparent way out.' To deceive the Russian garrison and divert its attention, one company was to be echeloned in depth and advance on Krasnotorka on a wide front on the left side of the road.

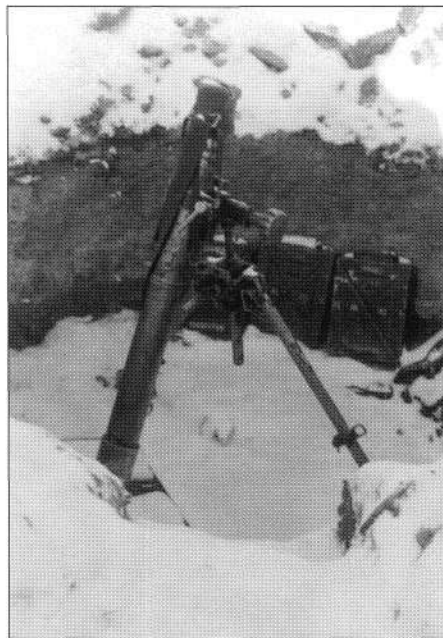
While this company was launching its diversionary attack, the rest of the battalion's soldiers crept to within 500m (1,600ft) of the objective.

The Russians fell for this ruse and concentrated the fire of their multi-barrelled rocket launchers, self-propelled guns and mortars on these men, who were promptly pinned down. Meanwhile, 'the main assault force continued its advance along the snow fence, infiltrated Krasnotorka, and seized it, in short order. Because of the deep snow, the battalion took two hours to cover the two miles along the fence. The Russians were taken completely by surprise and beat a hasty retreat to Krainatorskaya. A few days later the regiment, committed as a unit for the first time, followed up this initial success by seizing Slavyansk after overcoming stiff Russian resistance.'

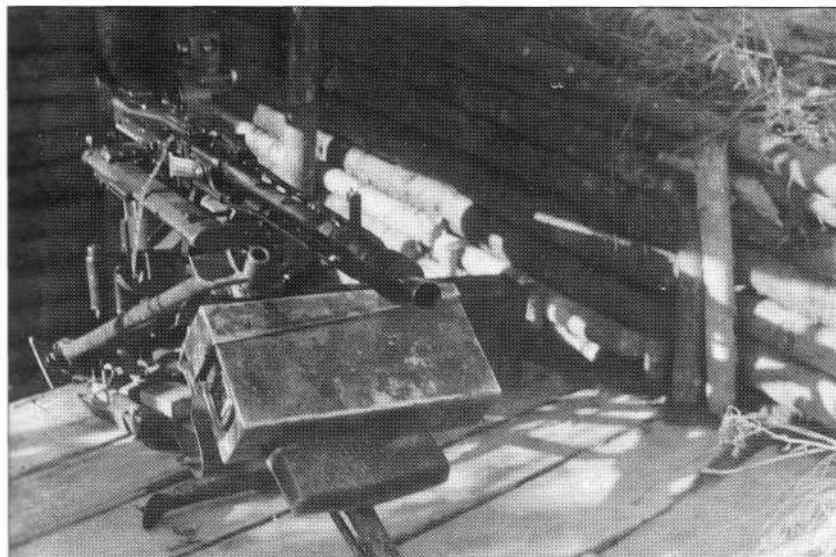
## TACTICAL DEFENCE

Initially German tactics during the long withdrawal still emphasised the need for counter-attack as soon as an enemy attack took place. However, many officers soon came to realise that these counter-attacks involved great human cost which was depleting the army, for which fewer and fewer replacements were available. For this reason the fighting retreat was modified so that when the enemy attacked, German troops would withdraw to a rearward prepared defensive position as soon as the first position was in danger of being destroyed. The Germans continued to attack to recover important lost ground, but as the war went on German forces became starved of men – both experienced and replacement troops – and attacks were frequently less forcefully carried out than during the advances of the first two years on the eastern front.

A typical prepared battalion defensive position would locate all infantry units behind frontal minefields. Battalion mortars and any short-range infantry guns supported the infantry positions and anti-tank weapons were placed about 1,000m (3,280ft) to the rear, where they were able to shoot enemy tanks but were not immediately



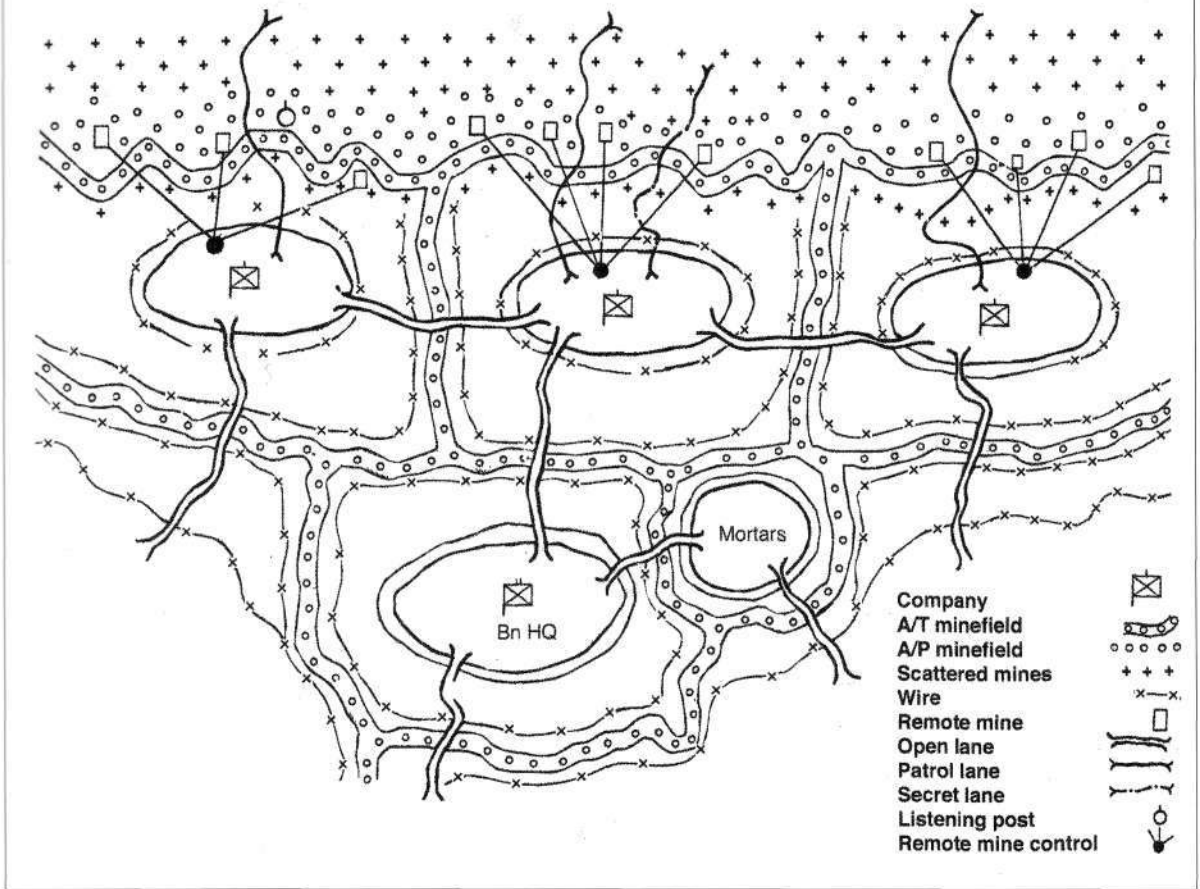
**A German 8cm Granatwerfer 34 in the typical circular trench, which allowed for all-round training and firing. Three ammunition boxes stand in the background.**



**A good view of an MG42 on its tripod, set up for fixed-line firing at night. The ammunition box resting on the back pad in front of the gun is to improve stability, as the gun was prone to vibrate heavily.**



## Prepared Battalion defensive position



**A prepared battalion defensive position, showing its considerable minefield protection.**

vulnerable to attack. Lanes through the minefields allowed patrols and wire-maintenance parties to operate safely. The rapidity of Russian advances made such positions luxuries, however, and the Germans were often unable to form stop lines except at natural obstacles, particularly rivers. The Russians had learned their basic tactics from the earlier German successes, and with ever-increasing manpower available, plus numerically superior armour and artillery, were now able to give the Germans their lesson back.

Defensive positions were arranged in depth, with the strength concentrated where the main enemy attack would take place. Advanced and outpost positions were put out from around 6,500m (21,300ft) in front of the main fighting line (*Hauptkampflinie*). The Germans aimed to stop the enemy as far out as possible, or to direct his attack towards points of their own choosing. Artillery fire always covered the advanced and outpost positions.

From late 1943 onwards, German defence became more passive, as the *Wehrmacht* began to lack the mobility and reserves they had had previously. The *Waffen-SS* was kept up to strength whenever possible, but many infantry battalions and regiments were always short of men – both the older, experienced men, and new replacements for the dead, wounded and captured, whose numbers mounted alarmingly.

Protected by the outpost and advanced positions, the main defence line was, if possible, constructed to give individual strongpoints linked to provide a belt. The strongpoints were built to give all-round defence, and surrounded by wire and minefields. Heavy weapon support consisted of machine guns, mortars and, when possible, infantry guns and anti-tank weapons. The new *Panzerfaust* was invaluable for giving the German infantryman close-range anti-tank capability.

The Germans sited their main defence positions on reverse slopes wherever possible, avoiding detection by the enemy and making the positions more difficult to observe by artillery spotters. If there was time, woods were fortified, but the speed of the Russian advance often made such luxuries impossible. The narrower rivers and streams were defended on the enemy side, and the waterway used as an anti-tank ditch. Wider rivers were defended on both sides where there was a crossing point to allow withdrawal of German troops as the enemy attack developed.

In the face of the growing number of Russian tanks, the German soldiers created obstacles to funnel the enemy into lanes protected by anti-tank guns and on to minefields. The main anti-tank ditches were sited between the front-line trenches and the anti-tank gun positions, allowing tanks to penetrate the front-line, only to be destroyed by the anti-tank defences. Infantry accompanying the tanks were destroyed by the machine guns and rifles of the front-line defenders, and by artillery support from the rear. Minefields were concentrated within the defensive positions in the front-line, with only a few scattered mines to the front of those positions. Experience had taught the Germans that Russian artillery fire could easily create safe lanes through minefields.

Towns and villages were regarded as excellent strongpoints by the Germans, especially where the buildings were built of stone or good brick. Towns offered especially good anti-tank defences, due to the problems of coordinating attacks in built-up areas and the ease with which tanks could be attacked at close quarters, especially with the *Panzerfaust*. The edges of the built-up area were lightly defended; the main resistance was concentrated further in. This made artillery support for an attack more difficult to observe and control, and meant that the attackers would be funnelled along roads to points the Germans chose to defend.

As the enemy penetrated further in, pockets of Germans would create small centres of resistance to slow down the rate of advance, and provide flanking fire on the attackers. Every attempt was made to trap the attacker in culs-de-sac, and to attack with a mobile German reserve held within the built-up area for that purpose. Larger reserves were held outside the town.

The German soldier had, by 1944, learnt the skills of urban combat. Booby traps were laid in both defended and unoccupied buildings; doors



**Another section position, well dug in with overhead cover, this time of thick concrete blocks.**

**A captured Russian Maxim water-cooled machine gun. The weapon was far too heavy and awkward to handle for the Germans to be interested in using it, especially in comparison with the MG42.**

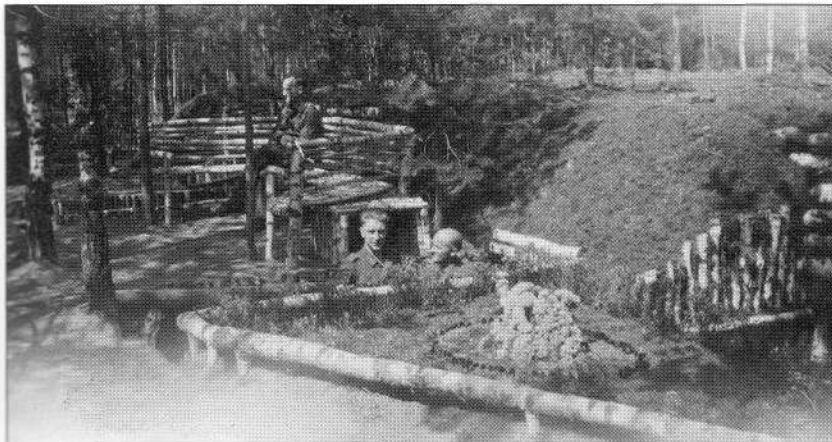


were blocked and windows filled with sand bags or bricks; 'mouseholes' were established in rows of houses so that the Germans could move internally, away from enemy fire and observation. Firing took place from the centre of rooms, not from the windows, so that muzzle flashes were well concealed from the enemy outside; after firing the Germans frequently moved to another room or even another storey of the building they were defending. Even the cellars were defended, with the lessons learned in Stalingrad being part of German doctrine thereafter.

Villages were defended as an entity: the village (if large) would have an inner defensive position surrounded by the outer defensive positions. The same aim was apparent: funnel the enemy into the killing zone in the centre, and harass his advance whilst he was moving through the outskirts. Tanks were regarded as ineffective in built-up areas, but when they were destroyed the Germans made sure that they could not be used by the Russians as observation posts or rendezvous points.

Although the Germans had spent the first two years of the campaign in Russia advancing, they had an effective system for withdrawal. The German troops would withdraw if there was no prospect of success in the battle, and particularly if they were in imminent danger of defeat. Careful planning was needed to break off an engagement, and to retire to rearward defensive positions. The Germans were adept at withdrawing troops securely, with all units completing a phased, planned withdrawal to the surprise of the enemy.

However, the German retreat on the eastern front was often the result of far superior numbers of Russians attacking; furthermore the Russians developed their own form of the war of movement, and were very successful in pushing the Germans back. Russian guns, tanks and infantry worked together extremely efficiently, with the tanks penetrating the German line and flooding towards the rear areas; following them were the infantry, who mopped-up German defences as they were met (or merely bypassed them). The attack was always supported by ever-increasing artillery firepower, from the outset to the limit of the tank advance and beyond. The Germans were understandably respectful of the Russian artillery, which made their lives



This rest area is the result of homesickness, with its wooden bank of seats and the flowers in the foreground. However, it has a military purpose as well, for beneath the bench is the entrance to the covered bunker on the right of the picture. Unfortunately nothing is known of the purpose of the bunker, but it may well be a headquarters.

hell, as one German soldier who fought at Kursk recounted: 'first came a dreadful barrage. I knew in advance what it was going to be like, because my father, who had been injured at Verdun in the First World War, described it to me. He knew what it was like to be at the mercy of the big guns – and in 1943 the Russians had many big guns. My father said that he had had to jump into shell holes. The ground looked as if it had been ploughed up. It was the same for us in Russia. You saw on the left or the right of you that there was a new shell crater, so you jumped into that one and then the next one. This went on for three hours before the actual fighting began.'

#### **An armoured forces task force seizes two vital bridges (August 1944)**

The Germans became aware quite soon during the war in the east that tank-infantry cooperation was vital to any success, and in those isolated instances in which German armoured forces units were at full strength, they were still able to attain local successes, even in the summer of 1944. During the nights of 13 and 14 August 1944, the infantrymen of 3 Panzer Division detrained at Kielce in southern Poland. Their mission was to stop the advance of Russian forces that had broken through the German lines during the collapse of Army Group Centre and to assist the withdrawing German formations in building up a new defence line near the upper Vistula.

In order to allow all units of the division the time needed to prepare for their next commitment, and at the same time secure the route of advance, the division commander decided to form an armoured forces task force from the units that had detrained first. The force was to be led by the commander of II Tank Battalion and was to consist of 5 and 6 Tank Companies, equipped with Panther tanks, one armoured infantry company mounted in armoured personnel carriers, and one artillery battery equipped with self-propelled 105mm howitzers. The task force was to launch a surprise attack on Village Z, situated approximately 48km (30 miles) east of Kielce, and seize the bridges south and east of the village in order to permit the main body of the division to advance along the Kielce–Opatow road toward the Vistula.

The attack was to be launched at dawn on 16 August. According to air reconnaissance information obtained at 1800 on 15 August, Village Z was



A knocked out T34 tank. The vehicle has been hit on the far side and subsequently 'brewed up', as the deposits in front of the turret show. The T34 tank turned the fortunes of the Russians around, and was highly mobile and very effective against the German Mk III and Mk IV tanks.



held by relatively weak Russian forces and no major troop movements were observed in the area. The only German unit stationed in the area between Kielce and Village Z was 188 Infantry Regiment, which occupied the high ground east of River A and whose HQ was in Village X.

The country was hilly. Fields planted with grain, potatoes and root crops were interspersed with patches of forest. The weather was sunny and dry, with high daytime temperatures and cool moonlit nights. The hours of sunrise and sunset were 0445 and 1930, respectively.

The task force commander received his orders at 2000 on 15 August and immediately began to study the plan of attack. Since the units that were to participate in the operation had not yet been alerted, the entire task force could not possibly be ready to move out before 2300. The maximum speed at which his force could drive over a dusty dirt road without headlights was 10km/h (6mph). The approach march to Village Z would therefore require a minimum of five hours. Taking into account the time needed for refuelling and deploying his units, the commander arrived at the conclusion that the attack could not be launched before dawn. Since the operation might thus be deprived of the element of surprise, he decided to employ an advance guard that was to move out one hour earlier than the bulk of his force, reach Village X by 0200 at the latest, and cover the remaining 15km (9 miles) in 1 1/2 hours. After a short halt the advance guard could launch the attack on Village Z just before dawn.

At 2020 the task force commander assembled the commanders of the participating units at his HQ and issued the following verbal orders:

6 Company, 6 Tank Regiment, reinforced by one platoon of armoured infantry, will form an advance guard that will be ready to move out at 2200 in order to seize Village Z and the two bridges across River B by a coup de main. A reconnaissance detachment

will guide the advance guard to Village X. Two trucks loaded with fuel will be taken along for refuelling, which is scheduled to take place in the woods two miles west of Village Z.

The main body of the task force will follow the advance guard at 2300 and form a march column in the following order:

- 2 Tank Battalion Headquarters,
- 5 Company of 6 Tank Regiment,
- A Battery of 75 Artillery Regiment,
- and 1 Company of the 3 Armoured Infantry Regiment (less one platoon).

After crossing River A, the tank company will take the lead, followed by battalion headquarters, the armoured infantry company, and the artillery battery in that order.

The task force will halt and refuel in the woods two miles west of Village Z. Radio silence will be lifted after River A has been crossed.

The commander of 6 Company will leave at 2100 and accompany me to the HQ of 188 Infantry Regiment and establish contact with that unit. 5 Company's commander will take charge of the march column from Kielce to Village X.

Upon receiving these instructions the commander of 6 Company, Lieutenant Zobel, returned to his unit, assembled the platoon leaders, the company sergeant major, and the maintenance section commander and briefed them. He indicated the march route, which they entered on their maps. For the march from Kielce to Village X, the headquarters section was to drive at the head of the column, followed by the four tank platoons, the armoured forces infantry platoon, the fuel trucks, and the rations and maintenance sections. The senior platoon commander was to be in charge of the column until Zobel joined it in Village X. Hot coffee was to be served half an hour before the time of departure, which was scheduled for 2200. The reconnaissance detachment was to move out at 2130 and post guides along the road to Village X.

After issuing these instructions to his subordinates, Zobel rejoined the task force commander, with whom he drove to Village X. When they arrived at the HQ of 188 Infantry Regiment, they were given detailed information on the situation. They learned that, after heavy fighting in the Opatow region, the regiment had withdrawn to its present positions during the night of 14–15 August. Attempts to establish a continuous line in conjunction with other units withdrawing westward from the upper Vistula were under way. The Russians had so far not advanced beyond Village Z. Two Polish civilians who had been seized in the woods west of the village had stated that no Russians were to be seen in that forest.

**A corduroy road made of small tree trunks, absolutely vital in keeping transport moving to and from the front. The detail in this photograph shows a road junction and a horse-drawn trailer, suitably camouflaged in the wider passing place on the right.**





not observed any Russian movements during the night. Zobel radioed the task force commander that he was going into action.

To permit better observation, the tanks drove with open hatches. The tank commanders stood erect with their heads emerging from the cupolas, listening with a headset. The other tank hatches were buttoned up. Gunners and loaders stood by to open fire at a moment's notice. In anticipation of an encounter with Russian tanks the guns were loaded with armour-piercing shells.

At 0845 the advance guard reached the wooded area in which it was to halt and refuel. The tanks formed two rows, one on each side of the road, while armoured forces infantrymen provided security to the east and west of the halted column. Sentries were posted at 50m (164ft) intervals in the forest north and south of the road. Trucks loaded with fuel cans drove along the road between the two rows of tanks, stopping at each pair of tanks to unload the full cans and picking up the empties on their return trip. The loaders helped the drivers to refuel and check their vehicles. The gunners checked their weapons, while each radio operator made coffee for his tank crew. Zobel gave the platoon commanders and tank commanders a last briefing and asked one of the returning lorry drivers to carry a message on the progress of the operation to the task force commander in Village X.

According to Zobel's plan of assault, the advance guard was to emerge from the woods in two columns. The one on the left was to consist of 1 Tank Platoon, the headquarters section, and 4 Tank Platoon, whereas the right column was to be composed of 2 and 3 Tank Platoons and the armoured infantry platoon. The plan was for 1 Platoon to take up positions opposite the southern edge of Village Z, with 2 Platoon at the foot of the hill to the south of it. Under the protection of these two platoons 3 and 4 Platoons were to seize the south bridge in conjunction with the armoured infantry platoon, drive through the village, and capture the second bridge located about half a mile east of the village. Then 2 Platoon was to follow across the south bridge, drive through the village, and block the road leading northward, while 1 Platoon was to follow and secure the south bridge. The tanks were not to open fire until they encountered enemy resistance.

Zobel did not send out any reconnaissance patrols because he did not want to attract the attention of the Russians. In drawing up his plan Zobel kept in mind that the success of the operation would depend on proper timing and on the skill and resourcefulness of his platoon commanders. Because of the swiftness with which the raid was to take place, he would have little opportunity to influence the course of events once the attack was under way.



**A treetop observation post. These positions were used frequently to enable long-range observation of the enemy, and were very valuable as long as they were well concealed.**



Here soldiers are preparing the defences of a village during the long retreat. Morale is still relatively good, as can be seen from the smile on the face of the man on the left. The small wooden causeway bridge is of interest.



At 0430, when the first tanks moved out of the woods, it was almost daylight and the visibility was approximately 1,000m (3,300ft). As 1 and 2 Platoons were driving down the road toward Village Z, they were suddenly fired on from the flank by Russian tanks and anti-tank guns. Three German tanks were immediately disabled, one of them catching fire. Zobel ordered the two platoons to withdraw.

Since the element of surprise no longer existed and the advance guard had lost three of its tanks, Zobel abandoned his plan of attack and decided to await the arrival of the main body of the task force. He reported the failure of the operation by radio, and at 0515 his units were joined by the main force. After Zobel had made a report in person, the task force commander decided to attack Village Z before the Russian garrison could receive reinforcements. This time the attack was to be launched from the south under the protection of artillery fire.

The plan called for Zobel's company to conduct a feint attack along the same route it had previously taken and to fire on targets of opportunity across the river. Meanwhile 5 Company and the armoured infantry company were to drive southward, skirt the hill, and approach Village Z from the south. While 3 and 4 Platoons of 5 Company, the armoured infantry company and 6 Company were to concentrate their fire on the southern edge of the village, 1 and 2 Platoons of 2 Company were to attack across the south bridge, drive into the village, turn east at the market square and capture the east bridge. As soon as the first two platoons had driven across the bridge, the other tanks of 5 Company were to close up and push on to the northern edge of the village. The armoured infantry vehicles were to follow across the south bridge and support 1 and 2 Platoons in their efforts to seize the east bridge. The soldiers of 6 Company were to annihilate any Russian forces that might continue to offer resistance at the southern edge of the village. The artillery battery was to go into position at the edge of the woods and support the tanks.

No more than two tank platoons could be employed for the initial attack because the south bridge could support only one tank at a time. All the remaining firepower of the task force would be needed to lay



**A 15cm s FH 18 emplacement. The crew are relaxed, but shells are being fused, so presumably the gun will soon go in to action against an impending Russian attack.**

down a curtain of fire along the entire southern edge of the village. This was the most effective means of neutralising the enemy defence during the critical period when the two tank platoons were driving toward the bridge. To facilitate the approach of the tanks to the bridge, the artillery battery was to lay down a smoke screen south of the village along the river line. Having entered the village, the two lead platoons were not to let themselves be diverted from their objective, the east bridge. The elimination of enemy resistance was to be left to the follow-up elements. The attack was to start at 0600.

The tanks of 2 Company refuelled quickly in the woods, and the battery went into position. The task force was ready for action.

At 0600, 6 Company began to move. The task force commander and an artillery observer were with the company – the battery gave fire support against specific targets. At 0610 the tanks of 5 Company emerged from the woods in columns of two, formed a wedge, turned southward, and made a wide circle around the hill. The vehicles of the armoured forces infantry 6 Company followed at close distance. As the tanks and armoured forces personnel carriers approached the hill from the south, they were suddenly fired on by Russian machine guns and anti-tank rifles from the top of the hill. The commander of 2 Company slowed down and asked for instructions. The task force commander radioed instructions to engage only those Russians on the hill who obstructed the continuation of the attack. The tanks of 2 Company thereupon deployed and advanced on a broad front, thus offering protection to the personnel carriers which were vulnerable to anti-tank grenades. Soon afterward 5 Company reported that it had neutralised the Russian infantry on the hill and was ready to launch the assault. The task force commander thereupon gave the signal for firing the artillery concentration on the southern edge of the village. Three minutes later 1 and 2 Platoons drove toward the bridge and crossed it in single file, while 6 Company's tanks approached the crossing site from the west.

As soon as the last tank of 1 and 2 Platoons had crossed the bridge, the other two platoons of 5 Company and the armoured personnel carriers closed up at top speed. The two lead platoons drove through

**German signals lorries. These two vehicles are from divisional headquarters.**



the village and captured the east bridge without encountering any resistance. Russian infantry troops trying to escape northward were overrun by 3 and 4 Platoons and knocked out two retreating Russian tanks at the northern edge of the village. Soon afterward all units reported that they had accomplished their missions.

The task force commander then organised the defence of Village Z, which he was to hold until the arrival of the main body of 3 Panzer Division. Two tank platoons blocked the road leading northward, two protected the east bridge, two armoured infantry platoons set up outposts in the forest east of River B, and the remaining units constituted a reserve force within the village. The artillery battery took up positions on the south bank of the river close to the south bridge. Its guns were zeroed in on the northern and eastern approach roads to the village.

In this action the task force commander made the mistake of ordering Zobel's advance guard to halt and refuel in the woods 3km (2 miles) west of Village Z. In issuing this order he applied the principle that tanks going into combat must carry sufficient fuel to assure their mobility throughout a day's fighting. Although this principle is valid in general, it should have been disregarded in this particular instance. Since the element of surprise was of decisive importance for the success of the operation, everything should have been subordinated to catching the Russians unprepared. If necessary, the advance guard should have refuelled as far back as Village X or shortly after crossing River A. Since the woods actually used for the refuelling halt were only 3km (2 miles) from Village Z, the German commander should have foreseen that the noise of starting the tank engines would warn the Russian outposts, which happened to be on the hill south of the village. Moreover, the task force commander should not have stayed behind in Village X, but should have led the advance guard in person. By staying up with the lead elements, he would have been able to exercise better control over both the advance guard and the main body of his force. However, in general the attack by the fully assembled task force was properly planned and its execution met with the expectedly quick success.

## FIGHTING IN TAIGA AND TUNDRA

Although the German Army on the eastern front was generally conducting a fighting retreat following the winter of 1942/43, German soldiers in some sectors fought a quite different type of war until the very last stages of 1945. During the summer of 1941 German forces advancing through northern Finland toward Kandalaksha and Murmansk failed to reach their objective, the Murmansk-Leningrad railway line. After an unsuccessful Russian offensive in the spring of 1942, there followed a period of stalemate which lasted for 2½ years. During this time the German forces north of the Arctic Circle opposed the Russians along two widely separated fronts. The Kandalaksha front to the south was held by two infantry divisions under the command of XXXVI Infantry Corps, and the Murmansk front to the north was held by one coastal defence and two mountain infantry divisions under XIX Mountain Infantry Corps. Patrols secured the intermediate country.

Immediately after the Russo-Finnish armistice, which was concluded in the beginning of September 1944, the Russians launched an offensive on the Kandalaksha front, followed by another in the Murmansk area a month later.

The country factors and weather conditions had a decisive effect on the German soldier operating in these regions. Moreover, the assistance given to the Germans by their allies, the Finns, proved to be extremely valuable. Not only did the Finns fight side by side with the Germans, they also assisted in the training of newly arrived troops and helped them get adjusted to the peculiarities of the theatre. When the Finns dropped out of the war the position of the Germans in the area became untenable.



**A German sergeant inspects the breech mechanism of a Russian light gun, destroyed by the Russian gunners who wedged a shell in the muzzle and fired a second shell in the breech. Many Russian weapons were taken over by the Germans for their own use.**



The Russians were thoroughly familiar with the requirements of combat in taiga and tundra. During the stalemate they defended themselves with great skill. In 1944 they demonstrated an extraordinary ability to move across trackless country and to adapt themselves to its features. Even tanks and artillery travelled over roads that the Germans had previously considered impassable for any vehicle. No less surprising to the Germans was the speed of the Russians in overcoming or bypassing man-made obstacles and barriers. The tactics they used most frequently were enveloping manoeuvres. When pursuing withdrawing German units, they often sent encircling forces around one or both flanks of the retreating Germans.

### **German raid on a Russian strongpoint in northern Finland (February 1944)**

During the winter of 1943–44, the XIX Mountain Infantry Corps, occupying the northern sector of 20 Mountain Army, was composed of two mountain divisions and one coastal defence division. The unfortunate German troops faced numerically superior Russian forces. Both the Germans and Russians were holding fairly well-constructed positions for the third successive winter.

One of the two mountain infantry divisions, reinforced by special troops, occupied positions in the rocky tundra country about a mile west of the Litsa River, which was completely frozen over during the winter and therefore constituted no serious barrier. The tundra region combines the features of sub-alpine mountain tops and hilly country. The relatively minor heights afford good observation of the intermediate country. Bare, rocky ground alternates with mossy patches. With the exception of some scattered, stunted birches the vegetation offers little cover.

The German front-line consisted of a chain of unevenly spaced strongpoints, each organised for all-round defence. In some sectors the intervals between strongpoints was as much as a mile. These gaps were protected by an intricate defence system involving mutual fire support from the strongpoints and, if necessary, the commitment of local



A fine picture of an MG34 on the sustained-fire tripod. For more details of this weapon, see *Warrior 59*.

reserves. In general, the Forward Defence Line (FDL) was an imaginary line connecting the positions that had been prepared for defensive weapons. Along this line stood chilled sentries, and additional listening posts were manned at night and during bad weather. Only during a state of alert were the positions fully occupied. The distance between the German and Russian lines varied between 1,000m (3,300ft) and 1.6km (1 mile).

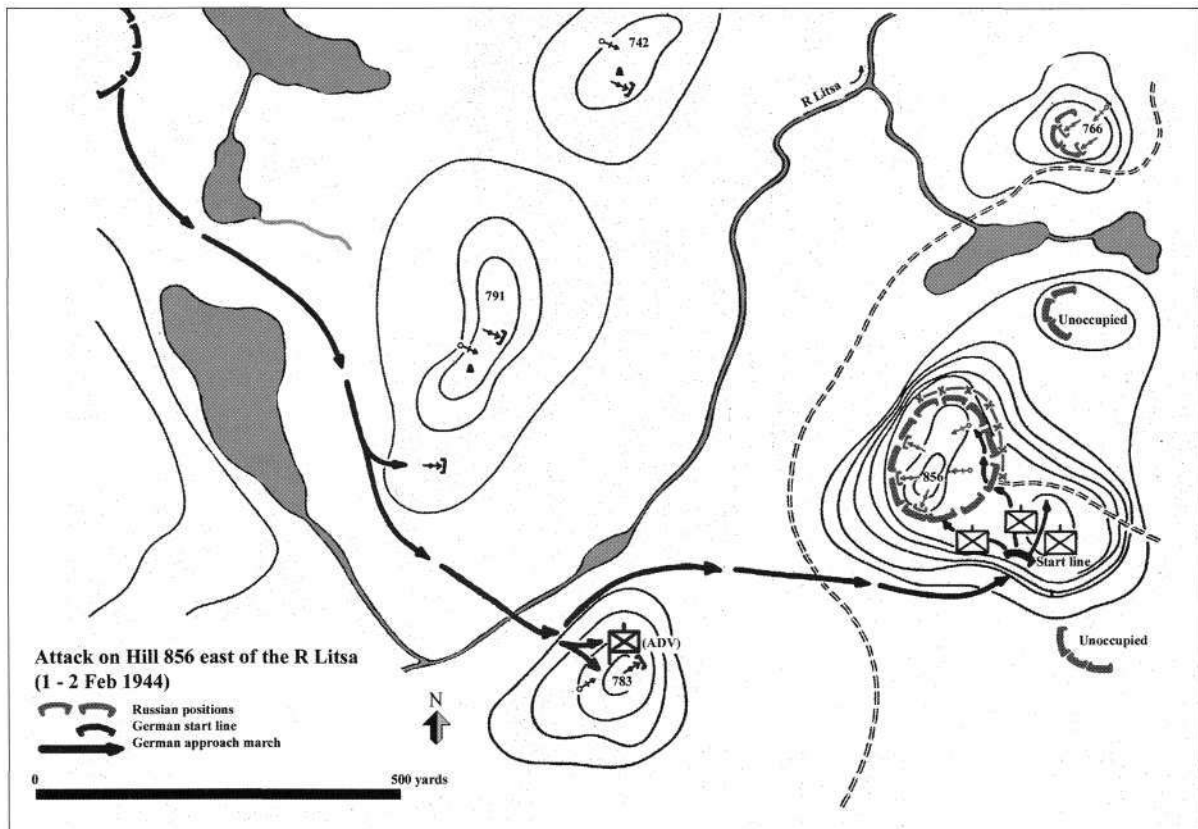
In freezing arctic conditions, the German infantry limited their activities to intensive patrol actions, and operations in greater than section strength were a rarity during the winter. In addition to the constant close-range reconnaissance, which was essential for security, especially during the long winter nights and during snowstorms, both sides carried out raids and probing attacks to gather information, disrupt supply traffic and maintain the aggressiveness of their troops.

Early in January 1944, I Battalion, 143 Mountain Infantry Regiment, received orders to prepare and carry out a raid against the Russian strongpoint on Hill 856. The objective of this raid was to take prisoners and to destroy as many of the enemy defensive installations and shelters as possible. To assure success, the raid was to be preceded by meticulous preparations, for which the soldiers were allowed a maximum of four weeks. Hill 856 had been selected because it had not been attacked by the Germans since 1941. The steep western and southern slopes of the hill had been considered insurmountable, especially in winter. The Germans therefore assumed that the Russian garrison, whose outposts controlled the northern and eastern approaches of the hill, felt quite safe in its bastion and would consequently be more liable to relax its guard than troops in other sectors. On the basis of aerial photographs and close reconnaissance, it appeared that wire obstacles had been set up only along the northern and eastern perimeter of the strongpoint. Another factor that influenced the choice of this objective was that German heavy weapons and reserve elements would be able to lend effective support from Hills 742, 791 and 783, which were located in the no-man's-land between the German strongpoints and Hill 856.

According to air and ground reconnaissance, the Russian strongpoint was held by one reinforced platoon. The German battalion commander decided to select a correspondingly small assault force, consisting of one platoon sergeant, three section commanders and 24 men. This force was to be subdivided into an assault section, composed of the sergeant, one section commander, and ten men, and two supporting sections, each composed of a section commander and seven men. The assault force was assisted by reconnaissance elements, a medical team, a machine-gun section with two heavy machine guns, and a mortar section with one 80mm mortar.

The German strongpoint located closest to the objective was designated Base Camp 2, where one mountain infantry and one field engineer platoon were ordered to stand by as reserve forces. Artillery support would be provided upon request.

The raid was to be directed from a forward HQ to be established on Hill 783. Between Base Camp 2 and the forward HQ contact was to be maintained by telephone and radio. Wire lines would be extended to the assault force's jump-off line just southeast of the objective. Radio silence was to be imposed during the initial phase of the raid.



**Attack on strongpoint east of River Litsa.**

Hofer, a battle-tested senior sergeant who had proven his ability to lead such raids on previous occasions, was placed in command of the assault section. He was an excellent mountaineer from the Tyrol and volunteered for this mission. In his mind there was little doubt that, given the right weather and sufficient time for preparation, it would be possible to climb the steep slopes leading to the Russian strongpoint.

Plans called for the assault section to be armed exclusively with captured Russian submachine guns, and each man was to carry six magazines of ammunition. The supporting sections were to be equipped with two rifle-grenade launchers and 60 grenades, a medium mortar with 43 rounds, and a heavy machine gun with 3,000 rounds. The men were also to carry mines and demolition charges to blow up the Russian installations. In addition, the assault section was to be issued with three Very pistols and flares.

All men were to wear padded winter uniforms and felt boots, except for the members of the assault force, who were to be issued ski boots, the heavy rubber soles of which afforded extra traction. Each man was to wear a long white parka with hood, white outer trousers, a woollen cap and woollen mittens with a hole for the trigger finger. The ammunition was to be carried in the outside pockets of their parkas, and a Finnish dagger was to be kept handy. After careful deliberation, it was decided not to use skis or wear coloured brassards for identification as had been customary on patrol, because speed was less important than remaining unobserved.

The emergency-type rations carried by the assault force included combination chocolate and sweet bars, dried meat, bacon and dextrose.

In addition to the usual supplies, the medical team was to take along a dog sled, two collapsible ski sleds, several reindeer-skin-lined sleeping bags and some vacuum bottles filled with hot tea.

Before the operation was launched, recently taken aerial photographs were compared with older ones. Apart from a few hitherto unobserved shelters, they revealed no substantial changes in the Russian dispositions. Each man of the assault force was given an opportunity to familiarise himself with the land and the disposition of the Russian outposts by observation from Base Camp 2 and the observation posts (OPs) on Hills 791 and 742. The information thus obtained was collated and formed the basis for panoramic sketches, which were then studied and evaluated in the light of the most recent aerial photographs.

In the German rear area, physical features resembling the Russian held strongpoint were used by the engineer platoon to build a replica of the Russian installations. For almost two weeks the assault force carried out a series of rehearsals, some of them with live ammunition. During this intensive training period weapons, clothing and equipment were tested, as were also the various tactical solutions to achieve perfect coordination among the different elements.



**ABOVE** The hard way to cut timber: the issue double-ended saw, here being used to cut timber for shoring up trenches and dugouts.



**LEFT** A destroyed Russian field gun. This older-pattern weapon, found on the retreat, was being replaced by much more effective and longer-ranging guns.



The original plan of dividing the force into three separate sections appeared to be the most effective and was finally adopted. During the approach the assault section was to be split and each half was to be guided to the start line by one of the supporting sections. The supporting sections were then to occupy their designated positions on the southern and southeastern slopes of Hill 856, while the assault section reassembled and prepared to move out. Naturally, every man had to be given precise instructions as to the part he was to take in the raid, the success of which depended on maximum precision in timing.

The battalion commander ordered all participating leaders to attend map exercises, where different phases of the adopted and alternate plans of action were reviewed, including possible enemy countermeasures. The nearest major Russian strongpoint was 1.6km (1 mile) to the rear of Hill 856, so that the intervention by reserves was not expected less than 45 minutes after an alert had been sounded. The powdery snow, averaging over 1m (3ft) in depth, would prevent these reserves from making better time.

After a prolonged freezing spell, during which the temperatures dipped as low as  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), the sky was overcast and toward noon of 1 February light snow flurries began to fall. By evening the flurries turned into a regular snowstorm. This was ideal weather for the execution of the planned raid and, since all preparations had been made and the men were well rested, the assault was set for that night.

At 0030 the raiding party left Base Camp 2. The reconnaissance elements led the way. Following in sequence were the officer in charge of the operation with headquarters personnel to man the forward HQ, the medium mortar section, the assault force proper, the medical team, and the heavy machine-gun section.

Each element kept within sight of the one ahead. Part of the way up the southern slope of Hill 791 the machine-gun section fell out and moved to a previously designated point from which it covered the advance of the other elements.

Shortly after the raiding party had set out, the snowstorm let up – soon only a few clouds obscured an otherwise clear, moonlit sky. The improved visibility was expected to be unfavourable for the execution of the raid. However, the raiding party continued its march, knowing that once the moon was down, visibility would again be poor. Despite the excellent visibility for the Russians, Hill 783 was reached safely at 0115.

As soon as the command post had been established and sentries posted, the assault force proceeded on toward Hill 856. By 0300 the moon had set, and soon thereafter, despite the deep snow and occasional Russian flares, the assault force arrived at the

**Long after this tank (a T34) was destroyed, the soldier in the picture and the photographer found it again. The turret has been blown off the hull (on the left) and the rather gruesome skull of an occupant stares sightlessly at the camera as the German soldier looks at it with sombre mien.**

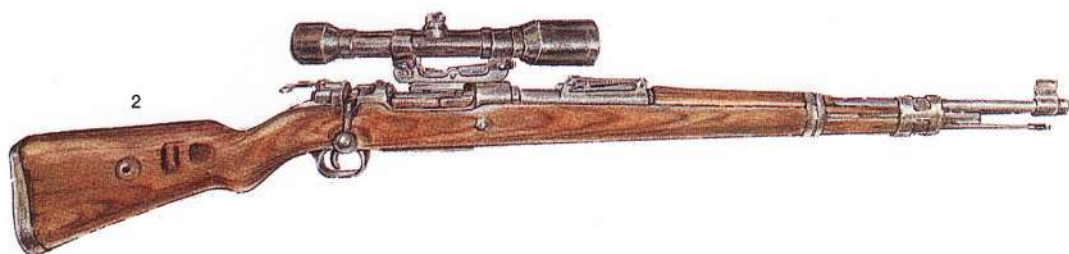


A: The Nebelwerfer



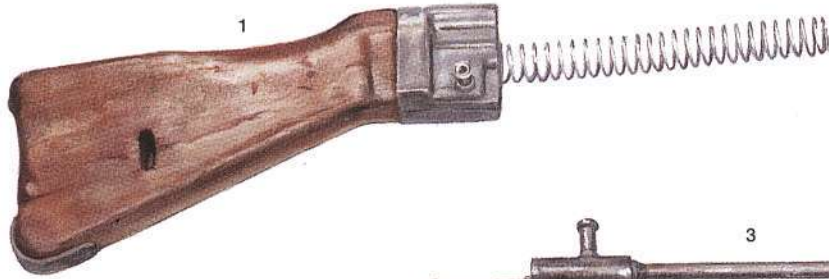


B: New weapons for the infantry



E. Sharpou

C: The MP 44/StG 44



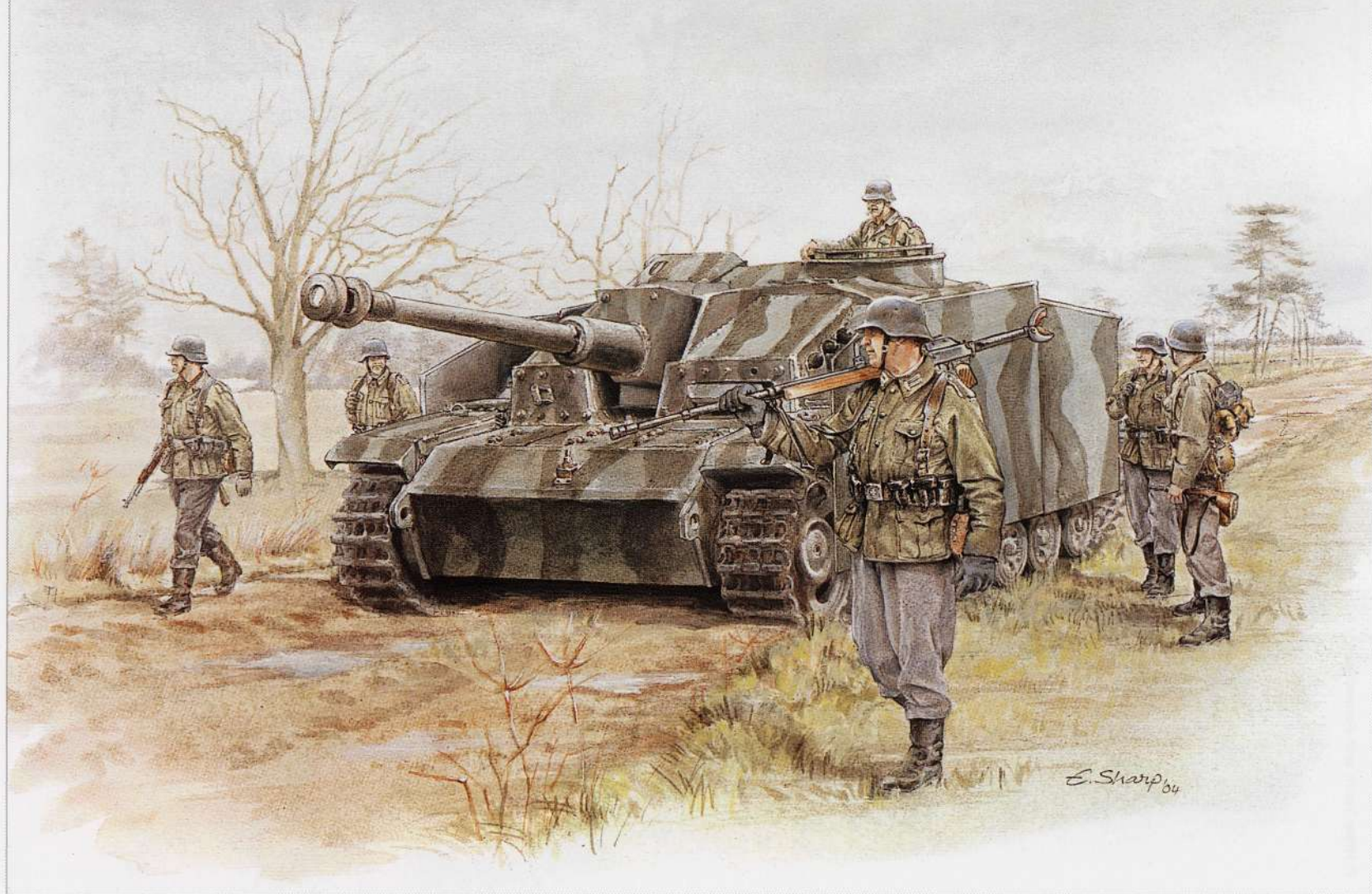


D: Uniforms 1944-45





E: Infantry support: the Sturmgeschütz





F: Hitler Youth with *Panzerfaust*





G: Mounted Reconnaissance





H: Berlin - April 1945



foot of Hill 856, apparently without being observed. Over the steepest portion of the hill's slope the men had to crawl and climb in two single files, a feat that required great effort and skill.

By 0345 all the men were assembled on the start line. The two supporting sections took up their assigned positions without making contact with the enemy. Hofer and his section began to work their way toward the road leading to the objective from the east. Concealed by the snow that was banked high on both sides of the road, Hofer hoped to gain access to the Russian compound. When he reached a point about 35m (115ft) from the communication trench that connected the various shelters and emplacements, Hofer saw a Russian emerging from a shelter and walking toward the northeastern part of the compound. Without having noticed the Germans, the Russian disappeared in another section of the trench.

Without hesitation Hofer decided to capture the bunker. Just as his section was getting ready for the assault, Hofer discovered that he had mistaken a stone reinforced section of the trench for a bunker. He quickly changed his mind, regrouped his section, and advanced in the direction of the shelters at the northeast end of the compound by moving along the communication trench. One of his men noticed a cable lying in the trench and cut it. Suddenly the section commander heard the steps of a man coming toward him in the dark. At a given signal the Germans pounced on him and overpowered him. While the section commander and his men were trying to hold down the struggling Russian in the narrow trench, a second Russian approached unobserved. He saw the scuffle and, shouting for help, made a dash for the nearest shelter before any German could stop him. Since these shouts were bound to alert the Russian garrison and since he had at least captured one prisoner, Hofer decided to pull his men back at once and leave the neutralisation of the strongpoint installations to heavy weapons and artillery fire. With the information he had obtained, he would be able to pinpoint their targets.

The withdrawal took place according to plan. First the assault section evacuated the area, taking along the prisoner, then the supporting section on the left, and finally the one on the right abandoned their positions. The supporting section on the left did not have time to mine the communication trench and thereby obstruct it as intended. The Russians who had emerged from their shelters on the double were pinned down by grenade-launcher and submachine-gun fire from the German rearguard, which inflicted heavy losses before following the main body. Hofer was the last man to leave the hill.

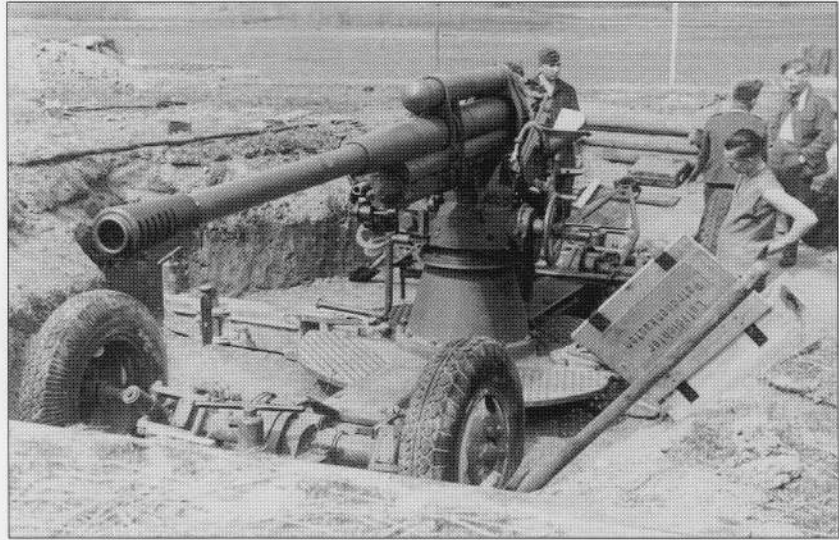
As soon as the Russians realised that the Germans were pulling out, they recovered from the initial shock and began to fire light and medium mortars in the presumed direction of the German withdrawal. Since the Russians were unaware of the route the Germans had taken, their fire missed the single-file column retracing its steps down Hill 856.



**This sign warns that the road ahead is under enemy observation, and that it is closed to movement on account of the heavy enemy fire that can be delivered against travellers. The Germans began to realise that the Russians of 1943, 1944 and 1945 were a much more professional enemy than they had faced in the advances of 1942 and 1943.**



**A Russian 85mm M1939 anti-aircraft gun captured and used by the Germans. The good ballistics of this weapon appealed to the Germans, who were happy to use captured stock.**

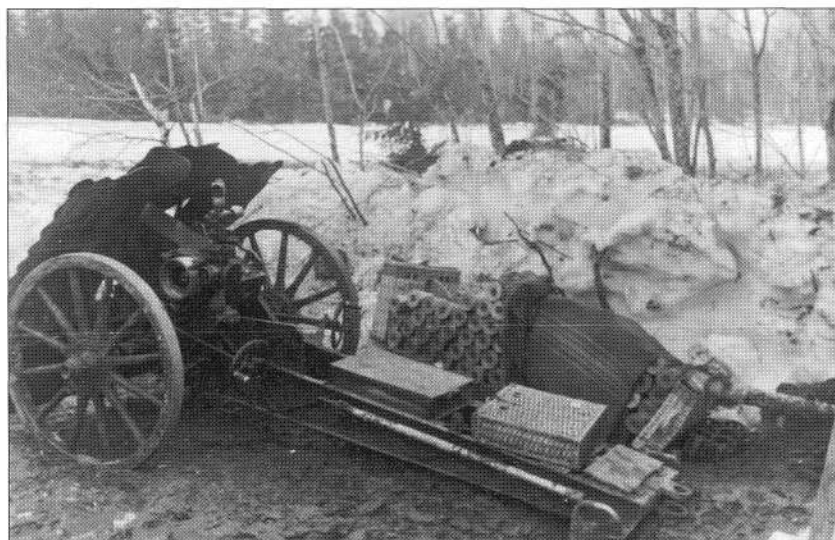


At 0440 the assault force reached a point about midway between Hills 858 and 783. The sergeant fired a red flare, which both indicated his position and requested fire on Hill 856. The Germans on the surrounding hills were just waiting for this signal. With sudden vehemence the prepared fire of combined heavy weapons and artillery was unleashed, thus facilitating the further withdrawal of the assault force. The Russians also fired flares and lit up no-man's-land between the German and Russian strongpoints with long-burning signal rockets. In addition to the Russian mortars firing from Hill 856, heavy machine guns on Hill 766 now joined in and raked the Litsa Valley. Their fire was well adjusted and German counter fire failed to silence them. The Russian mortars also directed well-aimed fire on Base Camp 2.

The withdrawing assault force took advantage of every physical feature while traversing the northern slope of Hill 783 and crossing the Litsa. Up to that point it had not suffered a single casualty. When it was moving up the slope of Hill 791 from the bottom of Litsa Valley, the end of the column was suddenly hit by a hail of machine-gun fire from Hill 766. Five men were wounded, and when a 120mm mortar bomb scored a direct hit on the machine-gun section on the south slope of Hill 791, the Germans suffered six additional casualties.

The last elements of the assault force reached Base Camp 2 at 0530, by which time all the wounded had been brought back safely and given first aid. Fifteen minutes later the Germans ceased firing and the Russians followed suit soon afterward.

This action is typical of the small-scale fighting that took place in northern Finland from 1941 to 1944. Meticulous preparations and painstaking efforts usually led to negligible results. In this instance the German raiders did achieve surprise and were able to capture a prisoner, but they found out that the Russians on Hill 856 were on the alert, despite the fact that this strongpoint had not been attacked in three years. Interrogation of the prisoner provided little information, except that the garrison on the hill had recently been relieved by fresh troops. If a lesson was to be learned from this raid, it was that even the most careful preparation could not guarantee the success of such an operation.



Although obsolete, this 7.5cm light infantry gun was still on issue late in the war, particularly to rear-area units and the *Volkssturm* support units. Further details are to be found in *Warrior 59*.

In the late summer of 1944 the Germans were preparing to evacuate their forces from northern Finland. The Russians, who anticipated such a move, brought up new divisions with the intention of cutting the Kandalaksha–Rovaniemi railway line and highway west of Alakurti and the vital Alakurti–Vuorijarvi–Salla road. The German 163 Infantry Division, forming part of the XXXVI Corps, was responsible for the defence of a large salient extending from a point approximately 18km (11 miles) northeast of Alakurti to the primeval forests west of Lake On.

The division's task was to secure the vital German lines of communication during the impending withdrawal. The German defence line was formed by a number of fortified strongpoints consisting of blockhouses and bunkers protected by wire entanglements. Each strongpoint was manned by one or two rifle platoons supported by mortars and heavy machine guns. Roving patrols of up to section strength maintained contact between the strongpoints, and several intermediate sentry posts were established. The Russians had developed a similar defence system opposite the German positions.

The country across which this German front extended featured lakes, swamps, deep forests, rocky plateaux and occasional dominating hills. The wooded areas, consisting in this region primarily of tall firs and stunted pines, are relatively sparse. On the other hand there is a dense growth of blueberry and cranberry shrubs over wide areas. Huge boulders and decaying tree trunks make the region even more difficult to negotiate. Inhabiting the forests are bison, elk, reindeer, bear and grouse. The few inhabited localities in this region were many miles behind the German lines.

During the winter the German soldiers had relatively little difficulty in maintaining security in this region since new tracks were immediately recognisable in the virgin snowscape, but they were unable to keep the area under observation during the summer. An encounter with a Russian patrol had to be expected anywhere at any moment.

Digging a foxhole was almost impossible because only a thin layer of soil covered the rock beneath. As an expedient blockhouses and bunkers were built, but these made inviting targets for anti-tank guns.





**The engine of a Russian Yak-2 aircraft which has been shot down by flak. The aircraft was one of the most successful ground-attack aircraft used by the Russians and was fitted with two 23mm cannon and three machine guns and could carry 600kg (1,322lb) of bombs.**

12 men were needed to escort one casualty: four stretcher bearers, four relief bearers acting as guards and four others to carry the rations, equipment and other baggage. The old Finnish proverb, 'At the creation of time the good Lord did not think of hurrying', is characteristic of the nature of human activities in this region.

Most of the time the German company commanders, platoon and even section commanders were completely on their own; any mistake on their part was all the more costly. The implementation of an order took an infinitely long time and it was equally time-consuming to carry out any change in plans. The responsibility of junior commanders went far beyond what was generally expected of men of their rank.

When properly clothed, the German soldier bore up fairly well in winter, even when temperatures dropped to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-40^{\circ}\text{F}$ ). In the summer, however, when the temperature occasionally rose to  $35^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $95^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) in the shade, any activity at all in those humid swamps was sheer torture. The Germans therefore preferred to occupy high ground, where there was some relief to be had from the heat and the swarms of mosquitoes that plagued them everywhere else. The Russians were apparently little affected by temperature or insects and could spend many days in the swamp land without reducing their effort.

On 13 August, after all had been quiet along 307 Regiment's front for several months, Russian riflemen supported by mortars suddenly attacked Yelchen, a well-fortified German strongpoint named after tiny Lake Yelchen near the northwestern tip of Lake On. One of the Russian prisoners taken during the inconclusive action that ensued disclosed that he belonged to 67 Rifle Division and that his unit had only recently moved into this area.

Lieutenant Colonel Schmitt, commander 307 Infantry Regiment, responsible for the defence of this sector, decided to improve his positions before the Russians could launch an offensive. For this purpose he concentrated some of the forces at his disposal for an attack on Hill 285, which dominated the area between Lakes Tolvand and On. With the Germans entrenched on top of the hill, a Russian attack between the lakes could be delayed until reinforcements were brought up from another sector.

Schmitt had no detailed information regarding Russian strength and dispositions on Hill 285. German reconnaissance patrols probing the

Stone parapets offered little protection against any but the smallest-calibre projectiles and greatly increased the number of casualties from rock fragmentation.

In this region every movement a soldier made took a disproportionate amount of time. Weapons, equipment and every other item of supply had to be carried over narrow trails that had been gradually established across the wilderness. Two-wheeled carts could be used only over stretches where roads had been laboriously cut. It took hours to evacuate casualties to the nearest first-aid station, and as many as

hill defences had recently been repulsed. No hostile artillery fire had so far been encountered in the area.

On 16 August, I Battalion of 307 Regiment reached Strongpoint Yelchen according to plan. The artillery battalion, which was supposed to support the attack with its light howitzers, experienced great difficulty with the road and was forced to stop more than 3km (2 miles) short of its objective. Instead of occupying its designated emplacements just west of Yelchen, the guns went into position in an area only just within range of Hill 285.

During the night of 16/17 August, I Battalion moved out under cover of darkness and reached the immediate vicinity of Hill 285 just before dawn. Since the artillery battalion was not ready for action and the attack could not be postponed without losing the element of surprise, Schmitt ordered the battalion commander to launch the assault without artillery preparation. The Russians were taken completely by surprise, but rallied quickly and defended themselves fiercely. It was not until Schmitt had moved up reinforcements that a report reached him at his OP at Yelchen that the Russians had been driven back from Hill 285 after leaving behind 89 dead.

During the next two days Schmitt could not obtain a clear picture of the situation on Hill 285 because signal communication between there and Yelchen had broken down. He therefore decided to join a supply column that was bound for the hill. This column comprised no fewer than 170 pack carriers and escorts, the minimum needed to provide I Battalion with ammunition and a two-day supply of tinned rations.

During the afternoon of 20 August, after several hours of strenuous marching, Schmitt arrived at I Battalion's OP. There he found out that the summit of the oval, shrub-covered hill was in Russian hands and that the Germans were pinned down in shallow hollows, behind rocks and behind the sparse growth of trees on the west side of the hill. He was told that the battalion had been unable to flush out the Russians during the initial attack. Unable to dig into the rocky ground, the hapless German infantrymen were exposed to mortar fire and ricochets from the ground and trees.

There was no doubt in Schmitt's mind that another attempt had to be made to clear and secure the hilltop. Reconnaissance patrols were then sent out. The information they brought back served as a basis for discussion of the assault plan between Schmitt and the battalion commander. The next day Schmitt returned to Yelchen to coordinate the artillery fire that was to precede the attack. During the evening hours the howitzers adjusted their fire by high-burst ranging.

After a brief but intensive preparation the infantrymen jumped off at 0500 on 22 August. In the difficult country they had to cross to reach the hilltop, the infantrymen made slow progress and were thus unable to take full advantage of the softening up achieved by the artillery fire. They failed to make a single penetration into the Russian defence system.



**The long march back! Here infantry are in retreat towards the German border, having brought with them a captured Russian pony and sleigh. The men are still in the standard uniform, which suggests that they are troops recently sent to the front.**

Instead, they were forced to withdraw to their line of departure. The battalion commander himself was among the seriously wounded. The attack on Hill 285 was the last German offensive operation in this region.

### **German withdrawal through the taiga (September 1944)**

During the last days of August and the beginning of September there was little change in the situation along 307 Infantry Regiment's sector between Lakes Tolvand and On. The men of I Battalion were clinging to their precarious positions on the west side of Hill 285, facing the well-entrenched Russians on the summit. German patrols observed feverish construction work and the felling of trees on the Russian side of the hill, but were unable to obtain any clues as to Russian intentions, since all of the enemy's activities were carried on by night.

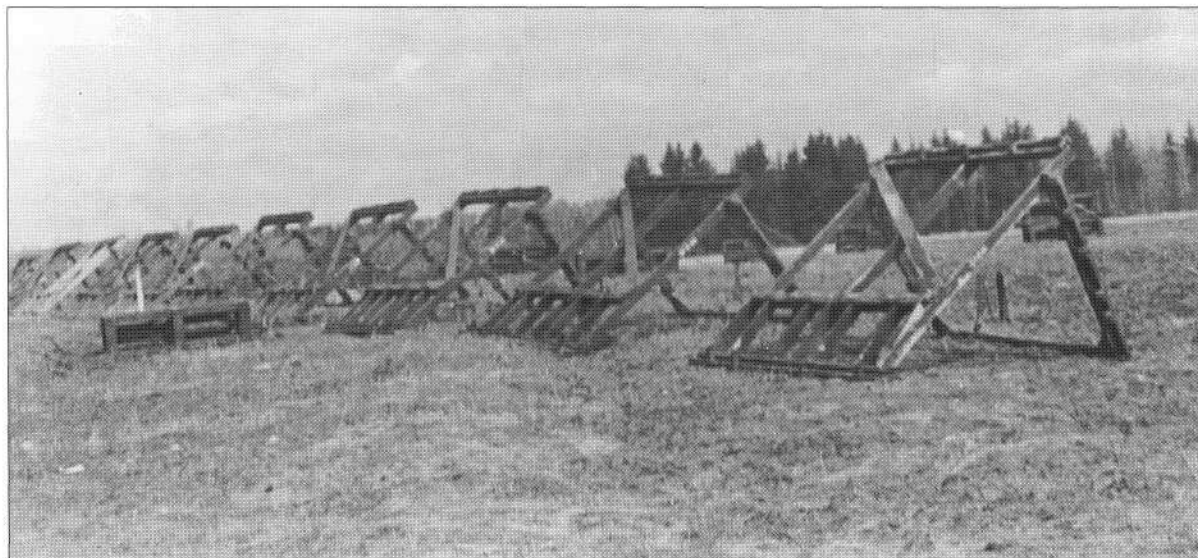
On the morning of 9 September, Russian artillery suddenly opened fire on the German hill positions. Consternation and surprise in the German ranks was great because in more than two years of localised warfare the Russians had never used artillery in this region. After a short preparation, three tanks emerged from the Russian fortifications on the hill, their guns firing pointblank at the German infantry. Helplessly exposed to this new threat, the Germans abandoned the hill without waiting for orders. In the process the battalion suffered few casualties, but its radio set and other valuable items of equipment were lost.

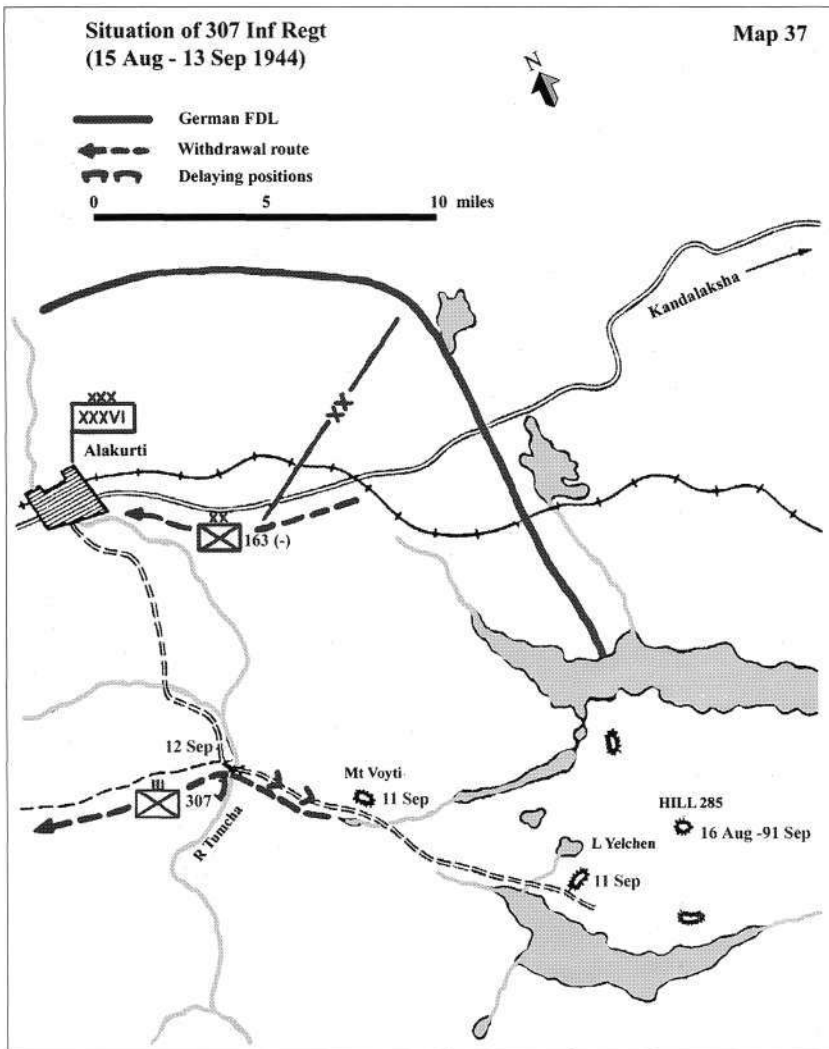
The news of the loss of Hill 285 did not reach Schmitt until the battalion turned up at Strongpoint Yelchen in the late afternoon. He immediately requested division headquarters to send some anti-tank weapons, which had hitherto been considered excess baggage in this theatre.

On 11 September, Russian forces began to attack Yelchen with small arms and mortar fire. Instead of maintaining strict fire discipline the German garrison expended its ammunition so fast that it was forced to abandon the well-constructed position much sooner than intended.

Encouraged by these unexpectedly quick successes, Russian assault detachments in platoon strength tried to keep the retreating Germans off balance. One of these detachments caught up with the march

This photograph shows a late development in artillery – the highly effective (if somewhat inaccurate) 28/32cm *Schweres Wurfgerät 40*. The picture shows the wooden rails and frames upon which the carrying case and rocket were mounted. The rockets (seen on the left in their cases) were fired electrically and stabilised in flight by a number of jets which were set at an angle. The frames could fire either 28cm or 32cm rockets. The rockets themselves were HE or incendiary, with the 28cm weighing 83kg (185lb) and the 32cm weighing 78kg (173lb). Maximum range was 2,000m (6,561ft) or 2,200m (7,217ft). As can be seen from the rail arrangement, the rockets were intended to be fired in salvos so that the area effect was intensified. Later rails were made of tubular steel, although the wooden versions were also found mounted on half-tracked vehicles. The rate of fire is not known exactly, but was probably about two rockets per minute.





**Situation of 307 Infantry  
Regiment.**

column of the artillery battalion that was moving from Yelchen to the strongpoint on Mount Voyti. After some initial confusion the artillerymen put up a staunch defence, firing on the approaching Russians at only 50m (164ft) range. The battalion thus escaped annihilation, its only materiel losses being two guns that had to be destroyed during the brief engagement to prevent their capture.

By evening Voyti was the only strongpoint east of the Tumcha River still in German hands. The blockhouses at the foot of Mount Voyti were held by the weakened troops of I Battalion, who had fought their way back from Yelchen during the day. The garrison was equipped with small arms and heavy weapons, but had neither artillery nor any of the recently requested anti-tank guns. All other regimental units had safely crossed the Tumcha and were moving toward Vuorijarvi. Every hour counted since the slow German march columns would never reach Salla intact unless the men at Voyti could hold off the mobile Russian assault detachments. After the premature evacuation of Yelchen the fate of the entire 163 Division hinged upon the sustained defence of Voyti and the approaches to the Tumcha River.



**Two German Abwehrflammenwerfer 42.** This device was a static flamethrower with a capacity of 36lt (8 gallons). This gave a flame of 1½ seconds, 4.5m (15ft) wide and 2.7m (9ft) high. Ignition was by command or trip wire. They were normally used within minefields to disrupt attempts to clear paths through the mines, or to cover roadblocks, and on landing beaches and harbour walls. They were buried at intervals of about 20m (65ft), leaving only the discharge tube above ground.



That night the Russians made their first attempts to seize Voyti. Once again the Germans were amazed to see Russian tanks driving across country they had considered tank proof for the last three years.

The Russian tanks broke through the outer defence ring, and the battle for the blockhouses raged by the light of burning sheds. Three of the tanks were disabled by mines, but their guns continued firing at the German defenders. Calling over the telephone from his HQ on the west bank of the Tumcha, Colonel Schmitt asked the battalion commander to hold out, promising the early arrival of a relief force which he had dispatched upon being notified that the Voyti garrison had come under attack. The relief force, a reinforced field engineer platoon, reached Voyti just in time to rescue the garrison and conduct it safely to the Tumcha River. To block the only road leading to the river, the engineers emplaced roadblocks and mines that they had prepared for this purpose during the preceding months. Schmitt hoped to delay the advancing Russians long enough to permit the main body of his regiment to withdraw beyond Vuorijarvi.

When the engineer platoon reached the Tumcha at dawn, it joined the other German elements which had previously crossed to the west bank. The engineers thereupon blew up the only bridge that spanned the deep and rapid river. As Schmitt and the rearguard watched the demolition, they suddenly came under the fire of two Russian tanks which had somehow managed to keep up with the Germans despite roadblocks, mines and demolitions.

During the next few days 307 Infantry Regiment withdrew beyond Vuorijarvi according to plan. The Russians crossed the Tumcha and gained access to the roads west of the river. They were thus in a favorable position to envelop and destroy major elements of the withdrawing German columns. As a countermeasure Schmitt decided to employ rearguard units to defend improvised delaying positions at favourable points along the escape route to Salla and Rovaniemi.

One such delaying position was established at 'Esche' near the chain of lakes that extends southeastward from Kairala. The position was held

by 2 Company of 307 Regiment. The company commander had orders to remain in place until he received specific instructions to withdraw.

When the Russians reached 'Esche' on 16 September, they enveloped the position on both sides and one infantry battalion supported by tanks began a siege of the German garrison. In the course of the afternoon and night the Russians launched no fewer than seven separate assaults, but each time they were thrown back with heavy losses.

Upon being notified that the strongpoint was surrounded and hard pressed, Schmitt organised the men of III Battalion into a relief force. Because of the necessary preparations the battalion's departure was delayed until evening, by which time radio communication with 'Esche' had broken off. Schmitt sent out a patrol, but it failed to get through to the encircled force. After every other means of communication had proved unsuccessful, a reconnaissance plane attempted to drop a message to the embattled company, ordering it to try to break out.

When the relief force got to within a mile of 'Esche', it clashed with Russian advance elements that had managed to bypass the German position. Instead of relieving the 'Esche' garrison, III Battalion was forced to withdraw in the face of superior Russian forces. Schmitt had given up all hope of rescuing 2 Company when, shortly after dawn on 17 September, he was notified of the contents of an intercepted Russian radio message revealing that the company had broken out. This unexpected news was confirmed early that afternoon when the



A German propaganda poster proclaiming 'Hitler is the liberator'. Needless to say the ideal was not backed by Russian experience!

exhausted men reached the German lines. The company commander reported that 16 men had been killed and 25 wounded.

The company commander told how by a stroke of luck the air-dropped order to break out had fallen within the lines of the beleaguered unit. After waiting for darkness to set in, 2 Company made a diversionary attack to the northeast and, taking advantage of the initial Russian confusion, had slipped out of the pocket and escaped to the west.

During the second half of September, while the main body of 163 Division was withdrawing along the main highway, 307 Regiment was ordered to use a path that traversed the otherwise impassable forest from a point southeast of Lampela to Kallunki. However, since this path could not sustain any vehicular traffic, all regimental vehicles were dispatched to Salla. Reinforced by a bicycle company and a field engineer platoon, those elements of 307 Division that were to follow the forest path were ordered to set up obstacles along the way and establish a defensive position northeast of Kallunki upon their arrival in that village.

On 25 September, the regiment started its march along the barely visible path that twisted its way through the boulder-strewn forest. The troops of the field engineer platoon, at the rear of the column, did what they could to make pursuit difficult for the Russians.

Upon arriving at Kallunki in the late afternoon of 26 September, Schmitt set up his HQ and reported by radio to division headquarters. To his message he added that he would eat his hat if the Russians reached the Onkamo position within the next 72 hours. It turned out that his optimism was unjustified, for the very next morning Russian advance elements attacked the German delaying position with mortars and light mountain howitzers. Schmitt thereupon requested that an artillery battalion be dispatched from Maerkejaervi to bolster his weakened force.

During the following night an incident occurred that illustrates the sort of nervous strain to which the German soldiers were subjected during their withdrawal through the taiga. The bicycle company, previously reduced to platoon strength in a series of tough engagements during which it lost its commanding officer, was holding an outpost line in the forest in front of the Onkamo position. At 0200 the acting commander and his men suddenly turned up in the battle position, reporting that they had been outflanked by strong Russian forces. According to the lieutenant, all indications pointed to a Russian enveloping attack in battalion strength. However, combat reconnaissance patrols, sent out that night and the following morning to verify this alarming report, failed to locate any Russian forces at the points he had indicated. The only traces of activity that could be found were numerous reindeer tracks, which led to the final conclusion that the battle-tested men had fled from a herd of reindeer.

During the entire withdrawal through the taiga, the Germans were amazed at the ease and speed with which the Russians surmounted natural and man-made obstacles. Along paths which, according to German unit commanders who had spent several years in the taiga and tundra, could be negotiated only by infantry forces, Russian tracked and wheeled vehicles would suddenly make their appearance and surprise the German rearguards. Against harassed German troops who had lost most of their equipment during the difficult withdrawal across northern



Finland, the fresh Russian troops launched a series of limited flanking thrusts, alternating them with bold wide enveloping manoeuvres. By the beginning of November 1944 the last German troops had either escaped to Norway or had been taken prisoner in Finland.

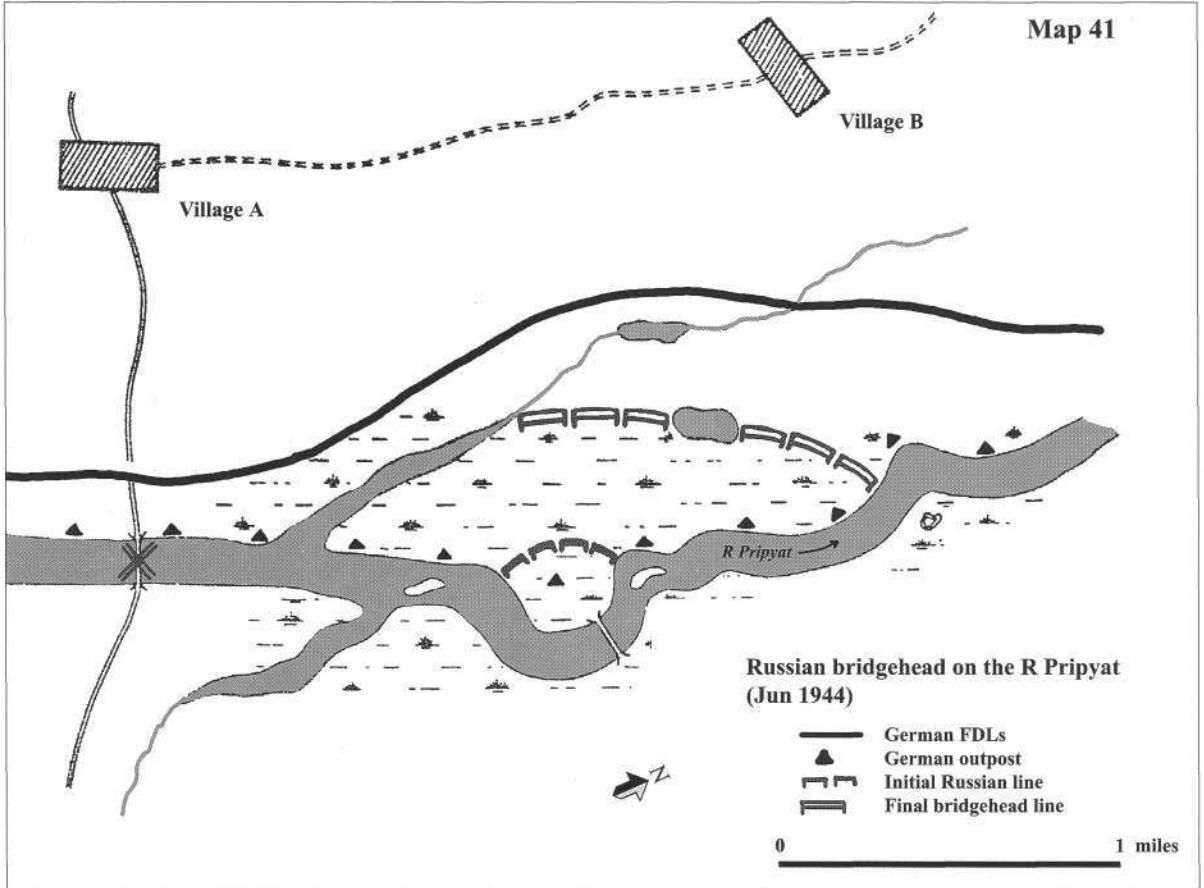
#### **The Swamp Bridgehead (June 1944)**

In this action, which took place during the summer of 1944, the Russians displayed their ability to cross rivers unobtrusively. Starting with the infiltration of individual soldiers, they would gradually form a bridgehead, almost unnoticed by the Germans – they chose the most unfavourable point for such an operation, and as a result the Germans tended to ignore their presence on the near shore. Persisting in their preparations for several weeks, the Russians created the prerequisites for enlarging their initial bridgehead. When the Germans finally realised the danger, it was too late for effective counteraction. Confronted by insurmountable country difficulties, German soldiers were unable to drive the Russians out of the area. Several weeks later the Russians used the bridgehead as a jump-off position for an all-out offensive.

During June 1944, a German infantry division had taken up defensive positions along the north bank of the Pripyat River. The sector between two villages, A and B, was defended by an infantry battalion. In this area the Pripyat River was bounded on both sides by extensive swamps and a maze of small streams and tributaries, stagnant pools and lakes. Marshy river banks were overgrown with reeds and underbrush up to 2m (6ft) in height. Only in the area near the road leading south from Village A across the Pripyat were the banks dry and relatively devoid of vegetation. The road bridge was destroyed, but since the river at this point was shallow and the bed was sandy, it could be forded with comparative ease.

**The 15cm *schweres Infanteriegeschütz 33* was the heaviest German infantry gun, firing a 38kg (84lb) HE shell or a 24.6kg (55lb) hollow-charge shell. It weighed some 1,700kg (3,743lb) in action, had a range of 4,700m (15,420ft) and it could also fire smoke. It was also found mounted on tank chassis as an assault gun for close support. The sights and breech are covered to protect the weapon from the weather.**





Russian bridgehead on the River Pripyat.

Originally the German FDL was to run close to the north bank. However, as terrain conditions did not allow for establishing fortifications and the vegetation obstructed a clear field of fire and since, furthermore, the Germans believed that no human being could stay for any length of time in the stagnant swamp, the FDL was set up further back. Near the river bank proper, outposts manned by three or four men were established on platforms built on piles driven into the murky swamp.

At first the Germans observed only weak Russian patrols. However, these patrols gradually grew in strength and number. The Germans expected that the Russians would attempt a crossing at the bridge site, where country conditions favoured such an undertaking. However, realising that German resistance would be strongest on both sides of the bridge site, the Russians decided to establish a bridgehead at the most unlikely point – in the worst swamps east of the bridge. At the outset the Russians established a foothold on two small islands that the German infantry had left unoccupied because they were too swampy. Several days passed. Then, one morning, the Germans observed a few Russians along a strip of the north bank opposite the islands. They infiltrated into the undergrowth and reeds, although the water reached their chests. The Germans did not attach much importance to this discovery because they thought the Russians could not possibly stay there, and therefore they saw no threat from that direction.

This assumption turned out to be a serious mistake. The Russian bridgehead was gradually reinforced, and three or four nights later the Russians seized the nearest German outposts. German troops launched themselves into a counter-attack, but this failed because the swamp was extremely difficult to approach. Moreover, the German soldiers making the counter-attack were placed under very accurate flanking fire by Russian snipers sitting in trees on the river islands. Since the Russians could not be dislodged from the north bank by small-arms fire, the Germans tended to accept the situation as inevitable. The general feeling persisted that no major danger threatened the German positions from that direction.

The subsequent conduct of the Russians in their tiny bridgehead was typical of Russian combat methods of 1944. Mostly under cover of darkness, they made persistent efforts to improve their bridgehead positions by building corduroy roads, high observation posts and wooden platforms. Exposed to German fire, the Russian soldiers moved around in the swampy country, often with water up to their chests. Within the limits imposed by the shortage of ammunition, the Germans did their best to make the position untenable and to dislodge the Russians from their bridgehead. However, the dense vegetation favoured infiltration tactics and hampered observed fire.

At that time the Russians began to build an underwater footbridge. This bridge, about 2m (6ft) wide, consisted of previously assembled trestles. During the night these were put in place in the river, with the planking about 10cm (4in) below the surface of the water. This presented no technical difficulties because of the very slow current of the Pripyat River. The bridge was thus invisible to the German observers. Its existence was not suspected by the Germans until a few Russian anti-tank guns suddenly appeared on the north bank of the river. Russian prisoners subsequently confirmed the existence of an underwater bridge and supplied information about its construction. Despite repeated attempts, the Germans failed to destroy this bridge.



As the war in the east progressed, Russian aircraft became more and more a part of life, and this picture shows an MG34 mounted in the anti-aircraft role.

In two weeks the Russians had thus created an adequate jump-off base for further operations. One foggy morning they attacked the German outposts in the immediate area of the river bend. They suddenly employed artillery and a few close-support aircraft to neutralise positions in the German FDL and to prevent movement of reserves. Thus far, Russian artillery had been conspicuous by its absence in the fighting along the river probably because the Russians wished to draw as little attention as possible to the bridgehead operation.

As a result of this attack, the Germans were pushed back to the edge of the swamp. Content with this success, the Russians took up defensive positions along the perimeter of their newly won bridgehead, which was protected in part by a river inlet and a body of stagnant water. Since neither tanks nor assault guns could be employed in the swampy country, all German counter-attacks were unsuccessful. The Russians consolidated the bridgehead during the following days, and then used it as one of the jump-off bases for their large-scale summer offensive.

## THE BATTLE FOR GERMANY

The battle for Germany was the disastrous climax to the German Army's adventure into Russia. Having reached the gates of Moscow in the winter of 1941, the Wehrmacht was now driven back across the Oder to fight on home soil. The intensity of the fighting on the eastern front in 1945 showed that the German infantryman, despite belonging to shattered ad hoc formations short on vehicles and many types of weaponry, was still a powerful military entity. Unfortunately for Germany, that same infantryman was not capable of stopping the inexorable juggernaut of the Russian advance.

### The Oder Crossings

The following action, which took place during the last phase of the war, led to the formation of a Russian bridgehead which was to assume

Rubber rafts were used to move men across water too deep to wade. During the retreat they were important in moving the men to new positions behind rivers so that they could prepare defensive strongpoints on the western side.





decisive importance a few weeks after its buildup. The procedure followed by the Russians was at variance with that in the preceding example. In this instance the Russians formed the bridgehead in a single day by executing a well-timed pincer attack. Before the main crossing, strong Russian elements made a diversionary assault farther up the river. This secondary attack achieved the double purpose of forcing the Germans to commit their reserves and of compelling them to fight on two fronts as soon as the main attack force had crossed the river. In this instance the two attack forces coordinated their operations and received effective ground and air support.

In evaluating this action it should be remembered that the German troops facing the Russians were improvised units organised in times of extreme emergency. The typical German fighting unit would, in 1945, often contain previously rear echelon troops scraped together into hastily trained fighting formations, everyone from typists to chefs. The deterioration in fighting quality and the rapid influx of replacements had a detrimental impact on morale, and heightened the sense of a nation on the verge of military collapse.

In early February 1945, after the collapse of the German front in Poland in January, the Russian advance ground to a temporary halt east of the Oder River. An improvised German infantry division was deployed on the west bank south of Frankfort an der Oder. The 2 Grenadier Regiment of this division, composed of such diverse formations as security guards, SS units, *Volkssturm* battalions as well as training classes from a military school, was assigned a 6km (4-mile) sector along a river bend that formed a salient approximately 16km (10 miles) south of Frankfort. I and II Battalions took up positions directly behind the river bank, while III Battalion was committed along a dike that formed the chord of the salient and dominated the open country between the dike and the river bend. The 2 Grenadier Regiment was supported by a light artillery battalion, two field howitzer batteries and one rocket-launcher battalion. Their observation posts were located in the forward positions, near the battalion HQs and on the dike.

In mid-February Russian tank and motorised spearheads attempted a surprise crossing of the Oder River near Frankfort but failed. After that, the Russians waited until their infantry was able to close up to the mechanised units. On the night of 22 February several Russian reconnaissance patrols attempted to cross the river unobserved, but were intercepted and repulsed by the two battalions on the west bank. A series of small-scale engagements took place during the following nights, but the German regimental commander felt certain that no Russian patrols had infiltrated his sector and that the enemy did not intend to force a crossing in that area.

The night of 27–28 February was marked by poor visibility, rain and strong west winds. Despite the bad weather, Russian reconnaissance aircraft were exceptionally active, and the droning of their engines could be heard throughout the night. The entire regimental sector up to the dike received sporadic harassing fire. At 0300 a strong Russian patrol crossed the river at the north end of the salient on pneumatic rafts without being observed by the Germans, broke into the positions of II Battalion's left wing, silenced the defenders, and sealed off both flanks of the 200-yard penetration. The storm and the noise of the aircraft

Winter 1944/45. Russian artillery pounds the ridge line in the distance and a truck stands in the foreground. The light snow covering shows signs of tracks where the truck is, suggesting that the occupants of the truck have got out to take the photograph. As the photograph has survived it is clear that they got away with it this time.



engines drowned out the sounds of the fighting, so that neither the adjacent units nor the staff at the battalion HQ were aroused.

Within the hour a Russian rifle battalion with anti-tank guns, howitzers and five light tanks was put across at the same point on pontoon ferries. The Germans were unaware of the existence of the bridgehead until 0400, when they suddenly heard the noise of Russian tanks starting their engines. II Battalion commander alerted his reserves, but their counter-attacks against both flanks of the bridgehead failed to dislodge the Russians.

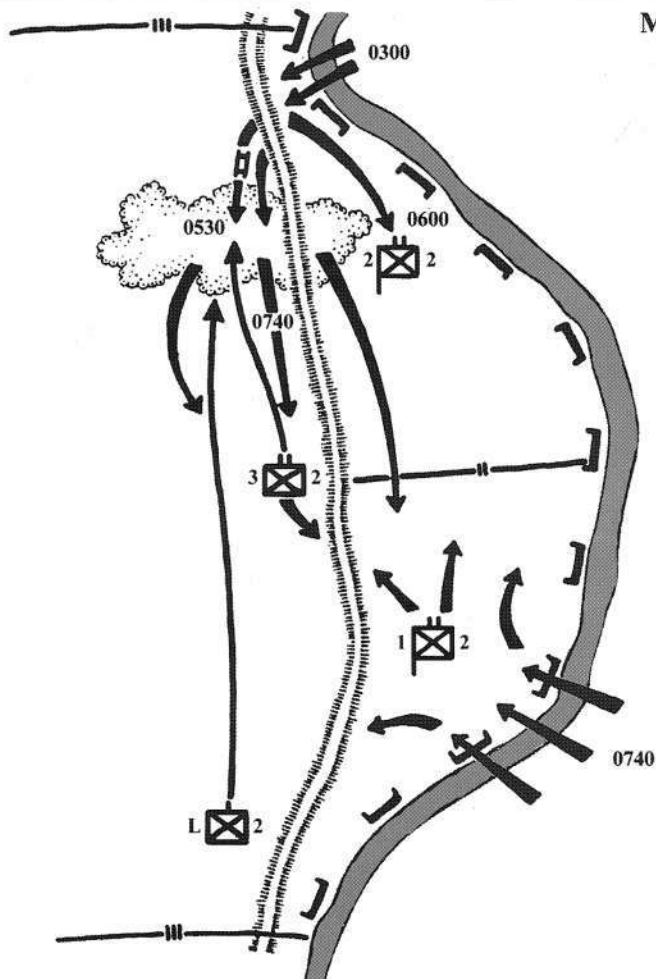
To block any further advance of the bridgehead force, the regimental commander ordered 9 and 10 Companies to assemble near the centre of local woods while it was still dark. At 0530 the two companies were suddenly attacked by a force driving from the north. The five tanks had broken out of the bridgehead and, supported by infantry, were advancing on the west side of the dike. In their attempt to block the Russian attack, the two German companies suffered heavy casualties in bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Although the fire from the Russian tank guns was far from accurate, it paralysed the resistance of the inexperienced German troops. At 0600 a platoon of Russian infantry turned eastward and attacked II Battalion OP from the rear, forcing the German staff to evacuate in haste.

At dawn the regimental commander evaluated the situation. The Russians held the eastern half of the woods. A few German pockets of resistance were holding out directly south of the woods. Sporadic bursts of fire were still heard from the woods. The remnants of 9 and 10 Companies were out of contact with regimental headquarters. At its new HQ II Battalion officers had no control over its subordinate units in the river positions.





In this emergency the regimental commander ordered 12 Company, the only unit still in reserve, to move from its position near the southern end of the salient and block any further Russian advance. He notified division headquarters of the critical situation and was promised reinforcements. One battalion was to be moved to his sector to launch a counter-attack against the Russian bridgehead, but its arrival could not

Map 42

Russian crossing of the River Oder south of Frankfort (22-28 February 1945).



Russian crossing of the R Oder  
south of Frankfort a.d. O  
(22 - 28 Feb 1945)

-  German positions
-  German counterattacks
-  Russian attacks
-  Dyke

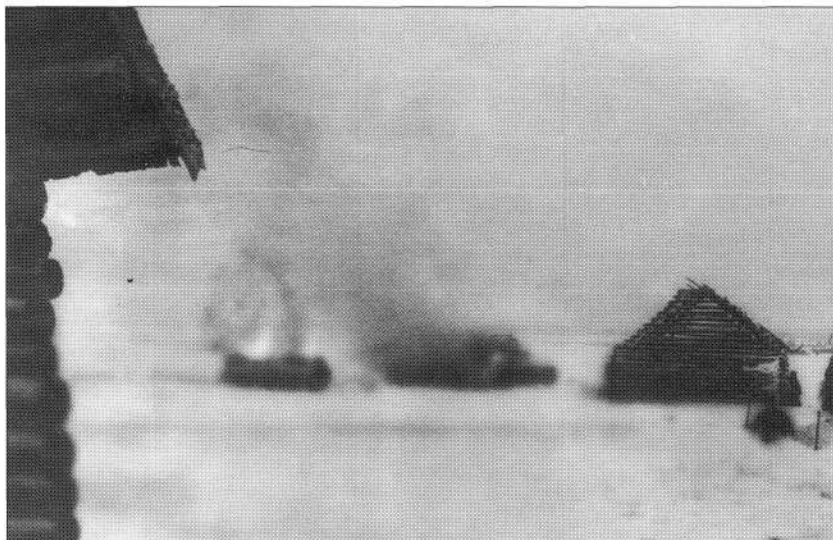
0 1 mile

be expected before noon. Meanwhile, the regimental commander directed the artillery battalion to shell the Russian forces assembled in the woods.

While the attention of the Germans was diverted to the threat from the north, the main Russian attack force was preparing to cross the river opposite the I Battalion soldiers. At 0700 approximately 25 Russian batteries opened fire on the positions of the I and II Battalions on the west bank, on the German observation post at the top of the dike, on 12 Company moving north, and on the artillery positions in the rear. At 0740 the main attack force, consisting of two infantry regiments, began



This regrettably blurred shot shows two vehicles in flames in a village not far from the German border. Whether the vehicles are Russian or German is impossible to say.



to cross the Oder and gained an immediate hold on the west bank. Simultaneously, the force that had made the initial assault assembled in the woods and attacked southward, effectively supported by artillery fire from the east bank of the river. The Russian forces pushed back the remnants of III Battalion, including 12 Company, eliminated those German observation posts on the dike that had survived the artillery preparation, and cut off the German forces holding out in the positions along the river bank. This attack prevented the two battalions from withdrawing to previously prepared positions along the dike.

Under these circumstances the main attack force had no difficulty in clearing a one-mile stretch of the west bank and mopping up the area east of the dike. During the following days the Russians consolidated the bridgehead, which became one of their principal assembly areas for the last major offensive of the war.

### **Fighting in Berlin**

The battle for Berlin, while the ultimate expression of Hitler's final delusion and madness, was none the less incredibly costly for the Soviet forces. That this was so was testament not only to the military talents of the German infantryman, but also to the desperation born of fighting alongside homeland civilians. One German soldier, Helmut Altner, was only recruited and trained in 1945, but was soon thrown into the thick of the battle for Berlin. His accounts (see Helmut Altner, *Berlin – Dance of Death*, Staplehurst, Spellmount, 2002) show how the German infantryman now descended to the level of little more than hunted street fighter:

The street ends and a big road junction appears with house facades and ruins, in which hundreds of people are crowding. On the left the street rises gradually up to the bridge. The street looks swept clean, but people are crouching on the steps leading up to the bridge, and soldiers are pressed behind the walls of the ruins leading to the Havel embankment. Occasionally a few people jump up out of the shelter of the steps and run across the bridge. The



The Russians attacked at night or just before dawn, and used searchlights to improve visibility and to blind the Germans. This remarkable picture shows the Russian lights which were put on just before the attack on Seelow Heights in 1945.

mass of people growing behind us in the dead angles begins to spill over. Beside me among the soldiers are women with babies in their arms, old women, children and young teenagers of both sexes. I look carefully over the top step. Shots are racing across the bridge, and the horror hits me for the bridge is swimming in blood.

They are calling from below and pressing forward. I take another deep breath and jump up and run into the tacking of the machine gun bursts, throwing myself into the death mill as the bullets strike all around. The road surface is slippery with blood and there are bodies lying around and hanging over the bridge railings. Vehicles and tanks race across grinding the bones with a crack. I dive forward, not seeing any more, just driven by the thought of finding cover.

Despite the evident desperation of this account, it is clear that there was an ingrained belief that restoration might be possible. 'Lieutenant Stichler pulls a map out of his pocket and explains to us what we are going to do. We have to get through Staaken to the Döberitz Training Area. The Wenck Army is behind Döberitz village, where they have taken up positions to wait for us. We will then get several weeks' rest and be accommodated in huts that the Wenck Army has set up for us. Reichs President Dönitz himself with his staff will explain the situation to us in the hutted camp. The towns of Potsdam and Nauen should already have been retaken by the Relief Army.' Hindsight and military history allows us to see that the Wenck relief was a forlorn hope, but in the last days of the Third Reich, after so many years of war, the idea that the fighting might finally cease seemed unreal.

This dramatic picture of the fighting in Berlin is made more striking by the fact that the author had had only five weeks' training, and yet was facing troops with months if not years of battle behind them. The last-ditch attempt to put every able body onto the streets with some sort of weapon saw the use of the old men of the *Volkssturm* and the teenagers of the *Hitlerjugend*. A soldier who saw the latter in action later wrote: 'The Hitler Youth press themselves anxiously behind the walls of the trenches. They have mostly rifles seized from France and Italy with a few cartridges which are scarcely usable. The youngest have never had a rifle in their hands and are now expected to know how to use them. The

recoil alone would be enough to knock most of them over. Not many of them will be left when the attack starts. [...] To fifteen, yes, sometimes even to twelve-year-old boys, scanty instruction was given in the use of the Panzerfaust, evidently the only weapon with which Berlin was to be defended. They were told that it was only a matter of holding out for a few hours. In the pale, nervous faces of the undernourished children a fire would begin to glow which consumed them in their thousands.'

The Hitler Youth and *Volkssturm* were a futile last attempt to create meaningful numbers of troops, this in turn allowing Hitler to cling to delusions of divisional operations when major units in reality only existed on paper. The Russians took Berlin, Hitler shot himself, Germany surrendered. The hubristic operation that began in 1941 took nearly four years to come full circle, and millions died, soldiers and civilians. The fighting was bad, the aftermath was horrendous. German killing groups (the *Einsatzgruppen* and other SS units) and the German forces killed thousands upon thousands of civilians and prisoners of war, in battle and out. The Russians had no mercy; when they advanced on Berlin from Stalingrad no quarter was given. Hitler unleashed a war which was medieval in its conduct, and which left Germany divided for forty years. The German infantryman did his duty, but duty was too much of a burden in the face of an outraged and increasingly effective Russian Army which was fighting for revenge.

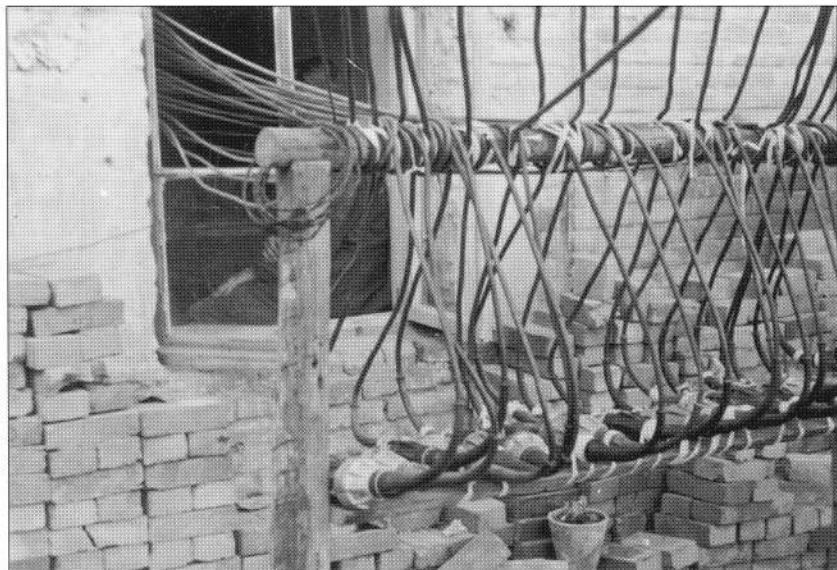
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**Wired for destruction.** German engineers have set up explosive charges in the building, and these wires lead from the detonators to the firing control box.

## COLOUR PLATE COMMENTARY

### A: THE NEBELWERFER

The war in Russia showed the Germans that they needed artillery; the heavy horse- and tractor-drawn pieces were all very well in normal operations, but they were very slow in the advance in comparison with armour, and when things happened fast artillery was needed to attack advancing Russian troops quickly and effectively. The six-barrelled *Nebelwerfer 41* was one of the answers. This weapon was designed and brought into use very quickly, being first issued to *Werfer-Abteilungen* in 1941. It was built on the standard 3.7cm Pak 35/36 carriage, of particular reuse value since the Pak 35/36 gun was already outdated and increasingly ineffective against Russian armour.

The calibre was actually 15.85cm, and the length of the barrels was 1.3m (3ft 3in). Travelling weight was 590kg (1,298lb), allowing it to be manhandled by its crew of four. It had a traverse of 24° and elevation from -5° to +45°. The muzzle velocity was 340mps (1,118fps), and shell weights were: HE 34.15kg (75lb), Smoke 35.48kg (78lb). Range was 6900m (27,640ft) maximum.

The rate of fire, most important later in the war when large masses of Russian soldiers were involved in attacks, was six rockets in ten seconds, and three salvos of six rockets in five minutes. Later, the Germans developed the larger 21cm version (the *Nebelwerfer 42*) which came into full service in 1943, but did not replace the 15cm version. Due to the fact that the weapon fired a rocket from an open barrel, there was little or no recoil, and the weapon was easily moved from position to position either by its tractor or by its crew. Loading was simple: the rockets were pushed into the barrels from the rear, and fired electrically in a ripple salvo.

### B: NEW WEAPONS FOR THE INFANTRY

1. Anti-tank warfare on the eastern front was a fact of life. The growing number of Russian tanks and the Russian habit of throwing tanks into any battle situation meant that more than just standard anti-tank weapons were needed. Often

the situation demanded that the infantry had their own anti-tank weapon in addition to the regimental guns.

1. The solution was the *Panzerfaust*, which was a throwaway weapon designed by Dr H. Langweiler of HASAG in Leipzig. Research in 1942 was followed by troop trials from July 1943 onwards. The original designs included versions effective at 30m (100ft) up to 250m (820ft), but only the 30, 60 and 100m (100, 200 and 320ft) versions were finally produced.

The weapon in this illustration is the production 60m (200ft) weapon. It weighed 6.8kg (15lb), with a bomb weight of 3kg (6lb 9oz). Although having a very low muzzle velocity – just 45mps (150fps) – because it was a shaped-charge weapon, the bomb could penetrate 200mm (8in) of armour at 30°. It was an extremely effective weapon which was simple to use, and was much feared by Allied tank crews.

2. The Gewehr 98k was issued as the standard infantry rifle, but was also fitted with telescopic sights for sharp shooting and sniper work. This rifle is fitted with the high-turret telescope mounting, and has a modified safety catch which allows operation despite the telescopic sight, which would interfere with the normal safety-catch fitting.

3. The Germans had no equivalent for the American Garand M1 semi-automatic rifle, and seemed to have little interest in the development of an assault rifle until they met the Russian Tokarev. At that time they immediately went into design and development and the first to appear was the 41W/Gew 41/41 M range of weapons. The 41 W rifle (3a) was a semi-automatic rifle which used the muzzle blast to operate the mechanism via a rod mounted on the top of the barrel. It was chambered for the standard German service calibre 7.92mm, but was both heavy 4.65kg (10lb 4oz) and clumsy. The design was by Walther. The second design, the 41 M by Mauser, later became the Gewehr 43 or Kar 43 (3b). This weapon was again chambered for the full-size German service cartridge, but weighed only 4.03kg (8lb 14oz) It had a 10-round detachable magazine. It was very similar to the Russian Tokarev weapon, and the design was good,

although manufacture was crude. It could also be fitted with a telescopic sight for sniper use.

4. The true assault rifle emerged in the MP43 and MP44 weapons, which were designed to fire the short 7.92 × 33mm intermediate military cartridge, rather than the more powerful 7.92 × 57mm fired by standard German infantry weapons. The short cartridge had the advantage that the weapon firing it, although having a reduced effective range, could be fired semi-automatically with the user maintaining aim during firing. The MP44 shown (also known as the StG 44) was a very effective short- to medium-range weapon, and the lighter cartridge meant that users could carry more ammunition, which was supplied via 30-round pressed steel magazines. One disadvantage of the long magazine was that firing in the prone position was difficult. The rifle was, almost certainly, the precursor of the Kalashnikov AK47 (see also Plate C).

### C: THE MP 44/STG 44

This rifle was designed to replace the standard German Kar 98k. It fired the shorter, lighter 7.92 × 33mm *kurz* (short) round, created originally by the Polte Werke in Hamburg in 1941. The designers were aware that Hitler would not have approved the redesign of the standard cartridge, and so the rifle was initially known as an MP (*Maschinenpistole* – submachine gun). Two initial designs, by Haenel in Suhl and Walther at Zella-Mehlis, eventually combined to produce the final weapon.

The weapon is shown here stripped and assembled.

1. The butt and the return spring. The return spring was compressed after firing as the working parts were forced to the rear by the piston. It then pushed the breech block and the piston forward to reload the weapon.

2. The breech block contained the firing pin and the extractor. It was carried by the movement of the piston, and extracted empty cases, pushed new cartridges from the magazine into the breech, and fired each cartridge when the trigger was pressed.

3. The piston: the piston was operated by gas pressure after firing (via a small gas port in the barrel), and when pushed back it unlocked the breech block which, in turn, extracted the spent case. It returned to its position of rest (forward) between shots, having reloaded the weapon during its forward movement

4. The gun body: the pistol grip and trigger mechanism could be moved down (after the butt and return spring were removed) to the position shown to allow the weapon to be field stripped. A simple locking pin held the grip in position when fully assembled.

5. The lower barrel cover: this was a light, steel fitting which protected the user's left hand from burns when firing.

6. The 30-round box magazine.

7. A five-round clip of 7.92 × 33mm cartridges for the weapon.

### D: UNIFORMS 1944-45

By 1944 German uniforms and equipment were altering to reflect the new weapons and equipment available, and the need to carry ammunition effectively. Further, leather supplies were getting scarcer, as were supplies of good quality cloth, and these shortages were reflected in the kit issued to the front-line soldier.

The man on the left wears the new gaiters (similar to the British issue) in place of the old full boot, but the rest of his equipment is as it would have been in 1940. He carries a *Panzerfaust* and a G43 rifle. Next to him stands a soldier issued with the hooded combat jacket which appeared later in the war. Sometimes these had camouflage patterns, sometimes not. He is also wearing cold-weather boots, and is armed with a StG 44 rifle. The man holding the map is wearing a waterproof combat jacket, and also wears cold-weather boots. The officer, pointing at the map, has a similar combat jacket, and carries binoculars and a set of MP44 pouches, designed to carry the long magazines for the StG/MP44. The soldier on the right wears standard equipment and is armed with a Gewehr 98k, but is also wearing gaiters.

### E: INFANTRY SUPPORT: THE STURMGESCHÜTZ

German infantry artillery support was initially horse- or vehicle-drawn, and this method of providing support was adequate in the campaigns in the west and southeast. However, the appearance of the Russian T34 and the hordes of Russian infantry meant that more immediate local support was needed. The Germans saw the value of fitting infantry guns to tank chassis, and many versions of the *Sturmgeschütz* or assault gun were produced. Captured tanks were fitted with field guns up to 15cm, as were German chassis, but the need for mobile, armoured, anti-tank defence became acute on the eastern front. One of the successful assault/anti-tank SP (self-propelled) guns was the *Sturmgeschütz* III.

Seen in the illustration is the later version, fitted with a 7.5cm Pak 40 gun, and known as the *Sturmgeschütz* II Ausf F or G.

The gun was fitted with a limited traverse, which meant that the vehicle had to be turned to allow increased traverse for the gun, but the gun itself was second only to the 8.8cm. It fired an anti-tank shell weighing 10kg (22lb) at a muzzle velocity of 600mps (2,300fps), a HE shell weighing 12kg (27lb) at 550mps (1,800fps), hollow-charge ammunition at 450mps (1,500fps) and smoke at 360mps (1,770fps).

The vehicle had frontal hull armour of 81mm (3in) at 52°, 31mm (1½in) plate on the sides (and the vehicle shown also has extra plates fitted against attacks by hollow-charge rocket) and 51mm (2in) at rear. The engine was the Maybach HL 120 TRM petrol engine developing 295hp at 3,000rpm. Performance was quite impressive, with the vehicle able to cross a 2.6m (8ft 6in) trench, to ford to 0.8m (2ft 9in), and to climb a 30° gradient. Maximum speed was 32km/h (20mph).

Also in the illustration are the accompanying infantry, without whom the vehicle was extremely vulnerable to close-quarter attack. The man in front carries a PzB 39 anti-tank rifle which, although ineffective against Russian T34s, was useful in the anti-sniper role and against soft-skinned vehicles.

### F: HITLER YOUTH WITH PANZERFAUST

The *Panzerfaust* as an anti-tank weapon is described in Plate B1. It was very effective against tanks at short ranges, and in trained hands would destroy most battle tanks, or damage them sufficiently to remove them from operations. Here a Hitler Youth waits behind cover in Berlin to get a shot at his target.

The Hitler Youth were imbued with the spirit of Nazism, and could have been a significant obstacle to the Russians



had they been well trained. However, the majority of the members of the organisation were not entirely willing volunteers and, even in the last battle, were prone to go home at the earliest opportunity. Older members (such as this young man) were trained in the basics of combat, and had had some urban operations training from members of the army and the *Waffen-SS*.

The uniform is the standard dark grey/black, and he also wears a *Volkssturm* armband, which might protect him as a combatant before he fired the *Panzerfaust*, but not afterwards. The fanaticism of the few in the Hitler Youth who fought led to thousands of casualties to no real avail, for these boys of 14 to 18 years had no battlefield experience, were abysmally led and were shoved straight into the front-line with no hope of real success. They were one of the many sacrifices the Germans made to Hitler's opportunism.

#### **G: MOUNTED RECONNAISSANCE**

Mounted reconnaissance was still very much a part of German operational technique in the east. Here a *Waffen-SS* rider observes the enemy with his binoculars. Mounted infantry became few and far between as the war progressed, but the value of fast-moving horsed observers was never forgotten. The horse wears a standard *Wehrmacht* double bridle, and has 1934-pattern leather pouches for the man's personal kit either side of the withers of the horse. Military horses were, of course, extremely costly in terms of the time taken to maintain them, and feeding was always a demand on railway cars for fodder in the winter.

#### **H: BERLIN - APRIL 1945**

The situation that Germany was in could no longer be hidden behind the bravado and bragging from Joseph Goebbels as

**This picture shows the impressive range of the hand-held flame-thrower, the *Flammenwerfer 41*. This was an assault engineer equipment, which was modified when the effect of cold upon it in Russia was realised. The new version was a ten-shot weapon, firing a 1½ second burst of flame on each trigger pull. It was an exceptional weapon for house and bunker clearing, but the backpack made operators very vulnerable.**

the Russians closed in on their main target. The city was increasingly under siege as massive Russian formations strove to enter it and to bring an end to the war. The inhabitants were short of food, lied to by their government, and increasingly aware of the desperate military situation. Although many were still convinced that Hitler would lead them out of the 'jaws of defeat', many others were more realistic. Those with members of their family in the armed forces were seeing the frightfulness of war close at hand, and some, as the mother in this illustration, were faced with their husband's murder by SS flying courts.

The General SS (*Allgemeine SS*) and the various security branches of the armed forces and the German police were operating in the city in 1945, and any serviceman without cast-iron evidence that he was where he was intended to be risked his life. The man here was strung up to a lamppost because he had no proof that he was on his way back to his unit. His wife and children, to their total shock, have come upon his body, and the two infantrymen are explaining why he has been executed. Such scenes were commonplace in the Third Reich of 1945. In the background the Brandenburg gate shows damage caused by Russian shelling, and the smoke drifting over the scene comes from burning buildings in the east of the city, where Russian forces are already advancing.



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