

Histories of German and Soviet Tank Divisions During World War II

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■ 2ND PANZER DIVISION

The 2nd Panzer Division was one of the German Army's first three panzer divisions, formed in October, 1935, as part of Germany's general re-armament. Its first commander, Gen. Heinz Guderian, had played a vital role in convincing the high command to concentrate tanks into divisions for use as a powerful combined-arms attack force. Guderian used his new division to test his theories of armored warfare and the unit quickly gained a reputation as an elite unit.

When Germany annexed Austria in early 1938, the 2nd Panzer Division spearheaded the triumphal march on Vienna. Broken-down tanks littered the road from the border at Passau all the way to the Austrian capital. Only scattered fighting occurred, with the Austrian garrison at Bregenz in far western Austria firing on advancing German units and socialist militia in the Vienna industrial district of Favoriten holding out for several days in a large bakery. Second Panzer Division troops were not involved in either incident, and the division's transfer from Bavaria to its new home station in Vienna went smoothly.

Many Austrian soldiers were transferred to the 2nd Panzer Division from the former Austrian Bundesheer's (federal army) small armored force and its Cavalry Division. Others joined as new recruits, and by 1939 the unit was known as the "Vienna Division." The division kept its Austrian connection throughout its existence despite the organization of another armored division, the 4th Light Division (later renamed 9th Panzer Division) in Vienna later in 1938. As originally organized, the 2nd Panzer Division had two tank regiments of two battalions each and one motorized infantry regiment of three battalions.

The Polish Campaign

In August, 1939, the division moved from its home station in Vienna into the allied puppet state of Slovakia to prepare for the campaign against Poland. Many soldiers thought this operation might be another bluff like the mobilization against Czechoslovakia the year before, but the high command was not willing to accept a peaceful solution this time.

The 2nd Panzer Division and its sister unit, the 4th Light Division, were assigned to the XXII Panzer Corps in the 14th Army of Army Group South. Their mission was to spearhead the drive on Kraków, the old capital of Austrian Poland. The high command hoped the two Viennese divisions (seven of the eight divisions on the German southern wing were Austrian units) would get a friendly reception from the former Austrian subjects, but the Poles were ready and willing to fight. The corps was assigned to break through Polish troops dug in along a mountainous line of forested ridges.

War began on September 1st, 1939. The 2nd Panzer Division pushed its tanks through the rough terrain, outflanking the Polish defenses. Late in the day the Poles had to commit one of their few modern mobile formations to restore their line, the 10th Mechanized Brigade. The 2nd Panzer Division fought their way past the Polish defenders, who would not commit their few tanks to a direct engagement. The next day intense fighting raged between the 2nd Panzer Division and the 10th Mechanized Brigade supported by a unit of tough Polish border guards. The Poles fought very hard, but slowly began to retreat toward Kraków.

By 6 September the 2nd Panzer Division had gained the upper hand in its struggle with the Poles, who lacked reserves to back up their determined defense. On the next day a premature withdrawal by one Polish army opened a wide gap in the Polish lines, and the XXII Panzer Corps burst into the opening. The Poles were soon in full retreat on the southern front, and the 2nd Panzer Division made enormous advances on 8 and 9 September. Soon the division was threatening to cut off the entire Polish *Armija Kraków*, and the Poles now tried to pull back into their "Romanian Bridgehead" along the border with Romania.

An attack by a Polish tank force against the 4th Light Division on 18 September, the day after Soviet forces invaded Poland, had good success. A tank force from 2nd Panzer Division stopped the Polish attack in the biggest tank battle of the campaign, which also marked the end of serious combat in Poland. The Poles had fought with determination and opposed 2nd Panzer Division with some of their best mobile formations, and as a result the division's casualties were quite high.

France

The 2nd Panzer Division quickly redeployed to the west to prepare for the attack on France scheduled to begin during the winter of 1939. Fortunately for the troops involved, sanity for once prevailed at the high command and the attack was postponed until the following spring. This allowed the division time to absorb and train replacement troops and obtain new equipment.

Once again the division came under the command of Heinz Guderian, forming part of his XIX Panzer Corps along with the 1st and 10th Panzer Divisions and the *Grossdeutschland* motorized regiment. This corps was to force its way through the dense Ardennes forest of eastern Belgium, then break out into the open farmland of northern France and head for the English Channel, trapping the best French and British troops in Belgium.

The attack began in early May, with the tanks moving slowly through the dense woods as French cavalry units fought a delaying action in front of them. Last-minute changes in the march order caused massive confusion and traffic jams, but the Allies did nothing to take advantage of this. The corps burst into open ground on 13 May, with 2nd Panzer Division, badly entangled with the neighboring 6th Panzer Division, trailing behind the corps' other two panzer divisions. Guderian sent his old division directly into the attack across the Meuse River at Sedan as it arrived on the battlefield. The 2nd Panzer Division's motorcycle battalion secured a crossing of the river, and probing attacks by the Vienna Division soon found a serious weak point in the French defenses. At the boundary of two French armies, the 2nd Panzer Division forced its way between two weak reservist divisions, both of which began to crumble. As the 10th Panzer Division and *Grossdeutschland* regiment fought to secure the southern flank of the bridgehead, Guderian took the 1st and 2nd Panzer Divisions and, heedless of approaching French counterattack groups, headed west toward the English Channel.

Over the next several days Guderian's corps advanced rapidly, paying no attention to orders from above to halt immediately. While some of the other advancing panzer divisions were counter-attacked by French armored divisions, the 2nd Panzer Division brushed aside light opposition. On 19 May the division captured a British artillery battery, still in its barracks at Albert with nothing but training ammunition on hand. The 2nd Panzer Division reached the Channel coast two days later and turned northward to cut off the British Expeditionary Force then retreating toward Dunkerque.

The British 20th Guards Brigade and some French troops barricaded themselves inside Boulogne, using the port city's ancient walls as an anti-tank barrier. By 23 May 2nd Panzer Division's tanks were drawn up outside the city, shooting the walls apart while the division's artillery shelled the port. The tanks surged through the breaches in the walls on 25 May and quickly secured the town. As the perimeter was constantly shrinking around the British Expeditionary Force at Dunkerque, the 2nd Panzer Division remained behind the front to prepare for a renewed offensive against the French still holding out to the south.

For about a week the German armies sorted themselves out, and then the second offensive against the French, known as *Case Red*, began. The XIX Panzer Corps, including 2nd Panzer Division, attacked across the Aisne River. This time the French put up furious resistance, but at the key moment the French high command panicked, ordering a withdrawal. Guderian's tanks poured through the gap, advancing rapidly. On the morning of 17 June the French asked for an armistice, a request many French soldiers took as an order to lay down their arms.

The 2nd Panzer Division returned to its home station for the remainder of the summer. During the reorganization undergone that summer by all panzer divisions, the 2nd Panzer Division gave up its 4th Panzer Regiment, which went to the new 13th Panzer Division, gaining in exchange a second motorized infantry regiment. Though some later commentators, including Guderian, would criticize the move, it did have advantages. Decreasing the number of tanks did weaken the division's firepower, but the smaller organization was far easier to supply with fuel and other items and could deploy more quickly off the rougher and less common roads to be found in Eastern and Southern Europe, where new campaigns were foreseen.

Yugoslavia and Greece

After re-alignment on the new, smaller table of organization, the 2nd Panzer Division spent several months in Poland before moving to Romania in preparation for *Fall Marita*, the attack on Yugoslavia and Greece. The division filtered into Bulgaria in early April, 1941, and crossed into Yugoslavia on 6 April. As in Poland, the 2nd Panzer Division was sent into mountainous country to cooperate with mountain troops and aid their advance. The 2nd Panzer Division was to advance westward into southern Yugoslavia and then turn directly southward to advance on the important Greek port of Salonika.

The Yugoslav defenders were willing enough soldiers, but had been caught in the midst of mobilization and even at full paper strength their units were seriously short of modern weapons and equipment, especially anti-tank guns. The rough terrain proved more of a hindrance to the German advance than the enemy, and tank crews often drove their vehicles along streambeds rather than making use of the region's badly-kept roads. A Yugoslav division counter-attacked on 7 April, causing some anxious moments, but the 2nd Panzer Division's tanks drove off the attackers and the advance continued.

On 8 April the division crossed the Greek frontier, where the Greek 19th Motorized Division held a line of entrenchments and prepared positions. The Greeks had placed their most mobile divisions, the 19th and the Cavalry Division, in front of 2nd Panzer Division's advance but the panzer division simply shredded the opposition. On the next day 2nd Panzer Division units occupied Salonika without opposition, taking one of Europe's leading ports and isolating the Greek divisions fighting along the so-called Metaxas Line to the east. Demoralized by word of Salonika's rapid fall, the Greek divisions along the border with Bulgaria laid down their arms.

Though 2nd Panzer Division had forced the surrender of a good part of the Greek army, the campaign was not over. Allied units were landing in Greece to help prop up the Greek armies. German and British units clashed as early as 10 April. Italian agents in Egypt had correctly identified the Allied units dispatched to Greece, mostly Australians and New Zealanders, and these engagements came as no surprise to the Germans.

The 2nd Panzer Division was sent southward along the coast of the Aegean Sea, to help the mountain troops past such historic obstacles as the pass at Thermopylae and Mount Olympus. There, the division fought a series of sharp actions against the New Zealand Division. Fighting in the narrow mountain passes around Mount Olympus continued for several days before the Allies fell back in some disarray. On 21 April the Greek forces in western Greece surrendered, leaving the Allied divisions in grave danger of total destruction. The Allies quickly began to evacuate their troops. The German advance continued, but as the Greek mainland narrowed so did the front lines, and 2nd Panzer Division was soon following behind 6th Mountain Division and 5th Panzer Division. The 2nd Panzer Division saw no more significant action in Greece.

With the invasion of the Soviet Union only a few weeks away, German units now began to stream northward out of Greece. The Greek railroad lines could not handle the volume of traffic required to move panzer divisions' tanks and other vehicles, so German logistics officers decided to send the vehicles of the 2nd and 5th Panzer Divisions by sea to Italy. From there they would go by rail to the assembly areas in Poland. Meanwhile, the personnel of the two divisions would travel by rail from Greece to meet their equipment.

Thanks to the "Ultra" code-breaking program, the Allies learned the details of this arrangement. A submarine attack sent both divisions' heavy equipment to the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea, leaving 2nd Panzer Division essentially unarmed when *Operation Barbarossa*, the invasion of the Soviet Union, began in June, 1941.

To Moscow and Back

The 2nd Panzer Division spent the early weeks of *Operation Barbarossa* in Poland and France, acquiring new tanks and training on the replacement vehicles. The 2nd and 5th Panzer Divisions returned to action in October, 1941. The addition of two full-strength panzer divisions, equipped with the newest weapons and vehicles, gave the German drive on Moscow a tremendous boost just as both sides were beginning to wear down.

East of Moscow, along the Volokolamsk Highway, the 2nd Panzer Division saw its first extensive combat on the Eastern Front. The division attacked repeatedly in late October, but the Soviets, inspired to defend Moscow to the utmost, would not break. Second Panzer Division tanks were even attacked by squads of Moscow factory worker militia armed with nothing but bottles filled with gasoline. When elite Siberian troops arrived in November to bolster the fanatic but dwindling defenders of Volokolamsk, the German attack sputtered to a halt.

Circling warily away from the determined defenders of Volokolamsk, the 2nd Panzer Division moved to the 46th Panzer Corps sector to try to Soviet defenses north of Moscow. The division penetrated to within five miles of central Moscow, and 2nd Panzer Division recon troops reported spotting the spires of the Kremlin in the distance. Once again the Soviets turned away the attackers, and when the Soviets counterattacked the 2nd Panzer Division and its neighbors were cut off. The division led a successful breakout down the one usable highway leading away from Klin, and spent the rest of 1941 and early 1942 retreating away from the Soviet capital.



While other panzer divisions were withdrawn from the front to refit for the summer campaign which led to Stalingrad, the 2nd Panzer Division spent the rest of 1942 on the central front around the city of Rzhev. The Soviets launched a number of attacks in the area, and 2nd Panzer Division formed 9th Army's mobile reserve, sealing off enemy breakthroughs and participating in a number of anti-partisan operations in the vast wooded region of central Russia. Entire Soviet divisions, including tanks and cavalry, were operating behind the German lines. In the summer of 1942 the 2nd Panzer Division participated in several offensives which finally eliminated these pockets of resistance. The division was already far under its authorized strength, with its tank assets combined into one small battalion, and the forest operations proved difficult and costly - during one stretch the division went through three commanders in eleven days. During this period, the 2nd Panzer Division headquarters was also a center of anti-Nazi intrigue within the German army.

Kursk

In the late spring and early summer of 1943 the division was finally re-equipped in preparation for *Operation Citadel*, the offensive at Kursk in northern Ukraine. The offensive was designed to cut off a large bulge in the front and hopefully lure Soviet armored reserves into a decisive tank battle. The 2nd Panzer Division headed the northern wing of the offensive, leading the 47th Panzer Corps in a strike southward from Orel. Somewhere around the city of Kursk, according to the battle plan, this attack force would meet the southern prong of the offensive, led by the *Grossdeutschland* Division.

On the first day of the attack 2nd Panzer Division shattered the main line of Soviet resistance and penetrated the second. The advance continued for two more days, and on 7 July the Soviets poured in armored units. A tank battle raged, but the Germans continued to slowly move forward. On 8 July, 47th Panzer Corps stalled in front of a heavily fortified ridge line, which resisted several German attacks. On 12 July a Soviet counter-offensive north of Orel made several breakthroughs. With the American and British landings in Sicily, which began on 10 July, causing some concern as well, the high command canceled *Operation Citadel* on 13 July and the 47th Panzer Corps withdrew to its starting position.

After serving once again as a mobile reserve, the 2nd Panzer Division went south to join 56th Panzer Corps in the battles raging north of Kiev. The 2nd Panzer Division suffered heavy casualties there, as repeated Soviet attacks forced their way over the Dnepr River. The high command would not allow a retreat despite massive enemy breakthroughs, and the 2nd Panzer Division along with the few other mobile reserves often found themselves battling Soviet tank and cavalry groups 40 miles or more behind the German infantry divisions, which were not allowed to leave their lines to help. In late December the Germans launched an attack of their own and restored their front. After this operation was complete, the remnants of 2nd Panzer Division boarded trains for France.

France, 1944

The 2nd Panzer Division spent the first half of 1944 at Amiens in northern France, re-equipping with the latest tanks, one battalion of new PzKw IV and another of PzKw V Panthers. The division still had not drawn a full allotment of tanks when committed to action again in June. When Allied armies landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944, the 2nd Panzer Division went on alert the night before, then was ordered to stand down, and spent another day awaiting orders from the high command before moving forward to oppose the Allies. Once the decision was made to commit the reserve panzer divisions to action, the 2nd Panzer Division had one of the greatest distances to cover to reach the battlefield. Despite the longer distance to travel, and several major rivers to cross, the 2nd Panzer Division reached the area before any of the better-equipped SS divisions stationed closer to Normandy. By the afternoon of 10 June the division was in action near Caen against elements of the British 50th Infantry Division and 7th Armoured Division.

As more German mobile units reached the front, the 2nd Panzer Division slid to the west to oppose the American forces coming inland from the beaches. The division's reconnaissance battalion stopped an American attack at Caumont, driving back the 26th Infantry Regiment of the famous 1st Infantry Division. The 2nd Panzer Division covered the junction between the American and British armies, and when the entire division was ready for action on 13 June it attacked this weak point. The Vienna Division drove back the "Desert Rats" of the 7th Armoured Division, but massive American artillery fire eventually stopped the attack. Under pressure from the 2nd Panzer Division, the US 1st Infantry Division, to the west of the British 7th Armoured Division, stopped its advance and dug in as well.

The defensive fighting in the hedgerow country continued for several weeks, despite repeated protests from 2nd Panzer Division staff officers that their unit's mobility was wasted there. The thick hedgerows, lines of trees between which dirt, rocks and underbrush had built up for ten centuries or more, made formidable defensive walls. In late July the Americans launched *Operation Cobra*, an attack designed to use their advantage in air power to break the stalemate. Wave upon wave of heavy bombers dropped high explosive bombs on the western end of the German line. Entire German battalions were vaporized; 60-ton tanks were flipped over like discarded toys. The few soldiers who survived were deafened or even maddened by the constant blasts. When the Americans moved forward through the new gaps in the German lines, 2nd Panzer Division led the counterattack which tried to stop their advance.

The 2nd Panzer Division fought a ferocious three-day tank battle with the American 2nd Armored Division in the last days of July. A week later, the 2nd Panzer Division spearheaded the German counter-attack at Mortain. American forces had pushed southward along the western coast of France and then swung eastward behind the German lines. The Germans hoped to cut off this attack at its base, trapping the new US Third Army and crippling the Allied advance.

The attacking German divisions had not received many replacement men or machines in recent weeks, and made little progress. The US 30th Infantry Division, a National Guard formation from Georgia and the Carolinas, had been expected to crumble before the weight of three SS divisions, but fought off their attacks with great determination. Only the 2nd Panzer Division made significant progress, but it could not get past counter-attacking units of the US 3rd Armored Division.

While the Mortain attack bogged down, the US Third Army continued its advance. Soon the Germans at Mortain were in serious danger of being surrounded themselves. The 2nd Panzer Division, along with the other panzer divisions involved in the Mortain attack, began to withdraw to the east. The divisions soon found themselves trapped in what became known as the Falaise Pocket. The 2nd Panzer Division led a number of counterattacks and many 2nd Panzer Division troops escaped American captivity by breaking through the Allied lines. Its fighting power destroyed, the 2nd Panzer Division was sent to Bitburg in western Germany for several months, where it was reformed in preparation for another counter-offensive.

Attack in the Ardennes

The Ardennes offensive, known in the United States as the Battle of the Bulge, was a final German attempt to break American fighting power by surrounding and destroying a part of the US forces. For the 2nd Panzer Division, by now at full strength, the attack began very badly as a panzer grenadier battalion became entangled in a minefield. This not only delayed the 2nd Panzer Division's dawn attack until full daylight on 16 December 1944, it also alerted the defending American units which fought back with determination. The town of Clervaux, with its bridges over the Clerve River, finally fell in the early hours of 18 December. With the bridges secure, the 2nd Panzer Division was to bypass the town of Bastogne and head for its objective, the Meuse River far to the west of the American lines. After negotiating the hairpin turns of the road above Clervaux, the 2nd Panzer Division went racing along the N12 highway toward their objectives.

At several road junctions along the N12 American armored task forces tried to stop the Vienna Division's advance, but the panzers smashed their way through. The new infrared night sights on the division's tanks were a great surprise to the Americans, as was the use of an American Sherman tank captured intact when its crew panicked and fled on foot.

Early on 19 December the 2nd Panzer Division ran into the American defenders of Bastogne, who had extended their perimeter to block the division's path. During a short, long-range firefight, nineteen German tanks were destroyed by American anti-tank guns. For two days the division joined in the attack on the town, continuing to suffer casualties and making no progress toward the Meuse.



On the night of the 20th the 2nd Panzer Division finally resumed its march to the west. A lack of gasoline stopped the advance the next day, and not until the night of 22 December did enough fuel arrive for the reconnaissance battalion to resume movement, with the bulk of the division moving out on the 23rd. The delay gave the Americans the time they needed to assemble reinforcements for a counterattack.

The Vienna Division had made the deepest penetration by far of any German unit, but the failure of the other army and SS divisions to keep pace meant the 2nd Panzer Division was alone and isolated in the midst of gathering American strength. On Christmas Day the US 2nd Armored Division trapped the 2nd Panzer Division, which was already greatly depleted, near the town of Celles. The American tank and artillery fire was devastating, together with massive air attacks. Only a few hundred men escaped on foot back to the German lines.

The Last Battle

The 2nd Panzer Division was only partially re-built before being committed to combat once again. The Vienna Division opposed the American advance into the Rhineland, but was down to the strength of a small battalion by this point and could offer little resistance. The "division" did fight all the way across Germany, ending the war in the Fulda area where its handful of survivors surrendered to the Americans.

■ *Grossdeutschland Division*

The *Grossdeutschland* unit's history began with the foundation of the Weimar Republic's army in 1921. The new Reichswehr formed a ceremonial and "palace guard" formation in Berlin, known as *Wachregiment Berlin*. This prestigious unit provided guards for important government buildings and political leaders. After a short disbanding in the early 1920s, the unit continued until the mid-1930s, with each of its seven companies coming from one of the Reichswehr's seven divisions in a regular rotation.

Known as the "Bodyguard of the German People," the *Grossdeutschland*, as it was renamed in 1939, looked back on the elite regiments of the Royal Prussian Guard for its historical inspiration. The unit was never a party or political formation. This has been a point of confusion for some amateur historians, partly because of the name, and partly because the party leader and war criminal Baldur von Schirach served in the unit in the 1940 campaign and later made much of his connection to the elite formation. Another infamous war criminal, Otto Remer, also served in the *Grossdeutschland* but committed his crimes later. At least two companies of SS troops were transferred to *Grossdeutschland* later in the war, but these men were then inducted into the regular army. While the entire German army was under the sway of party ideology, *Grossdeutschland* does not appear to have been infected any more than other units.

When war broke out in the fall of 1939, the *Grossdeutschland* contained some of Germany's finest young soldiers. However, the regiment had little combat training, having been used for public display instead. The personnel rotations ceased, and the regiment became a full-time, regular army unit. The unit, by now the size of a reinforced regiment with the addition of a battalion each from the Second Infantry Division and the infantry training school at Döberitz, went into intensive training for field service and was quickly dispatched to the front in Poland. By the time *Grossdeutschland* arrived on the scene, Polish resistance had collapsed and the unit saw no action.

The French Campaign

During the following winter the unit trained for use as an independent motorized regiment, and another new battalion, an assault engineer unit, joined the regiment. In April the regiment added a company of assault guns. When the attack on France known as *Case Yellow* began in May, 1940, *Grossdeutschland* formed part of the famous Gen. Heinz Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps.

One battalion performed history's first airmobile assault, *Operation Niwi*. Soldiers crammed into 100 small Fieseler Storch reconnaissance/liason planes, each carrying two soldiers and the pilot. The Storch carried no weapons, but could land on and take off from extremely short and rough runways. The planes landed on roads and highways at strategic locations, and the *Grossdeutschland* soldiers leaped out to secure these important crossing points. The *Grossdeutschland* troops drove off Belgian light infantry reinforced with armored cars and held the crossroads until the panzer divisions arrived on their way through Belgium into France.

Meanwhile, the rest of the regiment fought its way through French cavalry patrols in Belgium trying desperately to slow the German advance. The French fought hard to hold important bridges and crossroads. A hard fight for the small town of Etaille unexpectedly ended when the French withdrew. The *Grossdeutschland* regiment, now attached to the 10th Panzer Division, fought a stubborn French cavalry unit at Suxy on 11 May, the first use of the *Grossdeutschland* assault guns in their intended infantry support role. The assault guns quickly destroyed a French artillery battery and spearheaded the storming of Suxy.

On the 13th the regiment was attached to the 1st Panzer Division to lead the crossing of the Meuse River at Sedan. The regiment assembled during the wee hours of the morning and spent most of the day fighting their way down to the river. Along the southern bank of the river the French had built strong concrete fortifications, and the *Grossdeutschland* infantry crossed in their rubber boats under heavy fire. The *Grossdeutschland* troops captured the line of French bunkers after severe and bloody hand-to-hand fighting.

The other attempted crossings, by the 2nd and 10th Panzer Divisions, did not go nearly as well; only *Grossdeutschland* was able to fling a bridge over the river. The regiment fought off repeated counterattacks by the French 3rd Armored Division before being assigned to capture the high ground at Stonne. This would secure the XIX Panzer Corps' left flank and allow Guderian's troops to begin their offensive toward the English Channel.

The first French unit to stand in their way, the 55th Reserve Division, disintegrated under air and ground attack. The middle-aged French reservists seemed to believe they had a patriotic duty to prevent any stocks of alcohol from falling into German hands unconsumed. Other French units, especially the 3rd Armored Division, proved much more determined and *Grossdeutschland* anti-tank gunners claimed to have knocked out thirty-three French tanks in the first, 10-hour battle for Stonne. The village changed hands several times before the *Grossdeutschland* regiment secured it for good. Troops from the 29th Motorized Infantry Division relieved *Grossdeutschland* late in the evening of 16 May.

After a four-day rest (proof that the *Grossdeutschland* was indeed a favored unit) the regiment rejoined the XIX Panzer Corps, then tightening the ring encircling the British Expeditionary Force and French units at Dunkerque. The regiment joined the fighting on the night of 23 May and the next day spearheaded the attack across the Aa Canal. After forcing the surrender of a British battalion, the *Grossdeutschland* regiment remained in place for several days before resuming the attack. Despite stubborn British resistance, the ring around Dunkerque grew ever tighter. On 4 June the *Grossdeutschland* regiment was withdrawn from the Dunkerque perimeter to join in the renewed offensive through the so-called "Weygand Line" to the south.

The German offensive, known as *Case Red*, began on 5 June. *Grossdeutschland* remained in reserve to exploit the expected breakthrough. On the next day the regiment was committed to the attack against Amiens as the French fought desperately to hold their line. *Grossdeutschland* made the initial breakthrough, and fought off repeated attacks by French African units.

By 8 June the French were retreating and *Grossdeutschland* took up the pursuit. Resistance decreased with each passing day, and on the 17th *Grossdeutschland* captured the city of Creusot and the famous Schneider Works, center of the French armaments industry. Helping themselves to new trucks straight off the undamaged and still functioning production lines, the regiment resumed its advance.

On the 19th *Grossdeutschland* officers accepted the surrender of the French city of Lyons while most of the regiment struggled to fight their way through French Colonial units defending the approaches to the city and still determined to fight. Once the regiment made its way into the city, it remained there until the French signed an armistice with Germany. Out of a strength of 3,900 men, the regiment lost 1,108 killed, wounded and missing in the course of the campaign.

Interlude

The regiment's growth continued as the unit prepared to participate in planned campaigns against England and Gibraltar, attacks which never took place. The 400th Artillery Battalion, an independent unit, joined the regiment and a new flak (anti-aircraft) company was formed. The *Grossdeutschland* regiment also acquired its own replacement battalion to train new recruits. Only volunteers were accepted for service in the elite unit.

In the spring of 1941 the Germans launched attacks on both Greece and Yugoslavia. The *Grossdeutschland* regiment was assigned to the 41st Panzer Corps, a formation charged with capturing Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia. The regiment saw very little actual fighting, rounding up a few dispirited prisoners. Soon afterwards, the regiment boarded trains for Poland, to prepare for the planned invasion of the Soviet Union.

Operation Barbarossa

Other than the artillery batteries, the *Grossdeutschland* regiment did not participate in the initial attacks on Soviet positions. Instead, the unit exploited breakthroughs made by other units, crossing the frontier on 28 June 1941. After helping to secure the encirclement of several Soviet armies near Minsk, the regiment forced a crossing of the Dnepr River on 11 July.

In late July the *Grossdeutschland* regiment was thrown into the brutal fighting around Yelnya. Fresh Soviet divisions inflicted severe losses on the Germans, but *Grossdeutschland* held its positions. The hard fighting continued well into August before the regiment was withdrawn for almost two weeks of rest. *Grossdeutschland* then joined Panzer Group 2 in the encirclement of Kiev, after a march to the south. By mid-September the regiment was engaged in the mobile warfare for which it had been organized. In early October infantry units took *Grossdeutschland's* positions holding the encirclement, and the motorized regiment returned to the central sector of the front, where the drive on Moscow had finally begun.

As *Grossdeutschland* began to move out to join in the offensive, the first snow began to fall. The panzer spearheads pushed through thick mud to the city of Tula, for centuries an important arms-producing center. Though tank support came up from several panzer divisions, the brunt of the vicious house-to-house fighting was borne by the *Grossdeutschland* infantry. By the end of the first week of November, *Grossdeutschland's* rifle companies were down to 50 men or less, and the Germans abandoned their attack and switched over to the defensive. By late December, *Grossdeutschland*, like all the other German formations in front of Moscow, was in retreat.

Until late February, 1942, the *Grossdeutschland* regiment fought to establish a defensive line in the face of determined Soviet attacks. By March the Soviet offensive had run out of steam, stopped more by a lack of supplies and reinforcements than by German resistance. In April, 1942, the regiment was withdrawn from the front to be reorganized as a full-sized motorized infantry division.

Infantry Division Grossdeutschland

The *Grossdeutschland* had already grown far beyond the size of a normal regiment, forming a miniature combined-arms division. The assault gun, flak and anti-tank companies were increased to battalion size, the artillery battalion became a full regiment and the new division added a tank battalion, a reconnaissance battalion and a second infantry regiment. Rather than split the existing *Grossdeutschland* infantry regiment, which remained in Russia while the rest of the division formed in Germany, a completely new unit was raised.

Though described as a motorized infantry division, with its full battalions of both tanks and assault guns the *Grossdeutschland* approached the paper strength of a panzer division and exceeded the actual fighting power of most panzer divisions.

The 1942 Campaign

The new division was committed to the northern flank of the 1942 summer campaign in Ukraine, an operation known as *Case Blue*. Soviet tank units counterattacked the *Grossdeutschland* almost immediately, but the new *Grossdeutschland* tank battalion and the assault guns proved more than capable of driving them off. By 4 July the division's leading elements had reached the Don River near Voronezh. The 1st Regiment's 7th Company seized a road bridge over the river, hurling demolition charges into the river and taking most of the bridge intact, though one span fell into the Don. Voronezh fell on 7 July and the *Grossdeutschland* division started south to join in the attack into the Caucasus.

The Soviets were already in full retreat in this sector when the *Grossdeutschland* Division arrived at the front. The division seized new crossings over the lower Don River and began a rapid advance. Still a highly favored unit, the *Grossdeutschland* remained at the front for less than three weeks before being withdrawn from action for almost two weeks of rest. Afterwards, *Grossdeutschland* set off for the central sector of the front, for a series of operations against Soviet divisions which had infiltrated behind German lines in late 1941 and remained at large there, drawing supplies from airdrops and local partisans and harassing German rear areas.



The Soviets launched repeated attacks against the German front in hopes of relieving the pressure on their trapped comrades. By August these had developed into a regular offensive designed to re-take the key city of Rzhev. Heavy fighting continued throughout September, after which the *Grossdeutschland's* drastically depleted infantry regiments received new designations, the 1st becoming the *Grenadier Regiment Grossdeutschland* and the 2nd becoming the *Fusilier Regiment Grossdeutschland*. Once again the long-suffering German regular infantry relieved the *Grossdeutschland*, which withdrew from the front for a rest. By November the *Grossdeutschland* was scattered across the front of the German 9th Army to provide mobile reserves for the infantry divisions.

At point after point *Grossdeutschland* battlegroups sealed off Soviet penetrations of the German lines. Casualties mounted as the division headquarters desperately tried to regain control of its units. Heavy fighting in the Luchesa valley drew in more and more of the division's units until finally most of *Grossdeutschland* had been reunited. Losses, especially among officers, were enormous. As on the rest of the front, Soviet artillerymen proved especially adept at targetting and destroying German command posts. By the time the *Grossdeutschland* was relieved in early January, 1943, some rifle companies numbered less than a dozen men.

The Winter of Stalingrad

Having earned a reputation as a "fire brigade" unit excelling at stopping enemy breakthroughs, the *Grossdeutschland* division had little time to rest after leaving the 9th Army sector. Advance units of the division arrived on the southern front on 19 January, joining the *Escort Battalion*, a related guard formation, in the defensive fighting near Kharkov. Soviet tank armies had shredded the Hungarian and Italian armies holding the front line - though the soldiers were brave enough, these over-extended allied units had few tanks or anti-tank guns of their own and could not stop the masses of modern Soviet armor flung against them.

Grossdeutschland units fought to establish some sort of front while taking in thousands of exhausted, frost-bitten German and Italian soldiers who had survived the disaster along the Don River. The division fought off repeated Soviet tank attacks in front of Kharkov and around Belgorod. The division was nearly trapped in Kharkov on 15 February when an SS corps pulled out of the city in violation of direct orders from the high command that Kharkov be held at all costs.

At the end of February the *Grossdeutschland* Division pulled out of the line to absorb replacements for its severe losses. New units also joined the division, including a second tank battalion, a company of the powerful new Tiger tanks, a fourth artillery battalion and an additional anti-aircraft company. Though still stylized "*Infantry Division Grossdeutschland*," the unit was now actually much more powerful than any of the army's panzer divisions.

In early March the division returned to the attack in the drive to re-take Kharkov. Intense tank-vs.-tank engagements followed over the course of several days near the town of Borisovka. After the offensive had successfully re-captured both Kharkov and Belgorod, the *Grossdeutschland Division* was withdrawn to the Poltava area, well-removed from the fighting, where it rested and trained replacements until June. The division's growth continued, with still more of its infantry issued armored personnel carriers while the Tiger company expanded to form an entire battalion of the huge machines. In late June the division, now boasting about twice as many tanks and assault guns as a panzer division, was re-named *Panzer Grenadier Division Grossdeutschland*.

Citadel

The German main effort for 1943, *Operation Citadel*, was an attack designed to cut off and destroy the Soviet armies occupying a bulge in the front lines at Kursk, in the northeastern Ukraine. German ambitions had definitely been reduced from the sweeping offensives of the previous two years, in step with the decline in German resources and, more importantly, the disappearance of allied Romanian, Hungarian and Italian armies from the front. The Germans hoped to lure Soviet armored reserves into a massive tank battle, but the Soviets were well aware of German plans and prepared their defenses accordingly.

The rather poorly designed attack began for the *Grossdeutschland Division* on 4 July 1943 with a surprise attack in a driving rainstorm. The *Grossdeutschland* assault groups quickly bogged down in thick, obstacle-laden minefields protecting well dug-in infantry liberally supplied with anti-tank guns. Slowly, the division ground its way forward despite serious casualties, including most of its new Panther tanks. Some of these were lost to enemy action, while others caught fire and burned on their own.

For days the division fought through the Soviet defenses and engaged huge numbers of enemy tanks. By 12 July the Soviet reserve tank armies had entered the fray, and the *Grossdeutschland Division* re-doubled its assault in an effort to destroy these formations. On 13 July the German high command decided to call off the assault, though the actual orders to disengage were not given to *Grossdeutschland* until the night of 16-17 July. The Soviets had not only stopped the German attack, they now went over to the offensive themselves and held the strategic initiative until their red banners flew over the ruins of Berlin.

The *Grossdeutschland Division* now traveled northward to engage Soviet units which had broken through the German lines at Karachev, near Orel. With German offensive strength broken at Kursk, the division spent the rest of the war in this "fire brigade" role, counter-attacking enemy breakthroughs. The division covered the German retreat, then returned to Army Group South for another fire brigade mission, helping to stem the Soviet breakthrough near Belgorod.

Belgorod

The oversized *Grossdeutschland Division* could be moved by rail only slowly, and it took several days for the division to assemble around Akhtyrka, a town about 60 kilometers west of Kharkov. *Grossdeutschland* battlegroups almost immediately began fanning out to assist in the withdrawal of the shattered 19th Panzer Division and several German infantry divisions.

The division then held off repeated attacks by formations of the Soviet 27th Army, though the division was forced to continually give ground. To the south of the *Grossdeutschland's* "hedgehog" defense of Akhtyrka, the Soviets penetrated deeply into German-held territory. On 12 August the Germans began a counterattack designed to cut off the leading Soviet units. The northern wing of the attack, built around the *Grossdeutschland Division*, did not jump off until 18 August but had immediate success. Using a "time phase" assault, in which one battlegroup began the assault followed by a second and a third as each became exhausted, the *Grossdeutschland* quickly crushed the Soviet rifle division and attached tank brigade barring its path. The Soviets launched desperate counterattacks, which halted *Grossdeutschland* at the cost of massive casualties.

After Kharkov fell to the Soviets on 23 August and the Soviets made new advances north of Akhtyrka, *Grossdeutschland* and its neighboring divisions pulled back from the area. *Grossdeutschland* once again began to rest and refit. This lasted only a few days before new Soviet breakthroughs brought *Grossdeutschland* back to the front. Soon *Grossdeutschland* was trying to cover the panicked retreat of German units to the Dnepr River. The broad river could not stop the Soviet advance, and soon *Grossdeutschland* was desperately fighting on the opposite bank as well. Soviet attacks continued throughout October and November. By Christmas the division was dug in for positional warfare, in positions very close to those of September despite the heavy fighting.

Defense of Ukraine and Bessarabia

The long periods of rest, training and re-equipment which characterized *Grossdeutschland's* early years never returned. Partly this was due to Germany's continually deteriorating position on the Russian front. However, the political rise of the SS as defeat loomed for Germany had more to do with this change in policy. This party-controlled military force sent more and more divisions into the field, few of them very good, but demanded the best equipment for them. With these units now receiving the high command's favoritism, *Grossdeutschland* became a stepchild despite its fighting record. While pride and experience helped keep the unit elite, the now-constant commitment to combat wore away the division's fighting strength.

The opening days of 1944 saw the *Grossdeutschland Division* re-deploying to Kirovograd to hold off yet another Soviet breakthrough. The Soviet 7th Mechanized Corps of 5th Guards Tank Army had smashed through the German lines and the *Grossdeutschland* tried to fill the gap.

The defensive battle just to the west of Kirovograd continued with heavy fighting well into February, 1944, followed by several weeks of relative calm. A renewed Soviet drive opened on 8 March, driving in the *Grossdeutschland* positions and leading to a disordered retreat all along the German southern front. The *Grossdeutschland Division* attempted to slow the Soviet advance throughout the rest of March, pulling back from Ukrainian territory into the Romanian province of Bessarabia.

The Soviet advance continued unabated, and soon the *Grossdeutschland* and other German and Romanian divisions were fighting within Romania itself. Rearguard actions at Chisinau, Straseni and Cornesti slowed the enemy somewhat, but could not stop the Soviets. By mid-April the *Grossdeutschland* was on its way to seal off a Soviet breakthrough at the city of Tirgu Frumos near Jassy. A German-Romanian counterattack re-took the city and the *Grossdeutschland* began to dig in to hold Tirgu Frumos. The *Grossdeutschland* had been brought back up to strength in the meantime and had even acquired a fourth tank battalion.

The Soviets sent crack divisions and their new Josef Stalin tanks against the German and Romanian positions. The *Grossdeutschland*, well-supplied with ammunition and new equipment, and for one of the few times this late in the war well-supported from the air, fought off repeated attacks. The hilltop lines outside Tirgu Frumos changed hands repeatedly through the early days of May, as both sides fought with extreme fury. The *Grossdeutschland* Panther and Tiger tanks, dug in as armored strong points supporting the infantry, shot up dozens of Soviet tanks. An entire battalion of *Grossdeutschland* panzer grenadiers simply disappeared under the force of one Soviet attack. But by 11 May, after ten days of heavy fighting, the Soviet offensive finally came to a halt, with *Grossdeutschland* still holding its defensive line.

The division remained in the front lines while it absorbed replacement men and equipment. More modern equipment, especially armored personnel carriers for the infantry, were added but the two infantry regiments were reduced from four to three battalions each; even the army's elite fire brigade suffered from the general manpower shortage.

On the last day of May *Grossdeutschland* troops filed out of their positions for a counterattack against a new breakthrough near Jassy. This time the Soviets had the aid of waves of ground attack aircraft, and Soviet pilots pressed their attacks through a wall of anti-aircraft fire thrown up by the *Grossdeutschland's* plentiful air defense batteries. Under these waves of attacking planes the *Grossdeutschland* attack broke up and ground to a halt. Only with the aid of the Romanian 18th Mountain Division was the division able to secure a line of resistance. The *Grossdeutschland* then withdrew from the front for a refit period which lasted several weeks. In the last week of July, the division boarded trains for transfer to East Prussia, where yet more new Soviet breakthroughs had occurred.

East Prussia

During the summer of 1944 the Soviets had unleashed a series of attacks on the central part of the front, known as *Operation Bagration*. Many German divisions were annihilated, while the high command refused to allow German troops in the northern Baltic States to retreat. This left a huge gap in the German lines. Along the border of East Prussia, the easternmost German province, the *Grossdeutschland Division* and newly-recruited local militia attempted to fill this hole in the front.

The initial counterattacks, around the city of Vilkavishkis, had some success. The Soviets did not expect to meet a full-strength, veteran mobile division. By 11 August the East Prussian militia had replaced the *Grossdeutschland* troops along the front line, and the fire brigade marched north to try to re-establish overland contact with Army Group North. The *Grossdeutschland* made good progress at first, as the Soviets did not contest the advance too closely. Soviet resistance stiffened as the German spearheads approached the trapped Army Group North, and the German troops trapped in the Baltic States thanks to the increasingly insane orders emanating from the high command would remain there until the end of the war.

By early October the *Grossdeutschland* Division was being deployed in small battle-groups all around the East Prussian perimeter. One battalion of the panzer regiment even saw action in France. The Soviet October offensive drove the Germans back steadily, despite repeated orders from the high command to hold various towns and other positions "at all costs" and "to the last man." On 7 October the division withdrew into positions around Memel, a German-speaking city seized from Lithuania in 1939. There, the *Grossdeutschland* troops dug in and fought off repeated attacks by Soviet tanks and infantry. On the 10th, Soviet spearheads penetrated all the way to Memel's harbor, but were wiped out by *Grossdeutschland* battlegroups. A pair of German cruisers steaming offshore provided very effective fire support.

On 1 November the high command ordered the *Grossdeutschland* split to form two divisions, together to make up a *Panzer Corps Grossdeutschland*. Infantrymen evacuated from Army Group North took over *Grossdeutschland's* positions in the Memel perimeter, and in late November *Grossdeutschland* elements began to board ships for evacuation to Germany, and began to form the new *Grossdeutschland* divisions in East Prussia.

Many Grossdeutschland's

The evacuation from the Memel pocket effectively ended the *Grossdeutschland* as a unified force. Many of its veterans were sent to the ever-growing *Escort* formation, which grew from a *Grossdeutschland*-related battalion charged with protecting the high command into a full-fledged combat division in its own right. The *Escort Brigade*, as it was known at the time, took part in the Ardennes offensive against the Americans in December, 1944. Many of the soldiers involved still wore their *Grossdeutschland* insignia, leading the Americans to mistakenly identify the *Grossdeutschland's* presence in the attack.

The planned *Panzer Corps Grossdeutschland* never amounted to much, as most of the *Grossdeutschland's* men and equipment went to form the *Escort Brigade* (later *Escort Division*) and a related formation, the *Grenadier Brigade* (later the *Grenadier*



Division). The new "corps" ended up fighting under the control of another new formation based on a famous though highly over-rated unit, the *Parachute Panzer Corps Hermann Goering*. Attaching proud names to hastily-formed scratch units did not magically instill them with the former units' fighting ability. The remnants of the old *Grossdeutschland Division*, fighting as a small battlegroup, ended up surrendering to the British in northern Germany, while the *Escort Division* capitulated to the Soviets east of Prague.

■ 5TH LIGHT DIVISION/21ST PANZER DIVISION

The 21st Panzer Division began its existence as a special formation set up for possible German intervention in the Italian colony of Libya in North Africa. The Italians had suffered a severe defeat by British forces there in late 1940 and the 3rd Panzer Division was alerted for possible transport across the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa. For several months the political situation kept the possible intervention in limbo - the Italian high command was too proud to ask for help, and the German high command, eager to humiliate the Italians, would not send forces to Libya without a formal request.

While the politicians sorted out the particulars of the mission to North Africa, the units gathering for North African service, known collectively as *Sperrverband Libyen* ("Blocking Detachment Libya"), began to train and equip themselves for desert duty. Once again the German-Italian rivalry came to the fore - the Italians, with decades of experience fighting in the North African deserts against local resistance, would not offer any advice on rations, equipment or clothing appropriate to the desert. The Germans, for their part, were too proud or arrogant to ask for such help. As a result the first German troops to arrive found themselves woefully short of air and oil filters and fresh food (vital in the desert climate), hauled around far more water than necessary and were underdressed for the surprisingly crisp Libyan nights.

In mid-February the collection of units was named the 5th Light Division and shipped to Africa. The Italians had suffered another disastrous defeat in early February and the 5th Light Division was seen as a final defensive force to maintain an Axis presence in Africa. The new division sported an assortment of odd units, an arrangement thought best for desert conditions. The 5th Light Division was built around two tank battalions, a reconnaissance battalion, an anti-tank battalion and an artillery battalion, all from the 3rd Panzer Division, plus the independent 200th Infantry Regiment. From army-level troops came a motorized machine gun battalion, and two anti-aircraft battalions.

Cyrenaica: The First Campaign

The newly-appointed commander of the German Africa Corps, Erwin Rommel, sent the 5th Light Division units to the front as soon as they were unloaded from Italian transports in the port of Tripoli. Rommel would not be satisfied with merely defending an Axis presence in Africa, however. On 24 March 1941 the first clash between German and British forces in Africa took place, as the 5th Light Division's reconnaissance battalion drove a British force out of the town of El Agheila, an important strategic point and a source of water.

By April Fool's Day, 1941, the 5th Light Division was on the march for a "reconnaissance in force" that Rommel apparently intended as a general offensive. On the afternoon of the 2nd the II Battalion of the division's 5th Panzer Regiment fought and defeated a British tank battalion as the Allies began a widespread retreat. When the 5th Light Division reached Agedabia, Rommel separated it into several columns which then fanned out across Cyrenaica, as the eastern half of Libya was called. Gen. Italo Gariboldi, the Italian commander-in-chief in Libya, protested (with justification) that such a rapid advance could prove highly dangerous in case of a British counterattack.

The 5th Light Division reached the perimeter of the key port-fortress of Tobruk by 11 April. For two days the division probed the Allied defenses, chiefly manned by Australian troops. On the night of 13-14 April Rommel ordered the division to take Tobruk by storm. The division's assault groups breached the Australian defenses but could get no farther, and the 5th Light Division suffered severe casualties. Another attempt by the Italian 132nd *Ariete* Armored Division fared no better three days later. The Axis offensive ground to a halt to await the arrival of more supplies and reinforcements, including the German 15th Panzer Division.

British Counter-Attacks

Rommel ordered another attack on Tobruk in late April which made some progress but could not penetrate the perimeter. In the midst of a raging sandstorm a 5th Light Division task force blundered into a minefield. The attack ended in dismal failure, and Rommel took out his frustrations by firing 5th Light Division's commander, Maj. Gen. Johannes Streich. Streich had played little part in the attack - Rommel placed the 5th Light Division forces in two battle groups, one at Tobruk and one on the Egyptian frontier - but the two generals had never liked one another and Rommel took the first opportunity to sack his rival.

Meanwhile, the British had begun a counter-offensive along the Egyptian border. A tank battalion from 5th Light Division drove back a British column on 15 May and on the next day the 5th Light Division battle group made a counterattack, together with a group from 15th Panzer Division. The British struggled back to their starting lines and the offensive, code-named *Operation Brevity*, ended in failure. Soon afterwards 5th Light Division was withdrawn from the frontier for rest and reorganization.

The British began a new offensive, code-named *Operation Battleaxe*, on 15 June. Some 5th Light Division tanks moved forward to support the 15th Panzer Division forces holding the front line while the rest of the division assembled for a counterattack. Throughout 16 June, 5th Light Division dueled the British 7th Armoured Division and on the next day began a flank attack designed to cut off and surround the British attackers. Threatened with annihilation, the British withdrew with heavy casualties and yet another Allied offensive ended in failure.

With both sides having exhausted their strength, and the Axis unable to advance further without first securing Tobruk, the theater was quiet for several months while the Germans and Italians besieged Tobruk. Another German division joined Rommel's command, while the 5th Light Division was reorganized and re-christened the 21st Panzer Division in August, 1941. The division, like the 15th Panzer Division which was also serving in Africa, was smaller than the German army's other panzer divisions, with only one motorized infantry (later called panzer grenadier) regiment rather than the usual two.

By November the British had built up large stockpiles of supplies and had received numerous reinforcements. Tobruk remained under Axis siege, with Rommel hoping to attack the fortress in early November. Each side raced to launch its attack first, but British control of the sea lanes gave them an enormous advantage, and on 18 November 1941 the offensive known as *Operation Crusader* began.

The British hoped to draw the Axis forces into a general tank battle in which their far greater numbers of tanks could be used to their advantage. Rommel refused to react, preferring to concentrate his forces to attack Tobruk. On the 19th the 21st Panzer Division sent out a battle group which shot up the British 4th Armoured Brigade, while the Italian 132nd *Ariete* Armored Division inflicted a crushing defeat on the 7th Armoured Brigade.

On 20 November the 21st Panzer Division moved forward toward the Egyptian frontier, but turned back toward Tobruk on the next day when the fortress' Allied garrison threatened to break out. The 21st Panzer Division set out rearguards to hold off the British following behind them, but on the 22nd the division finally saw large-scale action. The 21st Panzer Division attacked and defeated British units at the key airfield of Sidi Rezegh south of Tobruk. The British 4th Armoured Brigade was destroyed on 22 November and the next day the 5th South African Infantry Brigade was wiped out as well.

The 21st Panzer Division, personally led by Rommel and followed by the 15th Panzer Division, next moved rapidly toward the Egyptian frontier to relieve the Axis troops still holding out under heavy Allied pressure. Rommel's plans began to fall apart, though, thanks to a lack of accurate information regarding Allied plans and a general shortage of fuel. At Sidi Azeiz the 21st Panzer Division defeated the 5th New Zealand

Infantry Brigade on 26 November, but that night the Germans headed west away from the frontier when word arrived that the Tobruk garrison had broken out. The 21st Panzer Division had lost most of its tanks and was greatly reduced in fighting power, but the British were in no condition to interfere.

Maj. Gen. Johann von Ravenstein, the 21st Panzer Division's commander, wandered into a New Zealand infantry battalion's position on the 28th, and his leaderless division struggled to reach the battle zone developing south of Tobruk. The *Ariete* Division took up the slack, crushing the 6th New Zealand Infantry Brigade, but 21st Panzer Division, now down to only twenty tanks, could do little to interfere with the withdrawal of the defeated New Zealanders. Tobruk was once again surrounded, but the British continued to introduce new troops while the Axis mobile forces neared total exhaustion. On 8 December the Italian infantry besieging Tobruk began to withdraw from the perimeter and the retreat back to Tripolitania was on. The Axis made a brief attempt at a stand at Gazala, some 50 miles west of Tobruk, and the 21st Panzer Division headed for the Beda Fomm area south of Benghazi.

The 21st Panzer Division participated in successful counter-attacks on 27 and 30 December which badly hurt the British 22nd Armoured Brigade, but most of the Africa Corps' tank strength came from 15th Panzer Division. In early January, 1942, the Germans withdrew to El Agheila, while the Allied offensive finally ground to a halt.

As bad as the situation looked for the Germans, their intelligence officers believed the British were even worse off. For a short time, it was believed, the Axis would have a slight strength advantage. Each side gained strength as it drew nearer its bases and withered away when far from them. On 21 January the 21st Panzer Division was back on the march, though it was desperately under strength. On the 23rd they ran into the British 2nd Armoured Brigade and needed help from the 15th Panzer Division, as was the case again two days later when the two panzer divisions fought the British 1st Armoured Division. By early February the Germans and Italians had driven back the British from much of their gains and the front stabilized again, this time around Gazala. Both sides spent the next several months preparing for a new offensive.

The Gazala Battles

The Axis was ready for its attack first, and on 26 May 1942 German and Italian troops moved forward to begin what the Italian staff called *Operazione Venezia*. The *Ariete* Division, reinforced with some 21st Panzer Division tanks, attacked and destroyed the 3rd Indian Motor Brigade in the battle's first action as the German and Italian mobile formations swept around the southern end of the Allied positions. The British had constructed a line of fortified positions running directly southward from the Mediterranean Sea, counting on the deep desert sands to anchor their southern flank. Heavy minefields helped secure the British "box" positions, and infantry brigades occupied the "boxes" in the fortified line with armored units stationed behind the line as mobile reserves. The German-Italian attack was designed to bypass the "boxes" and engage the enemy armor.

On the 27th the main burden of the attack fell on the 21st Panzer Division, as the 15th Panzer Division had run out of fuel and the *Ariete* Division was hung up attacking a Free French infantry brigade at Bir Hacheim on the southern end of the British line. The 21st Panzer Division took the British position known as "Commonwealth Keep," an important point along the road leading to Tobruk. With supply convoys having a difficult time moving around the British lines - Rommel himself led one convoy through - the German staff decided to strike to the west and break through the British positions to allow the supply convoys a shorter, safer route.

By the 30th of May, the 21st Panzer Division's tank regiment was leading the attack to the west. A swirling battle developed in the area known as "The Cauldron" as each side fed in more men and machines. The 21st Panzer Division overwhelmed the British 150th Infantry Brigade and joined hands with the Italian *Brescia* Infantry Division, opening a direct route through the British lines. On 2 June the 21st Panzer Division defeated the British 4th Armoured Brigade in a tank battle, and then both sides spent several days re-supplying and re-organizing. The three Axis armored divisions drew themselves into a circular defensive position in The Cauldron, and the British attacked them there on 5 June.

After driving off the attackers, all three divisions launched an attack of their own, crushing the headquarters elements of two enemy divisions and destroying the fighting power of several enemy brigades. For several days afterwards 21st Panzer Division remained in place to screen the forces attacking the Free French at Bir Hacheim, who were finally overwhelmed on 10 June.

On the next day Rommel returned to the attack, though his tank force was by now badly depleted. The 21st Panzer Division made a demonstration to support the main attack, and on the 12th and 13th the two German panzer divisions caught two British armored brigades between them and inflicted heavy losses on the British. The British began a general retreat on 14 June, but the German troops were too exhausted to take advantage of this. The Italian general staff insisted that Rommel begin a general pursuit regardless, and 21st Panzer Division began to move shortly afterwards.

After a brief rest the Germans and Italians resumed their offensive and on 15 June the 21st Panzer Division overran an Indian infantry battalion. The British Royal Air Force made repeated attacks on the panzers to screen the Allied withdrawal, and on the 16th the 21st Panzer Division was halted by strong enemy resistance at Sidi Rezegh southwest of Tobruk. The 21st Panzer Division then turned north to the Mediterranean coast, cutting off Tobruk from the Allied bases in Egypt.

Rommel reported Tobruk surrounded on 18 June, and - prodded by his Italian superiors - issued attack orders immediately. After an air attack on the morning of the 20th, engineers cleared paths through the minefields and the tanks of both panzer divisions followed. The 21st Panzer Division captured the heights dominating Tobruk harbor by 1:30 p.m. and moved on the town itself, reporting Tobruk captured at 7 p.m. The South African commander of the Allied garrison, Maj. Gen. H.B. Klopper, surrendered the next morning though some Gurkha and Scottish troops would not lay down their arms until they faced utter annihilation. The Germans captured vast amounts of food, fuel and ammunition as well as 2,000 vehicles. The Axis had the initiative and the supplies they needed at the proper point to press ahead with the conquest of Egypt.

Into Egypt

Despite earlier decisions to invade Malta immediately after the fall of Tobruk, both the German and Italian high commands agreed that the poor condition of the Allied forces in Egypt and the massive amounts of supplies taken at Tobruk represented an opportunity not to be missed. The Allies fell back to a line based on Mersa Matruh, a small port about 120 miles from the Egyptian-Libyan frontier. Rommel's forces attacked this line on 26 June. The 21st Panzer Division broke through Allied screening units, defeating the 2nd New Zealand Division and the British 1st Armoured Division on the 27th.

On the evening of 28 June the 21st Panzer Division wiped out the 29th Indian Infantry Brigade, but the British were able to withdraw into a line based on the town of El Alamein. This was the last useful defensive position before the Nile River. The Axis units made contact with the new British line on 30 June, the same day the last Allied troops reached its safety.

The 21st Panzer Division's first attack against the Alamein line began in the early morning hours of 1 July and went badly from the start. On the following day the German attack and a British counter-attack jumped off almost simultaneously, with 21st Panzer Division clashing with the British 22nd Armoured Brigade in a day-long tank battle. The Axis mobile divisions then withdrew into reserve positions, but when the 2nd New Zealand Division followed up these withdrawals too closely the 21st Panzer Division counterattacked them.

On 21 July the 2nd New Zealand Division, with the help of two new British brigades, attacked the 21st Panzer Division along Ruweisat Ridge, south of Alamein. The 21st Panzer Division, with help from the 15th Panzer Division, counterattacked and stopped the Allied offensive. By the end of July both sides had once again exhausted themselves, and the front remained quiet until the very end of August, 1942.

Out of Egypt

Rommel sent his forces forward on the night of 30-31 August in a sweeping attack around the southern end of the Allied line. The 21st Panzer Division fought a tank battle with the British 22nd Armoured Brigade in which the division's commander, Maj. Gen. Georg von Bismarck, was killed. By 1 September the 21st Panzer Division had run out of fuel, and it spent the next several days battling Allied units along the Alam el Halfa ridge. The attack had failed and the strategic initiative passed again to the Allies.

Once again the front remained quiet for a number of months while both sides built up supplies and brought in reinforcements. The Axis laid large numbers of mines and even posted dogs along the front to warn of approaching enemies. The four Axis armored divisions occupied reserve positions behind the lines, with 15th Panzer Division and the Italian 133rd *Littorio* Armored Division to the north and 21st Panzer Division and the battle-hardened *Ariete* Division to the south.

The British attack opened on 23 October 1942, with massive bombardments by aircraft and artillery. The main thrust of the attack came in the northern sector. On the next day a diversionary attack began in the southern sector. The 21st Panzer Division and the *Ariete* Division drove off the British 7th Armoured Division and the Allies called off the attack in the southern sector to reinforce their success in the north. On the 26th Rommel, returned to the African from sick leave, sent the 21st Panzer Division and part of the *Ariete* Division to join the counterattack against British breakthroughs in the north.

On 28 October the British changed the direction of their offensive, turning north from the bulge they had driven into the German lines to push towards the sea. The attack made little headway, but the Germans and Italians were nearing the breaking point. The next day, however, Rommel made the decision to withdraw, and ordered an Italian motorized division to take the 21st Panzer Division's place in the front lines. The 21st Panzer Division launched a counterattack at noon on the last day of October, but the tank-infantry assault groups fell back under heavy artillery fire.

The British attacked again on 1 November, concentrating on a very narrow front. The 21st Panzer Division went in to counterattack the southern flank of the breakthrough. On the afternoon of 2 November the *Ariete* Division arrived to join the effort, but the two veteran divisions could make but little progress. Rommel ordered a retreat on the next day, but the German high command instead ordered the troops to fight and die where they stood. The non-motorized Italian infantry was helpless under such an order, and the already-depleted *Ariete* Division was destroyed on the afternoon of 4 November.

On the morning of 5 November the German high command finally authorized a retreat, but there were few organized formations left to obey. The British moved very cautiously in exploiting their breakthrough, and this allowed the remnants of the 21st Panzer Division and the other German mobile formations a chance to escape. Rommel sent all remaining German tanks - less than three dozen - to 21st Panzer Division, which now acted as rearguard. On the morning of 6 November the 21st Panzer Division fought off a British attack, but when the fuel supplies ran out the division destroyed its stalled tanks and slipped away. A heavy rain helped slow the enemy pursuit - though it slowed the Axis retreat as well - and the leading British armored units, apparently not expecting such success, ran out of fuel themselves.

The retreat continued all the way back to Mersa el Brega, on the border between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Here the retreat halted for about a month while both sides brought up supplies. On 13 December the British advance and German retreat resumed, with 21st Panzer Division fighting a heavy action at Mugtaa against Allied armor. The 21st Panzer Division left Rommel's command on 13 January 1943, shifting to join the Fifth Panzer Army facing American and British units in northern Tunisia. Tripoli fell to the British on 23 January, as the Germans withdrew into southern Tunisia.



Tunisia

The 21st Panzer Division went to the Sfax area of Tunisia for rest and re-equipment, in preparation for an attack against the Americans. The offensive began on 30 January 1943, with 21st Panzer Division and the Italian 50th Special Brigade charged with seizing the Faïd Pass from the Americans. The attack was held up for some hours by a stubborn French defense at Sidi bou Zid, giving the American 1st Armored Division time to move up in support. The US reinforcements did not keep 21st Panzer Division from encircling the French troops defending the pass, however, and on the next day the Americans tried unsuccessfully to break through to the French, suffering heavy losses. By the mid-afternoon the pass had fallen. The Americans launched a set-piece attack on 1 February which 21st Panzer Division drove off with little trouble and more American attacks over the next several days had no more success.

In mid-February the Germans began an offensive against the Americans in central Tunisia, known to the Germans as *Operation Spring Wind* and to the Americans as the *Battle of Kasserine Pass*. With the 10th Panzer Division moved through the positions taken by the 21st Panzer Division at Faïd Pass, the 21st Panzer Division's mobile elements - now including 91 tanks in three battalions thanks to shipments of replacement vehicles - shifted to the south in a broad circling movement to strike the Americans from the south. When the American 1st Armored Division had been crushed, 21st Panzer Division was to move even farther south to join the Africa Corps in its attack on Gafsa.

The battle began for 21st Panzer Division on the morning of 14 February, with a tank force capturing an American reconnaissance company. By the mid-afternoon Sidi bou Zid had fallen and the 1st Armored Division's Combat Command A had been badly defeated. The Americans counterattacked on the next day, and 21st Panzer Division handled them roughly, destroying an American tank battalion. After pausing for a day while Rommel and the commander of the Fifth Panzer Army in northern Tunisia, Gen. Jürgen von Arnim, wrangled over who would control the 21st Panzer Division, the division moved forward to continue Arnim's operation. The 21st Panzer Division shattered an American screening force and advanced against Sbeitla, an ancient Roman town where the Americans had stockpiled huge amounts of supplies.

The 21st Panzer Division launched a night attack against 1st Armored Division forces in and around Sbeitla on the evening of 16 February. Many American soldiers panicked, reporting attacks by waves of Tiger tanks (which 21st Panzer Division did not possess). The mass confusion reigning in Sbeitla gave the German attackers pause and the 21st Panzer Division was ordered to wait for daylight before entering the town. A tank battle raged in front of the town for most of the 17th, but Sbeitla fell to the 21st Panzer Division in the early evening. The Americans gained enough time to evacuate or destroy their supply dumps, but the 1st Armored Division and an infantry regiment were wrecked in the battle with the 21st Panzer Division.

The Axis moved promptly to follow up their victory. The 21st Panzer Division moved north from Sbeitla on 19 February but was stopped by the American 34th Infantry Division and a British tank brigade. On the next day the division kept its opponents occupied while 10th Panzer Division crushed forces of the American 1st Armored and 1st Infantry Divisions in the Kasserine Pass.

Axis attacks continued, with Fifth Panzer Army launching an attack in the northern sector in late February and early March. The 21st Panzer Division remained in the central sector to threaten the Allied flank, but did send fifteen tanks northward to join the provisional *Manteuffel* division in its attack. While the fighting went on in the north, the remainder of the 21st Panzer Division rejoined Rommel for an attack on the British Eighth Army, as the forces which had chased the Germans and Italians out of Egypt and across Libya were known. The 21st Panzer Division attacked the British 51st Infantry Division on the morning of 6 March without much success, and a second attack against the British 201st Guards Brigade did no better.

Following the Axis failure the initiative passed to the Allies, who attacked in late March after careful preparation. The 2nd New Zealand Division took an important observation point, Hill 201, from its Italian garrison and the 21st Panzer Division spent most of 22 March trying unsuccessfully to take it back. On the 27th and 28th the 21st Panzer Division, along with the 15th Panzer Division, attacked the British 1st Armored Division to allow the German and Italian defenders of the Mareth Line defending southern Tunisia to pull back to a new, shorter line. The division then shifted to El Guettar, in central Tunisia, to help fight off an American attack.

On 30 March a 21st Panzer Division tank force joined the counterattack, and the entire division took part the next day. The American attack ground to a halt thanks to the veteran 21st Panzer Division. A 1st Armored Division tank force was shot up, but the American attacks continued in early April. The Axis forces withdrew into northeastern Tunisia without much interference. The Axis troops left in Tunisia held a small bridgehead around the ports of Tunis and Bizerte.

The Allied attack on the final Axis foothold in Africa began on 22 April, falling on the *Hermann Göring Division*, a German Air Force unit. The ineptly led *Hermann Göring Division* - highly overrated by the Allies and some later historians - crumbled under the first attack. With no room to fall back, the entire Axis position began to fall apart. The Americans captured Bizerte on 8 May and the northern half of the Axis forces capitulated.

The southern half, including the 21st Panzer Division, held out for several more days, giving in on 12 May. The last Axis unit still fighting, the veteran Italian 101st Trieste Motorized Division, gave up the next day. A number of 21st Panzer Division troops made their way across the narrow Sicilian Channel to Sicily, using whatever small craft they could obtain.

A New Division

Using the battle-hardened veterans who had escaped from Africa as a nucleus, along with other experienced 21st Panzer Division soldiers returning from convalescence, leave or other duties in Europe, a new 21st Panzer Division was formed in France. The new unit was mustered in July, 1943, at Rheims in northern France. New units were transferred to the division to bring it up to strength. The 125th Panzer Grenadier Regiment was brought in from the Rapid Brigade West. A second motorized infantry regiment, the 192nd, was formed from the "African" veterans and new recruits. The Panzer Reconnaissance School contributed its *Lehr*, or demonstration, battalion, a crack units of veteran troops used to show new recruits the latest combat techniques. The independent 100th Panzer Regiment, equipped with captured French tanks - some of World War One vintage - became the division's tank regiment and was renamed the 22nd Panzer Regiment. The new 21st Panzer Division's rear area service elements were largely those of the old 21st Panzer Division, most of which had been evacuated to Sicily before the collapse in Tunisia. The new division was led by Maj. Gen. Edgar Feuchtinger, a party functionary who had risen to high rank for his work arranging mass political rallies. A World War I veteran, he had also worked in the German secret weapons program but had no command experience.

The division remained in France for the next year, training its recruits and slowly acquiring modern, German-made equipment. By the early summer of 1944, with an Allied invasion likely, the 21st Panzer Division was the only panzer division in the western theater judged unfit for combat service. Once again the 21st Panzer Division came under the command of Erwin Rommel, who stationed it in Normandy with orders to counterattack any Allied force which might attempt to invade Europe.

Normandy Beachhead

In April, 1944, the 21st Panzer Division spent a short time in Hungary. When it returned to France Rommel stationed it at Caen, directly behind the Normandy beaches, as part of the beach defenses rather than a counterattack reserve. The division's artillery, anti-tank and anti-aircraft units as well as half of its infantry went directly to the coastal defenses, attached to the 716th Infantry Division, while the rest of the unit was held a few kilometers inland.

The 21st Panzer Division was the first panzer division alerted to attack the Allied landings on 6 June 1944. Orders arrived at 5 a.m., but Feuchtinger could get his command moving only slowly across the badly damaged roads and bridges. The 21st Panzer Division attacked the British 3rd Infantry Division at about 4 p.m., but made little progress. One small column slipped into the gap between the British and Canadian beachheads, penetrating to the coast, but it was driven back by the Canadians. At dusk the 21st Panzer Division stopped its attack and dug in. The only large-scale counter-attack on the day of the invasion was a dismal failure.

On the next day the 21st Panzer Division limited itself to a series of small, unsuccessful counterattacks against British paratroopers. On 8 June the 21st Panzer Division, together with the newly-arrived 12th SS Panzer Division, launched an attack which also failed, and the division returned to the defensive. For the next several weeks the division fought a bitter, grinding battle with the British for the shattered ruins of Caen.

In early July the 21st Panzer Division was pulled back slightly from the line to rest and receive replacements. An Air Force infantry division took the 21st Panzer Division's place in the line, with the panzer division occupying positions not far away. On 7 July the Allies unleashed a powerful air and naval bombardment on the German positions around Caen, beginning their attack the next day. The badly shaken Air Force division broke apart under British and Canadian attack, and the 21st Panzer Division returned to the line despite a failure to obtain many new tanks or troops. The British and Canadians finally broke into Caen on 9 July, 33 days after its scheduled capture, but still could not take all of the city.

On 18 July the British launched an offensive known as *Operation Goodwood*, targeting the area held by the 21st Panzer Division for another massive air and naval bombardment, followed by an attack by three armored divisions on a narrow front. The British made some gains, and the German counterattack which promptly followed stopped the Allied advance but could not retake the lost ground. The British continued a series of attritional attacks until 20 July, when heavy rains brought their offensive to a close.

While the Germans bottled up the British very effectively, they could not keep the Americans penned up quite so easily. A week after the failure of *Operation Goodwood*, the Americans burst out of their beachhead with an offensive known as *Operation Cobra*. German attempts to cut off the advancing Americans failed, and the new US Third Army swung behind the German units facing the British in Normandy, including the 21st Panzer Division. On orders from the high command, in mid-August the 21st Panzer Division disengaged from the front and prepared to launch a hopeless counterattack against the Americans, starting from deep within the pocket of trapped German troops then being formed. However, the division was diverted to hold off an attack by Canadian troops and a Polish Exile armored division. This saved the 21st Panzer Division from the fate of the divisions trapped in the so-called "Falaise Pocket," but the division's strength was down to no more than a small battle group.

Lorraine

The 21st Panzer Division immediately went to eastern France to form the mobile reserve for Army Group G, the force holding the front in Lorraine, the French province annexed by Germany in 1940. Most of the division's units had returned to Germany for refitting, and only a battle group remained at the front. The 21st Panzer Division, now little more than a reinforced infantry regiment, fought as a screening force throughout most of September, struggling to slow the American advance. The German high command gave the 21st Panzer Division top priority for new tanks and equipment, but these were slow to arrive.

In late September the 21st Panzer Division fought a bitter delaying action against the American 79th Infantry Division. The Germans fought tenaciously along the Meurthe River and in the Mondon Forest. The 21st Panzer Division had no tanks, few anti-tank guns and a handful of assault guns to help its single under-manned infantry regiment try to hold an extended line. By noon on 23 September the depleted division was in retreat, but it had inflicted serious losses on the Americans.

Throughout October and into November the 21st Panzer Division held a sector on the 19th Army's front in the Vosges Mountains, repulsing repeated American attacks around the twin road junctions of Brû and Jeanménil. In late October the division augmented its strength by absorbing the remnants of the 112th and 113th Panzer Brigades, and together with the arrival of replacements this brought the division up to almost half strength. The 21st Panzer Division had also added an assault gun battalion, and had the help of several fortress machinegun battalions and some scratch infantry units. Early in November the division returned to the army group reserve, and a second-line infantry division took its place at the front.

A short distance to the north the Americans had broken through the German lines, and the 21st Panzer Division was thrown into battle against the US 6th Armored Division. With no time to even begin the division's scheduled rehabilitation, the 21st Panzer Division now counted 19 tanks, three assault guns and less than 300 riflemen. A 21st Panzer Division task force attacked and defeated the 6th Armored Division's Combat Command B on 13 November, halting the American offensive. The 21st Panzer Division could not, however, destroy the key bridge over the Nied River near Ancerville, though they came very close to success.

The 21st Panzer Division then returned to the Vosges sector after a series of small-unit actions in the St. Barbara sector in front of the West Wall fortifications. The rear guards continued fighting there into early December. Soon the division was one again in a "fire brigade" role, counter-attacking to seal off an American breakthrough near Schönau on the German border. The 21st Panzer Division was forced back into the fortified line on 14 December after the American 614th Tank Destroyer Battalion, a colored unit, fought a day-long battle with and defeated the division's tanks.

For the next week the 21st Panzer Division fought a series of vicious battles against the American 45th and 103rd Infantry divisions as they tried to penetrate the West Wall, known to the Americans as the Siegfried Line. The Americans called off their attack when the Germans launched their offensive in the Ardennes region well to the north of Lorraine, known as the Battle of the Bulge.

To tie down the Americans during the Ardennes attack, the Germans also launched an offensive in the Vosges, called *Operation North Wind*. The 21st Panzer Division received many replacements to help it prepare for the attack. The armored units were held back from the initial attacks, which jumped off just before midnight on 31 December. The attack never made enough progress to commit the 21st Panzer Division, however, and on 5 January 1945 the division moved northward to participate in a new series of attacks near Wissembourg in an unsuccessful drive on Strasbourg, which continued through the rest of January.



The January battles greatly depleted the 21st Panzer Division, and in February it was sent to the Eastern Front. The division was on the rather static front on the Oder River, about 60 miles east of Berlin, for the next two months and was part of the Fourth Panzer Army reserve. The remnants of the division fought to the south of Berlin in April, 1945 and were destroyed there by the Soviet armies advancing to the final battle for the German capital.

■ THE 5TH GUARDS TANK CORPS

The 5th Guards Tank Corps traces its origins back to the 40th Tank Division, formed from separate tank battalions in the Kiev Special Military District on March 11, 1941, as a part of the 19th Mechanized Corps. When the war started on June 22, 1941, the corps was deployed in the area of Zhitomir, west of Kiev but far from the front. The whole corps contained 450 tanks, but included only six KV tanks and two T-34s. The 40th Tank Division, commanded by Colonel Mikhail V. Shirogokov, was up to full strength in enlisted men, but only 53% of its officers and NCOs. Of the tanks assigned to the division, 139 of them were obsolete T-37 amphibians, with a two man crew, extremely thin armor, and a single light machine gun. In addition there were nineteen obsolescent T-26 tanks with light armor, a three man crew, and a 45mm gun, and a half a dozen T-28 medium tanks which were found in repair depots in the division's area by intrepid junior officers. These tanks were slow and lacked good armor, but had a low velocity 76mm gun in the main turret and two small turrets in front with machine guns.

Within two days of the war beginning most of the T-37s had been assigned in small groups to support rifle divisions. They were not to be heard from again. The rest of the division marched towards the border in two echelons, the first with all of the tanks remaining and the motorized elements, while all of the others who lacked transport were to march behind the mechanized elements. The motorized rifle regiment lacked 83% of its heavy weapons and had no 76.2mm infantry guns at all, while the artillery regiment was missing 66% of its guns. By June 24 the division, under constant air attack, was concentrated at Dedovichi. The next day the tank element of the division, namely all nineteen T-26s and the T-28s were assigned to support the 228th Rifle

Division against German attacks at Dubno. In 24 hours of intensive combat it lost eleven T-26s with an additional three damaged, and two of the T-28s. Thus after three days of war, the division, which on paper was to have over 415 tanks, was down to 9!

The division continued to fight, but by July 22 it had been reduced to 700 men! In late August the survivors were evacuated to the Caucasus to form new brigades, the 45th and 47th Tank Brigades. Since the 47th was later withdrawn from the corps, we will follow the path of the 45th Tank Brigade.

The brigade, under Colonel Alexander Kukushkin, began forming up in September, 1941. Under the pressure of the German forces driving for Rostov, the brigade was moved to Stalingrad to finish its organization. This was not completed until April 1942, at which time the brigade contained two tank battalions (250th and 251st), which contained a total of twenty-five to thirty T-34s, seven KV-1s, and fifteen to twenty T-60 tanks as well as the 45th Motorized Rifle Battalion. In April the brigade was entrained and moved to Voronezh where it became part of the 4th Tank Corps under Lt. General Vasili Mishulin. The corps also contained the 47th Tank Brigade (thirty-one T-34s, twenty T-60s), the 102nd Tank Brigade (thirty-one Lend Lease Mk II "Matilda" tanks and twenty T-60s), the 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade, a Guards Rocket battalion and a reconnaissance battalion. Unit training began in April, by June the corps was ordered to concentrate at Sary Oskol. Under air attack as it moved up, the corps got badly spread out on the roads.

By June 30 the corps was ordered to attack the advancing Germans at Gorshechnoe along with 24th and 17th Tank Corps. Unfortunately the 24th Tank Corps never showed up, and two tank brigades of the 17th had been pushed back before the 4th arrived. The 45th Tank Brigade led the attack, followed by the 102nd. Like all the Soviet tank corps thrown into the fighting around Voronezh, the 4th took heavy losses, and by July 3rd the remnants of the 4th and 24th Tank Corps were struggling to cover the retreat of the 13th and the scattered 40th Soviet armies. As the German attack headed southeast toward the Don bend, the front around Voronezh stabilized and the 4th Tank Corps was withdrawn in August and shipped southeast to the 1st Guards Army where it was promptly thrown into a series of costly and futile attacks on the northern flank of 6th German Army which was straining towards Stalingrad. At this time, 45th Tank Brigade's Colonel Kukushkin was replaced by Lt. Colonel Pyotr Zhidkov. Attacking over the open steppe under German dive bombings and against dug in 88mm guns, the corps took heavy losses through September.

On September 28th General Mishulin was relieved and replaced by Major General Andrei Kravchenko. Kravchenko, a veteran of tank fighting since the beginning of the war was to lead the 4th Tank Corps to some of the most important victories of the Second World War. A tall, good humored man, Kravchenko was of the school of generals that preferred to lead from the front, sometimes by personal example.

The remnants of the corps was withdrawn in October to Southwest Front reserve to be refitted, reorganized, and retrained. The 47th Tank Brigade was removed from the corps and disbanded to form the basis for a tank regiment. The 69th Tank Brigade was attached to the corps to replace them. A period of intensive training followed, to prepare the corps for the Stalingrad offensive being planned. By November 19 everything was ready, the corps was more or less up to strength, reinforced with an anti-aircraft

regiment and an anti-aircraft machinegun battalion, and paired off with 3rd Guards Cavalry Corps to be the mobile group of the 21st Army of Southwest Front.

The rifle divisions of the 21st Army smashed the Rumanian 13th and 15th Infantry Divisions facing them and the 4th Tank Corps was committed into the breach by 3:00 PM the first day of the offensive. By 8:00, advancing through a snow storm against little resistance, the corps had covered 25 kilometers. On the twentieth Yeremenko's Stalingrad Front punched out from its front south of the city and the Southwest Front forces continued to drive southeast to meet them. Kravchenko's men ran into a tough fight on the twentieth against German and Rumanian rearguards, but pushed on. Advancing steadily to the southeast, brushing aside rear guards and shooting up fleeing transport, the 4th Tank Corps approached Kalach on the Don and Sovietskii with the 45th Tank Brigade in the lead.

On the morning of November 23 the advance guard of Major General Volskii's 4th Mechanized Corps, the 36th Mechanized Brigade under Colonel Rodionov, reported that Kalach seemed to still be in German hands, but at 3:30 in the afternoon a column of tanks was observed approaching from the northwest. Rodionov sent out an armored car flying a red flag to check out the tanks. To the relief and joy of the armored car crew, the column sent up one green rocket, the expected recognition signal. Shortly after that Colonel Zhidkov and Colonel Rodionov were embracing and exchanging the traditional three kisses of a Russian greeting. They were the kiss of death for the 6th Army in Stalingrad.

Subsequently the whole of 4th Tank Corps was turned east, to support 21st Army's drive against the 6th Army. The fighting was slow but steady, grinding down the pocket and pushing it steadily eastward, away from any relief effort. During this time the corps was able to repair some of its tanks damaged in the offensive, so that by January 8, 1943, when the corps was entrained for its new deployment area behind Voronezh Front, the 45th Tank Brigade had 32 T-34s, 21 T-60s, 137 trucks and three armored cars, and the other brigades of the corps were in similar shape, the corps having a strength of 7,221 men and 176 tanks (79 of them light). For its accomplishments in the surrounding of the Stalingrad pocket, the corps received the honorary title "*Stalingradskikh*".

On January 12th Lt. General Golikov's Voronezh Front kicked off its *Ostrogorzhska-Rossoh* operation that was to consign the Hungarian 2nd Army to the same scrap heap that held the 3rd and 4th Rumanian and 8th Italian Armies. The 4th Tank Corps, initially behind schedule in its deployment so much that the offensive was postponed waiting for them, worked with General Major General Moskalenko's 40th Army covering the northern flank of the front. In the process they inflicted heavy casualties on the German 2nd Army, the Hungarian's neighbor to the north. The Hungarians and remnants of the Italian 8th Army were surrounded by January 18th and the second phase of the operation commenced on the 24th with an attack through fog and a blizzard in which the temperature dropped to -20°. By night the weather cleared enough for Soviet biplanes to drop drums of fuel to the forward elements of the corps that had burned large amounts of diesel plowing through the snow. The next day Kastornoye fell, trapping two out of three corps of the German 2nd Army.

It was at this point that the tank corps was ordered to attack Gorshechnoe, the same rail station that it had failed at the previous summer. This time there would be no failure. The station was defended by at least a battery of the lethal German 75mm Pak 40 antitank guns. As they opened fire, General Kravchenko, who was personally leading the advanced brigade of the corps, took a brief look out of the commander's hatch, then "buttoned up" again and ordered his driver to drive straight for the guns at high speed. Following their commander's example, the rest of the brigade followed. In practically no time the battery was overrun, guns crushed, and crews machine gunned.

The reduction of the encircled forces took until the first week in February, when the corps was pulled back into Voronezh Front reserve. At this time the corps received recognition for its recent triumphs and was redesignated the 5th Guards Tank Corps. The 45th Tank Brigade became the 20th Guards Tank Brigade, the 69th became the 21st Guards Tank Brigade, the 102nd became the 22nd Guards Tank Brigade, and the 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade became the 6th Guards.

Sporting its new guards badges and new uniforms (the Red Army at this time reintroduced the shoulder board, the *pogon* of the Czarist army, for all ranks), the corps continued to support General Moskalenko's 40th Army. It was down to only about 50 tanks still running in the whole corps by this time.

The Soviet High Command decided that at this point there was little left for the Germans to do but retire behind the Dnepr River, and ordered an all out assault all along the southern half of the front. Widely diverging objectives were assigned, ignoring the fact that the forces ordered to achieve them were badly weakened in men, machines and munitions. Now seemed to be the time to press ahead. A converging attack was ordered against Kharkov, the fourth city of the USSR, with the 5th Guards Tank Corps fighting its way past the elite *Grossdeutschland* Division to cut in against Kharkov from the north and northwest, while the 69th Army came at it from the east and the 3rd Tank Army struck it from the southeast.

Kharkov was evacuated (against orders) by its SS defenders on February the 16th. After a few days spent in unscrambling the massive tangle of three armies that had stormed the city, the tank corps continued its role, supporting 40th Army in its drive on Akhtyrka and Poltava. Kravchenko's tankers, pushing through weak German resistance, celebrated Red Army Day, February 23rd, liberating Akhtyrka. But the celebrations were short lived, as the Southwest Front, Voronezh Front's left hand neighbor, was assaulted that day by massive German reinforcements and was smashed and reeling back from the Dnepr to the Northern Donets by the end of the month. Voronezh Front's attempt to cover its southern flank by sending 3rd Tank Army to the rescue barely slowed the panzer's drive north, and the Germans smashed into Kharkov again and took it by March 14. As the SS Panzerkorps stormed into Kharkov, the refitted *Grossdeutschland* Division thrust into the gap between the 69th Army and 40th Army, aiming for Belgorod. Kravchenko's tankers were hard pressed to defend the flank of Moskalenko's army as it rapidly back pedaled from Bogodukhov. By late March Soviet reinforcements and deteriorating weather (mud) brought the German offensive to a halt. The attack had pushed the Soviets back over the Northern Donets and inflicted serious losses on them, but left a large bulge protruding into German lines around Kursk.

At this point the armored forces of both sides were mostly drawn back into reserve, to be rebuilt, receive new equipment and fresh replacements, and, in the Soviet case, reorganized into pretty much the structure with which they would fight the rest of the war. In the case of 5th Guards Tank Corps, this meant adding a third battalion of tanks to each tank brigade, as well as the corps itself adding an antitank regiment of twenty 76.2mm AT guns in April, a mortar regiment of thirty-six 120mm mortars, an anti-aircraft regiment of sixteen 37mm AA guns in May, and a heavy tank regiment, the 48th Guards equipped with twenty-one Churchill IV tanks (British Lend Lease) in June. In June of 1943 German intelligence estimated the strength of the corps as over nine thousand men, one hundred thirty-one T-34s, twenty-one Churchills, sixty-three T-70s (an improved light tank with a 45mm gun), forty-three armored cars, an equal number of American halftracks, almost eight hundred trucks of all kinds, and among other things, five U-2 biplanes. One interesting note; the corps had not only a motorcycle battalion, but also a reconnaissance battalion and a motorized submachine gun battalion. The 20th Guards Tank Brigade itself had eleven hundred men, four 76.2mm guns, one armored car, thirty-two T-34s (less than the other two brigades), twenty-one T-70s, three cars, eighty-five trucks of various kinds, and five motorcycles. On June 7, 1943, Major General Kravchenko was promoted to Lt. General.

The corps remained in Voronezh Front reserve until the beginning of the great battle of Kursk. On July 5th, the first day of the offensive, Voronezh Front commander, General Vatutin, ordered the 5th Guards Tank Corps to advance and at 24:00 hours to reach Tetervino and in conjunction with 2nd Guards Tank Corps and 1st Tank Army to counterattack the German panzers. Instead the corps was forced to assume the defensive behind 6th Guards Army on the line Yaklovo-Oboyan. At 11:30 on July 6th the Germans fired off a 90 minute artillery preparation after which they launched an attack with 300 tanks towards Yaklovo. Later in the afternoon they shifted their attack towards Luchki. The 5th Guards Tank Corps claimed 95 enemy tanks knocked out, as well as several "Ferdinand" assault guns. It is worth noting that there were no Ferdinands in this part of the battle, but, in common with their American and British allies, the Soviets tended to report every enemy tank a "Tiger", every enemy gun an 88mm, every assault gun a Ferdinand. While it is easy to smile in retrospect, when they are facing you *any* tank looks very big.

During the night the corps withdrew to the northeast of Yaklovo, and during July 7th was forced to withdraw to Pokrovka-Tetervino. At 10:00 on the 8th the corps went over to the attack against Kalinin, but after gaining some ground was hit by strong enemy counterattacks supported by Stukas, and was forced back to its start lines. The 2nd Guards Tank Corps was attacking towards Nechaevka at the same time, but suffered a similar result. In heavy fighting, alternating between offensive and defensive, the 5th Guards Tank Corps contributed to the defeat of the left flank of the German assault on the southern face of the Kursk bulge. In previous summers German offensives had rolled until November or December, smashing up Soviet armies, corralling hundreds of thousands of prisoners, and threatening the world's first socialist state with defeat. Now, despite the presence of hundreds of massive Tigers, deadly Panthers and awe inspiring Ferdinand assault guns, the major German offensive lasted...no more than eight days. Within two weeks the Soviets would be counterattacking, starting a series of offensives that would continue, with pauses only to bring up supplies and replenish losses, until they came to a halt in the smoldering wreckage of Berlin.

The 5th Guards Tank Corps was reinforced with patched up tanks salvaged from the battlefield, producing a tank strength of 150-180 tanks in the corps and was finally assigned a battalion of 85mm anti-aircraft guns designated for anti-tank work against the formidable Tigers and Panthers. On August 3rd, they jumped off as the mobile group of 6th Guards Army. They were supposed to enter a breach in the German lines to be made by 71st Guards Rifle Division, but the division failed to break the German lines. Instead the corps was shifted and assigned to provide tank support for the infantry of 23rd Guards Rifle Corps attacking the Germans at Tomarovka.

Here it was hung up for two days, failing to penetrate the defenses of the German 255th and 332nd Infantry Divisions supported by the 19th Panzer Division and a detachment of Tiger tanks. All this while, however, to the east of Tomarovka the 1st and 5th Guards Tank Armies had a clean breakthrough, and were advancing rapidly to the south. On August 6th the corps side stepped the defenses at Tomarovka and headed for Grayvoron, skirmishing all the way with elements of the 11th and 19th Panzer Divisions. By the seventh the corps was west of Bogodukhov, deep in the German rear when it ran into elements of the *Grossdeutschland* Division probing east from Akhtyrka. The corps side stepped these units as well and pushed to the southwest, on August 8th reaching nearly to Krasnokutsk, about 65 miles west of Kharkov.

In the great drive to cut off Kharkov from the west, 5th Guards Tank Army was furthest to the east, with 1st Tank Army to its west. Covering the western flank of 1st Tank Army was the 5th Guards Tank Corps which after the first few days of the offensive had experienced less heavy fighting than the rest of the tank army. On August 11th, the Germans, now heavily reinforced, began a two pronged drive to cut off the mass of Soviet armor west of Kharkov. Their first days attack took advantage of the Soviet tactic of leading their attack with advance guards, typically a brigade per corps. Striking north and west with large panzer formations, they trapped or beat up most of the advance guards they faced, inflicting substantial losses on both tank armies. German attacks, mostly from the area west of Kharkov, continued through the 17th of August. For reasons that are not clear, while the 3rd Mechanized Corps and 6th and 31st Tank Corps of 1st Tank Army fought terrifically bloody battles with SS Das Reich and Totenkopf Panzer Divisions and the rest of III Panzerkorps, 5th Guards Tank Corps seem to have led a peaceful existence at the tip of the Soviet penetration towards the southwest. When 5th Guards Tank Army was forced to move west to support the 1st Tank around Bogodukhov and 6th Guards Army was very roughly handled by the German counterattacks, Kravchenko's men seemed to continue to enjoy a break.

On August the 18th the Germans struck from the west, primarily relying on the *Grossdeutschland* Division with its seventy-some odd tanks, including Panthers, and two groups of Tigers. Their strike quickly penetrated the Soviet lines and threatened to cut off most of 27th Army and also part of 6th Guards Army, now including 5th Guards Tank Corps. The German III Panzerkorps attacked from the south to link up with *Grossdeutschland*, running into defenses along the Merla River held by the 72nd Guards Rifle Corps supported by 20th Guards Tank Brigade, and later by all of 5th Guards Tank Corps repelled all attacks by SS Totenkopf. On August 20th the SS men finally broke through the 52nd Guards Rifle Division, as well as the 5th Guards Tank Corps elements supporting it, linking up with the 10th Motorized Division on Gross Deutschland's right flank and cutting off the 166th Rifle Division and the 4th Guards



Tank Corps. Most of the elements of the 5th Guards Tank Corps were pushed to the north and were not pocketed. The Germans were too weak and preoccupied to reduce the pocket, which was relieved on the 25th of August.

All of this desperate fighting reduced the participants to where Soviet tank armies could boast of only a hundred or so tanks still running in three or four tank or mechanized corps, and German panzer divisions as few as eighteen or a dozen tanks per division. The winner would be the side with fresh forces to throw into the scale of battle. This being 1943, that side was of course the Red Army, who replied to the German offensive around Akhtyrka with one of its own further north, employing the newly arrived 4th Guards and 47th Armies. The attrition battle, which had been costly to both sides, was now over, and renewed Soviet attacks by General Konev's Steppe Front took Kharkov on the 23rd of August while Vatutin's Voronezh Front took Akhtyrka on the 25th. The Germans bowed to the inevitable and began a withdrawal to the Dnepr River, which took most of a month.

The 5th Guards Tank Corps was given another break in reserve, its brigades now being filled up only with T-34s (no more T-70s were assigned to it) while its heavy tank regiment was rebuilt with fifteen more Churchills. Then, on October 3, 1943, it received urgent orders to advance to reinforce the 38th Army in its meager bridgehead over the Dnepr River north of Kiev. In order to do so the corps had to first cross the Desna River. Haste was in order, as the 38th Army had its back to the mighty Dnepr and was under tank attack. But there were no bridges remaining over the Desna and it would take eight to ten days to build heavy enough bridges to cross a tank army. What was to be done?

Dangerous situations call for dangerous solutions, so rather than wait for a bridge to be built, the 5th Guards Tank Corps decided to do without one. First a path to the Desna through the marshy woods on its banks had to be found. Leading the way was the 20th Guards Tank Brigade. Then, with the help of local farmers and fishermen, engineers reconnoitered the river bottom and found a flat sandy place fairly free of obstacles. The tankers were then ordered to prepare their tanks by making greased tubes of canvas for the exhaust pipes, and to fill in every chink and crevasse in the

tanks with oakum and grease. Then, with only the driver and commander aboard, the former with his hatch fastened and waterproofed and the latter standing in the turret to direct the blind driver, the tanks began to ford the river, *underwater!* Even more astonishing, only a few tanks flooded out and no crew were lost. The few tanks that flooded were towed out of the river and the whole corps, some ninety tanks, proceeded to the bank of the Dnepr. With the exception of a few German operations with specifically designed amphibious tanks, nothing like this had ever been done before. Fortunately several damaged barges were found on the Dnepr shore, and these, rapidly repaired, were put into service as a ferry while rafts were constructed to move trucks, men, and guns across. By dawn of October 6th Kravchenko had sixty tanks in the Lyutezh Bridgehead, on the west side of the wide Dnepr River.

The first man across the river was Colonel Stepan F. Shutov, since the sixteenth of September the commander of the 20th Guards Tank Brigade. Colonel Shutov, who was to command the brigade for the next year of triumphs, had a special desire to return to Kiev where he had been stationed before the war. His wife and two sons had not been evacuated from Kiev before it fell to the Germans in 1941. The Colonel and his troops had some scores to settle. Even before all elements of the corps crossed the river, General Kravchenko received orders to conduct a raid out of the bridgehead. With the troops of General Chibisov's 38th Army, the tankers lunged out, rapidly expanding the bridgehead. General Kravchenko sent his men in a thrust across the Irpen River to Makarov, less than two miles north of the main Kiev-Zhitomir highway, a main German supply route.

Unfortunately as the tankers thrust into the German rear, the Germans attacked the southern edge of the bridgehead just north of Kiev along the bank of the Dnepr. Reluctantly the tank corps was withdrawn back into the bridgehead proper to help repulse the German attacks. While the Germans had been very slow to identify the 5th Guards Tank Corps, only confirming its presence in the bridgehead on October 12, they were quick to brag about its withdrawal. Leaflets dropped on Soviet lines crowed about the "destruction" of the corps and its "240 tanks". Seeing the leaflet, Kravchenko harrumphed that if he had 240 tanks he wouldn't be going for Makarov, hell, he'd be going for Berlin!

Failing to breakout from the larger bridgehead south of Kiev at Velikye Bukrin, Voronezh Front (soon to be renamed 1st Ukrainian) secretly shifted General Pavel Rybalko's 3rd Guards Tank Army into the Lyutezh Bridgehead, followed by a rifle corps and an artillery corps, as well as other forces. Once again the Germans missed the massing of Soviet forces, and were subject to a nasty surprise on November 3rd.

A massive barrage was followed by an assault out of the Lyutezh bridgehead. The 3rd Guards Tank Army and 38th Army, now under General Moskalenko, smashed the thin German front and fought their way through the counter attacking German panzer reserves. In the final attack that produced the breakthrough both Rybalko's and Kravchenko's tankers were ordered to turn on their headlights and sirens for a night attack that sent the Germans flying in all directions. The front broken, a mass of Soviet armor headed south, west of Kiev, taking Vasilkov. The German forces in Kiev swiftly evacuated the city as Kravchenko's tankers probed into the northern and western edges of the city.

On November 6th, the eve of the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Front Commander Vatutin was able to proudly announce that the third city of the USSR, Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, was again in Soviet hands. For his (and his troop's) contribution to the victory, General Kravchenko was awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union, the USSR's highest award.

While the 3rd Guards Tank Army headed southwest towards Fastov and Vinnitsa, 5th Guards Tank Corps was directed southeast towards Belaya Tserkov. Almost immediately they ran into German reserves hastily streaming towards the battlefield. They were first attacked by elements of the SS Das Reich Division, as well as some troops of SS Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler and the 25th Panzer Division. These fresh troops halted the Soviet drive, and forced Kravchenko's corps onto the defensive. The 21st Guards Tank Brigade in particular took serious losses. His men stubbornly gave ground as the Germans pushed towards Fastov from the southeast. Reinforced by infantry of the 40th Army, they dug in and repelled all attacks, forcing the Germans to redirect their attacks to the west of Fastov.

On November 12 the massed panzer might of the German Army Group South struck a concentrated blow to the north. Unable to make ground against the 3rd Guards Tank Army around Fastov, they struck further west against the southern flank of 38th Army which was driving west against Zhitomir. The 1st Panzer Division, with over 170 tanks, almost half the deadly Panthers, sliced into Moskalenko's troops and then turned straight west to retake Zhitomir from the east. To cover this attack, the SS Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler, (with almost as many tanks) attacked towards Brusilov. Brusilov was an important road hub between Fastov and Zhitomir. Half of the SS division struck towards Brusilov from the south while the other half pushed north past it on the west side and occupied Kocherovo on the Kiev-Zhitomir highway.

Kravchenko's tankers were ordered to swing around from southeast of Fastov to north of Brusilov. They were tasked with breaking through the SS and taking 1st Panzer from the rear. For three days they battered away, supported by lots of artillery support and several rifle divisions. The SS took heavy casualties and were surrounded in Kocherovo. But they held on, and while they did so the 1st and 7th Panzer Divisions chased the Soviet cavalry out of Zhitomir and immediately reversed course and headed east again. Although the SS history describes how they were relieved in Kocherovo by the 1st Panzer, the 1st Panzer history claims that they had to fight their way into the town and that they took very serious losses fighting through the woods to the west.

For the next six days the remnants of 5th Guards Tank Corps fought to defend the Zhitomir-Kiev highway, fending off attacks by 7th Panzer Division and elements of SS Das Reich. Finally the Germans were forced to call off their attacks on November 26th due to heavy losses, stiff Soviet resistance, and bad weather. Kravchenko's weary survivors were pulled back into reserve to refit and rearm preparatory to the next offensive. At this time the corps lost its heavy tank regiment (no tanks left anyway), as well as its antitank regiment and heavy antitank battalion, having these replaced with two regiments of SU-76s and a regiment of SU-85s. Later in January another regiment of towed 76.2mm antitank guns was added.

While the Germans attacked north against the 60th Army, 5th Guards Tank Corps continued to rest and refit. Still somewhat understrength, it was committed at the end of December to support the massive Soviet offensive that kicked off on Christmas Eve. Kravchenko's men were attached to General Chernyakovsky's 60th Army. Along with 15th Rifle Corps they attacked the German 213th Security Division, waiting till late morning on the 24th instead of the usual dawn attack to catch the Germans in the early phases of their Christmas boozing. In this they succeeded, and quickly Zhitomir passed back into Soviet hands. The corps was then pulled out of 60th Army's zone and sent all the way over to the left flank of 1st Ukrainian Front to support General Zmachenko's 40th Army in its attack on Belaya Tserkov. In the first part of the new year the corps drove south, but it was well understrength. German counterattacks battered 40th Army and sent it reeling back, leaving pockets of surrounded Soviet troopers behind. In one such pocket, around Tichovka, was the 6th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade of the corps and a rifle division.

Undismayed, the Soviet troops held their ground and, resupplied from the air, held off all German attempts to destroy them for two weeks. Meanwhile, big things were doing behind Soviet lines. General Kravchenko was summoned to Front headquarters and told that he was to join his corps with the 5th Mechanized Corps to make the 6th Tank Army, which he was to command. General Vasili Alekseev was given command of the corps. As yet there was neither staff nor supporting elements (artillery, engineer, anti-tank, antiaircraft, supply, communications, etc.) for the new army, so the staff of the corps doubled as the army staff. Formed on January 20, the army was to concentrate in and around Tinovka and to prepare for a new operation on January 25th!

This was to be the Korsun Shevchenkovsky Operation, designed to snip off a salient where the inner flanks of 1st Panzer Army and 8th Army met and touched the Dnepr bank, the last German foothold on the mighty river. General Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front had expanded like a balloon from its November bridgeheads across the river, and was now stretched thin. All it could contribute was the weak 27th Army, part of 40th Army, and 6th Tank Army. It was to jump off on January 26th. The day before that the 2nd Ukrainian Front would jump off with three armies seeking a breakthrough that 5th Guards Tank Army under General Rotmistrov could exploit through. The plan was for the two tank armies to link up at Zvenigorodka.

The attacks did not get off to a good start. The 6th Tank Army was massed at Tinovka, screened by a rifle division. But before the attack the Germans captured a lieutenant of that rifle division who revealed the concentration. Kravchenko ordered the 5th Guards Tank Corps to lead the attack, striking in the first echelon towards the German strong point at Vinograd. Not only was the corps missing its motorized rifle brigade, in the three tank brigades the corps could only boast fifty tanks and in the three SU regiments a total of four assault guns! Worse, the Germans had reinforced the front line with an assault gun battalion of their own and when the corps jumped off, it promptly lost thirty of its fifty tanks to German antitank guns, assault guns, and mines. No penetration was achieved.

On the 27th General Kravchenko decided to change the axis of the attack, using the tank brigade of the 5th Mechanized Corps, the 233rd, to attack further north. This brigade, equipped with Sherman tanks, succeeded and drove through the German lines, outflanking the Vinograd position, and reaching Lisyanka by midnight. The next

day they relieved the encircled Soviet forces, including the 6th Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade and swept into Zvenigorodka to link up with General Rotmistrov's tankers of 20th Tank Corps. Over 80,000 Germans were pocketed around Korsun.

At the beginning of February the Germans struck back with eight panzer divisions, two of them, followed by two others, attacked through the positions of 6th Tank Army. The army was reinforced with a strong rifle corps and antitank assets, but nonetheless was mauled by the 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions. Vatutin committed General Bogdanov's 2nd Tank Army, understrength but possessing brand new JSU-122 heavy tank destroyers armed with the devastating 122mm high velocity gun. Counterattacks by both armies and some of the worst weather in the whole of the war (snow, rain, mud, ice, fog; sometimes all of them the same day) brought the German attacks to a halt.

The Germans brought in more tanks and troops, including a heavy panzer regiment armed with Panthers and Tigers, and attacked again on February 10th. In two days they had lanced through the 6th Tank Army's front and captured an important river crossing at Lisyanka. Marshal Georgi Zhukov, who was supervising the entire operation of both fronts, severely criticized General Kravchenko's conduct of the battle. Of course it was hardly shocking that a man who had been a tank corps commander a few weeks before and now found himself commanding a tank corps, a mechanized corps, three or four rifle divisions, artillery, antitank guns, etc. etc had a little difficulty coping with the situation, especially in light of the fact that his headquarters lacked both staff and communications equipment to control such a large and varied force.

Zhukov ordered the commander of the 27th Army to take over for Kravchenko. Unfortunately at just that point the German forces inside the pocket began their breakout attempt against the 27th Army. No doubt all the command shuffling did nothing to stabilize the defenses. Nonetheless, the German drive stalled after two days, and with 6th Tank Army and 2nd Tank Army nipping at their flanks, their strength was rapidly whittled down to the point that they were unable to advance another foot. Meanwhile 2nd Ukrainian Front continued to grind away at the pocket. Finally on February 17th the survivors in the pocket made a desperate breakout attempt at night. While some of them reached German lines, the bulk of the forces were destroyed by the tanks of 5th Guards Tank Army and the sabers of the 5th Guards Cavalry Corps.

After a brief rest period to rebuild the shattered corps, the 6th Tank Army took part in the Uman Botoshani operation as a part of the 2nd Ukrainian Front. Sometimes called the "Mud Offensive", this attack broke all precedent on the Eastern Front. It was normal for the spring time, when melting snow dissolved the roads and countryside into bottomless mud, for all armies to take a break until the ground dried out. Not this year. Ivan Konev, just having received his marshal's star for the Korsun pocket operation, urged his troops on through the glue-like black mud. The broad-tracked T-34s helped by hauling other vehicles and supplies through the slush, while the Germans found themselves abandoning masses of heavy equipment as their troops retreated steadily southward.

The operation ended in May with the Soviets on the border with Rumania and Poland. There a series of Soviet probing attacks were all turned back by German counter thrusts. General Malinovsky then took over 2nd Ukrainian Front and prepared to take Rumania out of the war with one massive blow. The 5th Guards Tank Corps received



its new T-34 tanks armed with the 85mm gun, what many think of as the best tank of the Second World War. Fortunately Kravchenko's men had enough time to learn to use them, as the attack on Rumania was not scheduled until August 20th. This also provided time for the veteran survivors of the corps, including those returning from the hospitals, to give the masses of green replacements some idea of how to fight.

A massive barrage and air strike led off the attack. General Trofimenko's 27th Army tore a gaping hole in the German lines. Plans had called for the introduction of the 6th Tank Army into the breach on the second day of the operation, but as early as 10:00 on the first day the 5th Guards Tank Corps, led by the 20th and 22nd Guards Tank Brigades, jumped off, followed four hours later by the 5th Mechanized Corps to its left. The forces drove straight south, where they ran into serious resistance by night fall against the third line of the enemy's defenses. This was the wooded Mare Ridge (Mare means great in Rumanian) defended by elements of several Rumanian mountain brigades and part of the German 76th Infantry Division. The next day involved heavy fighting for the ridge, in which Colonel Shutov's 20th Guards Tank Brigade took serious casualties before they wised up and turned the flanks of the position.

What followed was a swift strike to the south, by August 25th the reconstituted German 6th Army was in the bag again, the rebuilt Rumanian 3rd and 4th Armies were gone, and the 8th Army reduced to a scattered group of battalion sized *kampfgruppen*. Elements of the latter, including parts of 20th Panzer Division and 10th Panzer Grenadier were pushed steadily south as the corps menaced Birlad on the 23rd, took it the next day, and reached Focsani on August 27th. The latter earned the corps the Order of Suvorov II Class. Involved in the latter action was the dramatic storming of a double decked bridge, road and railroad, over the Siret River. One motorized rifle company crossed the river on assault boats and at the same time a brigade of tanks rushed it. The combination succeeded and allowed the corps to continue its advance. On the 30th this advance swept through Ploesti, Germany's main source of petroleum products.

On September 12th, in recognition of its key role in the elimination of the German forces in Rumania, the 6th Tank Army was made the 6th Guards Tank Army. After September 15th, the 5th Guards Tank Corps was commanded by Major General Mikhail Saveliev. Saveliev had been the commander of the 233rd Tank Brigade of 5th

Mechanized Corps who had led the attack through Lisyanka to Zvenigorodka in January of 1944 that had sealed the fate of the Korsun Pocket. The next day Colonel Shutov was replaced as commander of 20th Guards Tank Brigade and was replaced by Colonel Fedor Zhilin, who would command the brigade through the rest of the war.

The next operation of the tank army took it into Hungary, heading northwest. The armies of Rumania were turned around and now fought on the Soviet side, to attack their traditional rivals, the Hungarians. The tank army had been badly worn down during the offensive into Rumania which had take in more than 600 miles. On September 5th, when the Germans began counterattacking the Rumanian Army on the border, the tank army had only 130 tanks and 56 assault guns left in running order, by the 14th of the month they had raised this total to 262 tanks and 82 assault guns. Soviet attacks attempting to cross the Carpathian Mountains from the east were making only slow progress, and attempts to break into Hungary from the south were stymied by the same German military renaissance that was to surprise more northerly Soviet forces in the Baltic states and in front of Warsaw, the British at Arnhem, and the Americans at Aachen, Heurtgen Forest, and Metz. Counterattacks with Tigers and Panthers blunted General Malinovsky's attacks and by September 24th the attacks were called off. Instead the 6th Tank Army, its 5th Mechanized Corps recently renamed the 9th Guards Mechanized Corps, was moved to the west, concentrated with the Cavalry-Mechanized Group under General Pliiev and other forces for the Debrecen Operation, to be launched on October 6th.

The operation was preceded by some costly fighting on October 2nd when the tank army provided direct support for units of the 33rd Rifle Corps. Getting nowhere and taking losses on the 3rd of October, the tank army was regrouped. Attacking on the 6th, they managed to seize bridgeheads over the Keresz Canal south of Komadi but could not breakthrough. Heavy counter attacks by elements of the 1st, 23rd and 24th Panzer Divisions considerably slowed the pace of the attack and inflicted casualties on the Guards tankers. Finally by the 15th of October the area between the Keresz and Bereto Canals was cleared and on October 18th the 5th Guards Tank Corps took Sharand. These battles had been costly, and the tank army was down to 50% of its authorized strength in men, 39% in tanks, and 8% of its assault guns. Struggling forward, the army reached Solnok on the Tisza River in Hungary, and was withdrawn into reserve to refit at the end of October. Here they remained until December 4th, 1944, now equipped with over 350 tanks and SUs.

The next operation began on December 5, 1944, and would last through February 1945, the bitter battle for Budapest, the Hungarian capital. The attack jumped off early on a cold, overcast day. After the usual artillery preparation, the attack went in and by evening 7th Guards Army reported a clean breakthrough. The tank army headed into the breach, led by a tank brigade. General Kravchenko's guardsmen closed in on the town of Vacs on December 7th, where they were repulsed by the powerful *Feldherrenhalle* Panzer Division. This fighting continued inconclusively for two days, after which the army was pulled out and shifted further north of Budapest towards the Ipel River Gorge. Here was a pass through the Matra Mountains, about a mile wide, with one railroad bridge and two road bridges over the river at Sahy. The gorge was defended by the 26th Panzergrenadier Regiment of the crack 24th Panzer Division, as

well as by elements of the Dirlwanger Brigade, which was made up of a combination of criminal elements and German Communists who had been released from the concentration camps to fight. Not surprisingly, several battalions of the brigade promptly defected to the Soviets.

Fighting was heavy in the gorge, which took until the 13th to clear. The army then emerged into more open terrain in the foothills of the Matra Mountains, where it promptly ran into the 8th Panzer Division which slowed the Soviet advance. By the 19th of December, the army had reached the Gron River valley. Despite difficult weather, the army attacked with heavy air support against the German 357th Infantry Division and took Levice. At that point the army was counterattacked again by elements of the 3rd and 6th Panzer Divisions and a four day battle of maneuver took place. The maneuvering was restricted, however, by the muddy ground this channeled the German attacks and prevented the Soviet advanced guards from being overwhelmed. The Germans had a battalion or two of Panthers and Pzkw IVs in each division, but very little infantry. The advanced Soviet brigades were cut off by the German tanks, but, reinforced by the Pliet Cavalry-Mechanized Group, the tank army resumed the attack on Christmas and by the 26th of December had linked up with the 18th Tank Corps in Esztergom, surrounding Budapest. This was the fourth large German pocket that the 5th Guards Tank Corps was instrumental in cutting off, and its fate was no different from that of the Germans at Stalingrad, Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi, and Jassy-Kishinev.

On December 31st the army was drawn back to Sahy to refit again. Their rest was to be brief, however, as the 4th SS Panzerkorps launched an attack to relieve Budapest the next day, and by January 4th the 6th Guards Tank Army was committed again to stop the German attack. The army had only 180 tanks and SUs available at this point, many of them repaired. Counterattacking without an artillery preparation on the night of January 6th, they broke through the Germans and pushed west towards Komarno. Those German strong points they encountered were bypassed, but their supporting infantry was unable to keep up with the tanks so these sore points remained in German hands. During the next day the tank army was counterattacked by the 20th Panzer Division from the north and by the 8th Panzer Division out of Komarno. The battle deteriorated into one of position, and, failing to take Komarno, the army was once again returned to reserve on January 26th, 1945.

They would not be in action again until March 19th, during which time the 6th SS Panzer Army, freshly arrived from its defeat in the Ardennes, launched the last great German offensive effort of the war. This had run into a steel wall south of Lake Balaton, and had been turned back. Germany at this point was running out of troops, equipment, oil, and time. The break they got was put to good use, and when the army again went into action, it had more than 500 tanks and SUs running.

Attacking at dawn on the morning of March 19th, the 9th Guards Army was supposed to open a hole for the tankers to exploit through. Thick fog grounded the Soviet air force and prevented accurate correction of artillery fire, however, and no hole was opened. The 5th Guards Tank Corps, trying to find a gap to flow through, managed to advance a little more than 6 miles. That night they sent out advanced reconnaissance parties and eventually found the weak spots they needed. By the end of the 21st of March they had their breakthrough and were headed for Vienna at the rate of more

than 35 miles per day. On the 23rd the 22nd Guards Tank Brigade took Vesprem. On the 26th the 20th and 22nd Guards Tank Brigades stormed Devecher, on the 28th Sharvar fell and on the 29th the tanks rolled into Sombatkei.

Finally, on the night of the 4th-5th of April, the 5th Guards Tank Corps entered Vienna from the south, as elements of 9th Guards Mechanized Corps did the same. Some brigades were down to as few as a dozen tanks by this time, but German resistance was limited. The leader of the Hitler Youth, at the head of the *Hitler Jugend SS Panzer Division*, swore to fight to the death for Vienna, but like many of his followers, he took to his heels at the sight of the Soviet tanks.

The experience of capturing a fairly undamaged Western European capital was something new to the grizzled veterans of 6th Guards Tank Army, and the colonel commanding the first tank brigade to make it into the downtown area struck up a deal with the manager of a local hotel for a full sit down dinner for his brigade, with white table cloths, a spectacular dinner, and a bottle of champagne between every two men. The colonel then asked for the bill, offering payment in German marks, British pounds, or American dollars. The proprietor coolly asked for dollars and was given a bundle. It was only years later that the colonel realized that the bundles he had handed over were worth \$10,000, a tidy sum in those days! He figured it was worth it anyway.

The tank army took to the road again after Vienna, as part of the massive descent of Soviet forces on Prague to subdue and capture the large German forces there. After that, with time off for celebration, rest, leave, and refitting, the whole army was shipped across Siberia to the Mongolian People's Republic. From there it jumped off in the Soviet attack into Manchuria against the Japanese Kwangtung Army. Crossing a high mountain range and a broad desert, the army conducted a mechanized blitzkrieg that is still studied as a text book example of how to carry out such operations. The end of the war found the lead elements of the 5th Guards Tank Corps on the road to Port Arthur and Darien, having already seized Mukden. For his army's operations in Manchuria, Kravchenko received his second gold star of Hero of the Soviet Union.

■ THE 8TH GUARDS MECHANIZED CORPS

Just as each Soviet Tank Corps was eventually composed of three tank brigades and a motorized rifle brigade (plus supporting units), each mechanized corps was composed of three mechanized brigades and a tank brigade (plus the same assortment of supporting units). The unit that we will follow most closely here is the 4th Tank Brigade, which became the 1st Guards Tank Brigade for its efforts in the battle of Moscow in 1941. Throughout the war it was one of the outstanding units of the Red Army.

This brigade can trace its history to the 15th Tank Division that was formed in July, 1940, in the Kiev Special Military District as a part of the 8th Mechanized Corps. (These pre-war mechanized corps had two tank divisions and a motorized rifle division. Enormous and powerful on paper, very few of them were anywhere near their authorized strength when the war began. They were either destroyed in combat or dissolved in a few weeks) The division began with two tank regiments, the 29th and 30th, a motorized rifle regiment, the 15th, and a motorized howitzer regiment plus some supporting units. The division reached its full authorized strength in men and tanks by

October, 1940, having nearly 300 obsolescent light tanks assigned to it. The division was then shifted to the 16th Mechanized Corps. When the war began on June 22, 1941, the division had all the troops it was supposed to but only 75 T-28 medium tanks, no modern tanks at all, and 280 of the old BT and T-26 "sparrow shooters" or "knights in plywood armor" as they were called. Trained officers, particularly staff officers, were in such short supply that the corps could not form its operations or intelligence sections.

Shortly after the war started, the corps was attached to the newly formed 18th Army, watching the Rumanian frontier. Just as this front became active in July, the corps was directed north to join the Southwestern Front in the fighting in front of Kiev. Between long road marches with elderly equipment, regular visits from the Luftwaffe, and combat with von Runstedt's rampaging panzers, the division had few tanks left when it was disbanded on August 14th.

The survivors of this inauspicious beginning were withdrawn to Stalingrad and on September 8 were used to form the 4th Tank Brigade, armed with a combination of thirty modern T-34s, seven heavy KV-1s, and the rest new T-60 light tanks and elderly (but fast) BT-7s. Altogether the brigade had sixty tanks, overstrength for the tables of equipment of the day. The brigade also received a new leader, a tank colonel named Mikhail Efremovich Katukov. Katukov had started the war as a division commander in Rokossovsky's 9th Mechanized Corps, missing the first day of the war because he was in the hospital with a stomach ailment. "Deserting" from the hospital, he left for the front on June 23rd and fought well and hard with the 21st Tank Division, learning how to oppose the panzers with only a handful of old BT-5s. While watching the Germans, Katukov came to some definite conclusions as to how to fight them. He was soon to have a chance to prove his theories.

The word came in early October, the Germans had broken through the Bryansk Front and were headed for Orel and Tula. General Lelyushenko was given orders to assemble a new army and stop the Germans, or at least delay them long enough for Bryansk Front to escape and form a new front to protect Moscow from the south. Facing them was General Heinz Guderian's Second Panzer Group. The father of the blitzkrieg himself was about to learn a few lessons.

Guderian's men had crashed through the Bryansk Front at the end of September and were into its rear before the front command realized it was in trouble. While infantry forces tried to encircle the dazed Soviet armies, the panzers were ordered to go deep. They took Orel before anyone could set up defenses, the panzers passing electric trolley cars still running in the streets. The eastern outskirts of the town and the rail sidings were littered with industrial equipment that was being prepared for evacuation. The next major town in their path was Tula, the arsenal city south of Moscow.

Chosen to lead the way to Tula was Guderian's protégé, Colonel Eberhard, leading a composite force of 4th Panzer Division called *Brigade Eberhard*. This consisted of a battalion and a half of tanks, a motorcycle battalion, and a reinforced artillery battalion, as well as a heavy flak battery and some other odds and ends.



Lelyushenko in the meantime was assembling his forces. These included an NKVD border regiment that was retreating into his sector, the 36th Motorcycle Regiment which Lelyushenko had hand picked so that he would have some way of effectively reconnoitering the location of the mobile enemy forces, three brigades of paratroopers who were air landed to reinforce him, and the 4th and 11th Tank Brigades. Several Guards rifle divisions were also sent to strengthen his forces, along with some artillery and rocket units.

The lead battalion of 4th Tank Brigade (Captain Gusev's) and the motorcyclists were the first in action. Encountering Eberbach's lead elements on the Orel-Tula road on October 4th, they fought a skillful delaying action that seriously cut up the German motorcycle battalion. This gave the arriving Soviet forces time to begin to assemble behind the Lisiza River south of Mtsensk.

On October 6th the German main body came up and fought a sharp action that penetrated the Soviet screening elements. The panzers were driven back by a flank attack delivered by the 11th Tank Brigade, but that brigade's thin skinned BT tanks took serious losses in the action. That night the Soviets, after firing off salvos from two rocket battalions, fell back across the Lisiza. For reasons that are unclear they apparently failed to blow up the bridge behind them.

For two days the Germans halted to regroup, reinforce and resupply. The efforts of the partly encircled forces of Bryansk Front in breaking out and grimly defending some key road junctions were having important consequences. Fuel supplies were particularly in short supply, a lucky strike by a couple of Shturmoviks had caught a number of Guderian's scarce fuel tank trucks on an open stretch of road and reduced them to smoking wreckage in minutes.

Finally at dawn on October 9th Eberbach got his command moving again. After a short artillery preparation they crossed the Lisiza bridge at 0900 hours. Tanks and dismounted motorcyclists scattered the screen of NKVD and motorcycle defenders who quickly abandoned the open ground around the bridge. The German motorcyclists remounted their machines and, followed by the tanks, drove a mile north to a low

ridge. As the first panzers crested the ridge, they came under long range fire from tanks of 4th Tank Brigade hidden in the village of Voin about three quarters of a mile north of the ridge. This fire was very accurate and effective (almost a third of the German tanks were the light Pzkwfws II); after being shot up in the flat ground between the ridge and the village, the Germans drew their forces back behind the ridge.

The Germans left a screen of 37mm AT guns and the 88mm flak battery on the ridge. This tactic had worked many times for them. They expected the Soviets to come swarming out of the village after the retreating German tanks, only to be shot to pieces by the AT screen. Instead Colonel Katukov calmly directed his men to pick off the guns, which they did in an exhibition of accurate long range HE fire with their 76.2 guns. Only after every gun on the ridge had been knocked out did Katukov's men emerge from cover to pursue the retreating Germans. At the same time, the rest of the brigade which had remained hidden on the German's left in a woods came charging out to hit the enemy flank. The Germans scrambled to get back across the bridge, losing additional guns and vehicles as they fled. Covering fire was provided by a battery of 100mm cannon, which also took losses. By noon the Germans were all back over the river, and Katukov summoned his troops back behind cover of the ridge. That night they fell back to their next defensive position outside of Mtsensk.

The following day additional German forces arrived and, after heavy airstrikes, sought to take Mtsensk from several sides. Breaking into the town, they seized the highway bridge over the Zusha River. The only way out for Katukov's men was over a railroad bridge. The brigade contested the town until sunset, and then made a hair raising escape across the railroad bridge, under bright moonlight and German harassing fire.

During the fighting on October 9, the Germans claimed to have destroyed eight Soviet tanks. In fact they had only knocked out two with four more damaged but salvageable. The Soviets claimed forty-three German tanks destroyed, and while only eight were burnt out, a large but indeterminate number had been disabled. In addition, the Germans lost half a dozen trucks and sixteen guns, including two of the dreaded 88mm guns and a 100mm cannon.

Guderian admitted that, "The damage suffered by the Russians was considerably less than that to our own tanks." He also admitted that, "Descriptions of the quality and, above all, of the new tactical handling of the Russian tanks was very worrying." Interviewing Eberbach after the battle, he noted that, "For the first time during this exacting campaign Colonel Eberbach gave the impression of being exhausted, and the exhaustion that was now noticeable was less physical than spiritual." This was after only four months of war! It seems that the 4th Tank Brigade made a big impression on the Germans.

The Soviet government, faced by a wave of military disasters that threatened to engulf the capital, was also impressed. Victories over the German panzers were not common, even if in places they were made to pay a high price for their triumphs, and Katukov and his brigade were lionized in the Soviet press. The brigade was ordered north on October 16, told to entrain and relocate to Chismena on the Volokolamsk Highway north of Moscow. Katukov bitterly protested the order, feeling that his tanks would be far too vulnerable on flatcars to the ministrations of the Luftwaffe. Instead he insisted on road marching to his objective.

Assuring the High Command that his tanks had the engine hours available to justify the march, he won his point and in three days the brigade was transferred to General Rokossovky's 16th Army that was struggling to keep the 3rd Panzer Group from getting at Moscow from the northwest.

Through the rest of October and early November, while mud, snow, and above all mass heroism held up the German drive on Moscow, Katukov's men fought heavy defensive battles to keep the Germans out of Moscow until new armies could be raised or railed into place to defend the capital. Grudgingly, yard by yard, they gave ground. Behind them they left their shot up tanks, one after the other. Along with Panfilov's riflemen from Kazakhstan and Lev Dovotar's cavalrymen, they took a terrible toll on the attackers. Panfilov's division became a Guards division, Dovotar's cavalry corps received the same honor, and on November 11, in recognition of their terrific fight at Mtsensk, Katukov's 4th Tank Brigade became the 1st Guards Tank Brigade, the very first Soviet armored formation to receive this honor. Colonel Katukov became Major General Katukov, and received the Order of Lenin. Katukov, who was not big on ceremony or display, took an indelible pen and drew his general's stars on his collar tabs himself.

To celebrate their new status, the brigade threw in a sharp attack on a German assembly point, the village of Skirmanovo, on November 12th. They claimed the destruction of twenty-one German tanks and the capture of an 88mm flak gun. The next day they counterattacked again, hitting the village of Kozlovo and taking it by 20:00 hours on November 14. By this time the brigade was down to only fifteen tanks. But the Germans were not done with Moscow yet. They had been painfully bringing up fuel, supplies, and reinforcements and as the ground froze solid in the second week of November, they prepared for a last effort to seize the Soviet capital.

On November 18th, the Germans attacked towards the Istra River with two tank wedges of thirty tanks each. The new tank guardsmen had patched up five of their losses and now had twenty tanks available. Maneuvering over forest paths through the snow, they fought for five days to hold back the German attacks. They received reinforcements, including a battalion (ten to fifteen tanks) of heavy KV-1s, and on the 21st they were reinforced by the 27th and 28th Tank Brigades, which were put under Katukov's command temporarily. While this may sound like a lot, the 27th had only six T-34s and eleven light tanks on November 14th, while the 28th Brigade had less than ten tanks on the same day.

For five days Katukov's men fought a desperate defensive battle in slush, snow and mud. Fighting in support of Dovotar's horsemen, using tank ambushes of three to four tanks each, seven deep with a mile to a mile and a half between them, they claimed to have destroyed thirty-three German tanks and seven AT guns. The description of their tactics gives a good hint as to the reason for their relative success. The Germans were forced to stay on the few roads. Had they been able to maneuver cross country it is hard to imagine how Katukov's small force could have organized itself in any depth.

By December 2nd the brigade was trying to support an 11 mile front, maneuvering its pitiful handful of tanks to cover whichever spot was the most critical. (The cold weather was making the ground more passable). But then a funny thing happened. In one small Soviet counterattack, the Germans put up almost no resistance and instead dropped their weapons and fled. At first Katukov thought that the enemy might be a

green group of replacements, but that turned out not to be true. His next thought was that it was a deception effort by a crafty enemy, seeking to lure him into over confidence. But the intriguing idea kept coming up, maybe the mighty *herrenvolk* had reached the end of their rope? Maybe casualties, cold, and exhaustion had reached the point where the Germans were beginning to crack. Could it be? Was it too good to be true? Clearly an experiment was in order.

To conduct the experiment, Katukov tapped Lt. Samokhin. Samokhin had distinguished himself in the attack on Skirmanovo, hurling hand grenades from his turret hatch at the Germans as his tank rushed among them. He was given command of eight tanks, and instructions to precede over forest paths to the town of Nadovrazhye (that's Nad o vrazh' yuh) at night and fall on the Germans like a wolf on a sheep flock. As it turned out, the Germans had considerable forces converging on Nadovrazhye the same night, oblivious of the possibility of offensive Soviet action. A German column of ten tanks, forty trucks loaded with infantry and a motorcycle escort was just pulling into the town when Lt. Samokhin and his men arrived. They promptly drove into town at high speed, shooting at everything that moved and running over everything that didn't. "Like a fire in the tavern with music and dancing," one of the Soviet tankers later described it. Quite a party.

Samokhin's men roared through town and back out again, suffering no losses and claiming three tanks, forty trucks, fifty motorcycles and over a hundred infantrymen accounted for. Pausing on a knoll overlooking the town, Lt. Samokhin observed two German columns approaching the town, one from the north and one the south, no doubt to investigate the noise and fire there. Quickly he ordered his detachment forward to a copse of trees halfway between the two oncoming columns. From here they opened a concentrated fire on first the northern column, and then turned and gave the southern column a salvo. They then turned and rapidly departed, using the T-34's excellent mobility to good advantage. The Germans were apparently not aware of each other's presence. A terrific firefight broke out between the two columns. Not wanting to be left out, Samokhin's men put several salvos into each column before departing into the night. Sadly, Lt. Samokhin was killed less than a month later, ending what promised to be an outstanding career.

A day later the brigade was reinforced by a battalion of Matilda II tanks (British lend lease, featuring thick armor, a reliable engine, the slowest speed of any tank extant, and a puny main gun) and a battalion of NKVD border guards (usually crack light infantry) and ordered to attack to reduce the German bridgehead over the Istra River at Kryukov. From the 4th to the 6th of December, all attacks were repulsed. Katukov, a master of defense and deception, had a good deal to learn about how to conduct an offensive. Finally the brigade broke through on December 7th with the help of the 8th Guards Rifle Division, and attacked towards Volokolamsk from the southeast and south. On December 19th the town finally was liberated.

Through January and February the brigade continued its attacks, making ground only slowly to the west, away from Moscow. Losses were serious and many of the men who had gained fame in the battles at Mtsensk and in defense of Moscow died under the guns of the German hedgehogs that were established around every village. On February 15th, 1942, the brigade reported 95 tanks assigned to it (a very large number for this stage of the war) but only twenty-eight of them were in running order.

Finally in March the brigade was pulled out of the line for an overdue rest and rebuilding. In April Major General Katukov was pulled out of the brigade and called to Moscow where he was ordered to begin assembling the 1st Tank Corps. He asked for and received the services of lieutenant colonels M. T. Nikitin from the brigade to head up his operations section and P. G. Dyer ("the tank doctor") to head his maintenance department. Both of these men would stay with him in the same capacity throughout the war, ending up as heads of these departments in a tank army. The brigade went with him as well, being a part of the new tank corps. Colonel Nikolai Chukin was appointed to command the brigade.

The new corps spent the entire summer training and building up. Then on September 17 General Katukov was summoned to the Kremlin. Stalin himself cross examined the nervous general, asking about operations the first year of the war and asking his opinion of, among other things, Soviet tanks. Katukov was full of praise for the T-34, a tank that had completely proved itself to everyone's satisfaction. (It had impressed Guderian so much that he had suggested the Germans begin manufacturing it!). On the other hand, Katukov was not at all impressed with the light T-60, which sported a 20mm popgun and little armor. He pointed out that its poor ground clearance often left it bogged in deep snow, and its lack of power, armor, and firepower made it next to useless. He had less to say about the new T-70 light tank, with its 45mm gun, but he did indicate that he was not impressed and expected little from it. More surprisingly, he also expressed displeasure with the heavy KV-1 tank. He pointed out that it had no more firepower than the T-34, and was slower, and thus not able to keep up. It also tended to crush bridges that were built to support medium and light tanks, thus cutting off the units it was supposed to support.

The Soviet tank brigade of the day was armed with a mixture of light, medium, and heavy tanks. Like many others, Katukov was asking for more homogenous units. Shortly thereafter the KVs were withdrawn from the regular tank brigades and concentrated in tank regiments meant to support infantry in breakthrough operations. The light tanks would continue to soldier on until the fall of 1943, simply because there were not enough T-34s around to allow the Soviets to field brigades all armed with these superb medium tanks.

General Katukov came back to his corps with new orders. He was to be reassigned to a new unit then forming, the 3rd Mechanized Corps. Once again he took Nikitin and Dyer with him, and also the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. This new corps was organized on September 18, 1942 at Kalinin. It was unusual for Soviet mechanized corps in that it had two tank brigades and the usual three mechanized corps, as well as a motorcycle battalion and a Guards mortar (Katyusha rocket) battalion. All other Soviet mechanized brigades were equipped with only a single tank brigade (as well as a tank regiment in each motorized rifle brigade). Katukov was also joined in Kalinin by Nikolai Popel, his political deputy, who would also stay with him until the end of the war.

With only two months training, the 3rd Mechanized Corps was committed to battle in *Operation Mars*, which began on November 24, 1942. This little known operation was a Soviet failure that took place at the same time as the victorious counterattacks at Stalingrad and Veliky Luki. The Rzhev salient stood out like a thumb thrust into Soviet lines, far too close to Moscow. *Operation Mars* was designed to snap the bulge off at its base, generating another major encirclement at the same time as Stalingrad. The



Western Front was to attack from the east with three tank corps designated as the exploitation force, while the Kalinin Front would attack from the west, with two mechanized corps leading the way.

There were some notable differences from the Stalingrad operation that must be borne in mind. Rather than making their breakthroughs through third class Rumanian divisions stretched out in the open steppe, the Soviets around Rzhev would have to fight their way through powerful German defenses which had been built up over almost a year's time, backed by three panzer divisions and the *Grossdeutschland* motorized division. Soviet offensive doctrine, and the mobile corps that were to implement it were still in their infancy. In addition a significant proportion of the Soviet armor committed to this attack were T-60 light tanks, which simply stood no chance at all attacking German prepared defenses.

General Katukov's 3rd Mechanized Corps was to attack just south of the Luchesa River in the sector of the 22nd Army. After breaking through it was to exploit both south and north; south to link up with 1st Mechanized Corps around Vladimirskeye, and north to defeat the *Grossdeutschland* division and link up with 39th Army attacking the bulge from the north. Just on its face the plan screams of dispersion of effort, always a bad idea.

Further ominous signs appeared when Katukov met with the commander of the 238th Rifle Division whose front Katukov was to exploit through. The divisional commander was extremely vague about the exact location and identity of the enemy facing him (it was the 86th Infantry Division). The only thing that he was sure about was that his division was not prepared for an offensive.

The 3rd Mechanized Corps attacked with both tank brigades in the first echelon, 1st Guards Tank on the left (north) and 49th on the right. In three days of stubborn fighting through snow covered marshy woods, the 1st Guards had made only six kilometers progress, while the 49th managed seven and a half. Heavy resistance was offered by the German infantry, supported by the Grenadier Regiment of the *Grossdeutschland* Division. The 49th Tank Brigade, reinforced with the corps reserve, the 10th Mechanized Brigade, punched deeper to the west, only to be surrounded by a German counterattack. They were forced to fight their way free, losing most of their

equipment in the process. The 1st Guards Tank Brigade hooked north, supported by 3rd Mechanized Brigade and the 114th Rifle Brigade. In heavy fighting they cleared Vasiltslovak, forcing out two battalions of the *Grossdeutschland*, but by December 3rd the Soviet offensive had broken down in all areas, and the Germans were counter-attacking. On the opposite of the bulge the Western Front was barely able to dent the German front line. The 1st Mechanized Corps to the south had the most success, drawing on itself the attentions of three panzer divisions. It was heavily counter attacked, had one brigade surrounded and destroyed, and was forced to withdraw. On December 15 the 3rd Mechanized Corps survivors were pulled out of the front to rest, regroup, and receive replacements.

The best that could be said about *Operation Mars* was that it pinned certain forces in front of Moscow that might have been sent south to reinforce the German attempted relief of Stalingrad. The bad side was the fact that the Soviets took heavy casualties without accomplishing much in terms of territory taken or enemy destroyed.

In January General Katukov was again summoned to the Kremlin. This time he was ordered to take command of the 1st Tank Army, which was established on January 30th, 1943. Once again he took Popel, Nikitin, and Dyner along with him to fill the same positions in the new army. He also took the 3rd Mechanized Corps, to which was added the 6th Tank Corps. In addition he requested the services of General Shalin, the chief of staff for the 22nd Army, to be his chief of staff. Along with his other requests, this too was granted.

The army was assigned to the Northwest Front for a special mission. It was to strike at Leningrad from the southeast, trapping the Germans surrounding the city. For this operation the army was reinforced with a tank brigade and several independent tank regiments, some ski brigades, and two airborne divisions. The plan was to drop the paratroopers around Dno, punch the armor through to them, and trap several German corps against Lake Ladoga. Considering the fact that the terrain selected was probably the worst tank country in the USSR, consisting of mostly boggy forests, it is probably a good thing that the advent of the thaws in February led to the operation being canceled. The airborne and ski units were stripped out of the army, which was ordered to redeploy to the Voronezh Front in March.

The German counteroffensive known as "*Manstein's Backhand Blow*" was rolling rapidly northward, retaking Kharkov and rolling towards Belgorod. Katukov's army was directed to Oboyan, south of Kursk. The army, with the 100th Tank Brigade and four separate tank regiments beyond its usual organization, could boast of 631 tanks by this time, although up to a third of them were light T-70s. At Katukov's suggestion, the extra brigade and the regiments were used as a basis for forming the 31st Tank Corps. This corps lacked most of its supporting elements and its motorized rifle brigade and was to fight its first battle basically as a collection of tank brigades.

Through April, May, and June, the army had plenty of time for training, drilling, and digging defensive positions in preparation for the great battle of Kursk. The army was attached to the Voronezh Front of General Vatutin, deployed in the second echelon behind the 6th Guards Army. As a result it was directly in the path of the German offensive that jumped off on July 5, 1943.

At 24:00 hours on July 5, the army was ordered to assign two corps to the 6th Guards Army's second line, to assume the defense and be prepared to attack at dawn on July 6. Looking over the terrain, Katukov, Shalin and Popel all agreed that this didn't look like a great idea at all. The slightly rolling treeless terrain south of Kursk was poorly suited for a Soviet attack against German Tiger and Panther equipped panzer forces. With their superior range, optics, and penetrating power, they could pick off exposed Soviet tanks long before the T-34s could get close where their guns could hurt the Germans. It seemed a much better idea to hold the high ground where they were in dug in positions, let the Germans come to them, and pick off the panzers as they attempted to cross the Pena River. Vatutin accepted the tank army's suggestion and Katukov placed the 6th Tank Corps and 3rd Mechanized Corps in his first echelon, with 31st Tank Corps in the second echelon and the 112th Tank Brigade of 6th Tank Corps in his reserve.

The 3rd Mechanized Corps sited all of its guns for direct fire. These included twenty 76.2mm AT guns of the antitank regiment, the 16 37mm AA guns of the anti-aircraft regiment, the 12 85mm guns of the antitank battalion. Supporting them were the thirty-six 120mm mortars of the heavy mortar regiment, and the eight 132mm Katyusha rocket launchers. Each tank brigade and tank regiment held back one battalion of tanks for counterattacks, while the rest were dug in with only their turrets above ground, set up to deliver flanking fire on the most likely approaches.

The morning of July 6th dawned hot, a prelude of things to come. The Germans attacked at 11:30 hours, following heavy air strikes and artillery preparation. The XXXXVIII Panzerkorps punched in the 52nd Guard Rifle Division, capturing Novo Ivanovka-Krasnyi Pochinok and Mikhailovka. Heavy attacks struck the boundary with the 5th Guards Tank Corps at Yakovlevo, defended by the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. In the afternoon a battalion of 49th Tank Brigade advanced to support them. The attacks came from the *Grossdeutschland* Division, which included a group of the new Panther tanks with their deadly long range guns.

In the afternoon a large air raid struck the lines of 10th Mechanized Brigade, followed by an attack of up to 220 tanks. The 10th Mechanized was well dug in. Their infantry kept their heads while the German tanks rolled over their positions, and resumed fire, pinning the German panzer grenadiers to the ground. Soviet tank attacks then drove back the German panzers.

That day the Germans in places made 10 to 18 kilometers, but at a terrible price. Despite the barrenness of most of the terrain, the Germans encountered one hidden minefield after another, covered by hidden antitank batteries, hidden trench lines, and hidden dug in tanks. Fields of fire were interlocking, designed to set up flank shots wherever possible. Supporting all of this were massive amounts of Soviet artillery, and overhead were hundreds of planes from both sides, bombing, strafing and rocketing everything that moved.

On July 7th the 1st and 3rd Mechanized Brigades were attacked by more than 300 tanks attacking from Olkovka and Dmitirevka. Among the tanks were up to 40 Tigers, strongly suggesting that this was again the *Grossdeutschland* Division. This attack was supported by attacks from groups of 60-80 aircraft. The 1st Mechanized Brigade was penetrated and forced back on Syrtsevo.

The next morning at 05:30 the Germans attacked Syrtsevo, now held by 10th Mechanized Brigade, the last intact unit of 3rd Mechanized Corps. Reinforced by remnants of 1st Mechanized Brigade and the 112th Tank Brigade of 6th Tank Corps, they fought grimly for Verkopenye and Hill 260. At 14:00 hours they were finally forced out of Verkopenye by their heavy losses, but they held on to Hill 260 and the groves to the east and west of it. All other German attacks were beaten off.

At 12:00 hours on July 9, up to 100 tanks were thrown at the 3rd Mechanized Corps, which had by now been reinforced by the 86th Tank Brigade (armed with American M3 Grant tanks!). By the end of the day the corps withdrew north behind the prepared positions of the 309th Rifle Division. German attempts at pursuit were foiled by 10th Tank Corps which delivered a powerful counterattack at 16:00 hours.

On July 10th, the remnants of 3rd Mechanized Brigade, 49th Tank Brigade, 1st Guards Tank Brigade and 309th Rifle Division threw back all attacks made up the Oboyan-Belgorod highway. This was the last gasp by XXXXVIII Panzerkorps. Both sides had suffered terribly, but when the smoke cleared at last, the Germans were being forced back to their starting positions and their last attempt to gain the initiative in the war was over.

General Vatutin was well aware of the efforts of Katukov's tank army. On July 13th he notified General Katukov that he was recommending that the Soviet High Command raise the 1st Tank Army's corps to Guards status. They had earned the honor in the usual way, with their own blood. Fully half of the tanks in the army had been knocked out. Repair efforts raised the number of vehicles in the army back up to 1215 in fairly short order. From reserves set up for this purpose 200 new tanks arrived in the army's lines.

The Germans, while realizing that their panzer arm had taken perhaps irreparable damage and that their attempts to control the course of events in the war with the USSR had ended in failure, still believed that they had so damaged the Soviet defenders that there would be nothing to fear from them in the near future. In this they were terribly wrong. Little more than two weeks after taking everything the Germans had to throw at them, the Red Army on the southern face of the Kursk bulge would be launching an offensive that would clear the Germans from the eastern half of the Ukraine and begin the process of clearing first the USSR and then all of central Europe of the Nazi armies.

"Operation Rummyantsev" was to begin on August 3rd, 1943. The First Tank Army and Fifth Guards Tank Army were to attack shoulder to shoulder on a very narrow frontage, the attack was aimed straight south, with the 1st Tank Army on the right (West). Both tank armies were to attack through the sector of 5th Guards Army. This army was attacking on a 16 kilometer front, with most of its assets concentrated on a 6 kilometer zone. Here they faced two German infantry regiments. The 5th Guards Army was supported by 2 tank regiments, a regiment of self propelled guns, a breakthrough artillery division, a guards rocket division, 2 heavy artillery and 4 guards rocket regiments.

Katukov's 1st Tank Army now consisted of two tank corps (6th and the still incomplete 31st) and the 3rd Mechanized Corps. It had 37,000 men and 542 tanks and 27 self propelled guns. In support the army had a rocket regiment, an engineer assault battalion,

and the dedicated support of a division each of Shturmoviks and fighters. The army was to attack through the lines of the 32nd Guards Rifle Corps. They would face part of the 332nd Infantry Division, backed up by the 19th Panzer Division which had 49 tanks and *sturmggeschutzen*, as well as Panzer Detachment 52 which had 10 Tiger tanks available.

At 05:00 on August 3rd, the code word "Uregan" (Hurricane) set off 2 hours and 10 minutes of intense fire. The Germans responded quickly with several air strikes at the attackers, but the 32nd Guards Rifle Corps (led by Stalingrad hero General Rodimstev) plowed through the 164th Infantry Regiment of 332nd Infantry Division and plunged ahead. By 11:50 the 1st Tank Army began to enter the breach. Supported by groups of 6-8 Shturmoviks, the 3rd Mechanized Corps, advancing on the tank army's left with 49th Tank Brigade out in front, cut the Tomarovka-Belgorod Highway at Domnin at 17:00 hours. One hour later they were reinforced there by 1st Guards Tank Brigade. The German 19th Panzer Division launched serious attacks there in the evening, but all were repulsed.

That night a recon group of 1st Guards Tank Brigade probed the German positions outside of Domnin and found an unguarded spot. At daybreak the brigade raced through the hole, followed by 49th Tank Brigade and 1st Mechanized Brigade. Brushing aside a small group of tanks from 19th Panzer, they sped south, by nightfall they were 20 kilometers south of the Gristenka River.

On August 5th, there was a substantial bag of Germans formed around Tomarovka. The 3rd Mechanized Corps was holding the southern wall of the bag. As infantry of the 32nd Guards Rifle Corps came up to relieve them, the mechanized corps again headed south on the 6th of August, the 49th Tank Brigade in the lead again. This brigade covered 50 kilometers to the south, cutting the rail line east of Bogodukhov.

August 7th was the beginning of an enormous confused tank battle that was to go on for the next two weeks, at the end of which both sides would have completely exhausted their mobile forces that began the battle, but would see Kharkov again in Soviet hands and the Germans preparing to finally withdraw back to the Dnepr River. Although costly for the Soviets, it was to prove that the German panzer arm could be defeated, not only by a well prepared, fortified defense as at Kursk, but in open maneuver warfare.

On the morning of August 7th, the 1st Guards Tank Brigade and 10th Mechanized Brigade moved out at noon to take Maximova Station, Southeast of Bogodukhov, only to run into the lead elements of the SS Das Reich Division feeling their way North from Olshany. The advance guard of the 1st Guards Tank Brigade, one company of 10 T-34s, ran into 17-18 German tanks and 2 companies of motorized infantry 10 kilometers north of Olshany. A classic meeting engagement ensued, with the 10th Mechanized Brigade, reinforced by the 3rd Mechanized Brigade striking one German column, while the 1st Guards Tank Brigade fought the other. The fighting continued from 17:00 through 23:00 (one hour after dark at this time of year) with the result that the SS men were forced back a few kilometers.

The next day the rest of SS Das Reich arrived and the next two days saw the 3rd Mechanized Corps pushed back in its turn in heavy fighting. The battle then see-sawed back and forth. On August 10th the 31st Tank Corps arrived to reinforce the 3rd



Mechanized Corps and together both attacked to the south again. Most of the forces on both sides fought along the Merchik River, with the SS Totenkopf Division coming up to reinforce SS Das Reich. But 49th Tank Brigade and 10th Mechanized Brigade sent reinforced companies across the Merchik. These units found a way through the German lines and as far south as the Poltava-Kharkov rail line. Here they stormed Kovyagi Station, intercepting a German troop train and scattering the troops.

On August 11th, the 1st Guards Tank Brigade crossed the Merchik and fought their way to Kovyagi Station to reinforce the other two brigades in the vicinity. But the Germans were getting wise to the Soviet tactic of sending advance guards to break the way for the rest of the mobile forces, and on this day they turned with their panzer divisions concentrated and fell on the advance guards. At 11:00 both SS Das Reich and Totenkopf surged back north, surrounding the advance guards and giving them a drubbing. The 1st Guards Tank Brigade, acting on orders, broke out that night and made it back to the rest of the corps, but 49th Tank Brigade was stuck fast, low on fuel and ammo, and unable to free itself. During the next three days the brigade was ground to pieces, only a handful of survivors making their way back to Soviet lines. From this German action both tank armies lost a third of their tank strength, (the same thing had happened to 6th Tank Corps and also to the advance guards of the 5th Guards Tank Army) reducing 1st Tank Army to 154 tanks still running.

As a result of the German counterblow, Voronezh Front commander, General Vatutin, ordered the 5th Guards Tank Army to shift west to support the efforts of 1st Tank Army. On August 12th the 3rd Mechanized Corps attacked south to try to free their trapped tank brigade, supported by 31st Tank Corps. The attacks failed, and the Tigers supporting Das Reich wreaked havoc on the Soviet tanks, killing among others the commander of the 31st Tank Corps. The Soviets were pushed back to the positions of the 32nd Guards Rifle Corps, whose dug in infantry and antitank guns stopped the SS.

Attack followed counterattack during the next two days, with more Soviet infantry coming up and both sides getting closer to exhaustion. The next day, however, saw the two SS divisions smashing through the defenses of the 6th Guards Army, destroying part of the 6th Tank Corps in the process. Flight after flight of Soviet ground attack planes took a toll of the panzers but could not stop them. Both sides had taken amazing losses in this fighting. By the end of August 15th the 1st Tank Army was down to

100 tanks, while SS Das Reich could boast of only 32, with 19 assault guns. Other formations of both sides were similarly knocked about and were not only low on equipment, but their ranks were both thinned and stumbling from exhaustion. By almost mutual consent, August 16th saw a lull, as both sides reverted to the defensive.

This only lasted a day, however, as good summer campaigning weather was precious. To the northwest of Bogodukhov both sides were massing forces. On August 17th, the 5th Guards Tank Army resumed its attack to the southeast, to cut in behind Kharkov. This got nowhere, as one day was not sufficient to rebuild Rotmistrov's army. However, two fresh Soviet armies that had massed to the north of Akhtyrka kicked off their offensive the same day, plunging to the southwest, and cutting behind the German forces massing there.

The Germans showed considerable cool and ignored this development. Their mass assembled at Akhtyrka, centered on the *Grossdeutschland* Division, struck out with 100 tanks (including 20 Tigers) to the southeast on August 18th, slicing off the Soviet bulge around Kotelivka. Most of the Soviet 27th Army, along with 4th Guards Tank Corps and parts of 5th Guards Tank Corps were cut off.

The 1st Guards Tank Brigade got orders to pull out of the line on the Merchik at noon and head west to deal with this threat, followed by the rest of the mechanized corps. As they did that elements of SS Totenkopf were trying to fight their way through part of 5th Guards Tank Corps to link up with *Grossdeutschland* from the southeast. This fighting continued through the next day. August 20th saw remnants of 1st Tank Army attacking the northern face of *Grossdeutschland's* narrow corridor, while the Soviet units in the pocket suffered from heavy German air attacks. The Germans completely failed to eliminate the pocket which was eventually relieved on August 25th. The next day 3rd Mechanized Corps, a shadow of its former self, continued to attack, throwing the Germans out of Parkhomovka. It then reverted to the defensive, completely fought out. That day its commander, Major General Semyon M. Krivoshein, was promoted to Lieutenant General. By that evening, both sides had reached exhaustion and the battle was over.

The 3rd Mechanized Corps had lost over 90% of its armored vehicles, and nearly 90% of its officers. The Germans, in addition to the sudden pounce on the exposed advance guards, had shown the Soviets some new tactics. They would pull their tanks back in the face of Soviet armor, letting the Soviet armor bleed against an infantry-antitank gun screen, and then come out to counterattack after the Soviets had been weakened. The corps remnants, along with what little was left of 6th Tank Corps, were pulled back to Sumy to be rebuilt and refitted on August 22nd. On the 23rd, the word came in that Konev's Steppe Front had taken Kharkov. Within a month the Germans would be scrambling back over the Dnepr River.

For the next three months the tank army rested and received reinforcements. In September a regiment of heavy SU-152 "Animal Killers" was added to 3rd Mechanized Corps. In October, the 6th Tank Corps was made the 11th Guards Tank Corps, and 3rd Mechanized Corps became the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps. General Vatutin had been as good as his word.

Between the end of November and December 20th the 1st Tank Army was shifted across the Dnepr River and concentrated behind the 38th Army. The army, no longer including the 31st Tank Corps, now amounted to 42,000 men. The 546 tanks (almost all T-34/76s) and SUs didn't all arrive until just before the Zhitomir-Berdichev Operation began. Prior to the beginning of the attack, the army staff wargamed out the planned operation with Colonel Sobolev, the chief of the intelligence department playing the "blue" (German) side. It was clear that with the tank army hooking to the south, the danger lay in the enemy armored reserves to the west.

The attack began on December 24 in the middle of the day rather than with the traditional dawn barrage. The Germans had begun their Christmas celebrations and many were in their cups when the barrage hit. A large hole was rapidly punched in the German front line and the 1st Tank and 3rd Guards Tank Armies entered the breach. Katukov's men were somewhat slow to advance on the 24th, and he was the recipient of an unpleasant phone call from Front headquarters. General Katukov in turn passed the unpleasantness down the line to his corps commanders. The next day the corps stepped out more smartly, despite rainy weather. Leading the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps was the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. On Christmas they pushed through Kornin and by December 28th they had penetrated to Kazatin, 100 kilometers in four days. The 11th Guards Tank Corps watched their right flank and prevented the 1st Panzer and Liebstandarte SS Adolf Hitler Panzer Divisions from attacking the army's flank.

On December 30th came new orders from Front, ordering the army to advance to the south rather than southwest, seizing the important rail junction at Vinnitsa. The 8th Guards Mechanized Corps led the way, while the SS Adolf Hitler Division sliced off a brigade of 11th Guards Tank Corps but failed to eliminate it. A new commander arrived to take over the mechanized corps for Lieutenant General Krivoshein. This was the recently promoted Major General Ivan F. Dremov, who would command the corps for the rest of the war.

Bad weather, difficulties with supplies, and muddy roads delayed the army, but on January 7th Katukov ordered his two corps each to send an advanced guard of a reinforced brigade to Zhmerinka, south of Vinnitsa. The 11th Guards Tank Corps sent 40th Guards Tank Brigade and 8th Guards Mechanized Corps of course dispatched the 1st Guards Tank Brigade. The 40th Guards Tank Brigade outflanked the German right and occupied Guivan, giving them control over a bridge over the Southern Bug River. They were attacked there by the German 371st Infantry Division with some tank support from the newly arrived 16th Panzer Division. Finally on January 11th the remnants of the brigade were forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile the 1st Guards Tank Brigade crossed the Southern Bug River on January 9 and headed for Zhmerinka at top speed. By 15:00 it stormed into Sutisky, only 10 kilometers east of its objective. Securing an important bridge there, the brigade pushed on through a snowstorm to take Borskova and Novo-Petrovska, destroying the small German garrison there. A blizzard raged overnight, and under its cover the brigade, now down to about twenty tanks and self-propelled guns, assaulted Zhmerinka at five in the morning. By 08:30 they had fought their way into the town, pushing back desperate elements of the 371st Infantry Division. By 15:00 the brigade had lost eight of its remaining armored vehicles and was forced to withdraw to Sutisky, where it linked up with the 20th Guards Mechanized Brigade.

The fighting went on, with fresh German reinforcements arriving, including the 1st Infantry, the 4th Mountain, and the 16th Panzer Divisions, all of whom attacked the Tank Army, attempting to surround it. By January 13th the 38th Army infantry began to arrive, allowing the weary tankers and motorized infantry to be pulled out.

Originally there had been a plan for the 1st Ukrainian Front, led by 1st Tank Army, to curl to the southeast, meeting the 2nd Ukrainian Front around Uman to pocket a large chunk of von Manstein's Army Group South. The stalemate at Kirovograd of Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front and the reverse suffered by 1st Ukrainian around Vinnitsa put an end to these more grandiose plans. Instead it was decided to settle for a smaller slice of Germans; the salient centered around Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi. The First Tank Army was too weak and too busy to be involved in this battle, except near its end, when Marshal Zhukov, coordinating the efforts of the two fronts, ordered General Katukov to shift one "fully manned" tank brigade to the area of the German breakout effort. It is a measure of the degree to which the 1st Tank Army had been attritioned that when General Getman of 11th Guards Tank Corps got the order, he felt obliged to send his entire corps, and at that could only muster thirty running tanks!

It is clear from this that the tank army had suffered severe losses in the *Zhitomir-Berdichev Operation*. What is less clear is how these losses were suffered. Noting that on December 24th the tank army was running better than 85% of its authorized number of tanks and assault guns. By January 10, little more than two weeks later, the reinforced 1st Guards Tank Brigade was at less than 30% strength. While 11th Guards Tank Corps had fought some heavy battles with German armor guarding the army's flank, the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps had enjoyed a fairly clear run down to Vinnitsa. What are we to conclude, that the few German garrisons and rear area elements encountered were able to knock out the bulk of the tanks of the mechanized corps? Seems unlikely, unless you subscribe to the *Übermensch* school of historical analysis. Instead a much more likely explanation is to be sought in looking at the weather. The abominable winter of 1943-44 was one of unusually warm temperatures, from time to time. This meant snow, followed by thaws and slush and mud, and then night time freezes, blizzards, then fog and more mud, sometimes varied by freezing rain, a real pleasure for those forced to live outside. Tanks had to strain through mud, and snow, and this meant engine, transmission, and suspension damage at unusually high rates.

This is not to imply that the Germans didn't knock out a lot of Soviet tanks. During 1943 the ratio overall was three Soviet tanks knocked out for every German tank lost. But to better understand this figure it would do well to examine the make up of the opposing forces. In the beginning of 1943 Soviet tank brigades were often composed of two battalions of T-34s and one battalion of T-60s (a light tank lacking armor and firepower and with undistinguished mobility), while the Germans began to introduce their Tiger tank in the spring of 1943. Many Soviet tanks were lost during the "*Backhand Blow*" at Kharkov in February and March, where they were at the end of a very long supply line that had many of them fighting without much fuel or ammunition. It was only in early fall that Soviet tank brigades tended to be all T-34 (except for those that were lend lease Matildas, Valentines, and Grants). These were the T-34/43 models, that while improved, still had the two man turret and the 76.2mm gun. The Germans, meanwhile, had countered in the summer with the feared Panther. True, it

had its teething problems, and was vulnerable to a flank shot that tended to send its gasoline powered engine up in flames, but it could hole a T-34 at 1,000 meters, and the T-34 would be lucky to penetrate its frontal armor at 300.

Nonetheless, by the end of 1943, the ratio was improving in the Soviet's favor. In the summer the SU-85 and SU-152 were introduced, which gave the Soviets an antidote for the Tigers and Panthers, and by February 1944 the first JSU-122s were becoming available at the front. These were a real ugly surprise for the Germans, able to penetrate a Panther or Tiger from the front at 1,000 meters. Then in March the JS-II tank, with thick armor and the same 122mm gun became available. At the same time (early 1944) the T-34/85, the best tank of the war, began replacing the T-34/76s. With a three man turret, a radio in every tank, a commander's cupola, and a powerful 85mm gun, this tank is still in service some 53 years later in some corners of the world.

Rebuilt once again, the 1st Tank Army moved on to its next operation, the *Proskurov-Chernovitsy* action. Since the battle of Stalingrad the Red Army had thrown a series of right hooks, trying to trap German forces against the Sea of Azov or the Black Sea. Since the front had run northwest to southeast, partly due to geography and partly due to the German insistence of clinging to the Crimea, the Nikopol Bridgehead and such, the Soviets had consistently concentrated their strength on their right, in the 1st Ukrainian Front. They had now reached far enough west that the Black Sea was no longer available as an anvil against to beat the Germans. Instead looming behind the Germans were the Carpathian Mountains. Just as the Pripet Marshes divide the western Soviet Union and force armies to drive north or south of them, so do the Carpathians divide Eastern Europe. North of them are Poland and Germany, and to the south Hungary and Rumanian.

The *Proskurov-Chernovitsy Operation* started with a secret regrouping of Soviet forces to the west from where they had stood at the end of the *Korsun-Shevchenkivsky Operation*. The Germans failed to detect the maneuver, and assumed that with the spring thaw imminent there would be a lull until the ground dried out. Nonetheless they did shift some of their forces westward, but too slowly. First the 2nd Ukrainian Front launched what would be called their "*Mud Offensive*". Only the broad-tracked T-34s and powerful Studebaker and Dodge trucks allowed them to push ahead. The Germans fled, leaving most of their heavy weapons behind, and often even their boots, sucked off by the thick black mud of the Ukraine.

Then Zhukov (standing in for General Vatutin, mortally wounded in late February), attacked on March 4th. Initially the attacking armies overcame the German front line defenses in three days of stubborn fighting, after which the 3rd Guards and 4th Tank Armies were committed to the breach. The 1st Tank Army was still recuperating, well to the east. On March 15th it shifted 250 kilometers to west of Shepetovka and then on March 21st it struck south as part of the main attack. It's aim was to drive south to the Carpathian Mountains, cutting the 1st Panzer Army off from Poland and Germany and leaving it no hope but to break out to the southwest into Rumania.

By March 24th, the tank army, led by the 1st Guards Tank Brigade, reached the Dnestr River. The river was flowing at a rate of 1.5 meters per second, was 100-300 meters wide and from 2.2 to 3 meters deep. The Germans had blown up the bridges in front of the racing Soviet forces. The Soviet mobile corps lacked organic bridging means,



and neither the tank army nor the front had taken care to provide them with any. However the word of Kravchenko's feat in getting his corps across the Desna River in the fall of 1943 had been spread, and General Dremov set about emulating it. A suitable place was found and the mechanized corps crossed its tanks by driving them over the river bottom with the hatches sealed with grease and tar and using canvas tubes to pipe out the exhaust. The 11th Guards Tank Corps was ordered to follow, with many sarcastic comments from the army commander about sun bathing on the beach and being afraid of getting their boots wet. Subsequently the army commander had to admit that the fault lay with inadequate planning and support from army to the corps, although history is innocent of any record of an apology.

The tank army fulfilled its objectives, reaching the mountains and cutting off 1st Panzer Army, but bad roads left it very short of ammunition and fuel and bad weather grounded its air support. The Germans, at first vacillated as to whether to breakout south or west, but as the Soviets scrambled to cover the southern escape routes, they flung themselves west across the supply routes of the 1st Tank Army. With a fresh SS Panzerkorps attacking from the outside to relieve them, Hube's 1st Panzer Army broke out successfully to the west, preserving some of their strength for the struggle in Poland. Much of their transport, artillery, and tanks, however, remained in the grasp of the Ukrainian mud.

Once again, the tank army was pulled into reserve, to lick its wounds, receive fresh equipment and replacements, and prepare for new tasks. On April 25th came word that for its exemplary actions in the great raid on Vinnitsa the army was renamed the 1st Guards Tank Army. From now on the army would operate on the central axis, north of the Carpathians, through Poland and into Germany, toward Berlin.

Between April 1st and June 25th, the army refitted. The orders to move up for the new operation came only in the latter part of June. This helped conceal the build up from the Germans until it was too late to respond. The size of the build up is somewhat indicated by the strength of the tank army when the operation started: fifteen JS-II heavy tanks, 277 T-34s (mostly T-34/85s), nine Valentine Mk VIII tanks attached to one reconnaissance battalion (British lend lease vehicles armed with 6 lb guns-57mm), twenty-one JSU-152 heavy assault guns, and twenty-four SU-85 tank destroyers.

These were the ones in running condition, with another seventy-odd in the repair shops. Additionally the army received two engineer battalions and two pontoon battalions from Front reserves to help in river crossings. The army had twenty days of food stockpiled, along with four "fills" of fuel and around three "units of fire" of ammunition. The offensive by 1st Ukrainian Front, commanded by Marshal Ivan Konev, involved three tank armies, two cavalry-mechanized groups, seven combined arms armies, four artillery divisions, and over 3200 planes.

The Germans had been thinking, and had come to the conclusion that standing in their fortifications waiting for the Soviets to deluge them with all the artillery in the world was probably not the smartest way to fight. Consequently they planned to withdraw to their second line when it became clear that the Soviet offensive was imminent. The Soviets understood this possibility and by July 10th became aware that the Germans were planning a withdrawal. Reconnaissance in force launched by the Soviet front line rifle divisions on the night of July 13th showed the Germans pulling back in front of the 3rd Guards and the right flank of the 13th Army. On other parts of the front it seemed that the Germans were still in their front line trenches.

The 1st Guards Tank Army was scheduled to advance through the sector of the 3rd Guards Army. The main attack jumped off on the 14th of July, but the Germans wasted no time and launched counter-attacks with tank support in the 3rd Guards sector. In the 13th Army sector they sent groups of twenty to thirty Ju-88 bombers to hit the attackers. Although the mobile forces were to be introduced into the breaches in the enemy lines, the going was very slow, and when the 1st Guards Tank Brigade was committed in the center of the 3rd Guards Army's front, it helped the 76th Rifle Corps advance 8 kilometers that day, but the rifle corps on either flank failed to make much progress against the enemy second line positions.

The decision was then made by Marshal Konev to shift the 1st Guards Tank Army some 20 kilometers to the south to advance through the sector of the 13th Army where, despite a stodgy initial advance by Baranov's cavalry-mechanized group, progress was being made against the enemy's second line.

Part of the reason that resistance here was weaker had to do with a subtle trick played on the Germans by Katukov. General Katukov was aware that the Germans had been paying close attention to Soviet technique. They had learned, for example, that the Soviets committed a reinforced tank brigade as an advance guard to pave the way for their tank and mechanized corps. They were familiar with which brigades customarily had this task. They had correctly identified the 1st Guards Tank Brigade as the chosen advance guard of both 8th Guards Mechanized Corps and the 1st Guards Tank Army as a whole. Consequently when they identified it pushing ahead in the 3rd Guards Army area, they carefully added up two and two and logically concluded that the whole tank army was moving on this axis. They promptly committed 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions, a Tiger battalion and an assault gun battalion to head them off. Dr. Pavlov, who had proved his theories of conditioned response with dogs, would have been proud.

Slowed significantly by surprisingly bad weather, including a downpour that drenched the roads on July 15th, the tank army entered the breach in German lines in the sector of the 13th Army at 10:00 hours on July 17th. By the 18th they were across the

Western Bug River, beating off counterattacks on the way. As German remnants came fleeing back to avoid being surrounded, the reconnaissance battalion of 8th Guards Mechanized Corps ambushed a group near Sokol'. The next day Sokol' fell to two of the guards mechanized brigades of the corps and its heavy tank regiment.

The 1st Guards Tank Brigade, having survived its experience as bait for a whole panzerkorps, drove ahead and reached the San River on July 22nd. There it waited until the rest of the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps caught up with it on the 24th. Reunited, the corps crossed the river the same day, racing the Germans for the Vistula. On July 27th, the corps pushed ahead and seized Yaroslav. For this it was reinforced with the 19th SU Brigade. This unusual formation was equipped with 65 US-made Lend Lease halftracks, each equipped with a 57mm antitank gun. The US Army called these T48 57mm gun motor carriages, the Soviets called them the SU-57. Two days later reconnaissance elements of 1st Guards Tank Brigade and 44th Guards Tank Brigade of 11th Guards Tank Corps reached the Vistula River about noon. Two hours later the two advance guards brigades arrived, opposite Baranuv.

The Vistula River was almost a kilometer wide here. As soon as they arrived, the sub-machine gunners and riflemen of the tank brigades began crossing the river on rafts and floats. The report came back that they had won the race; there were no Germans and no defenses on the western bank of the river. They were reinforced on July 30, as the rest of the mechanized corps' infantry began crossing by "improvised means". The next day with pontoon and engineer units arriving, ferries were built that started crossing the tanks and other heavy equipment of the army. On the 1st of August the tanks were in action against Baranuv and Visloki.

Exactly how many tanks were available to cross is open to some question. Note that the army had 419 tanks and SUs available in various states of repair on July 13th. By July 25th the army had lost 429 of them (102.4%). This reflects both the losses in fighting off enemy counterattacks and storming enemy strong points, and the losses from mechanical breakdowns. That there were still tanks to cross the river, and that the army could take more than 100% losses indicates both the presence of reserve tanks, held back for just such contingencies, and the exceptional repair abilities that these armies now possessed.

Throughout August the army fought to hold on to its bridgehead against furious counterattacks from fresh German forces, including the first appearance in the east of the powerful King Tiger tank. Although the Germans fought hard, they were unable to eliminate the bridgeheads over the Vistula. Part of Poland had been liberated and the frontier of the Reich was rapidly approaching. At the beginning of September the tank army once again was pulled into reserve for refitting. There it stayed until late November. During this time it was pulled out of the Baranov Bridgehead and sent north to the sector of the 1st Belorussian Front, in the Magnushev Bridgehead. The 1st Belorussian Front was faced directly towards Berlin.

The army was in reserve until January, 1945. The next operation was the *Vistula-Oder Operation*, involving three fronts, driving from just east of Warsaw up to within 40 miles of Berlin. While Hitler, citing Wehrmacht reports of enormous Soviet casualties, argued that the Red Army was burned out and no threat, Guderian described the Eastern Front as a "house of cards", with no reserves. The Soviets were plagued with

the problem of lengthy supply lines, poor weather, and a narrowing front that allowed the Germans to more easily determine the direction of expected thrusts and to pack the front more tightly with troops. On the other hand it allowed the Soviets to amass truly mountainous amounts of artillery and ammunition, as well as packing in more tanks and planes. For a change, the Soviets were determined to win their battles with munitions, rather than lives, which were now more precious than equipment.

First Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front jumped off from Sandomierz on January 12th, followed two days later by the 1st Belorussian Front. This gave the Germans just time to get reserves moving to face Konev before Zhukov's front cut loose. By the evening of the first day the German front completely collapsed and the 1st Guards Tank Brigade was committed that evening to begin the pursuit. The rest of the tank army followed the next day. The 19th Panzer Division was committed to stop them and was swatted aside in short order, as was the 25th Panzer that attempted to stop the 2nd Guards Tank Army. By the end of January 15th, most of the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps had bypassed the 19th Panzer and was threatening its rear, while the 1st Guards Tank Brigade was 20 kilometers west of the corps, headed for the Oder River.

On January 17th, the mechanized corps bypassed Lodz (that's pronounced "Woodge" in Polish of course). Led by the 1st Guards Tank Brigade, the corps stormed the city the next day, although the tank brigade received no credit for its capture. This was because after cutting the roads west of the city, the brigade went to the Warta River, leaving the infantry-heavy mechanized brigades to actually take the city.

The 1st Guards Tank Brigade sped on, reaching the crossings on the Warta River on January 20. They were engaged in mopping up German *volksturm* (militia) and an officer school that were trying to hold the crossings when they received orders to proceed directly to Poznan. By evening of January 21st they were past Wresnia, with the rest of the mechanized corps 30-40 kilometers behind them and the troops of the 28th Guards Rifle Corps of 8th Guards Army a further 50 kilometers behind them. The brigade, which was headed north of the city, changed direction on the night of the 22nd-23rd, and cut south while 11th Guards Tank Corps advanced elements moved north of the city. As soon as the city was cut off Hitler declared it a *festung* or fortress. Following Soviet armies, the 8th Guards and the 69th joined in the siege, which finally succeeded on Red Army Day, February 23rd, 1945.

Meanwhile the mobile forces of the 1st Guards Tank Army continued to head west, reaching the old German-Polish border west of Poznan in the Meseritz Defense Region. This line of old but solid fortifications was held by the 5th SS Mountain Corps and two reserve infantry divisions so the attack on it was wisely delayed until further strength could pull up to take part in a deliberate assault. This happened on January 29th, and, attacking on a wide front with the 1st Guards and 2nd Guards Tank Armies, supported by the 8th Guards, 33rd, 69th, and 5th Shock Armies, the Soviets again broke through. The 1st Guards Tank Brigade was out front as usual, reaching Frankfurt-am-Oder by February 1st. When the rest of the 8th Guards Mechanized Corps joined them on February 2nd, the Vistula-Oder Operation was declared completed. The leading Soviet tanks had arrived 40 miles east of Berlin.

One interesting thing about this operation was that the advanced guards often moved at night. This was partly because at this latitude it was only light from 08:00 in the morning until 17:00 (5:00 PM) at night. Also contributing to the ability to move rapidly at night (up to 50-80 kilometers per day) was the fact that as they neared Germany the roads became better and more numerous.

Another unique aspect of this operation was the fact that responding to Churchill's appeal for help, resulting from Western Allied reverses at the Bulge, the operation kicked off two weeks ahead of schedule. This was ironic, because while it prevented the Soviets from amassing as much artillery ammunition as they had planned, in fact the early start was very helpful to them. If the attack had jumped off as planned, the rains that commenced in early February would have brought the offensive to a halt before it reached the Oder or the Baltic (where Rokossovsky's 2nd Belorussian Front cut off East Prussia).

German intelligence records indicate that the Soviets were operating with new TO&Es, with assault guns mixed with the tanks, and the tank brigades sporting up to 90 tanks as opposed to the expected maximum of 65. In fact what the Germans were seeing was the increasingly polished coordination between tank brigades and assault gun regiments, as well as the Soviets adding increasing numbers of reserve tanks to each tank formation to allow it to absorb losses and still continue to function with somewhat near its authorized strength.

Having driven to nearly the walls of Berlin, the Soviets spent a month refitting, rebuilding communications lines, and amassing more munitions. Some of their leaders, such as General V.I. Chuikov, commander of the 8th Guards Army thought that it was a terrible mistake to halt at this point. He felt that although his army's equipment was worn and his losses had been heavy, that one last effort would have achieved the prize, Berlin. The Soviet High Command, and many of his contemporaries, disagreed, feeling that it would be dangerous to ignore residual German strength in Pomerania to the north and Silesia to the south. Instead it was decided to rebuild and then clear up the armies flanks.

By March 1st, the 1st Guards Tank Army had rebuilt its strength up to 584 tanks and SUs. Advancing through the hole torn in the German front line at Reetz by the 3rd Shock Army, the army advanced rapidly towards Kolberg on the Baltic coast, 1st Guards Tank Brigade again in the lead. The brigade was reinforced for this effort by the 400th SU Regiment, equipped with 20 SU-100s. On the 4th of March the brigade reached the Baltic east of Kolberg. The next day they linked up with forces of the 2nd Belorussian Front. The next week was spent in mopping up operations, culminating in the seizure of Noishtadt on March 12th by the reinforced 1st Guards Tank Brigade.

During this operation, the tank army lost 149 tanks and SUs, 49 of them burnt out beyond salvaging. The bulk of these losses were suffered at the hands of the now ubiquitous *Panzerfaust* and *Panzerschreck*. These hand-held rocket launchers were very short ranged but in the numerous built up areas of Germany, and in the woods and forests of East Prussia, they took a toll of Soviet tankers. They could penetrate thick armor, and if fired from an upper story of a building, had an easy time penetrating the thinner armor on top of a tank.

On March 28th, the 1st Guards Tank Army was back under control of the 1st Belorussian Front and headed south to its concentration areas to prepare for its final operation. Now including the 11th Tank Corps as well as the 11th Guards Tank Corps and 8th Guards Mechanized Corps, the tank army by April 15th numbered 45,000 men, 709 tanks and SUs, 700 guns and 44 multiple rocket launchers. As in January, the army was to exploit a breach made by the 8th Guards Army (the heroes of Stalingrad). According to plan, Katukov's army was to be committed into action when Chuikov's 8th Guards Army reached the line Seelow-Dolgelin-Alt Malisch. It would then drive into the eastern suburbs of Berlin and swing south to surround the city from that direction. It was expected that the army would go in to the attack on the second day of the operation. Unfortunately things did not go according to schedule.

East of Berlin the Seelowe Heights rear their sandy escarpment 200 meters above the Oder River. These the 8th Guards Army had to storm in order to free the tank army to drive on to Berlin. The Germans fell back in front of the Soviet reconnaissance in force that started April 14th. As a result the 8th Guards Army was able to occupy the swampy ground on the banks of the Oder while the Germans withdrew to their second line on the heights. On the night of April 15-16 the red banners of the Guards divisions were carried forward into the front-line positions and the gunners laid out the masses of ammunition they were to fire off. At 05:00, Moscow time, three red flares soared into the sky. What followed was twenty minutes of organized chaos, as the thousands of guns, mortars and rocket launchers let fly with concentrated fire. As the barrage came to a raging close, 143 searchlights lit up the clouds of smoke and dust kicked up by the artillery.

This turned out to be a blunder, as the lights seemed to go on and off and confused and back lit the attackers as much as they may have blinded the Germans. When Chuikov's troopers reached the Haupt Canal at the foot of the heights, their infantry-support tanks, and those of the 1st Guards Tank Brigade that were supporting them fell behind, unable to cross the canal. In fact, the boggy ground at the foot of the heights, cut by streams and canals, slowed the tanks so that the infantry had to attack without much support. Those tanks that got across the water obstacles and found a way through the minefields found the heights too steep to climb, and they were forced to stick to the roads. These the Germans had well covered with 88mm fire, artillery, and panzerfaust gunners.

With Chuikov falling behind schedule, and a phone call from Stalin pointing that Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front had successfully crossed the Neisse River and his tanks were racing ahead, Marshal Zhukov ordered the two tank armies under his command, 1st and 2nd Guards, to commit themselves in support of the infantry. This mistake made the searchlight blunder look like child's play. The massive columns of tanks forced everything else off the roads, including the artillery and ammunition needed to blast the Germans off the heights. The tanks themselves were bound to the roads by the marshy ground and the massive minefields. A huge traffic snarl built up under the eyes (and guns) of the Germans on the heights. Losses piled up as repeated assaults were thrown back. Finally just before midnight three houses in the northern edge of Seelow were captured.

To break the resistance of the German paratroop division holding the heights, Zhukov whistled up 800 bombers of the Long Range Aviation to pound the enemy positions during the night. Preceded by a half hour barrage and more bombing, the Soviets attacked again at 10:15 on April 17th. By noon the 1st Guards Tank Army began to get through the German lines, at which point it was attacked by the *Kurmark Division*. General Yushchuk's 11th Tank Corps made the best progress attacking Seelow. Once this key point could be taken, the road ran straight to Berlin. On the way, General Yushchuk noticed that his men were methodically looting every bedspring they could find, lashing them to the front and sides of their tanks to act as stand-off armor to detonate the shaped charge warheads of the enemy panzerfausts. Finally by the end of the day the 11th Guards Tank Corps pushed through Yushchuk's men and took Seelow and the German defenses began to crack. Nonetheless, the terrain ahead was far from promising for tank action, showing clusters of woods and solidly built villages, interspersed with lakes, small rivers, and canals.

With Konev's armies now straining towards Berlin from the southeast, Katukov's men were directed towards the city from the east, not the south. On April 21st the 1st Guards Tank Brigade reached Marzhan in the Berlin suburbs. Although they had been fighting through built up areas for several kilometers at that point, the Soviets define the beginning of the struggle for Berlin itself as starting on the morning of April 22nd.

On the morning of April 24th, the 1st Guards Tank Brigade, reinforced with the 6th Motorcycle Regiment, reached the Tetlow Canal, near Tempelhoff Airport in south central Berlin. On the far side of the canal they spotted T-34s and JS-IIs. Shouted inquiries revealed that they belonged to General Rybalko's 3rd Guards Tank Army of Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front. To Marshal Zhukov's disappointment, Katukov had to report that Rybalko's men had beaten them to Berlin by a whole day.

Fighting in the city was savage, some German troops still willing to sacrifice themselves, although for what end it is hard to imagine. The city was a wreck. The Americans and British had bombed Berlin for the last time on April 20th, leaving a lot of the central part of the city in wreckage. This basically helped the defenders since it made it hard to maneuver tanks. The Soviet air force (6th, 16th, and 18th [Long Range] Air Armies hit Berlin on April 25th, while the 1st Belorussian Front fired over 1,800,000 rounds of artillery into the city between April 21st and May 2nd. It is amazing under the circumstances that there was much left standing.

The Germans had fortified many large buildings, especially those that controlled major streets and squares. To deal with these the Soviets used special storm groups of infantry reinforced with engineers, guns and tanks. They also used their tanks and heavy assault guns, along with heavy artillery, for direct fire against these fortified buildings, reducing them to heaps of burning rubble. The Germans struck back with their terrible panzerfausts. The Soviets responded by spraying every window in sight with machinegun fire. While advancing up a street, the Soviets would place their tanks in three-tank wedges, with the central tank slightly advanced, and responsible for everything straight ahead. Meanwhile the tank on the right would cover the buildings ahead on the left and the left tank would do the same for the buildings on the right. Infantry would accompany the tanks to help spot targets and to suppress any panzerfaust gunners or snipers.



Advancing methodically through the city, the 1st Tank Army moved northwest from Tempelhoff, with the Spree River on their right flank and the Schoneberg District on their left, taking the central railroad station in the process (a large heap of ruins). On May Day they fought their way into the Berlin Zoo, pushing out elements of the 1st Luftwaffe Flak Division. Fortunately for Katukov's and Chuikov's men, the automatic twin 128mm flak guns mounted on towers in the zoo could not be depressed to engage nearby ground targets. By the next day they fought their way 3 kilometers to within 200 meters of the Reich's Chancellery. And suddenly, there was a hush, broken only by the sound of fires raging and aircraft wheeling overhead. The word spread, Hitler was dead, Berlin had surrendered.

It was a long way from Mtsensk, but the 1st Guards Tank Brigade had made the journey. Most of the way they had been leading. As Katukov had pointed out, leading the way was no joke, the first to find enemy ambushes, the first to find the panzerfausts, the first to find the mines. Not many men had managed the whole journey. Perhaps some of the last of them died below the Seelowe Heights, or were sniped from their turret on a Berlin street corner. But they had been the point of the spear that the Soviet people finally buried in the heart of the fascist aggressor. They are not forgotten.

■ COMBAT PATH OF THE 12TH GUARDS HEAVY TANK REGIMENT

The Worker's and Peasant's Red Army revived the use of the distinctive "Guards" title in the fall of 1941 to distinguish units that had shown exceptional ability and courage during the terrible summer and fall of 1941. Subsequently it was used to honor units that had performed exceptionally in combat, and sometimes, when applied to larger units like armies and such, for purposes of inspiration. For example, a regiment, brigade, or division would be made a guards unit based on its performance. An army might be dubbed a "Guards Army" even if it contained no units that were rated guards. Another army might get the rating due to excellence in combat and might have many guards divisions assigned to it. A tank corps might contain both guards and normal tank brigades, but when the corps was designated a guards tank corps, all of the sub units might have their designations changed to guards.

A soldier would become a guardsman if his regiment, brigade, division, or tank or mechanized corps was rated guards. This was not true if the army to which his unit was attached was given a guards title. This entitled the officers and men to better pay, and theoretically better rations, although the latter was probably not often the case. If the unit made guards was a rifle unit, it was entitled to a more generous share of heavy weapons and supporting units than a normal rifle unit. (Of course when the unit was made guards it probably had lost 80% of its troops earning the title, so that the new unit would have a seasoned cadre but would be at least for a while weaker than when it had been just a rifle unit.)

Interestingly enough, tank, mechanized and cavalry units that were made guards were not reinforced with more weapons or support units, although they might receive a priority on new weapons. This was not always the case, note the 3rd Guards Tank Army whose guards tank corps were some of the last to officially receive their rocket launcher battalions.

There were two types of units that were handled very differently. These were units who were rated guards to emphasize the importance of the weapons they were armed with. These were the rocket launcher units, the "Guards Mortar" battalions, regiments, brigades and divisions, and the "Guards Breakthrough Tank Regiments." These latter are the units we will now examine.

Although the Soviet Union started the war with two heavy tank battalions (equipped with the woefully under armored and five-turreted T-35 tanks) these were soon all gone, either destroyed by the Germans or more often by their own crews as they ran out of gas or broke down and had to be abandoned. The excellent new KV-1 (and its rare and clumsy stable mate, the 152mm armed KV-2) were attached to mixed tank units containing light, medium, and heavy tanks together. When the Soviets decided to stop trying to run large tank formations and settled on the tank brigade to rebuild their shattered armored fist with, the brigades contained typically one company of seven KV tanks, one of twenty or twenty-one T-34s, and one of twenty to thirty light tanks of whatever variety were available.

As a result of this integration, the Soviets had no real heavy tank units above the size of a company during 1941. The experience of using mixed tank units was not a happy one, however, and most of the leading Soviet tank leaders expressed themselves as General Katukov did when he said that the T-34 was fine, while the light tanks were

not too useful and could not keep up with the T-34. The KVs, which terrorized the Germans and were invulnerable to all of their antitank means smaller than an 88mm antiaircraft gun, were OK when they got into action, but were slow and tended to break bridges leaving their units cut off from supply and support.

As a result the decision was made in July of 1942 to regroup the KVs into brigades of their own, and shortly after into regiments. It should be noted that Stalin was very conscious of the language used to describe units and the effect the language had on superior formations it might be subordinate to. These regiments were made up of five companies of tanks, each containing two platoons of two tanks each! (In addition there would be a regimental HQ tank, perhaps an armored car or so and some submachine gunners to accompany the tanks.) Note that a medium tank *battalion* would normally have twenty-one tanks. So why call these a regiment? For the same reason they were called guards; to indicate that they were meant for special important tasks and to impress the commander they were subordinate to.

These regiments were officially called Breakthrough Tank Regiments (*Proryva Tank Polk*) rather than Heavy Tank Regiments (*Tyazhelyi Tank Polk*). This officially changed in early 1944 when their KV-1s, KV-85s and Churchills were replaced with JS-IIs. However, even in official documents and official histories, they were Guards Heavy Tank Regiments from the beginning so we will call them that.

The Guards Heavy Tank Regiments were very different units from the tank brigades and tank corps, as well as the mechanized corps. Those were units designed with operational objectives in mind. They were best used when inserted into a breach in the enemy lines and allowed to run free into the enemy's rear area, there to raise hell and reach important distant objectives that would either force the enemy to withdraw a long way or to encircle him and prevent his ever being able to withdraw. They were thus like a long handled crowbar inserted into a hole and using leverage rather than brute force to shift large chunks of enemy forces and territory. The Guards Heavy Tank Regiment was more like a short handled sledge hammer. Its job was short ranged and its effect was tactical. Its job was to help smash the hole for other forces to exploit through.

Although in 1945 the Red Army would combine three such regiments to make a heavy tank brigade, an awesome mass of 65 JS-II tanks, usually these regiments were used singly, or paired with self propelled guns. Their job was to give fire support to an attack, to lay back and knock out enemy strongpoints, antitank guns, machinegun nests, and anything else holding up an attack. They advanced at the pace of infantry and were directly attached to infantry units.

If you were in the Red Army in a combat arm, the best place to be was in a JS-II heavy tank. Their loss rate was only a third that of their comrades in the T-34s and only two thirds that of those in the SU assault guns.

One interesting thing that distinguished Soviet heavy tank units was that from the very beginning they were all equipped with radios, although only the company commanders and higher ranks had transmitters in theirs; everyone else had only a receiver. Some tankers have suggested that this is not such a bad system, as it allows commands to actually get through without a lot of cross-talk cluttering up the radio nets.

As a result of their being auxiliary forces, supporting units attached to larger formations to facilitate their breaching of the enemy front lines, the Guards Heavy Tank Regiments have not had as much written about them as their larger sister formations the tank corps and armies. But they played an important part, and a difficult one. A tank corps was, if possible, to avoid the actual job of breaking the enemy front. Soviet studies showed that up to 40% of the tank losses expected from an operation would occur in this part of the battle, when the enemy was dug in, with his mines and anti-tank guns covering the sectors in which tanks could advance. By contrast, this is where the Guards Heavy Tank Regiments worked!

The 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment was originally formed in September, 1941, as part of the group of thirty tank brigades that Lieutenant General Lelyushenko was ordered to organize. Named the 21st Tank Brigade, it was formed in Vladimir in the Moscow Military District as an oversized tank brigade. It contained three tank battalions, the 1st having seven KV-1s in one company and two companies of ten T-34s each. The other two battalions of the brigade, the 2nd and 3rd, each contained about 30 light tanks, apparently T-26s. With 87 tanks the brigade would seem to have been slated for important tasks. When the German offensive against Moscow, *Operation Typhoon* burst over the Soviet front line at the end of September, 1941, its sister brigades went to find glory at the front. The 17th Tank Brigade fought to the death with the officer cadets defending the Malo Yaroslavets approaches to Moscow, while the 18th and 19th Tank Brigades fought heroically on the Borodino battlefield, supported by the 20th and 22nd Tank Brigades, barring the Moscow-Minsk highway to the Germans.

The 21st Tank Brigade, commanded by Colonel B. M. Skvortsov, was sent in early October to the Kalinin Front. The Germans had driven a thin wedge deep into the Soviet Western Front, seizing the major city of Kalinin on the Moscow-Leningrad Railway by *coup de main* on October 14th. The Soviet command reacted strongly, sending strong forces to attempt to cut off the German 1st Panzer Division in the city. The 29th Army attacked from the west, while the 30th Army pushed from the east. The 21st Tank Brigade was committed against the southeast side of the city on October 16th, where it engaged elements of the 36th Motorized Division reinforced by tanks of 1st Panzer Division.

During this fighting the brigade was supporting and supported by the 20th Reserve Rifle Regiment. The tank brigade constituted the left flank of the 30th Army, attempting to curl in around Kalinin from the southeast and south. Its own left flank hung in the air, off to the south were some of Dovatar's cavalry of 16th Army.

On October 17th the German 1st Panzer Division pushed west from the city, only to find itself in danger of being cut off by the 29th Army to its south. The effect of this thrust was to force 29th Army to divert four rifle divisions that were planning to attack to the southwest in order to cut off the Rzhev-Kalinin road and link up with 21st Tank Brigade. Meanwhile 8th Tank Brigade stopped 1st Panzer. By the 20th the 21st Tank Brigade had edged forward towards the road, but 29th Army was pulling away from it. The 29th Army resumed its push, getting two divisions across the Volga on 22nd of October while the German 161st Infantry attacked them from the northeast and the 162nd Infantry from the southwest. Finally on the 24th the Soviets nearly linked up, with Kalinin almost surrounded.

At that point additional German forces arrived from the south, pushing the Soviets back. The 21st Tank Brigade was pushed to the southeast by the 6th Panzer Division coming up on its open southern flank. The brigade had taken some losses and was pulled out of the front on November 2nd. The Germans continued to widen the shoulders of the salient, hammering the 29th and 30th Armies. On November 15th the German 86th Infantry Division, supported by up to 50 tanks from 1st or 6th Panzer Divisions, attacked to the southeast, pushing the tank brigade before it. Soon the attack was joined by the whole 6th Panzer and the 14th Motorized Division as well. The brigade was forced back, first to the northern bank of the Moscow Reservoir ("Sea"), and then across it and half way to Klin.

When the Soviet counteroffensive began rolling westward on December 5, the 21st Tank Brigade began its drive supporting the 371st Rifle Division, a brand new unit. As the Germans cracked and began their retreat, the 21st was attached to the mobile group of the 30th Army. It included two other tank brigades, the 8th and the 35th and the 46th Motorcycle Regiment. Perhaps the only people more miserable than the tankers in this running fight through heavy woods and deep snow were the motorcyclists trying to push their sidecar combinations through the snowy forests. The tankers played a key role in keeping this offensive going, as the artillery was left far behind in the trackless winter forests and had little ammunition even when it did appear, while the rifle units following in the tank's deep trails were for the most part green, newly raised, and suffering from among other things from a lack of many necessary supplies. For example, the 371st Rifle Division had no wire to even establish communications with the army that commanded them.

The 30th Army nonetheless drove 3rd Panzer Group before them, fighting through snowy woods the whole way, until they butted up against the German last ditch defenses in front of Rzhev. During this drive the tanks were subject to terrible conditions, with a general lack of support services and supply meant that spare parts, servicing, and at times fuel and ammunition were hard to come by. Despite this, the few KVs of 21st Tank Brigade gave the Germans a sound thrashing. This period was the peak of their ascendancy, when they earned the nickname of the "White Mammoths". Slow though they might be, their presence terrorized the Germans, who simply could not penetrate their armor with the available 37mm and 50mm antitank guns in general use. One or two KVs could roam at will through a German position, with AT shot bouncing off of them leaving hardly a mark. German tanks, armed with a low velocity 75mm short barreled cannon or a short barreled 50mm gun were hardly better off. Only an 88mm antiaircraft gun or a 100mm cannon could hope to penetrate the mammoth's tough hide, and these guns were big, awkward, and hard to hide or maneuver, so that they often fell prey to the mammoth's 75mm gun. The next summer, when the Germans reequipped with long barreled 75mm high velocity guns and developed high velocity armor piercing rounds for their 50mm guns, the mammoths became a large slow target rather than an unstoppable force. Attacks by 30th Army continued until late in the winter. At this point the 21st Tank Brigade was pulled back to the Moscow Military District for rebuilding. The brigade was reduced to the two battalions of tanks and a battalion of infantry that was more common at that time. The T-26s were all gone by now and the 12th Battalion had T-34s and KV-1s while the 21st Battalion received the T-60 light tank with its two man crew and its 20mm main gun.



The brigade spent the summer and fall as a part of the 41st Army of the Kalinin Front located in the “Toropets Bulge” west of Rzhev. They operated in the swampy and heavily wooded terrain, supporting the infantry holding the front and occasionally attacking forward German positions. Due to the lack of good roads and clear terrain, the tanks were often used in small groups to provide support for the infantry. During this period the brigade was under the command of Lieutenant Colonel D. Ya. Klinfelyd. In this area the brigade prepared to take part in the unfortunate “Operation Mars” that jumped off in late November, 1942.

Before they could take part in this operation, however, the brigade received new orders. It was ordered disbanded, and its troops moved to the large tank training school north of Tula. Here it was equipped as an all-KV-1 tank regiment with twenty-one tanks. Its new title was the 12th Guards Breakthrough Tank Regiment. After brief training, it was dispatched to the Northwestern Front's 11th Army, holding the northern face of the Demyansk Pocket. Arriving in late December, the regiment was committed to support attacks near Rosino, attempting to snap the neck of the bulge. Two other heavy tank regiments were committed alongside of it, the 3rd and 11th Guards Tank Regiments. This made a total of 50-60 heavy KV tanks attacking together.

Unfortunately the attacks were a flop. This was primarily because maneuvering was very difficult in the marshy terrain, because the Germans were well dug in on what ground was above the water level, and because the fresh and full strength 225th Infantry Division and the 184th Sturmgeschutz Battalion were committed against them. The assault gun battalion, equipped with both long and short barreled 75mm guns was particularly effective. Sergeant Horst Naumann became the first NCO in the assault gun arm to win the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, in his case for knocking out twenty-one tanks.

Eventually the Germans were forced to evacuate the Demyansk salient, in February of 1943. By this time the 12th Guards Tank Regiment was already back in Stavka reserves being rebuilt again. In March of 1943 it was assigned to the 61st Army in the Bryansk Front. Here it trained and prepared for big things to come. The veterans of previous campaigns must have been thankful to at last get out of the swampy terrain of the north. Of course the veterans also knew that moving south meant moving clos-

er to the center of the action. That was sure to mean tougher fighting and more losses, but at least one didn't have to worry about the tanks sinking in the mud!

In July the Germans attacked the Kursk bulge. Their attempt to pinch off this large protrusion into their lines ended in complete failure. Their most successful penetration was against the southern face of the bulge, where it took the Soviets two weeks of preparation after the Germans had been driven back before they could commence their counter offensive. Not so in the north, where the German 9th Army was barely able to dent Rokossovsky's Central Front. While the Germans were still attacking on this front, the Soviets opened an offensive of their own, striving to destroy the Germans in the bulge north of Kursk centered around Orel.

It was here that the 12th Guards Tank Regiment attacked, moving south towards Orel. On July 11 it moved out, supporting the 9th Guards Rifle Corps of the 61st Army. This effort involved the following units: the 12th, 76th, and 77th Guards Rifle Divisions, the 68th Tank Brigade, the 1539th SU Regiment (with twelve SU-152s), the 16th and 17th Artillery Divisions, the 13th Mortar Brigade, the 310th and 311th Guards Mortar (rocket)Regiments (twenty-four BM-13 “Katyusha” rocket launchers each), the 310th Army Engineer Battalion and attached engineer battalions from two other rifle divisions. Of course you have to understand that this was a *secondary* sector! In two years of heroic work, the Soviet people, with a bit of help from their allies, had provided their soldiers with an abundance of supporting arms. It must have brought tears to the eyes of some of the veterans of 1941 who had had to make do with a few guns and tanks.

The attack was launched on a frontage of 9.5 kilometers, with the main concentration on a 6 kilometer front. On this 6 kilometers were concentrated 17 out of 27 rifle battalions, all 67 tanks and SUs contained in the tank brigade, the heavy tank regiment and the SU regiment, 17 companies of engineers and 984 out of 1564 guns and mortars. Although no spectacular breakthroughs resulted, the Germans were forced to call a halt to their failed offensive and by August 18th were forced back out of the Orel bulge. Successive lines of prepared fortifications prevented any deep Soviet successes. When the Germans were forced behind their switch line across the base of the salient, once again the regiment was pulled out to be reequipped.

Between August and November the regiment trained on their new weapon, the KV-85. This was a KV chassis with a new, more efficient turret equipped with an 85mm gun. This tank was a kind of a hybrid, mating a turret designed for a new heavier tank with a modified hull of a KV. In late November the word came again to load the tanks onto flatcars and to head south to the 1st Ukrainian Front west of Kiev. Between December 7th and 14th the tanks off-loaded at Gostomel Station and proceeded by night marches to the assembly area of the 18th Army. This army, along with 1st Guards Army and 1st Tank Army were massed just behind the Soviet lines, although the Germans were blissfully unaware of their presence.

The German 4th Panzer Army had been conducting a series of attacks against the 38th and 60th Soviet armies, driving them back but failing to destroy them, while the German armor strength took considerable losses. Finally, on December 24, the curtain ran up on a new Soviet offensive. The Soviets changed their usual pattern of a dawn barrage, opting instead to attack in the middle of the day, when it was hoped that the Germans would be well into their liquid Christmas Eve celebrations.

Lieutenant General V. S. Golubovsky's brand new 101st Rifle Corps was assigned the 12th Guards Breakthrough Tank Regiment for support. In addition it had the 117th Guards and 24th and 389th Rifle Divisions, a dozen SU-76s of the 1812th SU Regiment, the 2nd and 28th Antitank Brigades and seven artillery and mortar regiments. Its mission was to attack straight down the Kiev-Zhitomir Highway through Stavische to Kocherovo. The 12th Guards Breakthrough Tank Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Mikhail Ivanovich Ilyushkin, played a crucial role in the attack, suppressing enemy firing points and repelling enemy tank counterattacks.

Directly behind the 18th Army was coiled the 3rd Guards Tank Army. When the 101st Rifle Corps broke through the German lines on the first day, threatening to pocket the spindly 8th and 19th Panzer Divisions (each of which had the strength of a weak regimental combat group). Driving the Germans before them, and hurrying to keep up with the rampaging 3rd Guards Tank Army, the 101st Rifle Corps stormed Berdichev on January 5th, winning an honorific title for most of its sub units, including the 12th Guards Breakthrough Tank Regiment, as well as a brigade of the 1st Tank Army and a Sturmovik Division.

After a brief lull, in February the 12th Guards Tank Regiment was shifted to the 1st Guards Army, but as the offensive ground towards the Carpathian foothills they were pulled back into Front reserve for a rest and refit. This was only brief, as they were then assigned to the 1st (now Guards) Tank Army's 11th Guards Tank Corps when it broke into Starokonstantinov on March 9, 1944. In April the regiment was back in reserve for the front, no doubt receiving new tanks.

These new tanks were the JS-II heavy tanks. Here the Soviets caught up again with German tank design, and surpassed it. The JS-II only weighed as much as a Panther medium tank, but carried a 122mm gun. True, the size of the gun limited the amount of ammunition that could be carried and kept the rate of fire quite slow (it used separately packaged propellant and shells). Its armor was superb and the gun...well, the first test of the gun was a shot at the awe inspiring frontal armor of a captured tank. The shot was fired at 1500 meters. It punched through the front armor with so much energy left over that it proceeded to plow through the engine compartment and emerge through the back armor! The Germans first ran into the 122mm gun carried by the JSU-122 assault guns at the Korsun Shevchenkivsky. After a disastrous exchange of fire at long range, Hitler ordered that henceforth such tanks or assault guns should not be fought in a meeting engagement, but rather the panzers should retreat to a good defensive position from which they could engage from a hull down position.

At any rate, the KV-85 had only been a stop gap measure until the JS-II could be produced in quantity. In May the regiment was attached to the 1st Guards Army again, and then on July 12th, one day before the Lvov-Sandomierz Operation, the regiment was transferred to the 38th Army under General Kiril Semenovich Moskalenko. This army had a key role in the operation, it was to open the way through the deep German defensive positions for the 3rd Guards Tank Army.

For this task, the army planned to attack on a front of only 8.6 kilometers. Four rifle divisions, two each from the two first echelon rifle corps, the 52nd and 101st, would attack in front, with one division in the second echelon of each corps. In the army's second echelon was another rifle corps, the 67th, with two more rifle divisions, and

yet another division was in army reserve. The infantry were not expected to do the job by themselves, they were supported by the 3rd Breakthrough Artillery Division which had four artillery brigades and a mortar brigade, by two antitank brigades, plus an antiaircraft division, and two Guards Mortar (rocket) regiments. The only thing the army lacked was armor. In addition to the twenty-nine tanks in 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment, it also had two SU regiments. Moskalenko in his memoirs claims these contained 45 SUs, all SU-76s. It would appear, however that the second regiment was the 349th Heavy SU Regiment, equipped with 21 JSU-152 heavy assault guns.

But why did the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment have twenty-nine tanks you ask? Its table of organization and equipment only called for twenty-one JS-II's and in fact it only had twenty. The other nine turn out to be T-34/85s, scrounged up somewhere (there hadn't been a tank unit in the 38th Army for months!). Never underestimate the ingenuity of the soldier in the field to acquire reinforcements where they can be found.

The attack kicked off on July 14. The Soviets had indications that the Germans intended to withdraw from their forward positions just before the Soviet offensive to avoid the effects of the expected massive artillery barrage. The Soviet command consequently launched reconnaissance in force attacks on July 13 to ascertain the Germans intentions. On the 38th Army's front it appeared that the German had no intention of withdrawing, so the attack went in as planned. Well, not quite as planned as bad weather precluded air support or good observation for artillery spotting on the morning of July 14th and the attack was not begun until 14:35 hours (2:35 PM) when more than 300 bombers and ground attack aircraft hammered the German positions. An artillery barrage of an hour and a half duration finished what the airplanes had left undone and the attack then went in. Despite the massive artillery fire and air strikes, and the heavy tanks and assault guns, the rifle divisions were able to overcome the German front line positions and advance a total of only 7 kilometers into enemy territory. That was as far as they got, as German counterattacks began rolling in on July 15th.

Coming on in groups of up to a regiment of infantry supported by ten to fifteen tanks at a time, the German 1st and 8th Panzer Divisions succeeded in rolling the 38th Army back 2-4 kilometers. To prevent the German armor from completely defeating the army's forward elements, the 2nd Air Army was called on to conduct continuous air strikes. They responded with 1,800 sorties that dropped 716 tons of bombs, rockets, and other ordinance on a 7 square kilometer area east and northeast of Zborov, all on the afternoon of July 15th. This effectively relieved the pressure on the forward infantry units. By July 18th the 38th Army was beating off up to twelve counterattacks a day supported by large groups of tanks, including Tigers and Panthers.

It was determined that 38th Army, under the veteran general Moskalenko, had made numerous mistakes on July 15th, including failing to coordinate its artillery well with the forward troops, failure to bring its antitank units forward fast enough to deal with the enemy counterattacks, and a failure of army headquarters to maintain communications with all its units (the army commander had gone too far forward and was only in communication with one of his corps.) As a result, the decision was made early to divert the 3rd Guards Tank Army to the north, where it exploited a hole in the German lines created by 60th Army and already widened by 4th Tank Army.

The 38th Army was left to soldier on, pushing to the southwest towards the Carpathian foothills. The German defenses were 25 kilometers deep, although all the five defensive lines were not manned. The terrain grew increasingly hilly the further the army advanced. While the 60th Army and the tank armies got the laurels for liberating Lvov, the 38th Army found itself facing successively higher ridges and counterattacks from the 1st, 8th, 16th and 17th Panzer Divisions. Although they were faced with superior numbers of enemy tanks, the 38th Army managed to continue to push the Germans back through all of July. This was in no small part due to the expertise of the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment.

In August the army paused to catch its breath, lick its wounds, and bring up ammunition and replacements. This apparently did not include much in the way of tank replacements, because when the offensive resumed at 0845 on September 8th, between the 12th Guards and the 349th Guards Heavy SU Regiment they could muster only twenty-two vehicles. That is about 50% strength. To reinforce the attack the similarly depleted 25th Tank Corps was ordered to commit 25 out of its 86 workable tanks to support the infantry in the break in operation.

Once again the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment found itself in terrain little suited for its best use. First it had been the swamps and forests in the north in 1941 and 42. Now it found itself engaged in mountain fighting. Attacking on a line of Yaslo-Emigrud-Novy-Lysa Gura-Dukla Pass, the 38th Army was advancing into terrain ranging up to 700 meters (2200 feet) and so steep that the fighting justly was described as "mountain warfare." The aim of the attack was to break over the Carpathians and relieve the national uprising taking place in Slovakia against the Nazis.

The initial attacks involved once again the 52nd and 101st Rifle Corps operating with two divisions each in their first echelon and one each in their second. Massed behind them was the 17th Artillery Division, an extra artillery brigade, a mortar brigade, two brigades of heavy rocket launchers and two regiments of mediums. All of this was unleashed for a 125 minute barrage, which produced a concentration of 140 tubes per kilometer of front. This artillery inferno was further concentrated so that the two leading divisions of Lieutenant General A. L. Bondarev's 101st Rifle Corps actually were supported by 82% of this fire. This is almost certainly also where the 12th Guards Tank and 349 Guards Heavy SU Regiments were committed. The barrage was very carefully planned so that its back edge stayed only 100 meters in front of the advancing troops. The German front line was pulverized up to 1500 meters in depth.

In army reserve was its mobile group, consisting of the 25th Tank Corps and the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps. Additional army reserve was provided by the 1st Czechoslovak Corps. The first day of the assault produced an advance of 6-8 kilometers in the first few hours. The army promptly committed its mobile group and reserve through the breach. Progress was slow thereafter, with a further barrage of 30 minutes being ordered on September 10 to help get the infantry unstuck. The Germans, however, committed the 78th "Sturm" Infantry Division supported by tanks to counter attack. The 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment was praised for its role in repulsing the enemy attacks. To increase the rate of advance, the 4th Guards Tank Corps was committed on the afternoon of September 10th although all it had was 50 tanks and nine SUs still running. It struck the Germans on the army's right flank.



Its help was needed, because by now the Germans had an estimated 180 tanks concentrated around the key Dukla Pass area from the 1st, 8th and 24th Panzer Divisions. (It is hard to see how deployment space could have been found for so many vehicles). The Dukla Pass had to be taken if any help was to be brought to the Slovaks. With the weather fast deteriorating, the Czechoslovak Corps was thrown in to the fighting for the pass and finally took it after suffering 6,500 casualties. No breakthrough resulted, however, and the Germans managed to both successfully crush the national rising and hold off the Soviet forces in the Carpathians. By late October the fighting died away as the Soviets began to stock up on artillery ammunition and prepare for the next operation. The operation, which had been in pursuit of no obvious strategic goal except solidarity with the Czechoslovak peoples in their uprising, had cost the Red Army in excess of 90,000 killed and wounded.

It was at about this time that the 38th Army fielded a very unusual unit, that may have operated in conjunction with the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment. This was Guards Lieutenant Sotnikov's special tank platoon, equipped with at least three captured Panther tanks, painted in the usual German panzer yellow with camouflage pattern oversprayed, but with big red stars on the turret sides for obvious reasons.

The next operation of the 38th Army was the "Yaslo-Gorlits Operation" which kicked off at 09:50 hours on January 15th. This was three days after the massive "Vistula-Oder Operation" involving the 1st Ukrainian and 1st Belorussian Fronts to the north had drawn away and consumed all the German reserves in the area. With 181 guns and mortars for each kilometer of front, and the usual four divisions attacking on about a 2100 meter front each, the army broke through in about 8 hours of heavy fighting and committed its mobile group by 18:00 hours. This group consisted of the 42nd Tank Brigade (with 40 T-34/85s), the 208th SU Brigade (with 50 SU-100s) as well as an antitank regiment, a heavy rocket launcher battalion, an artillery regiment, and two rifle regiments from a rifle division that were motorized in an impromptu manner and finally with an engineer battalion.

The German defenders of the 11th SS Korps, including the 545th Volksgrenadier Division and part of the 320th Volksgrenadiers, was knocked out of the way in short order. The 101st Rifle Corps was 6 kilometers into the German lines on the first day and two days later had penetrated 15-20 kilometers and the operation turned into a pursuit of the fleeing German remnants. During the next 15 days the 38th Army advanced 205 kilometers and assault crossed seven rivers.

A typical small unit action during this operation took place on February 10th, 1945, near Zabzhet on the Little Vistula. A force consisting of the 227th Rifle Regiment supported by eight SU-76s of the 1666th SU Regiment and eight JS-1Is of the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment. To clear a German rearguard out of the way and reach the Vistula, the regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Nikolai P. Chalov, ordered two reinforced infantry platoons, each with one tank in support, to conduct a night attack. The infantry were to creep up to within 50 meters of the German position while the noisier tanks stayed back about 500 meters. The attack went in on the night of February 10, 1945. As soon as the infantry made their move, the tanks opened up with supporting fire and advanced to close up with the infantry. The Germans retreated through a woods, over a road, and away from the river crossing.

The next morning the riflemen of the regiment were loaded on the tanks and were thus able to maneuver around the enemy remaining in their way and to go through Gurnakonets and Edes and force a crossing of the Vistula south of Maly Vistula. By the end of the day the other two regiments of the 185th Rifle Division were able to join up and a solid bridgehead had been established.

From February through the end of the war in May, the 12th Guards Heavy Tank Regiment continued to provide direct support to the infantry of the 38th Army as it pushed slowly towards Prague. They were particularly helpful in dealing with the old Czechoslovak border defenses, which consisted of concrete bunkers, pillboxes, and dragon's teeth. Along with the heavy tanks, 152mm gun-howitzers were dragged up for direct fire, one pillbox with nine firing positions took 28 rounds of 152mm fire before it was subdued.

Never quite as glorious as their fellow tankers in the tank corps and mechanized corps, the men (and sometimes women) of the Guards Heavy Tank Regiments had the thankless task of smashing the well dug in and well armed German front line defenses so that their speedier comrades could drive through and achieve deep objectives. They did so repeatedly, in part because of their superior equipment, and in part because of their courage and dedication