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# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

## Monterey, California



# THESIS

W 22459

ORDER OUT OF CHAOS:  
A CASE STUDY OF THE APPLICATION OF  
*AUFTRAGSTAKTIK* BY THE 11TH PANZER DIVISION  
DURING THE CHIR RIVER BATTLES 7 - 19 DECEMBER  
1942

by

Robert G. Walters

March 1989

Thesis Advisor:

Russel H. S. Stolfi

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<p>The U.S. Army's current AirLand battle doctrine emphasizes maneuver warfare. Coupled to this revision in doctrine there has been no major update to U.S. command and control philosophy. The German Army of World War II also operated under a maneuver warfare doctrine. Its use of <i>Auftragstaktik</i>, a command and control philosophy, provides valuable lessons for our army from an historical perspective. This monograph presents an anatomy of the Chir River battles, from a command and control, as opposed to a tactical, perspective. The brilliant defense of the German weak positions against a numerically superior Soviet attacker provides an interesting parallel to the current situation faced by NATO units in Central Europe. <i>Auftragstaktik</i> should serve well as a foundation from which the U.S. Army can develop a coherent command and control philosophy that complements the AirLand battle doctrine.</p>			
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Order Out of Chaos:  
A Study of the Application of *Auftragstaktik*  
by the 11<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division During the Chir River Battles  
7 - 19 December 1942

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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March 1989

## ABSTRACT

The U.S. Army's current AirLand battle doctrine emphasizes maneuver warfare. Coupled to this revision in doctrine there has been no major update to U.S. command and control philosophy. The German Army of World War II also operated under a maneuver warfare doctrine. Its use of *Auftragstaktik*, a command and control philosophy, provides valuable lessons for our army from an historical perspective. This monograph presents an anatomy of the Chir River battles from a command and control, as opposed to a tactical, perspective. The brilliant defense of the German weak positions against a numerically superior Soviet attacker provides an interesting parallel to the current situation faced by NATO units in Central Europe. *Auftragstaktik* should serve well as a foundation from which the U.S. Army can develop a coherent command and control philosophy that complements the AirLand battle doctrine.

C.1

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This thesis allowed me to delve deeply into an area of study which interests me a great deal. Through fortuitous circumstances I was able to write a monograph which was not only fun and challenging, but hopefully also of some value to my profession.

I would like to thank the many people who were vital in my endeavor. Colonel Russel H. S. Stolfi, USMCR, Ret., my thesis advisor, gave me much more of his time than I had a right to. His guidance gave focus to my disorganized ideas. It has been a singular pleasure to study under so eminent a warrior and historian.

Dr. Donald Abenheim provided guidance in research as well as invaluable assistance in checking my translations. Dean Charles Burdick of San Jose State University provided the National Archives War Records which were the foundation of my research. His interest in my work was a real morale boost. Colonel David Glanz of the Soviet Studies Institute at Fort Leavenworth provided very detailed maps on which I based mine.

The maps, as well as the rest of this thesis, were prepared on a Macintosh computer. Major Thomas Brown provided vital assistance with the computer work. Mister Bill Thompson, of the Department of Operations Research, spent many hours computerizing the maps, for which I am grateful.

Lastly, I would like to thank my curriculum, which allowed me to pursue a subject for study which is outside the envelope of topics normally pursued by its students.

## A NOTE ON SOURCES

Many of the sources for this paper are not available in English. *General der Panzertruppe* Hermann Balck's *Ordnung im Chaos*, from which I have taken my title, presents his experiences as a soldier from a historically interesting viewpoint with a cunning wit that makes the autobiography very readable. It would be worthwhile for this valuable work to be translated into English. For those who read German, I recommend it highly.

The war records, which were the backbone of my research, were taken from Germany at the end of the war and were photofilmed by the U.S. National Archives. Since then, the originals have been returned to the Federal Republic. Many of the documents are written records of radio messages, copied down by the radio operator as he received the call. They are often written in the old German script which, combined with the field conditions near Stalingrad in the winter of 1942 and the adrenaline of the moment, made them quite difficult to decipher. In most cases these records are quite complete and offer a vast sea of information for anyone willing to make the effort to use them. San Jose State University holds several hundred rolls of these microfilms, including the ones used in this thesis. The National Archives, of course, holds the complete collection, which, however cannot be borrowed and must be either used in their facilities or purchased. A very detailed directory for this collection of war papers makes their use relatively easy. The directory consists of about 80 volumes and is titled Guide to German Records Microfilmed at Alexandria, VA. Copies of the directory exist at San Jose State University library, the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution, and Peace, at Stanford University, as well as at Ft. Leavenworth.



## I. INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Army's AirLand battle doctrine firmly establishes maneuver theory as the basis of how we fight. This combat style makes use of the mobility afforded by our weapons systems and demands flexibility in their employment, within a framework of effective command and control.<sup>1</sup> The German Army of the Third Reich fought in this manner. Germany's great military successes were due neither to superiority in technology nor overpowering advantage in number of soldiers or weapons. The disastrous results of attrition warfare on the western front in the previous war, coupled with the new mobility afforded the battlefield through the introduction of motorized machines that were unhindered by the machine gun or barbed wire, led the German Army (hereafter "*Heer*") to readopt a doctrine based on mobility. This doctrine, which has come to be labeled "*Blitzkrieg*", goes hand in hand with a command and control style now referred to as "*Auftragstaktik*". Some consider the German style of command and control even more important to their superiority than the powers of organization of the German General Staff.<sup>2</sup>

Currently the Army lacks a "coherent philosophy with regard to command and control."<sup>3</sup> "[*Auftragstaktik*] appears to be the key to the effective implementation of manoeuvre theory as explained in FM 100-5...no other command technique

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<sup>1</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-5 Operations, 1986, 12.

<sup>2</sup>For example Richard E. Simpkin, Race to the Swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century Warfare (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985), 29.

<sup>3</sup>Charles G. Suttan Jr, "Command and Control at the Operational Level," Parameters, vol. XVI, no. 4, 20.



offers the speed and precision of response to match the tempo of the manoeuvre warfare of the future.”<sup>4</sup>

A study of how the *Heer* executed command and control should provide insight into how this activity was done by an army that successfully employed maneuver theory. Such a general presentation would set the stage for an in-depth analysis of the orders and messages of a self-contained German unit--the 11th Panzer Division (under *Generalmajor* Hermann Balck)--during the Chir river battles in December 1942. These documents would allow a glimpse at the command and control techniques used by a master of the German conduct of war. The *Heer's* experience in Russia, especially once the strategic initiative was lost, is particularly relevant, because it closely approximates some of the current conditions faced by NATO forces in Central Europe. Against a numerically superior enemy, Balck's division fought a brilliant series of “fire brigade” actions to block strong Soviet forces. Further, the Chir river defensive battles are relatively well known among U.S. Army officers, and *General der Panzertruppe*<sup>5</sup> Balck's brilliance as a commander has likewise been recognized. This analysis may provide some insights towards developing a “coherent command and control philosophy” for the U.S. Army.

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<sup>4</sup>Richard E. Simpkin, “Command from the Bottom,” *Infantry*, vol. 75, no. 2, March-April 1985, 34. Simpkin uses the term “directive control” as his translation of “*Auftragstaktik*”.

<sup>5</sup>This was the highest rank achieved by Balck and was equivalent to a U.S. Army three-star general.

## II. AUFTRAGSTAKTIK

### A. HISTORY

The term, *Auftragstaktik*, was coined only after the last war, giving a name to a concept that had existed in the German military for many decades.<sup>6</sup> Its translation from the German is difficult; the most widely quoted equivalent is “mission-type orders”. This system of giving subordinates extensive latitude appears to have been first introduced to Germans when Hessians fought as mercenaries for King George III during the American Revolutionary War. The commander of the elite Hessian Jäger Corps, a Captain Ewald, published his experiences in America after his return to Germany. The tactics he described reflected his belief that “...when properly led and afforded freedom of action, soldiers acting as individuals and in small groups consistently produced astonishingly positive results.”<sup>7</sup> The Prussian defeat at Jena in 1806 reinforced the need for a new approach. Ewald’s concept was picked up by the Prussians; Scharnhorst and Gneisenau continued to expand this idea.<sup>8</sup> In 1860, Prince Frederick of Prussia wrote: “...an unusual desire for freedom from above and a desire for responsibility, unlike any other army, has developed [in the Prussian Army].... We allow...the ingenuity of the individual full

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<sup>6</sup>John T. Nelsen II, “Auftragstaktik: A Case for Decentralized Battle,” *Parameters*, Sep 87, 21.

<sup>7</sup>John M. Vermillion, “Tactical Implications of the Adoption of Auftragstaktik for Command and Control on the AirLand Battlefield,” Master’s Thesis for the School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2 December 1985, 4.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

measure, hold the reins more loosely, and support every success....”<sup>9</sup> This concept of command and control was central in the wars of 1866 and 1870. During the Königgrätz campaign Moltke demanded that each soldier made use of his initiative. If a leader was unsure whether to intervene in the battle, or to follow his initial, now conflicting orders, Moltke recommended in most cases the former, as the opportunity for a tactical victory overshadows all other considerations.<sup>10</sup> The 1888 *Exerzierreglement für die Infanterie* (Drill Instructions for Infantry) called for a higher headquarters to issue orders only when necessary, to allow subordinates more initiative.<sup>11</sup> By 1914, these methods had been absorbed to the lowest levels of the German army.<sup>12</sup> The position warfare of the western front tended to stifle the initiative of the individual, but the application of this command style bore fruit during the *Michael* campaign in the spring of 1918.

Lessons from the allied employment of tanks in World War I did not go unheeded in Germany after 1918. This weapon offered the technical key to breaking out of the positional warfare dictated by the machine gun and barbed wire. Heinz Guderian took the lead in creating the modern German panzer force. While he was able to win over his superiors to employ the great mobility afforded by tanks, the French and British failed to realize their full potential. In his memoirs,

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<sup>9</sup>Dieter Ose, “Der ‘Auftrag’ - Eine deutsche militärische Tradition,” *Europäische Wehrkunde*, 6/82, p. 264. The quotation in German: “...ein ungewöhnlicher Sinn nach Unabhängigkeit von oben und ein auf sich nehmen der Verantwortlichkeit, wie in keiner anderen Armee, [sich] herangebildet zu haben.... Wir lassen...dem Ingenium des Einzelnen freien Lauf, treiben die Kunst laxer und unterstützen jeden Erfolg....” Translation is the author’s.

<sup>10</sup>Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, *Deutsche Militärgeschichte in sechs Bänden, 1648-1939*, Band 6, Abschnitt IX, *Grundzüge der militärischen Kriegsführung 1648-1939*, (München: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, 1983), 384.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 428.

<sup>12</sup>Vermillion, 5.

*Generaloberst* Guderian notes: "Position warfare controlled the minds [of the French and British] despite the new panzer weapon, which to a large degree afforded our opponents their victory in 1918."<sup>13</sup> Note that Germany attacked France with about 2200 battle tanks, versus the 4800 tanks on French soil (part of which belonged to the British Expeditionary Force).<sup>14</sup> These 2200 battle tanks were employed under a concept of maneuver warfare which allowed Germany to "fight outnumbered and win". This is precisely the goal of our AirLand battle doctrine. *Auftragstaktik* is a recognized concept in the Bundeswehr. However, the torch for its application has passed to the U.S. Army. British Brigadier Richard Simpkin :

With the last of the Wehrmacht-trained officers gone, the Federal Government Army [Bundeswehr], condemned by its government to a doctrine of positional defence, seems to have lost the Prussian spark of creativity.... It is to the "Reformist" movement in the U.S. Army that one must look for innovation. FM 100-5 Operations, promulgating a switch from attrition theory to manoeuvre theory, is a very good start.<sup>15</sup>

## B. THE CONCEPT

*Auftragstaktik* is a "broad concept...embracing aspects of...a theory of the nature of war, character and leadership traits, tactics, command and control,

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<sup>13</sup>Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen Eines Soldaten*, 4th ed., (Heidelberg: Kurt Vorwinkel Verlag, 1950), 84. The quotation in German: "Der Stellungskrieg beherrschte die Gehirne trotz der neuen Panzerwaffe, der die Gegner ihren Sieg vom Jahre 1918 größtenteils verdankten." Translation is the author's.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 84. A figure of 2574 tanks for the Germans was calculated by R. H. S. Stolfi, "Equipment for Victory in France," in *History*, Vol. LV, February 1970, 10. This figure also appears in Guderian, 429. Guderian claims 135 of the 2574 were "*Befehlswagen*", command vehicles which appeared to be normal tanks on the outside, complete with false wooden gun tubes, but which were internally reconfigured for their special purpose. The widespread use of these special command vehicles ( 5% of the tanks in the attack on France were "*Befehlswagen*" and thus had no main gun) demonstrates the emphasis the *Heer* placed on proper command and control of its forces. In effect, the German Army gave up 5% of its armor fire power in trade for more effective command and control on the battlefield.

<sup>15</sup>Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, 18.



senior-subordinate relationships, and training and education. It...[is] a comprehensive approach to warfighting.”<sup>16</sup> The common translation of *Auftragstaktik* as “mission-type orders” is unfortunate, because it focuses attention on paragraph 2 of the operations order, whereas the focus is really on paragraphs 3a (Concept of the Operation) and 3b (Coordinating Instructions).<sup>17</sup> *Auftragstaktik* emphasizes the commander’s intent, which gives the subordinate a base from which to make his own decisions, so that they are in harmony with the overall plan. “The German army used mission statements...in the form of the commander’s intent.... The commander then assigned tasks (*Aufträge*) to subordinate units to carry out his and his superior’s intent. The subordinate commander decided upon a specific course of action which became his resolution (*Entschluss*).”<sup>18</sup>

*Auftragstaktik* “explains basic principles of giving orders for operations.”<sup>19</sup> *Generalleutnant* Heinz Gaedcke, Chief of Staff to *General der Panzertruppe* Balck when he commanded Sixth Army in Hungary in 1944, and himself a Corps commander in the Bundeswehr, remarked:

[*Auftragstaktik*] was more than a method of giving orders, actually more akin to a habit of thought.... Usually the commander would provide only a single statement about the operation...the job of working out the details was left wholly to the subordinate commander without supervision.... It was simply taken for granted that everyone would exercise initiative to get the mission accomplished.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Nelsen, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Simpkin, 228.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel J. Hughes, “Abuses of German Military History,” *Military Review*, Dec 86, 67-68.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>20</sup> Battelle Columbus Laboratories, “Translation of Taped Conversation with Lieutenant General Heinz Gaedcke, 12 April 1979,” November 1979, p 5. Hereafter referred to as “Gaedcke”.

To foster this kind of individual initiative was a major goal of the soldiers' and officers' education.

Through all of an officer's education and training, the individual's decision was honored, and if wrong, corrected without condemnation. To do otherwise would have stilted initiative...officers who completed the military schools found it unnecessary to receive detailed specifics from higher headquarters in orders and directives.... Their thinking was not limited to specified doctrine or techniques but had more to do with a professional devotion to fulfilling the commander's intentions.<sup>21</sup>

In short, the officer corps was taught how to think, not necessarily what to think.<sup>22</sup> Generals Balck and von Mellenthin, during a wargaming session with high ranking U.S. Army officers in 1980, stated that they "considered the individuality of the German fighting man--his freedom to take initiative and the system which engendered these policies and attributes--to be the key to superlative German performance."<sup>23</sup> They agreed that a higher commander rarely if ever reproached a subordinate if he showed initiative. Much better to make a good decision now, than to spend considerable time to find the best possible solution or, worse, to wait for more accurate information before taking action. This attitude extended down through the ranks, to the individual soldier. In a situation when contact with the higher commander was lost, the subordinate could be counted on to take the action he thought appropriate, rather than to stop and wait until contact was reestablished. This aggressive attitude allowed units to take advantage of local successes. In short, "...nothing laid down from above in advance is sacrosanct. A subordinate

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<sup>21</sup>Richard F. Timmons, "Lessons from the Past for NATO," Parameters, vol. XIV, no. 3, 7.

<sup>22</sup>Hughes, 10.

<sup>23</sup>BDM Corporation, "Generals Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics: Implications for NATO Military Doctrine," December 19, 1980, pp 16-17. Hereafter "Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics".

commander...is justified...in modifying or even changing the task assigned him” as long as his action supports the higher commander’s intent.<sup>24</sup>

### C. ORDERS

Orders in combat at the division level were normally given verbally, either by telephone or, if possible, in person. Later, when the pace had slowed down somewhat, a written copy of these orders would be prepared for the unit diary. *General der Panzertruppe* Balck even went so far as to forbid the use of written orders in his division, including his largest and most important operations orders<sup>25</sup>, except to complete the diary. The more formal process for developing orders used in peacetime would be much too slow.<sup>26</sup> The thorough education of the officers referred to earlier also ensured that they all thought along the same general lines. This went far in reducing the length of the orders, since details did not have to be mentioned. Officers also tend to get to know each other better, the longer they work together, especially in combat. *Generalmajor* von Mellenthin: “Commanders and subordinates start to understand each other during war. The better they know each other, the shorter and less detailed the orders can be.”<sup>27</sup> Von Mellenthin stated that in Russia he and Balck usually allowed themselves only about 5 minutes in which to decide how to deploy their division for the next battle.<sup>28</sup> On the Eastern Front, a

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<sup>24</sup>Simpkin, “Command from the Bottom,” 35.

<sup>25</sup>Battelle Columbus Laboratories, “Translation of Taped Conversation with General Hermann Balck, 13 April 1979,” July 1979, pp 25-26.

<sup>26</sup>Gaedcke, 38.

<sup>27</sup>Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics, 22.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 25.

division often received its orders for the next day around 2200 hours. By midnight, the order had been analyzed, translated into regimental objectives, and dispatched.<sup>29</sup>

#### D. STAFFS

Divisional staffs were small, compared to today's standards. There were no deputy commanders or chiefs of staff. All these positions, as well as that of operations officer, were combined in the *Ia*<sup>30</sup>, who was normally a captain or major of the General Staff.<sup>31</sup> The other General Staff officer was the *Ic*, responsible for intelligence. A divisional staff, including drivers, clerks, radio-telephone operators, etc., came to about 50 soldiers. "The less there were, the less aggravation."<sup>32</sup> *General der Panzertruppe Otto von Knobelsdorff's* staff, when he commanded the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps in late 1942, consisted of a total of 12 officers.<sup>33</sup>

Germans of Wehrmacht vintage see this as essential to the proper exercise of [*Auftragstaktik*]. ...an operational level headquarters should have only ten or a dozen officers, and a minimum of supporting personnel--this meaning a minimum, not the kind of circus that traipses around in the wake of American and British formation commanders.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Timmons, 9.

<sup>30</sup>The *Ia* is the senior, or first, general staff officer (*Erster Generalstabsoffizier*).

<sup>31</sup>Gaedcke, 1.

<sup>32</sup>Battelle Columbus Laboratories, "Translation of Taped Conversation with General Hermann Balck, 13 April 1979," July 1979, p 26.

<sup>33</sup>1984 Art of War Symposium - From the Don to the Dnepr: Soviet Offensive Operations, December 1942 - August 1943, Transcript of Proceedings of 26-30 March 1984, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Center for Land Warfare, U.S. Army War College, October 1985), 100.

<sup>34</sup>Simpkin, Race to the Swift, 261.



The commander and his key staff worked as a team; a small headquarters helped to foster the team spirit. The decision makers were normally the commander, *Ia*, and *Ic*. The decision process generally was quick, without much detail or staff analysis, although the underlying staff work and planning was both competent and detailed.<sup>35</sup> A system of reliefs among staff officers was not used. Instead, the staff officers were stretched to the breaking point.<sup>36</sup> This practice helped hold down the size of the staff and ensured continuity. *Generalleutnant* Gaedcke describes his experience as a divisional *Ia* during World War II:

My division commander and I would sit together in a half-track vehicle with the map on our laps, [and] exchange opinions...then we'd scribble down our instructions, give them to the driver next to us, and he'd pass the orders along to a couple of radio operators in the back of our vehicle.

Now [post WWII] we've built the division staff into a little city with operations centers, communications centers, and whatnot--with everything now in formal writing and transmitted by teletype machines.

The daily command briefing--with 10 to 15 experts ranging from weather to religion--simply didn't exist in World War II. The *Ia* (or Chief of Staff) would go with his papers to the commander, who was perhaps at his cot or his morning coffee; the verbal report would be delivered quickly. There was no huge theater required.

There are lots of disadvantages to [today's] huge staffs. You get far too many vehicles which are too hard to move and that attract the attention of enemy aircraft. The whole apparatus becomes sluggish and slow. All of that needs to have the fat thoroughly trimmed away one of these days.<sup>37</sup>

These comments are not only humorous, but relevant. *Generalleutnant* Gaedcke served as *Ia* and chief of staff up to the army level during World War II and later also served as a Corps commander in the Bundeswehr.

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<sup>35</sup>Timmons, 8.

<sup>36</sup>Simpkin, Race to the Swift, 239.

<sup>37</sup>Gaedcke, 37-38.

## E. COMMANDER

The commander could not lead his forces from the rear, which included his command post. As often as possible, he would move forward to the regimental or even battalion lines. *General der Panzertruppe* Hasso-Eccard von Manteuffel:

The place of all commanders of armour up to the divisional commander is *on* the battlefield, and within this wherever they have the best view of the terrain and good communications with the hard core of the tanks. I was always located where I could see and hear what was going on “in front”, that is, near the enemy, and around myself--namely at the focal point. Nothing and nobody can replace a personal impression.<sup>38</sup>

*Generalfeldmarschall* Erich von Manstein describes how he and his chief of staff operated:

... the Chief of Staff had to stay behind [at] the command post to deal with the work and telephone calls, I spent the days, and often part of the nights, out on the road. I usually left early in the morning, after receiving the dawn situation reports and issuing any orders that were necessary, to visit divisions and forward troops. At noon I would return to the command post for a while and then go out to visit another division, for as often as not it is just around eventide that success beckons or a fresh impetus is needed.... Such flexible leadership on my part was, of course, possible only because I was able to take a wireless vehicle along with me on these trips....<sup>39</sup>

As chief of staff to *General der Panzertruppe* Balck, *Generalmajor* von Mellenthin made it a point to visit the front every two or three days, while Balck would man the desk at the command post.<sup>40</sup> The chief of staff would in this way have up-to-date personal experience of conditions at the front, which was imperative, since he often made tactical decisions.

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<sup>38</sup>Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, 234-235, quoting *General der Panzertruppe* Manteuffel.

<sup>39</sup>Field-Marshal Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories*, ed. and trans. Anthony G. Powell, with a foreword by Captain B. H. Liddell Hart, introduction by Martin Blumenson, (Chicago: H. Regency Co., 1958; repr., Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 191-192.

<sup>40</sup>Balck and von Mellenthin on Tactics, 22.

The commander would often locate himself at the anticipated crux (*Schwerpunkt*). Here his personal presence not only provided a boost to morale, but allowed the most talented and experienced man to be in place to make the most critical decision at the decisive point quickly.<sup>41</sup> He could sense the situation for himself rather than get it second hand.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Richard E. Simpkin, "Command from the Bottom," *Infantry*, vol. 75, no. 2, Mar-Apr 1985, 34-37.

<sup>42</sup>Simpkin, *Race to the Swift*, 226.

### III. THE CHIR RIVER BATTLE

#### A. BACKGROUND

Operation *Barbarossa* burst onto the Soviet Union in the early morning hours of 22 June 1941. The Wehrmacht had all but won the war within the first two months, only to throw the victory away through fatal mistakes in strategic direction at the highest level. But during the summer of 1941 enormous successes by the Wehrmacht established “...a psychological ascendancy over the Soviets that continued to the end of the war. This German sense of superiority and the parallel efficiency of German tactics and operations are fundamental for an understanding of the German defensive successes on the Chir River later in the war.”<sup>43</sup>

The Chir river is a tributary of the Don. Near their confluence the Chir river battles occurred in December of 1942. *Generaloberst* Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth Army, at Stalingrad, only 25 miles east of the closest German forces along the Chir river<sup>44</sup>, had been pinched off from the rest of the German forces. Seven Soviet armies contained the Sixth Army within the pocket.<sup>45</sup> *Generalfeldmarschall* von Manstein had just been named commander-in-chief of the newly formed (27 Nov 42) Army Group Don, which included the Sixth Army, Fourth Panzer Army, Army Detachment *Hollidt*, as well as allied forces in that area. The relief of Sixth

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<sup>43</sup>Russel H. S. Stolfi, “The Chir River Battles,” Counterattack, April 1988, 2.

<sup>44</sup>Major General Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin, Panzer Battles: A Study of the Employment of Armor in the Second World War, ed. L.C.F. Turner, trans. H. Betzler, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 173.

<sup>45</sup>Stolfi, 1.

Army was Manstein's foremost task.<sup>46</sup> Fourth Panzer Army launched a drive from the south while Army Detachment *Hollidt* (including Balck's 11th Panzer Division) was to attack toward Stalingrad from the west. But before the attack got under way, the Soviets struck first, attacking the Chir river positions, forcing that portion of the relief operation to be delayed; it was never executed. The attack by units of the Soviet 5th Tank Army along the lower Chir river fell against the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps, *General der Panzertruppe* von Knobelsdorff commanding. The Corps consisted of the 336th Infantry Division, the 11th Panzer Division, and, as of about 9 Dec 42, the 7th Luftwaffe Field Division.<sup>47</sup> The actions of *Generalmajor* Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division, starting with the response of the division to a Soviet attack on 7 December, will be analyzed in depth.

### 1. 11th Panzer Division

Formed in the autumn of 1940, the division first saw action in the Balkans, participating in the capture of Belgrade. The division took part in Operation *Barbarossa* as part of *Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South. It fought in Byelorussia and the Ukraine for 17 months. The division was an experienced combat unit. In the month prior to the Chir river battles, the division had been in combat with partisans near Roslavl in Byelorussia. On 25 November 1942, it started to move by train to Millerovo, a distance of several hundred miles. Here the unit came under command of Army Group Don,

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<sup>46</sup>von Manstein, 311.

<sup>47</sup>Stolfi, 38.



and road marched to its assembly area southwest of Morosovskaya, in preparation for an attack to relieve Sixth Army at Stalingrad.<sup>48</sup>

## 2 *Generalmajor* Balck

*Generalmajor* Hermann Balck took command of the 11th Panzer Division on 12 May 1942. Balck served as a highly decorated infantryman in World War I, joining the cavalry in 1923. He commanded a bicycle battalion in 1935, and became involved with the development of motorized and later Panzer units.<sup>49</sup> Balck commanded the spearhead motorized rifle regiment of the 1st Panzer Division of *Generaloberst* Guderian's Corps during the campaign in France, May-June 1940. For his actions here Balck received the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.<sup>50</sup> In the Balkans, he participated as commander of *Panzerregiment 3*<sup>51</sup>, 2nd Panzer Division, in Yugoslavia and Greece. Prior to his promotion to Division commander, Balck served six months with the German Army High Command (OKH) as chief of mobile troops.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>National Archives Microfilm Publication T315, Records of German Field Commands: Divisions, Kriegstagebuch Nr.6 der 11. Panzer Div.Führungs-Abtlg., Einsatz Rußland, in der Zeit vom 1. 11. 1942 bis 31. 12. 1942, roll 594. Hereafter citations from this source will appear as "Kriegstagebuch" followed by the date of the entry. All translations from this source are the author's.

<sup>49</sup>Hermann Balck, *General der Panzertruppe*, a. D., Ordnung im Chaos: Erinnerungen 1893-1948, 2nd ed., Soldatenschicksale des 20. Jahrhundert als Geschichtsquelle, vol.2, ed. Dermot Bradley, (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1981), 677. Hereafter cited as "Balck". All translations from this source are the author's.

<sup>50</sup>Guderian, 89-97 passim.

<sup>51</sup>This regiment was equipped with tanks, having been a cavalry unit (*Reiterregiment 12*) in earlier days.

<sup>52</sup>*General der Schnellen Truppen beim Oberkommando des Heeres.*

## B. 6 DECEMBER

At midnight, 5 to 6 December, the 11th Pz.Div. was placed under command of the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps. Throughout the 6th and 7th, the division's subordinate units arrived in the area, completing their lengthy move from the Roslavl area.<sup>53</sup> Pz.Rgt.15 (the division's only tank regiment), Pz.Art.Rgt.119 (the division's artillery regiment), and some combat support units closed on the 6th. The division's other combat units, including two Panzer Grenadier Regiments (Pz.G.R.110 and 111) and the *Kradschützen Bataillon*<sup>54</sup> (K.61), did not arrive until the afternoon of the 7th.<sup>55</sup> Commanders arrived on the 6th as part of the advance party.

## C. THE FIRST DAY - 7 DECEMBER

### 1. General Overview

The 336th Infantry Division was in position generally along the west bank of the Chir, facing elements of the Soviet 5th Tank Army. South of the 336th, *Gruppe Adam*, a collection of various 6th Army rear echelon units which had not been encircled at Stalingrad, held a small bridgehead across the Chir. North of the 336th, *Alarmeinheiten*<sup>56</sup> protected the division's left flank. Here the Soviets had established positions across the Chir. On 6 December, as the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps prepared the attack to relieve Stalingrad, the Soviets broke through these

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<sup>53</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 6 Dec 42.

<sup>54</sup>This was a battalion of motorcycles with side cars. Most of its cycles had not survived the severe conditions, so the battalion used trucks as transport.

<sup>55</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 6 & 7 Dec 42.

<sup>56</sup>These *Alarmeinheiten* were ad hoc units thrown together using rear echelon troops and soldiers returning from home leave.

*Alarmeinheiten* and drove their 1st Tank Corps behind the German front lines to Sovchos (state collective farm) 79. To aid the 336th, units of the 11th Panzer were thrown into action as they arrived in the area.

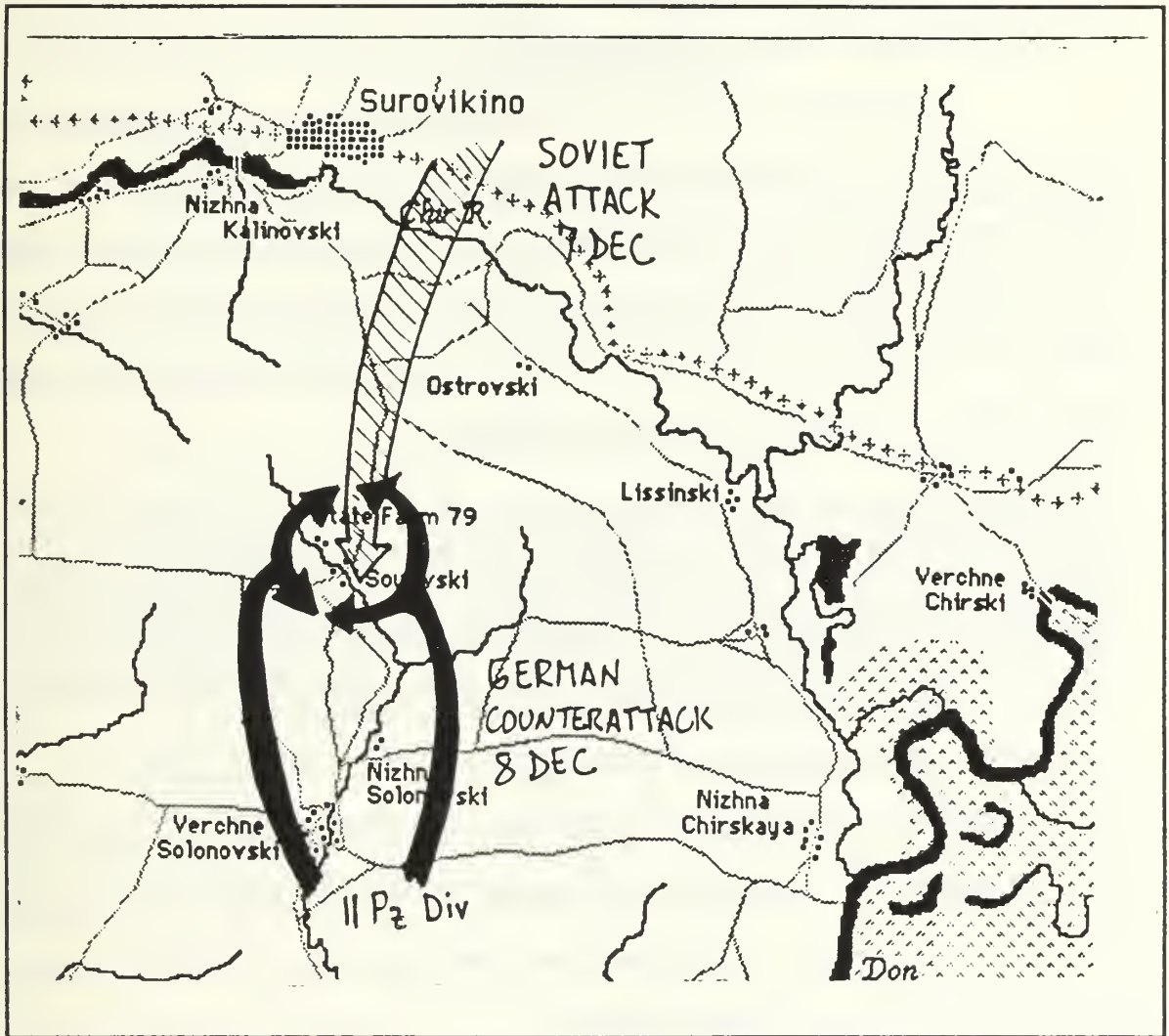


Figure 1. 11th Panzer Division Counterattack at Sovchos 79 7 - 8 Dec 1942

## 2. First Hand Accounts

*Generalmajor* Balck described these events in his autobiography, *Ordnung im Chaos*. *Generalmajor* Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin wrote about the Chir river battles in Panzer Battles.

### a. *Oberst i. G. von Mellenthin*<sup>57</sup>

As chief of staff of the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps, *Generalmajor* (at this time Colonel) von Mellenthin was a major orchestrator of corps actions. He presents an interesting view of these battles. A portion of his information came from records provided by *Generalmajor* Balck, as he acknowledges in Panzer Battles. Balck himself presented the battles from a different perspective in his autobiography. Von Mellenthin notes the following:

The 336th Division had taken up positions on the Chir by 6 December. General Balck was reconnoitering his sector in preparation for the move on Stalingrad. ...on 7 December the Russian 1st Armored [Tank] Corps forced its way over the Chir on the left flank of the 336th Division and swept forward to the settlement of Sowchos 79, far in rear of our [XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps] defensive positions on the river bank. The units of the 11th Panzer Division were still making their way up from Rostov; they were ordered to move immediately...and restore the situation.<sup>58</sup>

*Generalmajor* Balck was tasked to throw the Soviets out of Sovchos 79. He moved his headquarters along side that of the 336th Infantry Division. The infantry wanted Balck to make a frontal attack; this decision he protested because the terrain was unsuitable; furthermore, he wanted not simply to push the Soviets back across the Chir, but to destroy them.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>*im Generalstab* (of the General Staff).

<sup>58</sup>von Mellenthin, 176-77.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 177.



## *b. Generalmajor Hermann Balck*

7 Dec. Ahead of us the 336th Division, *Generalmajor* Walter Lucht commanding, had arrived at the Chir and taken up positions there. As I was reconnoitering along the Chir, I heard the bad news that the Soviets had broken through the *Alarmeinheiten* and stood deep in the left flank of the 336th. I immediately drove to Verchne Solonovski where the 336th command post was located. He [Lucht] impressed me as calm and pleasant. I set up my command post next to his, which was contrary to doctrine, but which the following days proved to be superior.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. Original Source Materials

These documents are principally the war diary of the Operations Section of the 11th Panzer Division and the diary's various supporting documents, which run the gamut from formal, typed operations orders, through teletype messages, to hand written copies of radio calls.

0700 7 Dec 42 - The division commander presented his plan to his subordinate commanders, followed by a ground reconnaissance by the leaders in preparation for launching the relief action towards Stalingrad. Meanwhile, Soviet forces had penetrated the weak blocking positions north of the 336th Infantry Division. This development threatened the infantry's left flank.<sup>61</sup>

0900 7 Dec 42 - Corps warning order was received at the 11th Pz.Div. command post: "Enemy tanks from vicinity Soyevski have broken through towards the southwest. Prepare Pz.Rgt.15 for possible counterattack."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Balck, 399. "7.12. Noch vor uns war am Tschir die 336. Div. unter General Lucht eingetroffen und am Flusse eingesetzt. Als ich am Tschir erkundete, kam die Hiobsbotschaft, daß die Russen durch die Alarmeinheiten durchgebrochen seien und in der tiefen linken Flanke der 336. Division ständen. Ich fuhr sofort nach Warchne-Solonowski, wo der Stab der 336. lag. Er machte einen ruhigen, angenehmen Eindruck. Ich schlug meinen Gefechtsstand neben ihm auf, was zwar gegen die Regel war, aber sich in diesen Tagen geradezu hervorragend bewährte."

<sup>61</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 7 Dec 42.

<sup>62</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 7 Dec 42.



0915 7 Dec 42 - 11th Pz.Div. passed warning order to Pz.Rgt.15. "Enemy with 50 tanks broken through left flank of 336th Inf.Div. Make regiment ready to move immediately. Order to follow."<sup>63</sup> The *Ia* was not at the command post, although that was his normal location. Rather than wait for a more senior officer to take action, a first lieutenant (*Oberleutnant*) sent out this order.<sup>64</sup>

0925 7 Dec 42 - Corps telephonic order received by 11th Pz. Div.:

Enemy tanks from area vicinity Soyevski<sup>65</sup> attacking direction southwest with lead elements at Sovchos (state collective farm) 79.

11th Pz.Div. hastily attacks, in cooperation with 336th Inf.Div., with Pz.Rgt.15 from Verchne Solonovski to the north, throws enemy back across Chir river. [This is a frontal attack].

Send liaison officer to 336th Inf.Div. immediately. Haste imperative!<sup>66</sup>

0930 7 Dec 42 - Division passed order to Pz.Rgt.15. Again, signed by our *Oberleutnant*.

1125 7 Dec 42 - A new order from Corps now called for the destruction of the enemy units south of the Chir, as opposed to "throwing them back across

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<sup>63</sup>National Archives Microfilm Publication T315, Records of German Field Commands: Divisions, Kriegstagebuch Nr.6 der 11. Panzer Div.Führungs-Abtlg., Einsatz Rußland, Anlegband Nr. 2 v. 1.12. 1942 bis 15. 12. 1942, roll 595, frame 29. Hereafter citations from this source will appear as "Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2" followed by the frame number.

<sup>64</sup>It is possible that the command post was in radio contact with the Div. Cdr. and the *Ia*.

<sup>65</sup>The name of this town is unclear. It is given as both Ssulaszki and Ssavinski in German documents. In any case, it appears that the small settlement near Sovchos 79, which is labeled "Soyevski" on the accompanying maps, is being referred to.

<sup>66</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 30.

Chir River,” as ordered earlier. Pz.Rgt.15 is subordinated (operational control, or OPCON) to the 336th Inf.Div. for this action.<sup>67</sup>

*Oberst* Graf Schimmelmann, commanding Pz.Rgt.15, informed the Division command post per written message (at 1235) that his 3rd Bn had started to move at 0930. This was only 15 minutes after his regiment had received the warning order!<sup>68</sup>

1205 7 Dec 42 - The situation continued to deteriorate. The 336th was unable to stop the enemy advance, even though augmented with Pz.Rgt.15. The entire 11th Pz.Div. was now given the mission to stop the enemy’s advance. The remaining units of the division (Artillery, Engineer, and FLAK<sup>69</sup>) joined the attack at 1300.<sup>70</sup>

By 1700, 7 December 1942, the situation looked like this: the counter-attack against the Soviet bridgehead was coming along nicely on the right flank. On the left, the enemy had managed to reach Sovchos 79. His attack had stopped at dusk. The location of friendly forward units was not entirely clear. To keep the enemy from advancing further, streets south and southwest out of Sovchos 79 were blocked by 11th Panzer Division units.<sup>71</sup> A new corps order was received at 1850. It ordered the division to attack and take Sovchos 79 the following morning. Throughout the evening, radio contact was established with the various elements of the division. The division order for the destruction of the enemy units had been

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<sup>67</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 33.

<sup>68</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, Frame 34.

<sup>69</sup>Air defense artillery (*FLiegerAbwehrKanone*)

<sup>70</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 7 Dec 42.

<sup>71</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 7 Dec 42.

sent to the units of the 11th Panzer. Unfortunately, a copy of this order is not in the records. It was passed along by radio, messenger (written form), and verbally, most likely by Balck himself. The units moved into position during the night, without being detected by the Soviets.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4. Analysis

The 11th Pz.Div. was caught totally by surprise when it was ordered into combat. Most of the combat units had not yet completed their movement from the railhead. The commanders were planning the upcoming offensive operation against the Soviet forces surrounding 6th Army at Stalingrad.

The Corps warning order was passed to Pz.Rgt.15 in 15 minutes. Only a very junior officer was at the command post (CP); both the division commander (who usually is not at the CP) and the *Ia*, who usually is, were absent. The *Oberleutnant* passed the order along immediately, and the 15th Panzer Regiment responded, without any bickering or questioning of the order of so junior an officer. It is quite possible that radio contact between the Div. Cdr., the CP, and Pz.Rgt.15 existed, but this does not diminish the importance of the mutual trust and “eagerness to take charge”<sup>73</sup> demonstrated by this action.

It was not usual for a corps order to specify which of the division’s units would be employed to accomplish a given mission. In this case, however, the only combat element available to the 11th Pz.Div. was Pz.Rgt.15; the other three combat units (P.G.Rgts. 110 and 111 and K.61) were still en route from the railhead.

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<sup>72</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 7 Dec 42.

<sup>73</sup>The appropriate German term is *Verantwortungsfreude*, which does not translate easily into English.

Between 0925 and 1125, the corps order was fundamentally changed. This corroborates von Mellenthin's description of the battle (which he based in large part on documents provided him by Balck). Balck realized the seriousness of the situation. He saw that the planned attack to save the Sixth Army must wait, but he was not happy with the Corps order. He claimed that the direction of the attack was across ground unsuitable for tanks. Further, he was not interested in just throwing the enemy back across the Chir. If the situation was dire enough to delay the important relief operation of Stalingrad, the goal must be to destroy the enemy!<sup>74</sup> The new Corps order (1725) reflected Balck's assessment.

*Generalmajor* von Mellenthin, at the 1984 Art of War Symposium, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, pointed out: "It was a very simple order, 'to destroy the enemy.' We did not say how -- from the front or rear. That was left to the commander to decide what he had to do. We did not care about these details."<sup>75</sup>

The first of *Oberst* Schimmelmann's battalions was on the move only 15 minutes after receiving the warning order. Schimmelmann himself was most likely with the rest of the commanders at the terrain reconnaissance; the execution of this order thus fell to a more junior officer. Without the senior officers on hand, a totally unexpected emergency situation was handled fluidly. Once Balck had a chance to study the situation in a little more detail, he chose to work with the corps headquarters to change the mission more to his liking. What characterized the German style was that the word was passed quickly and units were dispatched without waiting for detailed orders. Those would come in good time. This method of operation

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<sup>74</sup>von Mellenthin, 177.

<sup>75</sup>1984 Art of War Symposium, 102.



was similar to that of a fire brigade. The immediate need was to get the fire trucks rolling; the plan for their employment could be developed on the road.

Thirty minutes after the corps had ordered the 336th Division, in concert with Pz.Rgt.15, to destroy the enemy tanks, the order was changed once again. This change appeared to be a reaction by the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps to a decision made by Generals Lucht and Balck. But rather than causing a great deal of confusion, which such changes to orders must create, this order substantiated the decision reached by the two division commanders. The commander's intent was to destroy the enemy, how that was to be accomplished can be judged best by those closer to the action.

Balck's decision to collocate the two divisional command posts indicated that he recognized the gravity of the situation. Only a commander with great confidence in his own abilities would take such decisive action so totally contrary to doctrine.

The division was committed into action piecemeal, something that Balck would only do in an absolute emergency. As the other combat elements arrived during the afternoon, they were ordered to join the attack. Little actual contact between the enemy and the 11th Pz. Div. seems to have occurred on the 7th. Pz.Rgt.15 was the only one to report any engagement results -- one KW1 destroyed and one damaged.<sup>76</sup> As the various units moved into position to stop the further advance of the Soviets, the enemy settled into Sovchos 79 as darkness fell on the battlefield.

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<sup>76</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frames 43-44.



## D. THE BATTLE OF SOVCHOS 79 - 8 DECEMBER

### 1. General Overview

While the enemy's 50 tanks slept, the various elements of the 11th Pz.Div. moved into place around Sovchos 79. By morning (8 December) the division was deployed for a concentric attack; the Soviet 1st Tank Corps was surrounded at Sovchos 79. The Germans struck just as the Soviets started to move, on their way to turn the flank of the 336th. The battle lasted 7 hours. The Soviet 1st Tank Corps did not survive the day.

While Balck concentrated on the enemy at Sovchos 79, the Soviets brought more, previously uncommitted forces to bear on the 336th. The situation was deteriorating. Soviet tanks were flooding through the gap between the *Alarmeinheiten* and the 336th's left flank, pressuring that weak flank. Pz.Rgt.15 had to be pulled from the Sovchos 79 battle, leaving the Panzer Grenadiers to finish off the Russians there while the tanks came to the aid of the infantry.<sup>77</sup>

### 2. First Hand Accounts

#### a. *Generalmajor Hermann Balck*

On the 8th everything is ready for the attack. It is imperative to be at the decisive point an hour before the Russians. A rule which brought us success almost every day. Unfortunately the situation was so critical that a proper assembly of the division was not possible.

To protect the 336th Inf.Div., I [Balck] erected an obstacle composed of FLAK, engineer, and PAK<sup>78</sup> units. The Russian plan for the following morning [8 Dec] was obvious: turn the 336th's flank. When the Russian formed up in the morning, we were in place. He did not suspect our presence. [*Oberst*] Graf Schimmelmann, the trusty commander of Pz.Rgt.15, struck him in the back, with [P.G.]Rgt. 111 following, at the very moment when he[the enemy] started to move east on his attack. First a

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<sup>77</sup>*Kriegstagebuch*, 8 Dec 42. At 0903 Pz.Rgt.15 send a message to the division, stating that it has passed the battle [at Sovchos 79] off to P.G.Rgt. 111, and that it was moving to make contact with the [left] flank of the 336th. (*Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2*, frame 69).

<sup>78</sup>Anti-tank guns (*PanzerAbwehrKanone*)

long convoy of motorized infantry fell prey, then the mass of the Russian tanks, which themselves were attacking the 336th Division. Regiment 110 came up and I committed it to Sovchos 79, where we spotted numerous additional Russian tanks in the valley. These had been cut off from their support elements. One could see tanks, trucks, and Russian soldiers, who were running about nervously.

As evening fell, the 1st Russian Tank Corps has ceased to exist. 53 shot up Soviet tanks were strewn across the steppe.<sup>79</sup>

### 3. Original Source Materials

The attack began at 0430 with P.G.Rgt.111, followed by Pz.Rgt.15 at 0445, and P.G.Rgt.110 at 0520.<sup>80</sup> At 0625 the division *Ia* sent a radio message to Pz.Rgt.15 informing it that 40 enemy tanks were attacking from the east. The regiment was ordered to counterattack immediately.<sup>81</sup> At 0700 the tank regiment reported sighting an enemy truck convoy to division operations.<sup>82</sup> As the Soviet forces located at Sovchos 79 started moving to strike the 336th in its flank, Schimmelmänn's Pz.Rgt.15 attacked the enemy rear. The tank regiment was now heavily

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<sup>79</sup>Balck, 399-401. "Am 8.12. war alles zum Angriff bereit. Es kam darauf an, eine Stunde früher als der Russe am entscheidenden Punkt zu sein. Eine Regel, mit der wir von nun ab fast täglich Erfolg hatten. Leider war die Lage so kritisch, daß ich eine Versammlung der Division nicht abwarten konnte.

Zum Schutze der 336. Div. hatte ich einen Riegel aus Flak, Pionieren und Pak eingesetzt. Was der Russe am nächsten Morgen tat, lag auf der Hand. Aufrollen der 336. Div.. Als der Russe am Morgen antrat, waren wir zur Stelle. Unsere Anwesenheit ahnte er nicht. Graf Schimmelmänn, der bewährte Kdr. des Panzerregiments 15 stieß ihm - gefolgt vom Regiment 111, in dem Augenblick in den Rücken, als er zum Stoß nach Osten ansetzte. Zuerst mußte eine lange Kolonne motorisierter Infanterie dran glauben, dann die Masse der russischen Panzer, die im Angriff auf die 336. Division waren. Das herankommende Regiment 110 setzte ich auf den Sowchos 79 an, wo man weitere zahlreiche russische Panzer im Talkessel sah, die von ihren Verbindungen abgeschnitten waren. Man sah Panzer, LKW und nervös hin- und herlaufende Russen.

Als sich der Abend senkte, hatte das I. russische Panzerkorps zu bestehen aufgehört. 53 Russenpanzer lagen zerschossen auf der Steppe."

<sup>80</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 8 Dec 42.

<sup>81</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 54.

<sup>82</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 61.

engaged with the enemy at Sovchos 79. Once the Soviets discovered that they were surrounded at Sovchos 79, they attempted to break out in several directions.<sup>83</sup>

Meanwhile, the enemy brought more tanks through the gap along the left flank of the 336th Inf. Div. That front started to stagger, causing the 336th to request an immediate counterattack by Pz.Rgt.15. The third battalion of Pz.Rgt.15 was diverted to help shore up the 336th. But the Panzer battalion was out of ammunition, having expended it all earlier in the morning, so the second battalion took the mission.<sup>84</sup> At 0955 Pz.Rgt.15 reported; “Hole [the enemy had apparently succeeded in forcing a break in the ring around Sovchos 79] as good as closed. Request immediate advance of [P.G.Rgt.] 110, to free tanks for attack to the south.”<sup>85</sup>

Written copies of a series of radio messages between the division command post and the various subordinate commands reveals that the battle was raging throughout most of the day. All messages were simple; a few words sufficed. Uncharacteristically, the division command post momentarily lost its composure. Unsure of the situation along the 336th’s threatened flank, it sent this query to Pz.Rgt.15: “Situation vicinity height 161 [the threatened flank] unclear. Where Pz.Rgt.? Answer immediately.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 8 Dec 42.

<sup>84</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 8 Dec 42.

<sup>85</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 80.

<sup>86</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 90. “Lage bei 161 höhe unklar[?]. Wo Pz.Rgt. Sofort antwort.”

By midday more logistics problems plagued the tank regiment. “Attack proceeding eastward with half the regiment, due to lack of fuel. By the way, 20 [enemy] tanks destroyed.”<sup>87</sup>

By 1425, Sovchos 79 was taken. The rest of the division’s units were now committed to reestablish the 336th Infantry Division left flank.<sup>88</sup>

In its daily summation report to the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps, the division closed the report with its intentions for the following day. “Intention for 9 December--penetration to Chir. Clean up of pocket.” Reference to a pocket concerns the forces still threatening the 336th Inf. Div.’s left flank.<sup>89</sup>

A representative radio message was sent by *Kradschützen* (motorcycle) Battalion 61, which was assigned the mission of division reserve. The message was sent at 1500, received by the division command post at 1533, and reviewed by the *Ia*, Major Kienitz, at 1542. “Reached location as ordered. Enemy in sight. Contact with 111[P.G.Rgt.] established.”<sup>90</sup>

#### 4. Analysis

Note here how Balck took the initiative, even though his division had been sent into battle piecemeal. Twenty-four hours previously he had been totally surprised by the Soviet attack; he was on a terrain walk with his regimental

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<sup>87</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 93. “Angriff nach Osten und mit halbem Regt., da Treibstoffmangel. Leidlich 20 Panzer abgeschossen.”

<sup>88</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 8 Dec 42.

<sup>89</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 105. “Absicht 9.12. Durchstoß zum Tschir. Säubern des Kessels.”

<sup>90</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 106. “Befohlener Standort erreicht. Feind in Sicht. Verbindung mit 111 hergestellt.”



commanders in preparation for the relief of Stalingrad. Now he controlled the battle. The Soviets at Sovchos 79 were forced to react to him.

Today we would say that Balck had “moved inside the enemy’s decision cycle.” These terms, and more importantly, that line of thought did not exist with Balck. But the same result, taking the initiative from an opponent, was achieved by aggressive, decisive action. In this desperate battle, the 11th Panzer Division had to destroy the enemy to survive. Balck did this most effectively, superbly orchestrating the tactical skills of his troops. He moved faster and hit harder than his foe. In this way he replaced, at the tactical level, defensive with offensive, reaction with proaction, defeat with victory. This ability to win tactical victories by taking the initiative from the attacking enemy is what makes the study of these battles so interesting and relevant today.

By being able to move and respond quickly, the tanks multiplied their combat value on the battlefield. Once the enemy’s strength at Sovchos 79 had been broken, the battle was carried on by the mechanized infantry, allowing the tanks to turn about and attack the next crisis point. That the tanks started to run out of ammunition and fuel attests to the tough fighting as well as to the difficulties of logistics support in battle.

Messages and orders recorded in the records are uniformly short and precise. They provide the division command post with sufficient information to do its job. Note that the command post did not interfere much with the conduct of the battle, the exception on this day being the diversion of forces to aid the collapsing left flank of the 336th Infantry Division. Otherwise, the regimental commanders fought their battles. Although no mention is made of Balck’s actions on this day, it is safe to assume that he was located at the *Schwerpunkt* (crux), where he could most effectively influence the battle. Most communications among the division’s



leaders were undoubtedly done using radio or physically, face to face. There is no written record of these contacts, but they should have mirrored those that are available for study--brief and to the point.

*Major* Kienitz, the division *Ia*, informed his higher headquarters of his unit's intentions for the next day. *Generalmajor* Balck used this technique to provide the corps with what he thought was the best course of action from his viewpoint. Balck describes his routine with his *Ia*:

As far as command and control goes, this is how I worked with my General Staff Officer [*Ia*]. The latter would stay in a fixed place along with the staff, a place set off a ways from the fighting, where he maintained contact with higher and flanking units, directed reinforcements forward, etc. I commanded up front by radio or through face-to-face orders, where I was mobile and would position myself at the current focal point and could move my flag quickly.<sup>91</sup>

## E. THE ATROCITY AT SOVCHOS 79

Mention is made of this atrocity not so much to analyze command and control technique as to demonstrate the gravity of the situation for the Germans. The purpose is not to imply that Soviet troops should be expected to act in this manner in the future. Atrocities occur in the forces of "civilized" as well as more "primitive" societies.

The supply trains of the 336th Infantry Division were located at Sovchos 79 when the Red Army attacked the settlement on 7 December. When German forces recaptured Sovchos 79 the following day, a gruesome event was discovered:

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<sup>91</sup>Balck, 381. "Führungsmäßig hatte ich mich mit meinem Generalstabsoffizier wie folgt eingespielt. Letzterer blieb mit dem Stab an einem festen Platz, der etwas vom Kampfgeschehen abgesetzt war, hielt Verbindung nach oben und mit den Seiten, dirigierte Verstärkungen usw. nach vorne. Ich führte vorne beweglich mit Funk oder durch persönlichen Befehl, wobei ich mich stets am jeweiligen Brennpunkt befinden und meinen Standpunkt schnell wechseln konnte."

By the hundreds, our brave soldiers' bodies lay around, beastily murdered. At dawn they had been surprised by the Russians and were smashed.

The situation became crystal clear. It was a matter of existence or nonexistence. Could we protect our homeland, despite our overextended situation and the uncountable Russian masses? We hoped and believed that we could.<sup>92</sup>

Balck addressed his troops on this matter by issuing an order of the day, something he did only rarely. Another item mentioned in this order to his troops concerned a statement made by a Soviet POW, a Sergeant Kurilko, of the 157th Tank Brigade:

At a briefing shortly before the 19th of November 1942 (the Brigade was in preparation for its attack on the 3rd Rumanian Army), at which both the brigade and battalion commanders were present, two Rumanians were presented, apparently turncoats. The soldiers at the briefing were told that these were Rumanians, whom it was permitted to capture. German prisoners were not acceptable. Rumanians were not to be shot in front of Germans; shooting Germans in front of Rumanians was all right.<sup>93</sup>

The results of this mind set was the massacre of German soldiers at Sovchos 79. Balck closed this order of the day with these words:

Mates! The last few days of hard fighting showed once again: this is a matter of existence or nonexistence of our people. If you should lose your courage for a few hours, if you should become weak in these bitter fights, think always of this: the Anglo-

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<sup>92</sup>Balck, 401. "Zu Hunderten lagen unsere braven Leute bestialisch ermordet herum. Sie waren im Morgengrauen von den Russen überrascht und zerschlagen worden.

Ein Blitzstrahl erleuchtete die Lage. Es ging um Sein oder Nichtsein. Konnten wir angesichts unserer überspannten Lage und der unermesslichen russischen Masse die Heimat schützen. Wir glaubten und hofften ja."

<sup>93</sup>Balck, 401-2. "Bei einer Versammlung kurz vor dem 19.11.1942 (Bereitstellung der Brigade zum Angriff auf die 3. rumänische Armee), bei der Brigade- und Abt. [Abteilung] Kommandeur anwesend waren, wurden zwei Rumänen vorgeführt, die angeblich übergelaufen waren. Es wurde den versammelten Soldaten dabei erklärt, dies wären Rumänen und die durfte man gefangen nehmen. Deutsche Gefangene dürften sie nicht machen. Rumänen dürften sie nicht vor den Augen der Deutschen erschießen, wohl aber Deutsche vor den Augen der Rumänen."

This interrogation was documented by the divisional *Ic*, who forwarded the report to the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Korps as a matter dealing with the violation of the Geneva Convention. Balck's citation appears to stem from this source. See Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 122.

American eruptions of hatred, the watchwords [the above-described attitude concerning German prisoners] of the 157th Russian Tank Brigade, and the gruesome spectacle at Sovchos 79, showed us without a doubt what kind of fate was awaiting us, should we fail to achieve victory in this battle.<sup>94</sup>

## F. 9 - 17 DECEMBER

### 1. General Overview

On 10 December, *Generaloberst* Hermann Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army launched its attack to relieve Sixth Army at Stalingrad. Meanwhile, the fighting along the Chir river continued in the same general pattern established in the first days of the battle. The 11th Panzer Division was called upon again and again to "put out the fire" somewhere along the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps front.

A specific battle which is representative of the actions during this period started the evening of 11 December. Word came from Corps HQ that the enemy had broken through the front of the 336th Infantry Division, this time at both Nizhna Kalinovski and Lissinski simultaneously. The 11th Pz.Div. at the time was reducing the Soviet bridgehead at Ostrovski, which by this time was small enough to no longer be considered an immediate threat, but which had not been completely cleared.<sup>95</sup> The events of the 12th of December are analyzed in detail below as representative of this time period.

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<sup>94</sup>Balck, 402. "Kameraden! Die hinter uns liegenden harten Kampftage zeigen uns von neuem: Es geht um Sein oder Nichtsein unseres Volkes. Wenn Ihr einmal für Stunden den Mut verliert, wenn Ihr in den verbitterten Kämpfen einmal schwach werden solltet, denkt immer daran: die englisch-amerikanischen Haßausbrüche, die Parolen der 157. russ. Pz. Brigade und der grausige Anblick der Sowchos 79 zeigen uns eindeutig, wenn wir diesen Kampf nicht siegreich bestehen, was für ein Schicksal unserer harrt."

For the record copy of this *Tagesbefehl*, see Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frames 136 & 137.

<sup>95</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 11 Dec 42.

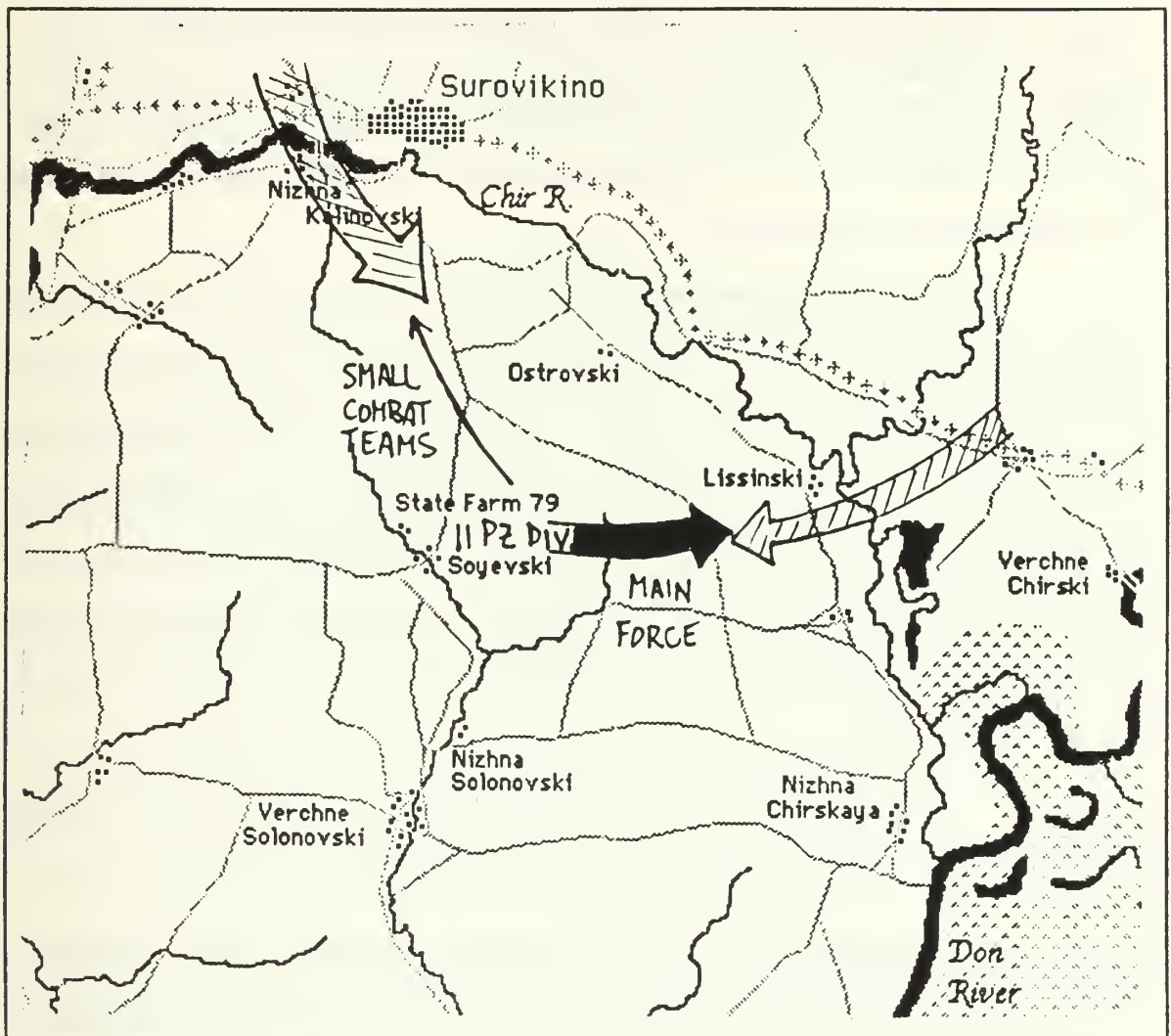


Figure 2. 11th Panzer Division Counterattack Along Chir River 12 Dec 1942

## 2. First Hand Accounts

### a. *Generalmajor Hermann Balck*

*Generalmajor* Balck remembers these days as follows:

From 9 to 17 December one day was like the other. Russian breakthrough at point X--attack--by evening everything was cleared up. As "reward" a message of another deep enemy breakthrough 20km due east at some *Alarmeinheit*. Turn around. Tanks, infantry, and artillery drove through the winter night, headlights full on. By dawn they stood at the Russian's most vulnerable spot, attacked with surprise,



crushing him, only to play the same “game” the following morning, somewhere 10 or 20 km to the west or east.<sup>96</sup>

However, the losses of the division were not too high, because it always had the momentum of surprise on its side. A familiar refrain in the division during these days was “Night marches save blood.”<sup>97</sup>

It was during these days that *General der Panzertruppe* Hoth’s Fourth Panzer Army was scoring its early successes in its attempt to relieve the trapped Sixth Army at Stalingrad. “The greater the enemy forces which we brought onto ourselves, the easier would be the task of the Fourth Panzer Army. The daily anxious question was ‘Is the Fifth Tank Army (our opponent) still here, or has he marched to fight Hoth?’ Then when we received a message that tanks had broken through [the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps’ front lines], the reaction was, ‘Thank God, they are still here.’”<sup>98</sup>

Of special interest is Balck’s description of the command style between himself and his second-in-command, *Major* Kienitz:

A unique command style had developed. The general staff officer, the brilliant *Major* Kienitz, stayed in place a little ways back [at the command post] and kept in contact with God and the world, and with me, by wireless. I was mobile and positioned myself at the focal point. Often I was at each regiment several times a day. Evenings, still out on the battlefield, I would make my decisions for the following day. I discussed my plan with Kienitz, via telephone, drove back to each regiment, and

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<sup>96</sup>Balck, 403. “Vom 9. - 17. Dezember verlief ein Tag wie der andere. Russeneinbruch bei X--Angriff--abends war alles bereinigt. Dafür Meldung 20km ostwärts weiterer tiefer Einbruch bei irgendeiner Alarmeinheit. Kehrt. Aufgeblendet führen Panzer, Schützen und Artillerie durch die Winternacht, standen im Morgengrauen an der für den Russen empfindlichster Stelle, fielen überraschend über ihn her, zerschlugen ihn, um am nächsten Morgen dasselbe Spiel 10 oder 20 km weiter west- oder östlich zu wiederholen.”

<sup>97</sup>Balck, 403.

<sup>98</sup>Balck, 403. “Je mehr Kräfte wir auf uns zogen, um so leichter würde die Aufgabe der 4. Pz. Armee. Ist die 5. Pz. Armee, unser Gegner, noch da oder zu Hoth abmaschiert, war die tägliche bange Frage. Kam dann die Meldung: Panzerdurchbruch bei X, so war die Reaktion: Gott sei Dank, sie sind noch hier.”



personally gave the orders for the next day. Then I returned to the command post, and spoke on the phone with the chief of staff of the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps, *Oberst* von Mellenthin. If Knobelsdorff, the CG<sup>99</sup>, agreed, the regiments would receive a short acknowledgment: "No Changes". If changes were necessary, I would visit all the regiments once more that night. There were no misunderstandings. By daybreak I was back at the decisive place.<sup>100</sup>

*b. Oberst i. G. von Mellenthin*

Between the 9th and the 13th, the 11th Pz.Div. was kept busy reducing Soviet bridgeheads. On 11 December the Panzers had to be used repeatedly to restore the front. By evening, the enemy had broken through the line at two places: Lissinski and Nizhna Kalinovski, 22km apart. Balck decided to go for the enemy at Lissinski.<sup>101</sup> "This decision was dictated by Balck's appreciation that the front of the 336th Division was the pivot and the shield for the operations of the 11th Panzer, and that this front had to hold at all costs."<sup>102</sup> The 336th's mission of holding the line allowed the 11th to dash back and forth across the Corps area of operations. In this way it could achieve local superiority over the enemy. Should the 336th fail to hold back the tide of the Russian attackers, the Panzer Division would eventually become fully committed on the line, thereby losing its operational mobility.

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<sup>99</sup>Commanding General [of the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps]

<sup>100</sup>Balck, 403-4. "Der Generalstabsoffizier, der brillante Major Kienitz, saß ortsfest etwas rückwärts und hielt Verbindung mit Gott und aller Welt und mit mir durch Funk. Ich war beweglich und war im Brennpunkt. Meist mehrmals täglich bei jedem Regiment. Draußen faßte ich abends den Entschluß für den kommenden Tag. Sprach mich telefonisch mit Kienitz aus, fuhr zu jedem Regiment und gab ihm persönlich den Befehl für den kommenden Tag. Fuhr zurück. Sprach telefonisch mit dem Chef des Stabes des XXXXVIII. Pz. Korps, Oberst von Mellenthin. War Knobelsdorff, der K.G., einverstanden, erhielten die Regimenter den kurzen Bescheid: keine Änderungen. Waren solche nötig, fuhr ich nachts selber noch mal alle Regimenter ab. Mißverständnisse gab es nicht. Bei Tagesanbruch war ich dann wieder am entscheidenden Punkt."

<sup>101</sup>Mellenthin, 178.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 178.

### 3. Original Source Materials

The command post received word at 1100, 11 December, that the enemy had broken through at Nizhna Kalinovski, with infantry and tanks. The word of the breakthrough in the 336th Inf.Div.'s line, at Lissinski, reached the CP later in the evening. The 11th Pz.Div. had been fighting to reduce the Soviet bridgehead at Ostrovski and its success there made a major enemy attack at that point impossible for the time being. The break of the line at Lissinski was the more unpleasant of the developments. That evening the Division commander recommended to the Commanding General of XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps that primary emphasis for the attack be placed there. The plan was agreed to, and Balck personally delivered the attack orders to his subordinate commanders.<sup>103</sup>

At 0445, 12 December, Pz.Rgt.15 reported that it was on the move for the attack.<sup>104</sup> The attacks were bloody and costly; the first Battalion of Pz.G.Rgt.110 lost two of its company commanders.<sup>105</sup> Fighting was fierce, especially around Nizhna Kalinovski. At 1040, the division sent this cryptic message to Pz.Rgt.15: "Attack immediately."<sup>106</sup> Other, equally terse messages are registered in the records, such as: "fga-fga-fga" (feind greift an--enemy is attacking) and "[Enemy] tanks in the village". At 1400 stragglers were reporting 19 Red tanks in Surovikino.<sup>107</sup> The line appeared to be faltering. The Russians were making a

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<sup>103</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 11 Dec 42.

<sup>104</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 341.

<sup>105</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 12 Dec 42.

<sup>106</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frame 362.

<sup>107</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frames 379, 382, 383.

major effort to force a bridgehead at Surovikino by a flanking attack on Lissinski, aiming for Sovchos 79, and from Nizhna Kalinovski eastward.<sup>108</sup>

In the war diary, 11th Pz. Div. reported that in its area of operation, the situation improved markedly through especially mobile, swift, and violent actions of small combat teams. For instance, three tanks were sent to bolster up *Kampfgruppe* Selle, an *Alarmeinheit* holding the line at Surovikino. The tanks had a very positive effect on the defense in that area.<sup>109</sup>

That evening, a corps teletype message called for an attack, with the primary goal of regaining control of the western bank of the Chir, so that the infantry could reestablish its position.<sup>110</sup> The 11th Pz. Div. saw its mission for the next day to be to finally clean up the situation at Surovikino and Kalinovski, thus setting up an attack on Ostrovski for the following day.<sup>111</sup> Orders to that effect went out to the various units of the division. Copies of these orders are in the records.

Not surprisingly, the quality of the 11th Pz. Div.'s operations diary starts to suffer as this grueling tempo of battle continued. Entries on the 7th of December, the first day of action for the division at the Chir river, tend to be more exact, often listing the time that the action occurred. Contrast this with the log for the 11th of December. These entries appear to be more a recapitulation of the day's activities. They are less precise in stating the exact time of each action, nor does the log now present a record of each event as it occurred, but rather a summary of the

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<sup>108</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 12 Dec 42.

<sup>109</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 12 Dec 42. The three tanks were a tank company. See Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frames 414-415, daily summary (*Tagesmeldung*) of 12 December 1942 from the 11th Pz. Div. to XXXXVIII Pz. Corps.

<sup>110</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlegband Nr. 2, frames 400-403.

<sup>111</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 12 Dec 42.

actions. Still, these logs are generally of excellent quality, especially when considering the extreme conditions under which they were written.

#### 4. Analysis

During this period of heavy and almost continuous fighting, the 11th Pz.Div. established a routine, of sorts. The commander spent the day on the battlefield. In the evening, after conferring with his operations officer, he made his decisions for the following day. Balck then visited all his lower commanders and personally gave the orders for the next day. In this way, his subordinates could begin to plan for the next day, although they knew that these orders had not yet been discussed with the Corps, and were therefore subject to change.

Balck seems to have had a very good “track record” of calling the right plays. Usually, his plans were approved. This in itself is indicative of the command and control style used by the *Heer*. *Generalmajor* Balck was closer to the action than was the Corps commander and thus had a better feel of the situation. Of course, he was not aware of the larger picture to the degree that the Corps commander was. But close contact between the command posts at the two HQ minimized the discrepancy. Balck’s *Ia*, in turn, kept him informed of the situation as he learned it from the higher command.

The command and control process, then, worked in this way. The command post, under the *Ia*, kept abreast of the location and status of the division’s units, as well as staying in close contact with higher headquarters. The information coming into the command post was digested by the operations officer and used to coordinate the battle. The commander would stay on the battlefield where he could see and feel the actual situation. The operations officer briefed the commander on the current situation within his division as well as the larger picture based on his contact with the Corps headquarters. This allowed the commander to compare the



information about his unit as he experienced it on the ground with that reported to him by his *Ia*. In this way discrepancies could be identified and resolved; reality could be separated from fiction. This went a long way to reducing the fog of war. The division commander was also informed of the Corps situation, in particularly the Corps commander's intent. Having been in the battle lines, the division commander knew the state of his units and the actual situation of his division *from his own experience*. By keeping up with the overall situation through his operations officer, he could usually anticipate the next move. He also was an extremely important asset to the Corps commander, who could count on him to have a very realistic picture of the battle and the capabilities of his troops. Thus, the Corps commander would place great weight on the Division commander's proposals, and usually accept them if they were in line with the Corps orders and intent.

The tanks worked as the "fire brigade" of the Corps, racing from one end of the Corps sector to the other, combating Soviet units which had managed to break through the line. Since relatively little fighting occurred at night, the enemy situation at dusk tended to be about the same the following morning.<sup>112</sup> The Germans could analyze the situation that evening and then move through the night, to be at the right place the following morning.

This kind of situation could be faced by NATO troops in the next war. Local breakthroughs by Warsaw Pact forces would require NATO's most mobile units to cover a large sector, racing back and forth to destroy local successes. Attack helicopters will play a significant role in this type of warfare. The command

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<sup>112</sup>Attacks started around 0500, at least two hours before sunrise at this latitude and time of year. This way the German units grabbed the initiative from the Red Army, which normally did not attack until an hour or so later.



and control techniques used so effectively by *Generalmajor* Balck's 11th Panzer Division provide a successful model.

## G. 18 - 19 DECEMBER

### 1. General Overview

Starting on the 15th of December, the 11th Pz.Div. was pulled out of the fight long enough to regroup in preparation for the next action: to take the bridge across the Don river at Verchne Chirski. As long as that bridge was in Soviet hands, it threatened the flank of *Generaloberst* Hoth's 4th Panzer Army's relief operation heading for Stalingrad. The top priority of Army Group Don, of which the 11th Panzer Division was a part, was still to save *Generaloberst* Paulus's Sixth Army. The 16th and 17th of December were days of relative rest for the division. The attack was planned for the early morning of the 18th. But in a pattern reminiscent of the preempted attack to support the relief of Stalingrad on the 7th of December, this attack likewise was cancelled shortly before it was to begin. The major attacks by the Soviets along the Chir river between Surovikino and Lissinski showed that the Russians were not turning east across the Don to attack the flank of Hoth's 4th Panzer Army. The plan to capture the bridge across the Don was therefore not as important and the 11th Pz.Div. could be diverted to counter these enemy attacks.<sup>113</sup>

The 11th Pz.Div. turned back towards the battlefields it had just left. The division took on the task of countering the Soviet attacks across the Chir at

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<sup>113</sup>Mellenthin, 181.

Ostrovski and Lissinski. An even more serious breakthrough at Nizhna Kalinovski late on the 18th of December forced the division to revert to its “fire brigade” role.

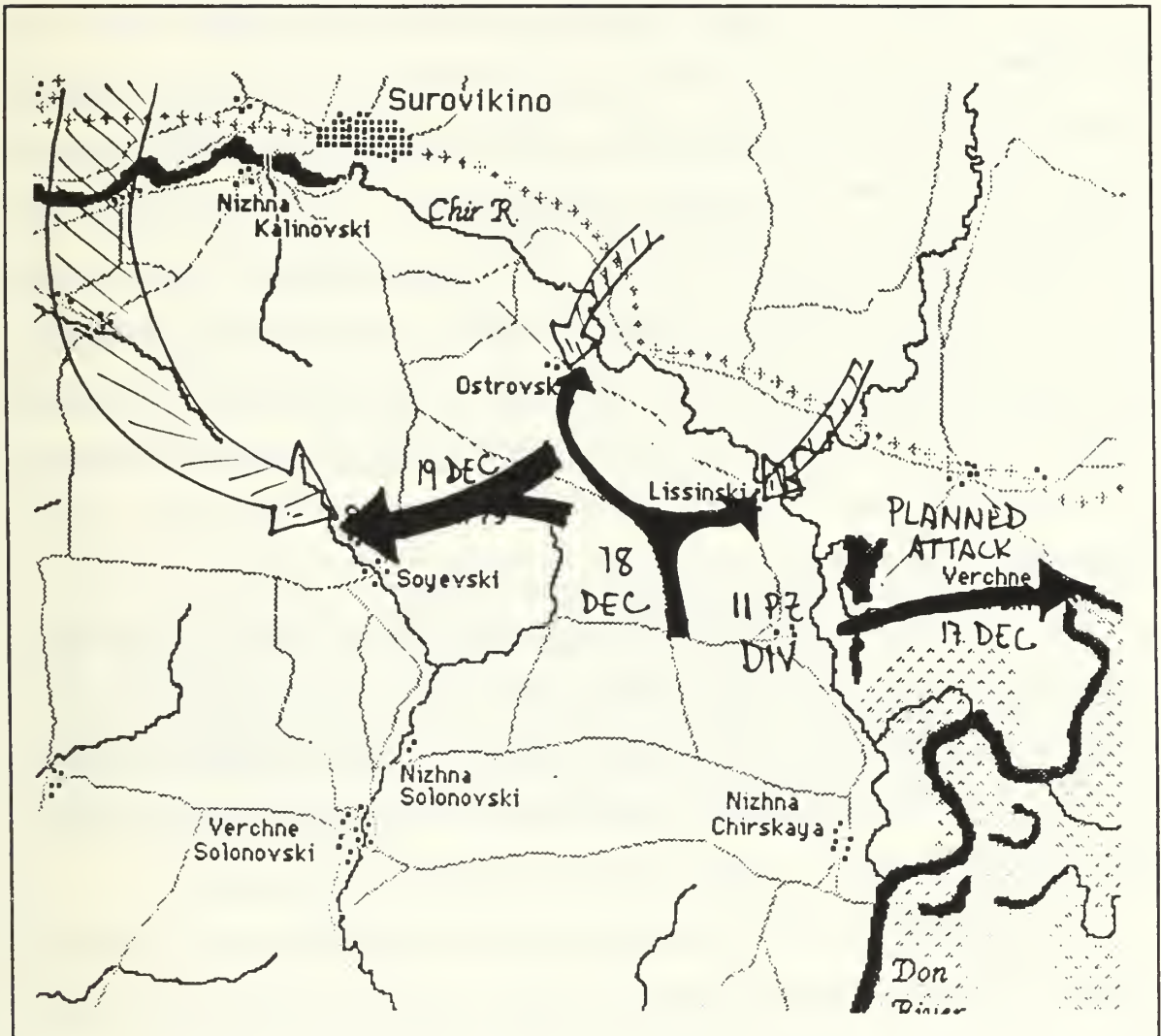


Figure 3. 11th Panzer Division Counterattack Along Chir River 18 - 19 Dec 1942

## 2. First Hand Accounts

### a. *Generalmajor Hermann Balck*

As the Division was cleaning up a deep Russian penetration [at Ostrovski and Lissinski] by swiftly counterattacking, the Corps ordered: “Stop attack. Deep penetration by Russians 20km further to the west [at Nizhna Kalinovski].” This was

in the evening and had become standard, so I [Balck] answered Mellenthin [XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps chief of staff]: “Fine, we’ll clean up here first and then deal with the next problem.” “No Sir, General, this time it’s more than ticklish, the 11th Pz.Div. must move immediately, every second is valuable.” “All right. Can do.”<sup>114</sup>

Balck goes on to describe the action. The attack currently under way was stopped, the vehicles were refueled and the troops fed, and then they dragged themselves 20km through the dark night. Units were in position at 0500 the next morning, 19 December, just in time to meet the Russians. The enemy vehicles were not deployed for battle, but in a convoy. They had not noticed the Germans and *Oberst* Graf Schimmelmann, commanding Pz.Rgt.15, held back his attack and permitted the Russians to continue. He sent a group of tanks to fall in behind the Soviets. The Russians did not realize that the tanks behind them were not their own. At the opportune time, the tanks of Pz.Rgt.15 destroyed 42 Russian tanks without taking a single casualty.<sup>115</sup>

These same 25 German Panzers then turned and met the second wave of enemy tanks. As the Red unit crested a height, momentarily exposing the soft belly of its tanks, Pz.Rgt.15 fired its guns, yielding 23 more Soviet tanks destroyed, for a total of 65, without taking a single loss. The accompanying infantry fled, their tanks were in flames. Another Russian Corps had ceased to exist.<sup>116</sup>

Balck was in the area and he took the opportunity to congratulate his soldiers. “A short while later [after the battle], among the still burning enemy

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<sup>114</sup>Balck, 403. “Als die Division im zügigen Angriff einen tiefen russischen Einbruch bereinigte, Befehl des Korps: Angriff abbrechen. Russe 20 km weiter westlich tief durch. Das war abends das übliche und ich antwortete Mellenthin: Schön, wir bereinigen erst hier und dann kommt das andere dran. Nein, Herr General, diesmal ist’s mehr als heikel, die 11. Pz. Div. muß sofort dorthin, jede Sekunde ist kostbar. Na schön. Machen wir.”

<sup>115</sup>Balck, 405.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid., 405.

tanks, I was able to thank these brave chaps. The stress of the last days was wiped away. Smiling faces appeared in the cupolas. This unit was truly unbeatable.”<sup>117</sup>

*b. Oberst i. G. von Mellenthin*

The chief of staff of the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps describes these events somewhat differently. According to von Mellenthin, *General der Panzertruppe* von Knobelsdorff, the Corps Commander, decided to send the 11th Pz.Div. to counter the Soviet breakthrough immediately, over a protesting Balck, who wanted to finish the battle he was currently fighting prior to moving west.<sup>118</sup> Still, von Mellenthin gives *Generalmajor* Balck credit for choosing to “set off immediately, march through the night, and fall on the enemy at dawn, at the very moment when the Russians would be preparing to move.”<sup>119</sup>

By 0500 on 19 December all preliminary moves had been carried out....the twenty-five tanks remaining to the regiment followed the Russian armor and in a few minutes had knocked out forty-two Russian tanks, before the latter realized that the tanks moving behind them as a second wave were German and not their own....On the other side of this height another line of tanks was seen moving in a similar way to the first one. Once again the German tanks...attacked the Russians from behind and destroyed them before they had time to realize what was happening. (Literally a case of being kicked in the pants!). Thus twenty-five German tanks destroyed sixty-five Russian tanks in the shortest possible time and without any loss to themselves.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 405. “Wenig später, noch mitten unter den brennenden Feindpanzern, konnte ich den tapferen Kerlen danken. Verwischt die Strapazen der letzten Tage. Frohe Gesichter sahen aus allen Türmen. Eine nicht zu schlagende Truppe.”

<sup>118</sup>von Mellenthin, 181.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 181.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 181-2.



### 3. Original Source Materials

#### *a. 18 December*

Although much happened on the 18th of December, the 11th Pz.Div.'s operations section's log book has less than a page of entries, as opposed to the normal three or so pages on a busy day. One reason may be that the fatigue of the long days of fighting was starting to impact on the staff. Although the division's fighting units had days of comparative rest on the 16th and 17th, this may not have slowed down the actions at the operations section, where planning for the now aborted offensive to take the Don river bridge was in progress. Further, the division command post repositioned on the morning of the 18th, to Verchne Solonovski.<sup>121</sup>

At 1600 on the 17th of December, a telephone call from the Corps HQ alerted the division that the attack of the Don river bridge was cancelled.<sup>122</sup> A liaison officer from the 336th Infantry Division reported to the command post of the 11th Pz.Div. by 1900, providing information about the current enemy situation. The adjutants of the various units of the 11th Panzer, which had reported to the division command post, were briefed on the situation and received the order for the counterattack.<sup>123</sup> The written order from the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps was sent by teletype and received by the division command post at 2300 on the 17th of December.<sup>124</sup> Here is an example of the way orders were passed quickly between

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<sup>121</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 18 Dec 42.

<sup>122</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 17 Dec 42.

<sup>123</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 17 Dec 42.

<sup>124</sup>National Archives Microfilm Publication T315, Records of German Field Commands: Divisions, Kriegstagebuch Nr.6 der 11. Panzer Div.Führungs-Abtlg., Einsatz Rußland, Anlageband



units. Even from the Corps to the Division headquarters, an important order would be passed initially by the fastest means available, usually telephone, and then followed up in writing later on.

Pz.Rgt.15 started to move at 0200 on the 18th of December.<sup>125</sup> Within two hours (at 0350) the tank regiment reported serious problems with icy roads. "Lots of tanks dropping out of road march. They are sliding off the road due to the icy conditions. Ten tanks lost up to now."<sup>126</sup> Later that morning Pz.Rgt.15 told the division that it would not reach its assigned position before 1000.<sup>127</sup> The loss, even temporarily, of ten tanks, was quite serious. In a status report to XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps on 16 December, the 11th Pz.Div. reported a total of 83 tanks on hand, of which 47 were mission ready, 21 required limited repairs, and 15 required extensive repairs.<sup>128</sup>

At 1425 the Corps ordered a halt to the counterattack. The division was to be disengaged from battle and collected at Sovchos 79.<sup>129</sup> At 1550 a radio

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Nr. 3 v. 16.12. 1942 - 25. 12. 1942, roll 595, frames 605 - 606. Hereafter citations from this source will appear as "Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3" followed by the frame number.

<sup>125</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 612.

<sup>126</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 621. "Sehr grosse Marschauftälle von Panzern durch Abrutschen durch Glatteis. Bisher 10 Panzer."

<sup>127</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 614. Note that this message was filed in front of the message cited above, although chronologically it follows this message by six hours. The reason is that the messages were filed as they were initialed by the *Ia*, Major Kienitz. The 0905 message was sent out by the regiment at 0905, received by the division at 0912, and initialed by the *Ia* at 0924. The 0350 message was sent out at 0350, received at 0355, but not initialed by the operations officer until 1040! Apparently, an error by the command post personnel kept this important first message about the poor road conditions from reaching the division operations officer in a timely manner.

<sup>128</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 590-591. The authorized strength of the 11th Panzer Division was 99 tanks. The division had only 2 of its authorized 3 tank battalions, the 3rd Battalion of Pz.Rgt.15 remained with Army Group Center in Roslavl. A Panzer Division with its full complement of tank battalions was authorized 150 tanks.

<sup>129</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 18 Dec 42.

message was sent to Pz.G.Rgt.110, ordering a halt to the attack, further orders to follow.<sup>130</sup>

In its daily activity report, as of 1826, 18 December, the 11th Pz.Div. reported, among other items, that “the enemy was not very active. Value of Russian infantry is marginal. Heavy Russian bomber and close air support activity. No support from own Luftwaffe.”<sup>131</sup> The same report gave a mission ready count for tanks as 29, down from 47 reported on the 16th.<sup>132</sup> Most, if not all, of these losses were temporary, inflicted by the icy road conditions.

*b. 19 December*

The written order from Corps, instructing the division to assemble at Sovchos 79, was sent out at 1900 on 18 December, by teletype. The attack was to start at 0500 the next morning, 19 December. The entire corps artillery was subordinated to the 11th Pz.Div. for this attack.<sup>133</sup> Spot reports started to arrive at the division command post at 0637, when Pz.Rgt.15 reported an enemy convoy with tanks.<sup>134</sup> At 0650, Pz.G.Rgt.110 reported a strong enemy of 50 tanks, infantry, and artillery, forming up to move south.<sup>135</sup> By 0710, Pz.G.Rgt.110 was engaged in

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<sup>130</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 633.

<sup>131</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 642. “Feind wenig activ. Kampfwert der russ. Infanterie gering. Stärkere russ. Bomben- und Schlachtfliegertätigkeit. Keine Unterstützung durch eigene Luftwaffe.”

<sup>132</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 642.

<sup>133</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 646-647.

<sup>134</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 661.

<sup>135</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 664. This message is interesting also in that it gives the time of the sighting as 0630, the time of its transmission as 0640, and the time of receipt at division as 0650. Thus, this spot report took 20 minutes to travel from the unit in the field to the divisional command post.

battle with enemy tanks.<sup>136</sup> By 0715, Pz.Rgt.15 had also spotted 24 enemy tanks moving south.<sup>137</sup> A spot report from Pz.Art.Reg.119, the division's artillery regiment, noted 24 enemy tanks, and 2 - 3 enemy battalions moving south.

Pz.Art.Reg.119 reported a serious shortage of ammunition at 0735, 19 December. "At battalion RICHTER serious munitions shortage, due to no ammo trucks. Urgent resupply by convoy requested."<sup>138</sup> Half an hour later, at 0805, the artillery regiment reported only 30 minutes of ammunition left.<sup>139</sup>

By 0750, the second battalion of Pz.Rgt.15 had engaged enemy tanks from the rear. Several enemy tanks were reported destroyed, but no count was given at this time.<sup>140</sup> Shortly thereafter, at 0842, the first indication of a major victory is received at the division command post. The panzer regiment reported that "over half of the enemy tanks destroyed. No friendly losses."<sup>141</sup> Then, at 0859, more precise information arrived at the division: "25 enemy tanks destroyed. 2 friendly tanks lightly damaged."<sup>142</sup>

In the early afternoon (1315), enemy tanks attacked Pz.G.Reg.110. Pz.Rgt.15 informed the division that its second battalion, the same one that attacked

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<sup>136</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 669.

<sup>137</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 2, frame 670.

<sup>138</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 674. "Bei Abt. RICHTER grosser Muni-Mangel, da keine Muni-Wagen. Eilige Zuführung durch Kolonne erbeten."

<sup>139</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 677.

<sup>140</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 675. "II/Pz.15 hat mit vordersten Teilen feindl. Panzer erreicht bei 148,8 von hinten. Einzelne vernichtete Panzer z. Zt. gemeldet."

<sup>141</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 683. "Über die Hälfte der Feindpanzer vernichtet. Kein eigener Ausfall."

<sup>142</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 688.

the enemy's rear earlier that day, was moving to counterattack. Almost simultaneously, at 1325, Pz.G.Rgt.110 radioed the command post that it was in serious trouble. "Our position...overrun by 15 enemy tanks. The 8.8cm FLAK out of action. Enemy is attacking to the south and east."<sup>143</sup> At the same time (1310) the artillery regiment was also attacked by about 10 tanks, and reported close combat ("*Nahkampf*"). By 1350 the first encouraging message was dispatched by Pz.Rgt.15: "Enemy tanks destroyed. Count not yet clear."<sup>144</sup> An hour later (1425), Pz.G.Rgt.110, which had a battalion overrun, reported that the enemy tanks behind its lines had been brought to a halt.<sup>145</sup>

After the fighting was completed, more accurate messages started to filter into the division command post. At 1725 Pz.G.Rgt.110 reported that its attached FLAK had destroyed 7 tanks. Own casualties had not been tallied.<sup>146</sup> In its daily activity report to the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps, the 11th Panzer Division reported having destroyed 48 enemy tanks, not counting the 7 that were scored by the attached FLAK. Its own strength was given as 23 tanks, down from the 29 reported a day earlier.<sup>147</sup>

The operations log for the 19th consists of a two-paragraph recapitulation of the events of the day. Items are not recorded in chronological order as

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<sup>143</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 705. "Eigene Stellung...von 15 fdl. Panzern ist überschritten. 8,8cm Flak ausgefallen. Feind in einem (?) Angriff nach Süd und Ost."

<sup>144</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 707. "Feindliche Panzer vernichtet. Anzahl noch unklar."

<sup>145</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 32, frame 708.

<sup>146</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 32, frame 712. Two FLAK weapons (probably 88mm) were assigned to the regiment from *Gruppe* v. Stumpfeld, one of the *Alarmeinheiten*. See Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 2, frame 713.

<sup>147</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 713-714.



they occur, as was standard practice. The last quarter of the entry boasts of the outstanding performance of the division during the last 10 days:

The enemy's plan was made impossible through the actions of the division, which was thrown, fast as lightning, from east to west and back again, always striking blows of annihilation. Correct interpretation of the situation and immediate actions by the Division Commander led the division to this unique victory, in which 2 -3 Tank Corps and 1 motorized-mechanized Corps were exterminated within 10 days. The division is convinced that it played the major role in one of the greatest defensive victories of the Eastern Campaign. By crushing the strongest elements of the Russian 5th Tank Army, the division has also played a decisive part in the success of the operations to relieve Stalingrad.<sup>148</sup>

Whether this kind of diatribe belongs in the operations log is debatable. However, it provides valuable insight into how the division perceived its performance and its part in the overall operations.

An item which has absolutely nothing to do with the battle at hand was also preserved in the records. A secret letter from the Corps HQ informed the division of the upcoming issue of snow plows, and instructed the division to send soldiers to a course being set up for training operators for this equipment. The message was written and received on the 19th of December, the same day in which the heavy fighting described above was going on. The letter is signed by the chief of staff of the XXXXVIIIth Pz. Corps, *Oberst i. G.* von Mellenthin. As always, *Major Kienitz*, the division *Ia*, initialed the correspondence, indicating that he had seen it. The word "*Eilt*", meaning "urgent" is hand written on the letter, probably

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<sup>148</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 19 Dec 42. "Dieses Verhaben ist dem Gegner durch die Einsätze der Division, die blitzartig während der Nächte von Osten nach Westen und zurück geworfen wurde, und ihn immer wieder vernichtend schlug, unmöglich gemacht worden. Richtiges Erkennen der Lage und blitzartiges Handeln des Div.-Kdr. hat die Division zu diesem einzigartigen Erfolg innerhalb 10 Tagen 2 - 3 Panzer-Korps und 1 mot.-mech.Korps zu vernichten, geführt. Die Division ist davon überzeugt, daß sie größten Anteil an einem der glänzendsten Abwehrrfolge des Ostfeldzuges hat. Durch die Zertrümmerung der stärksten Teile der russ. 5. Panzer-Armee hat die Division auch entscheiden Anteil an dem Gesamt-Erfolg der Operationen zur Entsetzung von Stalingrad."



by Kienitz.<sup>149</sup> A radio call instructs the division's engineer company (Panzer-Pionier Kompanie 209) to identify one Non-commissioned officer and nine men for immediate use as snowplow operators.<sup>150</sup>

#### 4. Analysis

Reminiscent of the action which marked the start of the Chir river battles on the 7th of December, another major attack (this one to capture the Don river bridge) was cancelled only a few hours before it was to start. The 11th Pz.Div. returned to its "fire brigade" mission. Then, while putting out one "fire" at Ostrovski and Lissinski, a bigger blaze 20 km west demanded its immediate attention. The situation was chaotic.

Some cracks were starting to show in the functioning of the command post. Both the relatively poor quality of the operations log and the bungled handling of the initial message concerning the icy road conditions indicate that things were not running smoothly. Given the long days of almost continuous combat and the near chaotic situation at the front, it is a wonder that the command post functioned as well as it did. That even items unrelated to combat were not ignored is demonstrated by the snow plow action.

Providing subordinate units early warning of a change in mission was an important control technique. Even between Corps and Division HQ, a telephonic order was sufficient to get the mission going; the written copy would follow in due course. The important thing was timeliness. Command and control actions were not slaves to inflexible procedures.

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<sup>149</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 725-726.

<sup>150</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 722.

The second battalion, Panzer Regiment 15, annihilated a large portion of an entire Red Army Tank Corps. This battle was not constricted by phase lines drawn by a staff officer removed from the actual battlefield. The commander saw a unique opportunity and supported by his confidence in himself and his soldiers, he rose to the occasion. He also had confidence in his superiors, that they would support his unorthodox decision to fall in behind the Russian tanks. This attitude stems from the education of the officers, especially the fostering of initiative. That attitude was also advanced by the German sense of superiority over the Russians. The order that the tank regiment received did not specify exactly when, where, or how the enemy was to be fought. These concepts are the cornerstones of *Auftragstaktik*. It is important to recall that *Generalmajor* Balck made it a point to be located on the battlefield at the crux, so it is quite possible that he was there along with *Oberst* Graf Schimmelmann, the regimental commander, when *Hauptmann* Lestmann, the battalion commander, maneuvered his tanks behind those of the Soviets.

A further indication of the initiative displayed by the subordinate commanders was this message sent from Pz.Rgt.15 to the division command post: "Enemy tanks attacking [Pz.G.Rgt.] 110. II/15 [2nd Bn, Pz.Rgt.15] on the move to counterattack.<sup>151</sup> The division did not tell the tanks to go support the mechanized infantry regiment. The subordinate commander saw the problem and made a decision. His guidance was the commander's intent, not a choreographed battle plan. This is how *Generalmajor* Balck created order out of this chaos and led his tank division to a spectacular victory.

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<sup>151</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 703. "Bei 110 Feindpanzerangriff. II./15 ange-treten zum Gegenangriff."

## IV. TATSINSKAYA

### A. GENERAL OVERVIEW

Whereas the Chir River battles are relatively well discussed in both English and German secondary sources, the actions of the 11th Panzer Division immediately after the Chir River have received little coverage. Yet this battle is important in that it demonstrates what a well led unit is capable of under extreme conditions of fatigue (both among the soldiers and the equipment) and weather.

As the Russian pressure along the Chir River waned momentarily, the 11th Panzer Division was relieved in place by the 336th Infantry Division. Once again, the 11th was to perform duties as a fire brigade, though this time not initially under the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps, but under the command of the 3rd Rumanian Army. Ninety miles west of the Chir River battlefield, the Red Army was moving towards Rostov, threatening that vital transportation center.<sup>152</sup> *Generalmajor* Balck received the task to salvage the situation.

### B. FIRST HAND ACCOUNT

*Generalmajor* von Mellenthin provides only a very short mention of this battle. The 11th Panzer Division was returned to that Corps after being assigned to the 3rd Rumanian Army for only 2 days. Actually, the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps followed the 11th Panzer Division westward.

*General der Panzertruppe* Balck devotes about four pages of his autobiography to this battle. He was desperate:

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<sup>152</sup>von Mellenthin, 202-3.

The situation was hopeless. The only hope was my tired and battle-worn Division, which arrived [in the area] piece by piece. I was of the view that the situation was so grave, that it could be salvaged only through audacity, that is, by attacking. Any defensive action meant our destruction.<sup>153</sup>

Balck moved his units towards Skassyrskaya to block the Red Army move south to Rostov. He moved forward with only twenty tanks. The rest of the division was still en route from the Chir River area. But the Russians were no longer at Skassyrskaya and had moved further south towards Tatsinskaya, so that he was in the Russians' rear. Balck immediately ordered, via radio, for the rest of his units to deploy concentrically around Tatsinskaya as they came up. Soon the commander of the Russian XXIVth Corps ordered all his tanks to concentrate on his position, as there were enemy tanks to his rear. This message was transmitted without encryption and was monitored by Balck. A reenactment of Cannae was in the making.

The following day, Christmas Day 1942, the division closed the ring around Tatsinskaya, but was unsuccessful in forcing a collapse of the Russian Corps trapped in its vise. The 26th was a day of frustration. Nothing seemed to click. Only 8 functioning tanks were now available to the Division. Reinforcements became lost en route and wasted the entire day. An attack from all sides on the 27th squeezed the Russians into a much tighter pocket, but their resistance was still formidable. That day a Russian plane landed near Balck's command post. When he realized his mistake and attempted to take off again, he was shot down. Apparently the plane was to go to the Russian command post, which had been located at the same spot two days earlier.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup>Balck, 408. "Die Lage verzweifelt. Die einzige Hoffnung - meine müde und abgekämpfte Division, die tropfenweise herankam. Ich vertrat scharf die Auffassung, daß sie nur noch durch Kühnheit, d. h. Angriff, zu meistern sei. Jede defensive Lösung bedeutet Vernichtung."

<sup>154</sup>Balck, 411.



On the 28th the pocket burst. 12 tanks and 30 trucks managed to escape. The rest was destroyed. We chased down those vehicles which had escaped and destroyed them also. "This was the end of the XXIVth Panzer Corps. All this had been accomplished with a tired division, starting with 20 tanks, which was reduced to 8 - 12 tanks. We had very few casualties."<sup>155</sup>

The troops were magnificent. Despite unheard of hardships outstanding morale. The huge food caches which fell into our hands in Tatsinskaya, and from which every soldier received a large share, had its desired effect. When I drove by, chocolates, cigarettes, and sausages were thrown into the car: "The general must have some, too."<sup>156</sup>

"The division had the singular luck to fight a successful Cannae without assistance against an enemy twice our strength. Their leader was another Terrentius Varro, who played right along."<sup>157</sup>

### C. ORIGINAL SOURCE MATERIAL

A cryptic radio message received at midnight 22 - 23 December ordered the division to detach itself from the front and work for the 3rd Rumanian Army to defend Morovskaya. At 0445 on the 23rd the division command post received the order per hard copy teletype.<sup>158</sup> The new mission once more required the division to

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<sup>155</sup>Ibid.

<sup>156</sup>Ibid. "Die Leute waren Glänzend. Trotz unerhörter Strapazen hervorragende Stimmung. Namentlich die phantastischen Verpflegungslager in Tatschinskaja, in denen sich jeder reichlich versehen konnte, taten das ihre. Wo ich vorbeifuhr, flog Schokolade, Zigaretten, Hartwurst in meinen Wagen. 'Herr General müssen auch was haben.'"

<sup>157</sup>Ibid., 412. "Hat die Division doch das seltene Glück gehabt, völlig aus eigenem Tun ein siegreiches Cannae gegen einen doppelt überlegenen Feind zu schlagen. Es führte gegenüber allerdings auch ein Terrentius Varro, der brav mitspielte."

<sup>158</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 870, 875.

to act as a fire brigade. That afternoon (1335 hours) the *Ia*, Major Kienitz, passed along Balck's decision that the Division will start to march at night again.<sup>159</sup>

There was no accurate intelligence on the enemy's location. No one knew exactly where to find the Russians, so the combat battalions went forward to find them. A secret letter from the *Ic* (Intelligence Officer) to the regiments and separate battalions on the 26th of December stated that the enemy situation was "totally unknown" and reinforced the need to send prisoners and captured documents to the intelligence officer quickly.<sup>160</sup>

The first portions of the division arrived at the new assembly area shortly after midnight 23 to 24 December. Pz.Rgt.15 had 22 tanks, the only working tanks left to the division. Throughout the night the tired soldiers move on. The movement of IVth Battalion, 119th Artillery Regiment, fell apart at 0200 due to the icy roads. A battery had to be left behind while the rest of the battalion continued on.<sup>161</sup>

Later that morning the first enemy contacts were reported by Pz.Rgt.15 near Skassyrskaya. Within two hours the town was cleared of enemy and an undamaged bridge across the Kalitva River was under German control. Balck's statement that there was no enemy at Skassyrskaya contradicts the original sources, but the enemy presence was slight. Pz.Rgt.15 reported sighting only four tanks.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 888.

<sup>160</sup>National Archives Microfilm Publication T315, Records of German Field Commands: Divisions, Tätigkeitsbericht mit Kartenanlagen, vom 1.11- 31.12.42, der 11. Panzer-Div. Abt.Ic. zum KTB, Nr.6 der Abt. 1a, roll 596, frame 174.

<sup>161</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 917.

<sup>162</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 935, 944, 950.

By early afternoon the spearhead of the 11th Panzer Division was in heavy contact on its way to Tatsinskaya. At 1340 Pz.Rgt.15 reported fighting 15 enemy tanks vicinity hill 175.<sup>163</sup> This is the hill where the Russian Corps Commander assembled his entire force and which became the center of the cauldron in which his Corps was destroyed. The Panzer Regiment had 20 Mark III, 3 Mark IV, and 3 command tanks (*Befehlspanzer*) involved in the fight. They destroyed 5 enemy tanks, but lost 4 Mark IIIs. Whether the German tanks were destroyed or lost to mechanical problems is not clear.<sup>164</sup>

This was Christmas eve. Although the division was in the thick of battle, Balck found the opportunity so send a solemn message to his soldiers, although it was by radio. "The Division reflects on this holy night on its brave soldiers."<sup>165</sup>

Later that evening (2110) Russian forces attacked the bridgehead set up across the Kalitva, but they were unsuccessful. Gruppe Lestmann was ordered to come to the aid of the bridgehead. The battle raged until at least midnight.<sup>166</sup>

During the next two days, 25 and 26 December 1942, the rest of the division closed the ring around the XXIVth Russian Tank Corps. Although there was a good deal of fighting, Balck was unable to break the defenses of the encircled Russians. At 1300 on 25 December, the 11th Panzer Division was placed back under the XXXXVIIIth Panzer Corps, which had by now also moved west from the Chir River battlefield. By 1445, 25 December, Pz.Rgt.15 had only 9 tanks operational.

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<sup>163</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 966.

<sup>164</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 986-7.

<sup>165</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 991. "Die Div gedenkt Heiligen Abend ihrer tapferen Truppen."

<sup>166</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 998, 1000-1003.

The division kept the Russians in the cauldron, but with this little firepower, it was unable to break through their defenses.<sup>167</sup> The soldiers, like their equipment, were at the end of their abilities. P.G.Rgt.111 reported that frostbite was becoming a problem, due to lethargy caused by extreme fatigue.<sup>168</sup>

On 28 December the battle finally became decisive. The 4th Panzergrenadier Regiment had been placed under the operational control of 11th Panzer Division. Early on the 28th, the Russian Tank Corps attacked to break out of the encirclement to the northwest, along the sector assigned to P.G.Rgt.4. A radio report to the Division command post at 0125 first notified the command of the Russian move.<sup>169</sup> A portion of the Russian forces succeeded in breaking through. On command of the *Ia* the escaped forces were pursued and destroyed. *Generalmajor* Balck was not available to make a decision, so the operations officer took the initiative to order the pursuit.<sup>170</sup>

#### D. ANALYSIS

The 11th Panzer Division had been running back and forth across the entire Chir River battlefield prior to this battle. Just as this battle was slowing down, the division was moved ninety miles to continue to perform “fire brigade” duties. The troops and the equipment must have been extremely exhausted. The lack of tanks indicates the anemic status of the division. Balck was able to drive his weary

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<sup>167</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frames 1021, 1031, 1064, 1073, 1079, 1080.

<sup>168</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 3, frame 1088. “Zahlreiche Erfrierungserscheinungen infolge Abstumpfung durch Übermüdung.” The temperatures during these days was between minus 9 and minus 24 degrees Celsius (plus 16 to minus 11 degrees Fahrenheit). Daily temperatures are recorded in the Kriegstagebuch.

<sup>169</sup>Kriegstagebuch Anlageband Nr. 4, frame 1318.

<sup>170</sup>Kriegstagebuch, 28 Dec 42.



soldiers to reenact Cannae during Christmas on the frozen Ukrainian steppe. This accomplishment underlines Balck's abilities as a commander.

## V. CONCLUSION

Weapons systems are becoming more and more complex. These systems are so much more mobile and lethal that the resulting battlefield can easily become even more chaotic than it has been in the past. The great strides in electronic communications and data processing offer the opportunity to reduce or to magnify the chaos. The last forty years have brought a revolution in technology, but a concrete philosophy of command and control has not been developed to use this new technology to restore order to the chaos of the next battle. *Auftragstaktik* promises to be a concept which may provide a foundation for such a philosophy. In any case, continued study of this concept cannot be a mistake. The brilliant tactical and operational successes at the hands of the German Army of World War II provide ample proof of this concept in battle.

This analysis of the 11th Panzer Division at the Chir river battles focused on the command and control actions, as opposed to a study of tactics. This thesis did not intend to provide a full description of the battle, blow by blow, although some events are studied in greater depth than others. Rather, representative actions were presented which give insight into command and control issues. The major source for the detailed information was the division operations log, and its supporting documents. These references cannot give a complete picture of how the division solved its command and control problems. But from these papers a rough sketch of *Auftragstaktik* in action was drawn.

The analysis of the first day of battle, 7 December, showed the speed with which a totally unexpected order, contrary to the planned attack, was transmitted from XXXXVIIIth Corps, to 11th Panzer Division, then to Panzer Regiment 15.

From the time the Corps warning order was received at the division command post until the first battalion of Pz.Rgt.15 started to move was only 30 minutes. There was no time for details; these were worked out as the tanks moved closer to where they were needed. This day also provided a glimpse of the interaction between the division commander and the corps staff. Having spent much of his time on the ground with his soldiers, *Generalmajor* Balck had first hand knowledge of the terrain and could argue effectively against the initial Corps order. According to the concepts of *Auftragstaktik*, the Corps order should not have specified from what direction Balck was to attack the enemy. Finally, this day demonstrated another important concept; that of trust in the fellow officer. When a junior officer at the division command post called the Panzer Regiment with the unexpected order, it was acted on immediately.

The fighting on the following day, 8 December, illustrates further possibilities of the German manner of combat. Here Balck displayed his command style; taking the initiative away from the enemy. He did this by moving at night and surprising the Soviets. The German sense of superiority and its counterpart, the Soviet sense of inferiority, played a major role. Also noted was the brevity of the communications. From these short messages one feels the sense of urgency as well as the lack of a large staff to debate issues and devise long-winded ways of saying simple things.

The following section, covering the period 9 - 17 December, looked at the routine between the division commander and his command post. The senior division staff officer, the *Ia*, was a major. He was not only the operations officer, but also the chief-of-staff. There were no assistant division commanders. Here again, the small size of the division staff relative to today's staff is presented. This is true not only in the *number* of soldiers assigned to the staff, but also in the *seniority* of

these officers. The *Ia* served as both the orchestrator of the division's forces when a change had to be made, and as the division's contact with the higher headquarters. He was the focal point for all information coming into the division from outside. He analyzed this information, as well as the reports from the various divisional elements, and reported his analysis to the commander, keeping him abreast of the bigger picture. The commander did not spend much time with things outside his division, relying on his *Ia* to tell him what he needed to know.

The next section looked at the major battle of the 18th and 19th of December. Here the analysis focused on the initiative of the commanders. An important victory resulted from a battalion commander choosing an unorthodox tactic to destroy over 40 Red Army tanks. The German tank officer knew that he was expected to show initiative in defeating the enemy. When a rare opportunity presented itself, he had the confidence to take advantage of it, knowing that this was precisely what his superiors expected of him. His guidance was the commander's intent.

The presentation of the Tatsinskaya battle focused not on the command and control aspects. Rather, it is a tribute to the generalship of Balck. His ability to execute a brilliant battle plan under such adverse conditions is worthy of continued study.

Some of the concepts of *Auftragstaktik* are quite similar to the command and control techniques in use in the U.S. Army. The examples of the 11th Panzer Division brought to mind similar personal experiences that I had had in a tank division in Europe during major field training exercises. But other components of *Auftragstaktik* are foreign to our current force. Today's division and higher staffs often resemble a three-ring circus. Instead of using the new communications and data processing technologies to reduce the labor force, more soldiers are required



to keep the whole thing from collapsing. With more people, internal friction increases and it becomes harder to ensure that the right information gets to the right person.

The AirLand battle doctrine has established maneuver theory as the basis of how the U.S. Army fights. The flexibility and mobility inherent in this doctrine closely resembles the combat style of the German Army of World War II. *Auftragstaktik*, their command and control doctrine, deserves continued close scrutiny as a framework for our own command and control philosophy on the modern battlefield.

## VI. APPLYING *AUFTRAGSTAKTIK* TO THE AIRLAND BATTLE

This short synopsis presents two avenues for establishing a command and control philosophy based on *Auftragstaktik* to complement the U. S. Army's revolution in operational doctrine. The significant strides being achieved under the AirLand Battle concept cannot reach their full value without a more efficient and effective style of commanding and controlling the chaos on the battlefield.

Computers can be used to process immense amounts of data. Currently we have huge staffs to sift through this information so that commanders are not overwhelmed. We must find a way to use the power of the computer to reduce staffs and decrease the time the commander needs to make a decision. Our need for detailed data must be tempered by what we really need to know to arrive at a quick, good decision, rather than what we would like to know to arrive at a lengthy, optimum decision. Operational staffs must be small so that information can be easily shared among a nucleus of officers streamlined enough to advise the commander in making timely operational decisions.

We must develop a new method of passing orders. The inclusion of the commander's concept in the operations order has been a vital first step in the right direction. Too often, however, commanders turn this new tool into a lengthy diatribe on exactly how they envision the battle to be fought. Short, very broad concepts are needed rather than detailed minutiae. Our operations orders are also far too detailed. Standard procedures, for example, belong in SOPs and not in operations orders. The commander must train his staff and subordinate

commanders so that they don't need lengthy instructions. Involved operations orders also take too long to write. While staffs are composing, printing, disseminating, and rewording orders, the enemy situation is constantly changing making detailed orders obsolete. Quick, broad orders are needed to keep ahead of the enemy. The subordinate commander most likely is more aware of the combat situation in his area than the higher staff. Let him decide how to execute the command of the higher commander.

The present revolution in Army operational doctrine must be carried through. We have restructured and reequipped our forces to support the AirLand battle concept. The challenge now is to establish an effective method to command and control our forces so that we force our opponent to react to our operational decisions.

The German style of making and executing command decisions under the conditions of wartime uncertainty, danger, chance, and stress recounted in this paper serves as a model of the right style. The challenge for the U.S. Army is to combine the right style with the information processing power of the computer to achieve a command system where good decisions are made quickly and at the appropriate level.

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