

Battle of Melikhovo

6th Panzer Division penetrates the 2nd Belt defences at the Battle of Kursk

Historical Background:



Pz Gen Werner Kempf
Commander Army

During the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, Army Detachment Kempf provided the flank guard for the main attack by the II SS Panzer Corps on the southern side of the bulge. The mission was to clear the eastern bank of the North Donets river and to drive the enemy back to the town of Korotscha. This would allow the three divisions of the SS Panzer Corps to drive northwards along the western bank of the river to capture the town of Kursk. This important mission was given to three Panzer Divisions (6th, 7th and 19th) and the 168th Infantry Division backed up by other Infantry Divisions from Corp Raus. The SS Totenkopf Division would drive up the western bank of the North Donetz to maintain a continuous front.

They were facing a formidable task as the area was defended by the 7th Guards Army under the command of Lt Gen M. S. Shumilov. This was the former 62nd Army which had defended Stalingrad and Shumilov was a good Army commander who would command the Army for the rest of the war. The Army occupied strong defences along the line of the river and the outskirts of the city with the 81st and 78th Guards Rifle Divisions in the First Belt and the 73rd Guards Rifle Division in the Second Belt supported by 2 Tank Regiments and 2 SU Regiments. The 7th Guards Army was part of the Voronezh Front which had the 69th Army in reserve in the 3rd Belt and Front Reserves of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps and 2nd Guards Tank Corps in the area ready to support the 7th Guards Army. On the western bank of the North Donetz river the 6th Guards Army deployed the 375th Rifle Division, with the 89th Rifle Division and 96th Tank Brigade in reserve.



Lt Gen M.S. Shumilov
7th Guards Army

The point of interest is that Army Detachment Kempf would be pitting its panzers against a defence made up of Rifle Divisions backed up by infantry support tanks. The big Soviet armoured reserves would all be committed further west against II SS Panzer Corps' attack.

The Plan:

The plan of attack was for the 6th Panzer Division to attack out of the Belgorod bridgehead along with the 168th Infantry Division and head along the line of the North Donetz river. The 19th Panzer Division would attack the southern part of Belgorod and the 7th Panzer Division would cross the river south of the city and clear the river bank before all three divisions headed along the east bank of the North Donetz river to Korotscha. The Soviet plan was to fight the Germans within each defensive Belt and to move reserves forward to reinforce the point of penetration. The reserves would include tanks, heavy AT guns and heavy artillery units to back up reserve Rifle Divisions. This would mean Rifle Divisions manoeuvring in front of Panzer Divisions but within a defensive belt they would be safe enough.



Lt Gen Hunersdorf
Commander 6th Panzer

The Forces: German

Army Detachment Kempf:

- **7th Panzer Division**
- **19th Panzer Division**

KG Kohler

73rd Pz Gr Regt
1Co/19th JgPz Bn (Marders)
Co/19th Pz Pioneer Bn

KG Richter

I Bn/74th Pz Gr Regt
3Co/19th Pz Pioneer Bn
2 Co/503rd Tiger Bn (lost 13 of 14 Tigers on Day 1 to mines.)

KG Becker

II Bn/74th Pz Gr Regt
II Bn/27th Pz Regt (I Bn in Germany refitting)
I Bn/19th Pz Art Regt
1-2/54th Nebelwerfer Regt
2/71st Artillery Abt (150mm)

- **6th Panzer Division**

KG Von Oppeln Bronikowski

II Bn/11th Pz Regt
Regt HQ (4 PzBef) von Oppeln
Bn HQ (4 PzBef 7 PzIII 6 PzII) Baake
5th Kompanie m (4 PzIII 6 PzIVG 10 PzII) Hulchtmann
6th kompanie le (3 PzIII 7 PzIVG 8 PzIII)
7th kompanie le (4 PzIII 8 PzIVG 7 PzII) Reutemann
8th kompanie le (3 PzIII 8PzIVG 9PzIII 12 Flamm) Spiekermann

II Bn/114th PzGr Bn (SPW)
I Bn/PzArtillery Regt 76 (12 x 105mm)
3/54th Nebelwerfer Regt
857 Artillery Abt (210mm)
3 Co/57 Pz Pioneer Bn (SPW)
228th StuG Bn (less 1 battery) (20 StuG III)
1 Co/503rd Tiger Bn Haupt Burmeister

KG Unrein

I and II Bn/4th PzGr Regt (motorized)
II Bn/PzArtillery Regt 76 (12 x 105mm)
1/41st PzJdg Regt (13 Marder: 6 xII 3xIII and 4xIII)
2/41st PzJdg Regt (PAK 43)

KG Bieberstein

I Bn/114th PzGr Regt (motorized)
III Bn/PzArtillery Regt 76 (8 Hummel 4 x105 guns)

- **168th Infantry Division**

1 battery 228th StuG Bn

The Forces: Soviet

Voronezh Front:

First Belt:

375th Rifle Division (6th Army)

193rd Artillery Regt
1667th AT Regt (Front Reserve)
93rd Guards Gun Artillery Regt (152mm) (army Reserve)
218TH Guards Mortar Regt (Front Reserve)

81st Guards Rifle Division (7th Army)

233 GRR
235 GRR
238 GRR
173 Guards Artillery Regt
262nd Tank Regt (21 KV-1)
290th Mortar Regt (120mm) (Army reserve)
97th Guards Rocket Regt (Front reserve)

78th Guards Rifle Division (7th Army)

214 GRR
211 GRR
209 GRR

153 Guards Artillery Regt
329th Pioneer Bn
30th AT Bde (Army Reserve)
1669th AR Artillery Regt (Army Reserve)
309th Guards Rocket Regt (Front reserve)

Second Belt:

89th Rifle Division (6th Army)
96th Tank Bde (6th Army) (6 T70s 46 T34)
228th Tank Bn
331st Tank Bn

73RD GRD (7th Army)
214 GRR
211 GRR
209 GRR
153 Guards Artillery Regt
329th Pioneer Bn

Northern Shock Group (Batrotskia Dacha)
31st AT Artillery Brigade (Front Reserve) (24 76mm 20 45mm)
167th TR (18 x T-70 21 x T-34)
1438th SU Regt (12 x SU-122)

Southern Shock Group (Gremiochii)
211th Guards Tank Regt
201st Tank Bde

295th Tank Bn
296th Tank Bn

225th Guards Tank Regt
1529th SU Regt (10 x SU-122)

148th Separate Tank Regt (18 x T-70 21 x T-34)
114th Guards AT Regt (11 76mm)
1670th AT Regt

161st Guards Gun Artillery Regt (152mm)
265th Guards Gun Artillery Regt (152mm)
315th Guards Rocket Regt (Front reserve)

60th Pioneer Bde
175th Pioneer Bn

Front Reserves sent to Second Belt 7th Guards Army

305th Rifle Division (69TH Army)
2nd Guard Tank Corps (elements only)

47th Guards Tank Regt (5 MkIV Churchills)
1500th AT Artillery Regt (15 45mm AT guns)

35th Guards Rifle Corps (69th Army)

92nd Guards Rifle Division Col V.F. Trunin

276th GRR
280th GRR: Novikov 1st Bn: Maksimihin 2nd Bn: Serov 3rd Bn: Novozilov
Training Bn - Tumansky

282nd GRR
197th Guards Artillery Regt

94th Guards Rifle Division

283rd GRR
286th GRR
288th GRR
199th Guards Artillery Regt

The Operation:

The start of the operation for the 6th Panzer on the 5th July was delayed when Soviet artillery fire destroyed the heavy bridge over the North Donetz which stopped the Tiger tanks of the attached 1st Company from 503rd Abt from crossing. So the 168th Infantry was left to carry on alone and the 6th Panzer and its Tiger company moved south to cross the following day in the area of the 7th Panzer. The 19th Panzer had a hard day but failed to dislodge the 81st GRD which was well entrenched on the high ground on the east of the city. The 7th Panzer crossed the river and quickly over-ran the positions of the 78th GRD despite their fortifications. The 78th GRD held a flat flood plain along the river bank with hardly any cover and the only defensible places were villages, but these lay at the bottom of hollows and simply turned into traps.

The following day, the 6th July, saw the 19th Pz Div grinding forward against the 81st GRD who still held the eastern approaches of Belgorod. 7th Pz Div chased the 78th GRD across the flood plain but was brought up short by the wooded hills and ridges to the east of the plain. These heights were defended by the 73rd GRD supported by armour, Army level heavy artillery and 85mm AA guns. Over the next few days, the 7th Pz and supporting Infantry Divisions would batter against these defences but make no progress. The 6th Pz spent the day crossing the river and setting up their repair base in Generalkova. They then launched an attack against a State Farm on the hill above Sevryukovo in support of the 7th Pz Div, over-running a battalion from the 73rd GRD. However 3 tanks were damaged by mines and 8 by gunfire.

The 7th of July looked more hopeful for the German command. True the 19th Pz Div and 168th ID were still locked in fighting for Belgorod and on the other side of the river SS Totenkopf had failed to shift the 375th Rifle Division from its defences along the river. Also the 7th Pz Div was making no progress further eastwards but the 6th Pz Div was now available and a gap had opened in the Soviet defences between the 73rd GRD and the 81st GRD along the line of the river Rasumnaja. So that morning, the 6th Pz Div under General Hundertsdorf launched attacks against the two villages on the river, to clear their way ahead, supported by air strikes. First the tanks captured Vastrebovo and then Sevryukovo, after crossing a minefield and rushing through AT fire from the 31st Anti-tank Brigade on the wooded hills above. The bridge at Sevryukovo was destroyed so the Pioneers started construction of 24 tonne bridge while the Pz Grenadiers crossed over and defended the crossing site on the far bank. The Tigers of 1/503rd spent the day helping the 7th Pz Div.

On the morning of the 8th July 7th Pz Div would continue fighting the 73rd GRD but gradually handed this sector over to Infantry Divisions.

19th Pz Div was still fighting to clear the villages to the east of Belgorod but KG Becker had got round behind Blishniaya Igumenka and was in a position to provide flank guard to 6th Panzers, KG Von Oppeln as it drove north, by attacking Delniaya Igumenka to the west of the line of advance. But KG Becker was now down to 15 tanks and has lost 13 of its 14 Tigers from the 2/503rd Bn during the first days fighting although Tigers were gradually returning from the workshops to the front line.

Starting at 2am, KG Von Oppeln crossed the river, formed up and advanced steadily until it came upon an anti-tank ditch dug between the State Farm Kalinina and the one at Postnikov. The Tigers of the 1/503rd were leading and ran into a minefield and spent the morning waiting for the Pioneers to rescue them. From this point on the KG came under sustained artillery and rocket fire from the west from 93rd Gun Artillery



6th Panzer Division advancing during battle of Kursk

Regt (152mm), 1/193rd Artillery Regt (122mm) and the 97th Guards Mortar Regt behind Delmaia Igumenka and similar fire from the east from the 94th GRD positions on the heights on the other side of the Rasumnaja river. There the 161st Gun Artillery Regt (152mm) and 315th Guards Mortar Regt had a clear view of the plateau and the both KG Von Oppeln and KG Bieberstein. The Russian artillery and Rocket Regts had a clear view across the river valley to the German tanks on the steppe on the other bank and so could fire over open sights at the armour as it waited for the minefields to be cleared.



Tiger from 2nd Company 503rd Bn guarding village near Belgorod while Landsers trudge past

The Pz Pioneers blew a crossing across the ditch and the Pz Grenadiers cleared away the Soviet light forces on the far side, but discovered two minefields which took time to clear. The two flanking KG were doing even worse. KG Bieberstein was pinned down by artillery fire in front of State Farm Kalinina which turned out to be held by a battalion from the 92nd Guards Rifle Division. The dominating heights on the far side of the river with its wooded hill crests provided the perfect position to control the river valley. On the other side, the attack by KG Becker against Postnikov and Delmaia Igumenka had stalled because the river valley was steep sided, boggy, filled with mines and the far side had been made into an anti-tank escarpment. The slopes above the farm were crowned by AT No1 and Delmaia Igumenka

contained AT Strongpoint No 7 and AT Region No 3 on the hill to the north. Lacking sufficient infantry in this close country the attack stalled. Here is an account of the attack by officer of 47th Separate Heavy Tank Regt:

"From 0800 8 July 43 up to 60 german tanks started advance to D.Igumenka from area east of Postnikov. By this time our 5th Churchill arrived to D.Igumenka. German tanks attacked without infantry support rolled in wedge formation of big depth. Enemy artillery fired upon village. Despite such superiority (5 vs 60) enemy attack was repelled"

The Battle of Melikhovo

Melikhovo is the name of the estate just outside Moscow, of the Russian playwright, Checkov but it is unlikely that the little village on the Belgorod road has any connection. It lies on a narrow piece of steppe, between two river valleys, at one end of a balka that cuts across this neck of land. The main Belgorod-Korotscha road passes to the north of the village.

But in July 1943 this village marked the outer edge of the Russian Second Belt which ran from the South-east to the North-west at this point and was around 6km deep. Melikhovo was a strong point of battalion size, with 15 "caponiers for tanks" (usually taken to mean tank foxholes, where they could remain hidden until the emerge to fight,) 10 AT gun positions and two minefields. Behind it Shlahovoe was a similar sized strong-point and the main road had minefields all around it and Mobile Obstacle Detachments had laid further ones within the Second Belt. The Second Belt ran along Petrovskii-Saznoe-Slahovoe-Mjasoedovo (Петровский-Сажное-Шляховое-Мясоедово), while the rear position of 2nd belt lay on line Zimolostnoe-Novoselovka-Vypolzovka-Mazikino-Sorokovka (Жимолостное-Новоселовка-Выползовка-Мазикино-Сороковка).

At 10pm the previous day the Front Reserve Divisions, the 92nd and 94th Guards Rifle Divisions based at Korotscha, 30km away had been ordered forward to take up positions in the Second Belt. The 94th was to extend the line of the 73rd GRD westwards to the River Rasumnaja at Sheino while the 92nd was to extend this line further through Melikhovo to Dal Igumenka. Another reserve Division the 305th RD was being moved in behind the 92nd GRD and the 96th Tank Brigade was to help reinforce Dal Igumenka. The 47th Separate Heavy Tank Regt (5 Churchills) and an AT gun unit were sent from the 2nd Guards Tank Corps as immediate reinforcements for Dal Igumenka to join the artillery units already stationed there.

The plan of the 92nd GRD commander Col V.F Trunin, was to occupy Melikhovo with the 1st Bn 280th Guards Rifle Regt and for the 2nd and 3rd Bns to move behind this screen and behind the low hills to link up with Dal Igumenka. Behind them the 276th GRR would make its way to the North Donetz river valley and follow it southwards to link up with the 375th RD and 81st GRD fighting to the south. In this way the 92nd GRD and 96th TBde would build up a defensive line running along the Belgorod road to the units in the south. It is unclear from Soviet accounts what was the task of the 282nd GRR but I suspect that it helped link the 280th GRR with the 94th GRD and moved southwards down the far bank of the Rasumnaja river and provided the defence at Kalinina. The Russian units arrived at Melikhovo in the morning and dug in while their advance units contested the German crossing of the anti-tank ditch.



At the same time KG Von Oppeln was crossing the anti-tank ditch and minefields under heavy artillery fire 3km to the south. The lead units were through by around 2pm but left the Tigers and support units behind while they advanced northwards to prepare to attack Melikhovo. At 3pm there is a 10 minute artillery

barrage of the village and then the 5th and 8th Kompanies launch an attack on the west side of the village and the woods there, supported by 2 companies of PzGr, while the 7th Kompanie with a company of PzGr attacks the south side. The Germans are under artillery fire by 152mm guns, 122mm guns and rockets from three sides and probably ran into the minefields outside the village and then the guns and tanks inside it. The 7th Kompanie had most of its tanks destroyed or disabled and the attack by the 5th and 8th Kompanies stalled in the wood. At least here there was some dead ground that provided some cover from the artillery.

General Hundersdorf was with the command group of KG Von Oppeln and contacted III Pz Corps for reinforcements. He summoned KG Becker from 19th Pz Div whose attack on Postnikov had stalled. This Kampfgruppe only had 15 tanks but it had the small 2nd Tiger Kompanie in support. He called up his reserve, KG Unrein (2 PzGr Bn), the 1st Tiger Kompanie and KG Bieberstein but the latter was unable to respond to the order as it was pinned down by artillery fire in front of Kalinina. The heavily reinforced KG Von Oppeln resumed its attack at 4pm and with an attack by the Tigers in the centre, the infantry broke into the village. They managed to fight through to the other side by 6pm but the infantry fighting raged well into the night and the village was only finally cleared by 6am the following morning.

Unwilling to commit his tanks to street fighting, von Hundersdorf gathered KG Von Oppeln and Becker and advanced towards Shlahovoe, the original objective for the day. The Tigers and 6th Kompanie went down the main road while the 7th and 8th Kompanies and KG Becker with the 5th Kompanie screening the left flank, went north of the road up to height 220. They ran into a minefield to the west of the village and the attack stalled. Shlahovoe was held in some strength by reserve units of the 280th GRR. On the heights above the town, were two batteries of 122mm guns and the 2nd Bn 197th Artillery Regt had just arrived to reinforce the defenders. Lacking infantry support and with the news of the battle behind him, Hundersdorf decided to withdraw. The days fighting was reported by the 35th Guards Rifle Corps:

"At 1400 enemy (up to 60 tanks with 2 infantry battalions) started advance on Melikhovo. At 1700 despite high losses (over 40 tanks knocked out) enemy entered in village and at 1800 reached north-east outskirts of Melikhovo. Remains of 280GRR fell back to Shlahovoe where with support of infantry training battalion, recon Co, SMGgunners Co of 282 GRR, 122 ATRBtl at 2100 occupied a defensive perimeter MTS-Shlahovoe-Orlov." The defenders were joined by tanks of the 148th Tank Regt (17 T-34 and 5 T-70) sent from 94th GRD.

At around 6pm the 96th Tank Brigade (46 T-34, 5 T-70) arrived on the heights to the north of Dal Igumenka under orders from Front Commander Vatutin to *"counterattack enemy forces between Melikhovo and D.Igumenka and hold the line here"*. To the north east the German armour was attacking Shlahovoe and to the east the German infantry was locked in fighting in Melikhovo. Captain Kulkov's 228th Tank Battalion (24 T-43) counter attacked in wedge formation: *"3/228 Tbn attacked to woods west of Melikhovo, broke through enemy's anti-tank covering and reached woods south of village. Destroyed 8 tanks, 6 guns, 7 trucks, up to inf. Co. 2/228 captured east outskirts of Igumenka and reached Postnikov. 1/228 provided fire support from starting positions."* To counteract this attack, the German armoured force was forced to return from Shlahovoe. *"228 Tbn must leave woods south of Melikhovo retreated to D.Igumenka. All enemy's attempts to capture D.Igum was beaten off. Germans held only small wood west of Melikhovo."*

This final counter attack brought to a close all German attempts to advance past Melikhovo, as the infantry were fully committed and the armour had suffered losses. But there was one final shift in the battle as at around 7pm the PzGr of KG Bieberstein finally captured State Farm Kalinina. Immediately 1st and 2nd Bns of 283th GRR of the 94th GRD with support of a battalion of the 199th Artillery Regiment counterattacked across the river and after bitter fighting had recaptured the farm by midnight. This battle cost the Russian's 294 men (25 KIA, 269 wounded).

The Days Following the Battle

The morning of the 9th found KG Von Oppeln in the woods to the west of Melikhovo, KG Unrein in the vil-

lage, while KG Becker and the Tigers had set off to try to take Dal Igumenka from the North and KG Bieberstein and 7th Pz Div was locked in battle with the 94th GRD from Kalinina eastwards. Generals Kempf and von Hunersdorf had decided that the flanks of the penetration would have to be cleared before KG von Oppeln made another attempt to drive northwards through obviously heavy defences. During the course of the morning supply trucks came up to re-supply the tanks but they were spotted and the woods were subjected to heavy artillery fire in which several panzers were destroyed by direct hits. KG von Oppeln left a detachment there and shifted to the safety of the woods south of Melikhovo, The Panzer Battalion was re-organized into two Kompanies Spiekermann (8th) and Reutemann (7th) due to the losses it had suffered.

The following day was spent in further inactivity in the woods south of Melikhovo while the flank operations continued. But at dawn on the 11th, KG von Oppeln and the newly reformed Tiger Abt (with a strength of only 19 Tigers from the original 45) began the offensive northwards once again. The attack drives northwards across the Belgorod highway, through the minefield, under AT gun fire and captured hill 220. At this point 8th Kompanie splits off with Pz Grenadiers and attacks Shlahovoe from the rear while 7th Kompanie and the Tigers attack Olchowatka which is captured with no resistance. At this point the KG von Oppeln is through the 2nd Belt and is faced with a drive across open country almost undefended to the crossing over the North Donetz river at Rzhavets. They reach the hills above the town that night and laager for the night. In the early hours Major Baake leads a small force to capture the bridge led by a captured T34—the famous “Ghost Column of “Rzhavets” which penetrated the Russian forces but fails when the bridge is blown up. On the 12th while a bridgehead is created on the far bank by Pz Grenadiers, the armour moves NE and meets Russian forces dug into Third Belt positions around Alexandrovka.

What had happened to the Russians? Following the success of the German flank attacks much of the Russian force including the 96th Tank Bde, 92nd and 94th GRD had slipped away on the 11th to the north to occupy the Third Belt of defences leaving the 305th to offer what resistance it could. The German KG had caught up with the rearguard of the 94th GRD at Rzhavets as it was falling back towards the Third Belt at Alexandrovka. The Rifle Divisions were being reinforced at Alexandrovka by units sent from the 5th Mech Corps and the Trufanov Group from the same unit was sent to dispute the crossing point. With both the 19th and 6th Pz Divisions owning less than 25 running tanks and only the 7th Pz Div relatively intact, the force lacks the strength to develop the attack across the river and NE into the Third Belt at the same time. None the less the 7th Pz got across the river and had linked up, finally, with SS Pz Div Totenkopf by the end of the battle on the 15th. The 6th Pz captured Alexandrovka on the 14th but got little further into the Third Belt. The III Panzer Corps had finally cleared the right bank of the North Donetz river but it had taken too long—10 days instead of the planned 3 days and had failed to protect the flank of the II SS Panzer Corps at the crucial time.

The Cost of the Battle

Counting tank losses is always a difficult exercise, since some tanks are destroyed (blown up or burnt out,) while other are abandoned but recovered later and returned to service after a spell in the workshops. A good example of this is the 503rd Schw Pz Abt (Tiger) during the battle. On the 5th, the Abt had 39 Tigers and were joined on the 6th by another 5 bringing the total for the battle to 45. Between the 5th and 8th, 34 fell out due to: 2 destroyed, 7 hit by guns, 16 mine damage (13 on the first day in 2nd Kompanie attached to 19th Pz Div), 9 breakdowns, giving a total of 34. 22 were repaired so that by 1200 on the 8th there were 33 operational.

The numbers for the 11th Pz Regt, 6th Pz Div are 105 tanks at the start of the operation but many of these are in the workshops for long term repair so it has about 75 tanks for the Kursk operation.

6th Pz Div (Jentz)	4th	8th	9th	10th	notes
Pz II	12	8	7	0	At Yastrebovo on 8th
Pz III Long	33	24	24	12	J or L
Pz III short	17	13	12	1	
Pz IV long	27	14	14	7	G without skirts
PzBef	6	3	3	2	command tank
Flamm	12	10	10	0	At Yastrebovo on 8th
total	105	54/18	54/17	22/0	Melikhovo/Yastrebovo

These figures seem to show a heavy loss on the 9th, yet according to the account, the main fighting was on the 8th and a few tanks destroyed by artillery in the wood on the 9th. So it is assumed that the figures were not compiled accurately on the night of the 8th as fighting was still going on. Also the PzII and Flamm tanks were let behind at Yastrebovo and were involved in fighting the 94th GRD on the 9th. So the losses of the 11th Pz Regt on the 8th at Melikhovo would be 11 PzIII long, 10 PzIII short and 6 PzIV a total of 28 tanks or 52% of the 54 taking part. This assumes a further 3 tanks, one of each type were lost in the wood on the following day. The battle was a serious drain on 11th Pz Regt for just one days fighting.

Also there are records of the number of vehicles destroyed between the 5th and 14th July for PzIII and PzIV. The 6th Pz lost 22 and the 19th Pz lost 27 both of which were high compared to other armoured units: SS LAH which lost 10, DR lost 7, Totenkopf lost 9, Gross Deutschland and the 7th Pz lost 10. This difference might be due to the fact that both Panzer Divisions were engaged by heavy guns which would do more damage.

Infantry casualties are not known for the battle but 6th Pz lost 119 killed, 662 wounded and 11 missing, a total of 792 casualties for the period 5th –10th July. Given that this was for two main days fighting, the attack on Jastrebovo and Melikhovo these do not seem out of the ordinary for the battle of Kursk.

The Russian losses are again not easy to determine. 92nd GRD started the battle with 9558 men and ended the battle on the 20th July 5600 men less. It appears that the Division may have lost 500 men on the 8th but a further 1500 on both the 9th and 10th, which shows the heavy fighting in which it was involved fro Postnikov, Kalinina and Melikhovo. But how many men were lost to the 1st Battalion on the 8th remains unclear. The Germans claimed 6 T34 (148th Tank Regt) 19 AT guns, and destroyed or captured 2 cargo trucks and 11 teams of horses. About 100 Soviet dead and 130 prisoners were counted. That would seem to indicate losses of around 25% for the Russian infantry and almost all the tanks and guns destroyed (2 battalion 45mm + 8 from 1/197th and 11 from 114th for a total of 21). In addition the 96th Tank Bde lost 8 tanks (3 T34 destroyed and 3 damaged) and 47th Separate Tank Regt lost 2 Churchills destroyed and 3 damaged out of the 5 they had available at the start of the day. This seems to follow the pattern for the rest of the Battle of Kursk where the defenders often lost more men than the attackers. This was no doubt due, in large part to the open nature of the terrain which allowed no easy means to fall back.

The Outcome of the Battle of Melikhovo

The battle of Melikhovo was a victory for the Germans, they held the field at the end of the day and they advanced onwards from this position further to the north on subsequent days. But it was a Pyrrhic victory because the 6th Panzer lost half its tank strength attacking a single Russian infantry regiment. It never recovered its tank strength during the rest of the battle and within a couple of days would be down to as few as a dozen tanks. This left Army Detachment Kempf with only one functioning Panzer division with which to clear the North Donetz River bank. The second reason is the delay imposed on the German command. 6th Panzer sat in the woods for two days after the battle, not advancing forwards. At the same time II SS Panzer Corps was struggling forward with one of its panzer divisions and several infantry divisions tied down in flank protection. Had Army Detachment Kempf been able to accomplish its mission on time, these divisions would have been able to join the attack, strengthen it and then the main attack may well have done a lot better. The delay imposed on them by the 7th Guards Army (73rd, 78th and 81st Guards Rifle Divisions) and 35th Guards Rifle Corps (92nd and 94th Guards Rifle Divisions) was crucial to the outcome of the Battle of Kursk and the Russian divisions put in an excellent defensive performance. They were led by a fine infantry commander, General Shumilov who had commanded the 'other' army at Stalingrad next to Chuikov and would go on to other victories in the southern drive through the Ukraine.

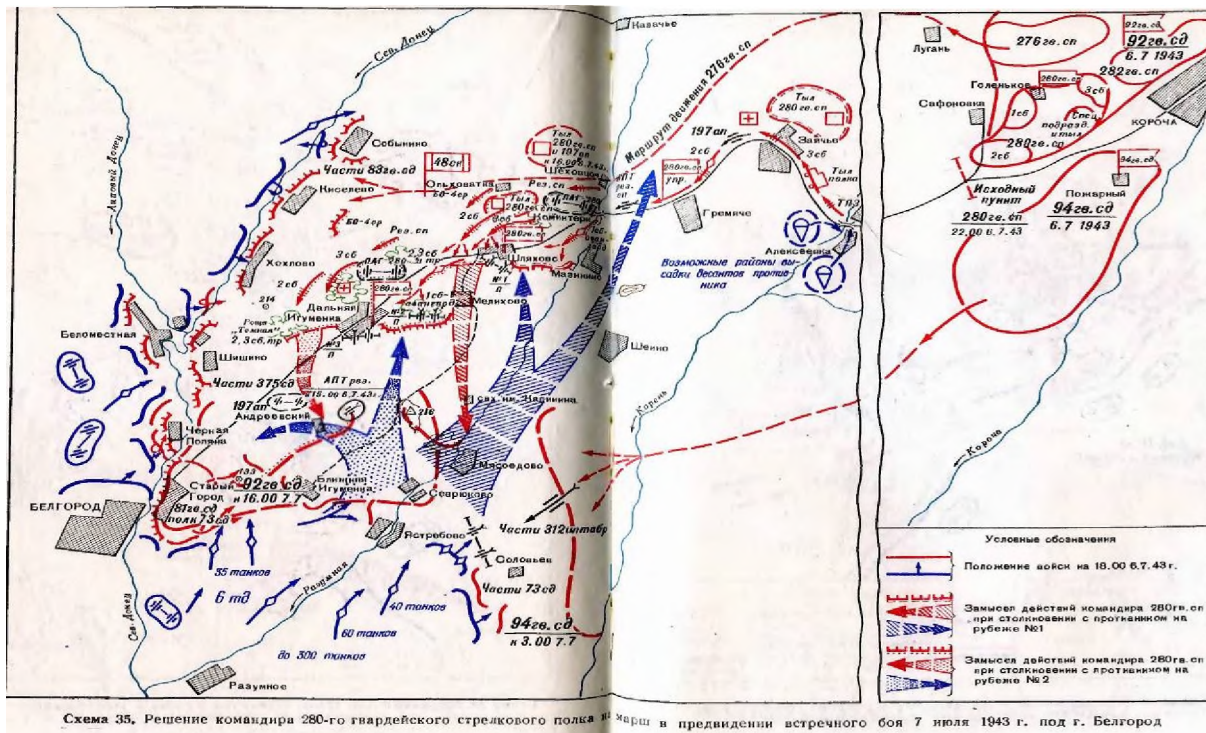


Схема 35. Решение командира 280-го гвардейского стрелкового полка о марше в предвидении встречного боя 7 июля 1943 г. под г. Белгород

Russian Account of the Battle

Example of meeting engagement executed by 280 RR at second half of 7th July 1943.

At 1620 (Moscow time) advance guard from 1st Battalion reached Melikhovo (МЕЛИХОВО). At the same time enemy was spotted by regimental recon detachment (circles with "K" letter on scheme). The first combat took place on southern outskirts of Melikhovo between 1st rifle Co/1RBn and leading elements of 6th Panzer. 3 km south of village Germans start to deploy their main force - (estimated strength - strengthened battalion with tanks). Soviet battalion commander decided to hold southern slopes of hills just south of Melikhovo.

Added artillery (1/197 AR) was fast deployed north of Shlahovo (ШЛЯХОВО) and opened fire. Two batteries moved to Melikhovo for direct fire support [it seems that only one - probably 122mm battery was at Shlahovo, while both 76mm batteries were used for direct support]. By the order of 280RR commander, 1st battalion was strengthened by 2nd Co/148 TR (Т34 tanks). It moved fast to small woods west of Melikhovo.

At 1700 after 10-minute arty preparation enemy started an attack on the vanguard. 18 tanks with inf. Co attacked east of village, while 15 tanks with two Co's - west. Another column of tanks with infantry moved via Sheino (ШЕИНО) to Mazikino (МАЗИКИНО). The same time more Soviet forces arrived on battlefield:

- Regimental AT Gun Reserve (~6 45mm guns+AT-rifles) deployed between Shlahovo and Mazikino;
- 2/197 AR deploy 122mm battery north of Komintern (КОМИНТЕРН), two 76mm batteries - south of Komintern (for direct firing);
- Divisional AT GRes deployed between hill 222 and Gremjache (ГРЕМЯЧЕ);
- 2nd and 3rd rifle battalions advanced to deploying along the line Dalnaja Igumenka (ДАЛЬНЯЯ ИГУМЕНКА) - Melikhovo.

After fierce fighting enemy lost 16 tanks east of Melikhovo and shifted main efforts to the west of village. Reinforced with 30 tanks, at 1830 enemy broke throughout Soviet lines and advanced to Shlahovo, while nearly 20 tanks continued attack south of Melikhovo.

With the night fall German forces stopped and start to secure their positions around Shlahovo and Mazikino. Soviet forces prepared themselves to night battle. The first move made by two rifle Co's, that managed to reach Mjasoedovo (МЯСОЕДОВО) and destroy enemy HQ in that village. Later in the night combined forces of 280, 276, 282 GRR's and 94 GRD managed to pull Germans back to Andreevski (АНДРЕЕВСКИЙ) - Bliznaja Igumenka (БЛИЖНЯЯ ИГУМЕНКА) line.

Preceding page Map 1: The Russian Plan for the Battle
 This page Map 2: The Russian Account of the Battle

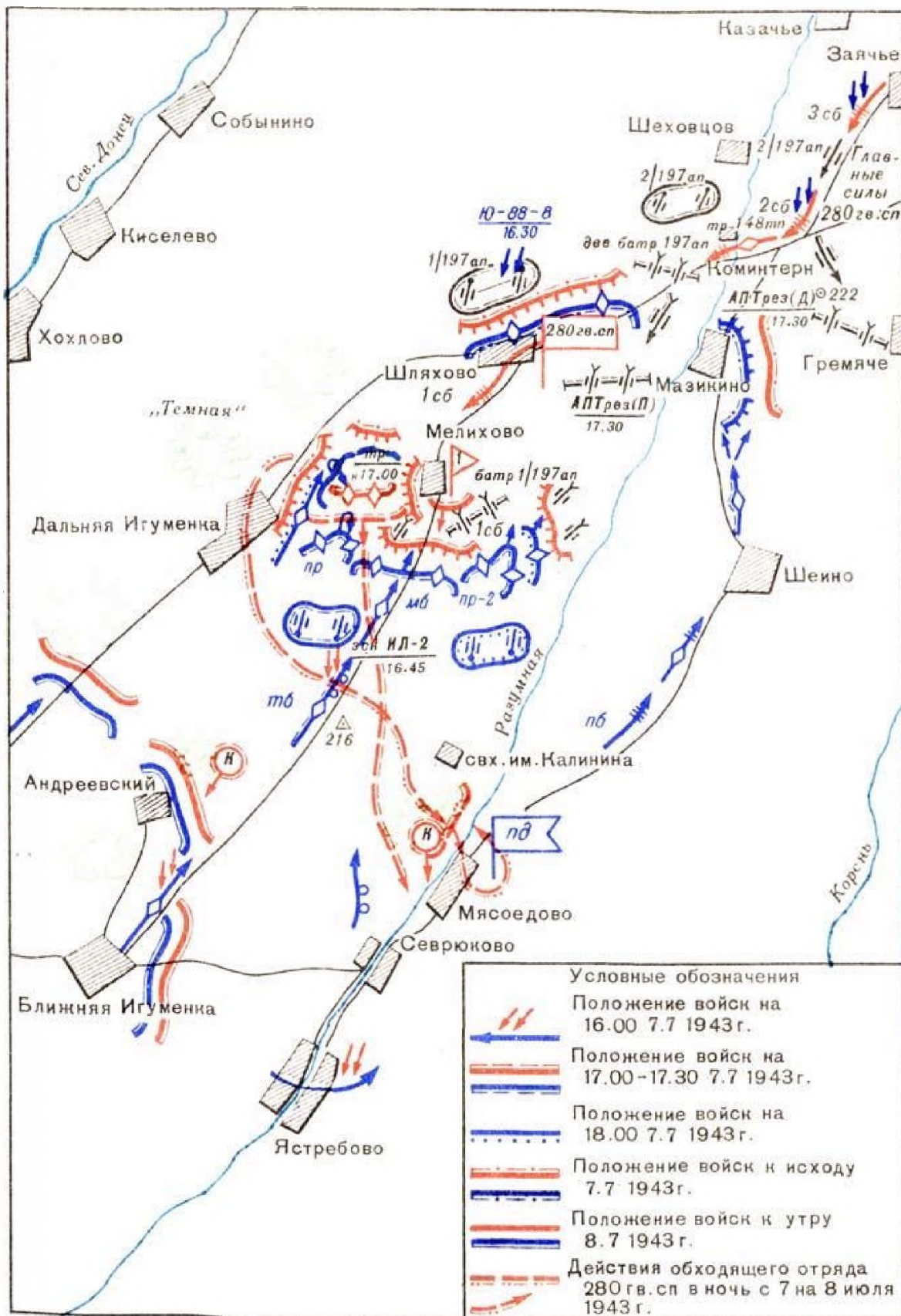
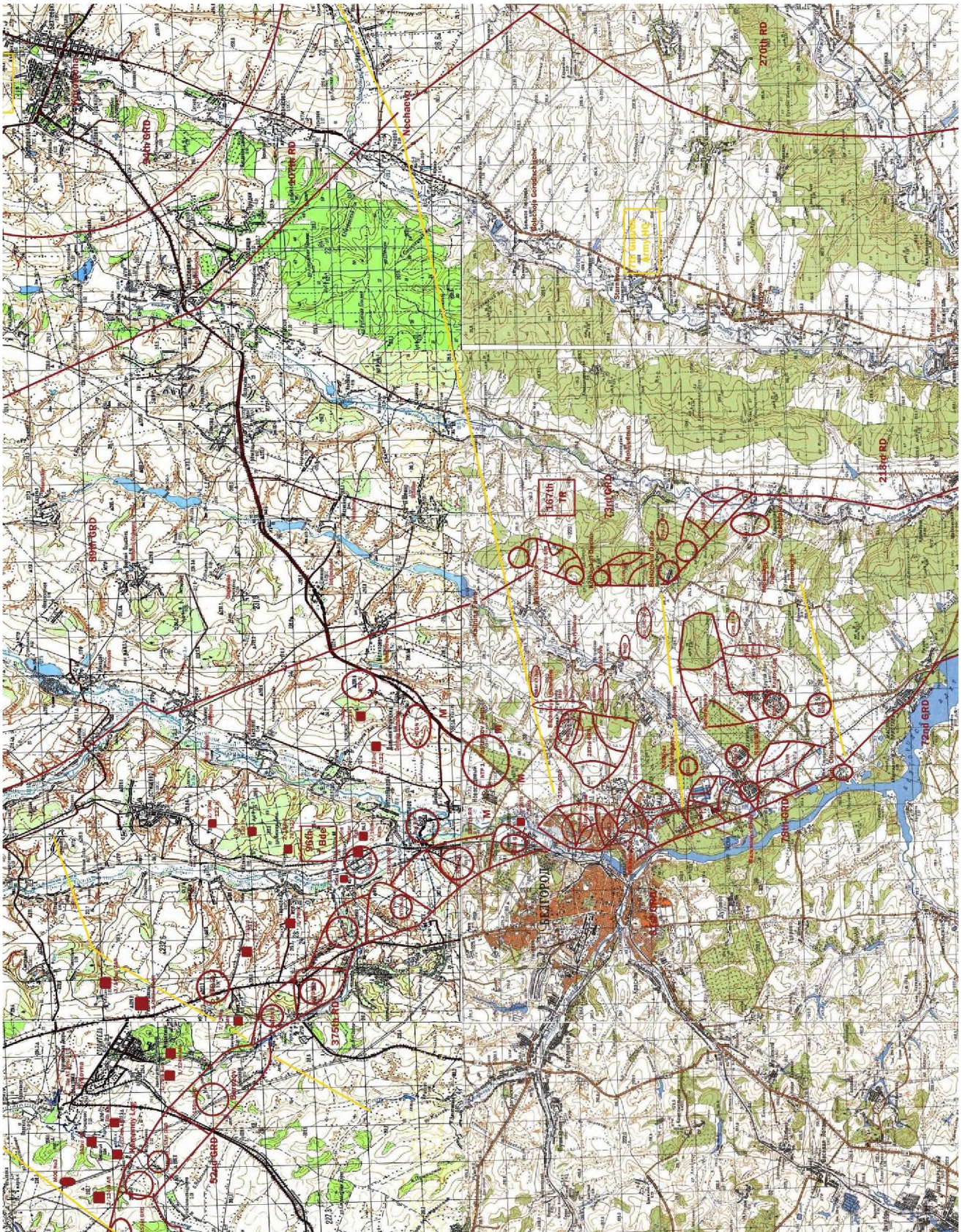


Схема 39. Ход боевых действий во встречном бою 280-го гвардейского стрелкового полка 7 июля 1943 г. под г. Белгород.



Defence area of 25th Guards Rifle Corps—7th Guards Army

In the NW corner of the map is the 52nd GRD and 375th RD of 6th Guards Army which were attacked by IInd SS Pz Corps. The 52nd was broken and the 375th held. Running north from Belgorod are the two arms of the Donetz River and to the south of the town the 81st and 78th GRD in the First Belt. Behind them is the 73rd GRD in the Second Belt with another reserve division, the 89th GRD to the north. The far eastern side of the map shows the Third Belt and the town of Korotshcha where the Soviet reserves were held and this town was the final objective for Army Detachment Kempf.

Studying history - the Great Patriotic War or Eastern Front?

It is accepted when studying the accounts of fighting between the Western Allies and German during the Second World War that the story has to be built up from both sides to gain a truer picture of events. However on the Eastern Front this has rarely been possible, due to the political constraints of Soviet history writing. This has meant that the account of the war in Russia has largely been told from the German side. Even the term *Eastern Front* is a German one. However in recent years, the release of material from old Soviet archives, the work of historians like David Glantz and his Russian counterparts have allowed some study of the war from a Russian perspective. But many of the old Soviet constraints remain, as even secret material, rarely deals with individual units, covers little below Army level and simply does not cover some battles at all, especially defeats or disasters. However there are some areas of light. Soviet history writing rarely told lies; there was omission, there was confusion, there was a tendency to deal in general terms only or to hint at specifics and once in a while a germ of a true account.

The Battle of Melikhovo is one of those rare gems where we have decent account of the battle from both sides. The Russians were obviously immensely proud of their achievement and rightly so and allowed rare units accounts from battalion or regimental level—in fact we have three! One from 1st Bn, 280th Guards Rifle Regt, 92nd Guards Rifle Division, another from 47th Separate Heavy Tank Regt and another from 96th Tank Brigade. Even units to the side such as 94th GRD are allowed a brief say.

Using this material it is possible, albeit difficult, to built up a true account of the battle which is what I have attempted in this short article. It also allows a useful comparison with German accounts to test their accuracy and what this shows is that they are far from being true accounts themselves. We have accounts of the battle from quite a number of German sources but the main one must be the war diary of the 6th Panzer division. In defence of the officer who wrote this account, it must be said that the practice of writing unit war diaries, common in the British Army since the C19th, was only started in 1942 and these early attempts focussed only on the unit itself. This German account is one that is very armour biased, depicts a steady advance by the 6th Pz, the two attacks are merged into one, there are no mention of losses, in fact there are no mention of activities by other units at all. The accompanying Tigers are mentioned rarely, the StuG Battalion never and the Panzer Grenadiers and other Kampf Gruppen in passing. This was obviously written a tank officer who did not concern himself with such trifles. The Russian counter attack at the end of the day is not mentioned at all by the 6th Pz diary but interestingly it does appear in Raus "Panzers in the East" and he was an ex-commander of the Division.

Reading it by itself, you would think that the Division had quite a successful day capturing an important road junction. Not that it had lost half its tank strength, serious losses in its infantry and failed to reach its objective while battering at the edge of a unforeseen defensive belt. There is quite a lot of double counting by units, the 6 Russian tanks destroyed in Melikhovo are claimed, quite rightly by 503rd Tiger Abt but are also claimed by both KG Becker (19th Pz) and KG von Oppen (6th Pz)! But other German records accurately record the daily tank strength and show the serious German losses in tanks on the 8th July.

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Russian articles translated by members of the Axis History Forum

Scorched Earth—Paul Carell