

# TAC NEWS

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July - August 2006

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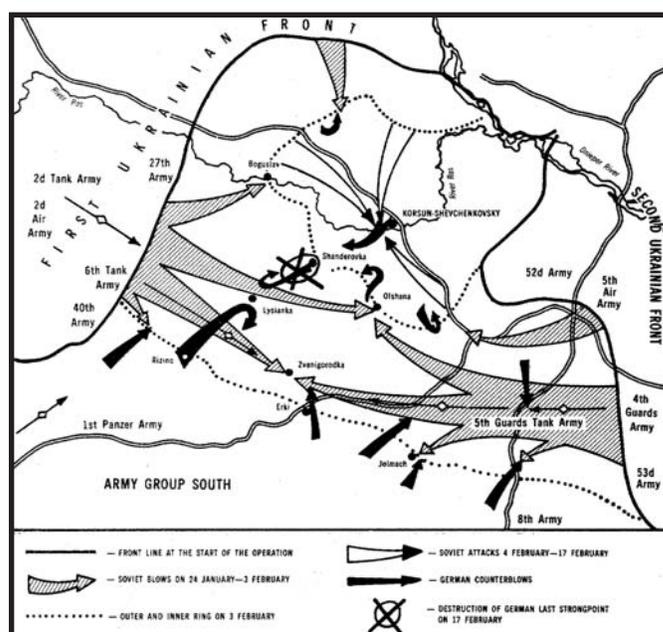
## HELL IS COLD!

Relief of the Korsun'-Schevchenkivskii (Cherkassy) Pocket  
(24 January 1944 - 18 February 1944)

### Background

The Battle of Kursk in July and August of 1943 was arguably the largest and most destructive bloodletting of World War II. It was logical, therefore, for the German high command to assume that both sides would be too exhausted to do much more than rebuild and reorganize for some time afterward. However, not only did the Soviets launch a major counteroffensive immediately after Kursk, but they continued to execute a whole series of offensives throughout the last half of that year.

By Christmas Day 1943, while the Wehrmacht watched in ever-mounting horror, the Soviets attacked again, bursting out of their Dnepr bridgehead. Within days, *1st Ukrainian Front* had hammered its way to within six kilometers of Army Group South's headquarters at Vinnitsa. To the south and east, *2nd Ukrainian Front* advanced along the Dnepr's southwestern bank to capture Kirovograd, inflicting and absorbing frightful losses in both men and materiel. In fact, the fighting around Kirovograd raged throughout January leaving both the Germans and Soviets physically exhausted and critically short of both men and equipment. Somehow, the Germans succeeded in halting the Russian offensive just short of Vinnitsa, while to the north, they continued to hang on to a precariously narrow salient defined by the towns of Korsun'-Schevchenkivskii<sup>1</sup>, Cherkassy, and Kanev. Thankfully, the Germans thought, though their formations had been bled white and their equipment was in tatters, the Soviet "Winter Offensive" had run its course and things would quiet down for a while... They were wrong!



On 24 January 1944, the Russo-German lines in the western Ukraine inscribed an enormous "lazy S" (an "S" lying on its side). The Soviet *1st Ukrainian Front* was holding a line more than six-hundred kilometers long with a total of eleven armies (including four tank armies) concentrated primarily around Vinnitsa, but spread out in a vast arc with its right flank facing west and the rest of it curving around to the southwest and south, and its far left flank facing southeast! Further east, the Soviet *2nd Ukrainian Front* was holding a line two-hundred fifty kilometers long with seven armies (including one tank army), with one cavalry corps and three mechanized corps in reserve, after taking and holding Kirovograd a few weeks earlier and

defending it against a series of furious German counterattacks. Between these two giant pincers was the "Cherkassy" salient, pointing north toward Kiev, centered around Korsun' and Kanev about 90 kilometers, north-to-south and 125 kilometers east-to-west, containing nine infantry divisions, two panzer divisions, and an independent armored "Sturm" brigade<sup>2</sup>.

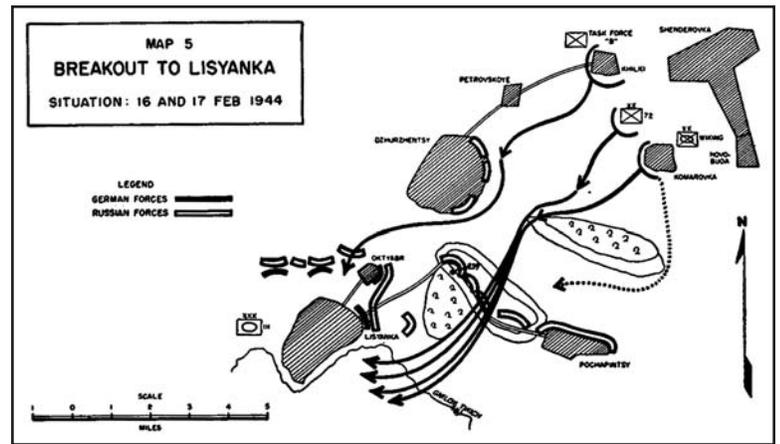
### *Another Soviet Offensive!*

At dawn on the 24th, assault elements of both the *1st* and *2nd Ukrainian Fronts* attacked the base of this salient and by sundown had advanced six kilometers, forcing the Germans to withdraw into previously prepared defensive works.

Next morning, the main strength of these two armies was engaged in a full-scale offensive. By sundown on the 27th, *5th Guards Tank Army* had taken Shpola, more than forty kilometers in the German rear. By dawn on the 28th, the first German counterattacks were launched. The fighting was intense and several towns changed hands more than once. The Soviets, however, were able to stand off every German attack and hold on to the ground gained. In fact, troops of *5th Guards Tank Army* were soon able to join hands with their comrades in the *6th Guards Tank Army* (part of *1st Ukrainian Front*), thereby closing the ring and making the "Korsun' Pocket" a terrifying reality. "Phase One" of the offensive was over. By 3 February, the encirclement had solidified and the battle went into its second phase, the destruction of those German forces isolated during Phase One.

### *Hammering the Ring*

Between 4 February and 17 February 1944, units of the *1st Panzer Army* (specifically *III Panzer Corps*) hurled themselves against the western side of the Soviet encirclement<sup>3</sup>. These units included the *1st*, *16th*, *17th Panzer Divisions*, "*Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler*", and the *23rd*, *503rd*, and *506th Heavy Panzer Abteilungen*. The attacks gained ground but the Soviet "*Tankists*" of their *5th* and *6th Tanks Corps* stubbornly held on and were able to maintain a solid wall of resistance between the German "rescue" force and the beleaguered troops slowly being squeezed to death within the ever-shrinking salient.



### *Last Chance*

On 17 February, *SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler"* and Bäke's *503rd Heavy Panzer Abteilung* made their last attempt to open a corridor for the escape of the remaining troops in the Pocket, now called "*Gruppe Stemmerman*" (after its commander Wilhelm Stemmerman). As darkness fell on that fateful day, though *1st SS Panzer Division* had repulsed repeated Soviet counterattacks against the full length of the corridor from Bushanka to Octyabr, Bäke's "*Tigers*" failed to capture the ridge crest north of Octyabr known as "*Hill 239*" which would have allowed Stemmerman's men to escape. It was now up to Stemmerman to break through the dug-in Soviet positions between Dshurshenzy and Potchapinzy and drive south into the German lines. The problem was that Stemmerman didn't know that Hill 239 was not in German hands!

### *The End*

One hour before midnight on the 17th, *Gruppe Stemmerman* advanced in three motorized columns toward Hill 239. Everything went according to plan until it became evident that, far from being their route to safety, the slopes of Hill 239 were occupied by grim and determined troops of the Soviet *5th Guards Tank Corps*. There was nothing for it but for the forward elements to fix bayonets and charge. Within minutes they found themselves blinking in the glare of Soviet searchlights. Hundreds were cut down by concentrated tank and machinegun fire at point blank range. At this point, the timely arrival of some Panthers from "*Leibstandarte*" cut a swath through the surprised Russians from behind and the escape route was open again. The word went quickly round the

ranks, "Run for it! Abandon everything! Run for your lives!" And run they did. Many slipped through the German outpost line around Ocityabr and Lisyanka. Others veered to the left only to be confronted by the black waters of the Gniloi Tickitch. Ignoring a temporary bridge thrown across to assist their flight, hundreds hurled themselves into the freezing waters. Many were drowned in the confused panic that followed. All told, roughly 35,000<sup>4</sup> of the 55-60,000 men trapped in the pocket escaped, many of whom were wounded, but all their heavy equipment and vehicles had been left behind, along with several thousand severely wounded comrades. Many of the survivors were broken men; half-starved, physically spent, frozen, and completely weaponless. They had been through hell... and it had been a cold, dark, terrifying place.

### ***Status of the Combat Forces Involved***

Both the German and Soviet units involved in the fighting around Lisyanka and Hill 239 on the evening of 17 February 1944 had been engaged in combat more or less continually from 24 January. Reliable sources, particularly David Glantz, put the "ration strength" (the German term for the number of men in a unit actually present on a given day) of 1st SS Panzer Division, 503rd Panzer Abteilung, 5th Guards Tank Corps, and nearly all other formations on both sides for that week as between 25% and 30% of full "paper" strength. At one point, 1st SS Panzer Division could muster no more than twenty-nine tanks and assault guns, while 5th Guards Tank Corps was down to a pitiful twelve serviceable T-34s out of a paper strength of one hundred and eighty. Even these numbers, though well documented, are not completely reliable, simply because both sides received replacement personnel and equipment during the operation and unit strength fluctuated dramatically from day to day. We have done our very best to come up with accurate numbers and believe we have largely succeeded in this. However, you may find other sources than those we used that disagree. Welcome to the exciting world of historical research!

### ***Weather and Terrain***

Throughout most of January 1944, the weather around Lisyanka and its environs had been cold and snowy (as usual). However, during the period

between 24 January and 17 February, the weather had warmed up enough to cause the ground to soften and make any sort of maneuvering (especially by wheeled vehicles) problematical. Temperatures ranged from just above freezing during the day to just below freezing at night with light rain and snow showers nearly a daily occurrence. If that wasn't enough, four days out of five would bring dense fog around dawn and dusk with visibility often dropping to less than two hundred meters!

The general terrain in this part of the Ukraine was and is characterized by rolling hills, partially covered by mature forest, and punctuated by shallow rivers flowing through broad flood plains. The Gniloi-Tickitch, for example was approximately fifty meters wide but only one-half meter to two meters deep at the time of this engagement, with muddy banks and dense brush along nearly its entire course. The most important terrain in the area, from a tactical point of view, however, were the numerous "balkas" (ravines) leading down from the surrounding steppe to the beds of nearly every local stream and river. Steep-sided and filled with dense brush, they made good cover for troops defending them, but frustrating obstacles to troops (and especially vehicles) needing to cross them. The terrain over which the "Korsun' Breakout" took place was, therefore, almost nothing like the endless, featureless steppe so commonly thought of by wargamers as typical for battles on the Eastern Front, where vast armadas of tanks and half-tracks roam nearly at will. We hope you find this fact as interesting and enlightening as we did.

### **Notes**

1. There is some confusion as to the name of the "pocket". Many sources refer to it as "Korsun", others call it "Cherkassy", and still others use the name "Korsun'-Schevchenkovskii" to describe it. I have found "Korsun' Pocket" to be the simplest solution and will use it throughout this work.
2. Formations driven into the "pocket" consisted of elements of the XI and XLII Corps, including the 57th, 72nd, 82nd, 88th, 112th, 167th, 168th, and 332nd Infantry Divisions, 213th Security Division, 3rd Panzer Division, 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking", and SS SturmBrigade "Wallonia" (made up of Belgian collaborators), between fifty and sixty thousand souls.

3. The southern and eastern sides of the encirclement were being just as fiercely pounded by units of the German 8th Army (specifically XLVII Panzer Corps).

4. As with so many events and operations on the Eastern Front, accurate personnel, casualty rate, and equipment figures are difficult to obtain and a spirited debate continues to rage over these. The most generally agreed-upon numbers are 56,000 Germans in the "pocket" and 35,000 escapees, many of whom were wounded, with another 5,000 or so wounded evacuated by air. There are also well-supported claims of about 10,000 Germans taken prisoner, many of whom were also wounded, which leaves somewhere around 6,000 Germans killed outright.

**Suggested Reading**

1. David Glantz and Harold S. Orenstein (Translated and Edited), *The Battle for the Ukraine* (London/Portland, Frank Cass, 2003). I have had the honor of dealing with Colonel Glantz for many years. As far as I am concerned, there is no greater authority on the Soviet Army in WWII than he. In addition, he is an extremely personable man with a well-developed sense of humor and a generous heart. An afternoon spent with Glantz, Charles Sharp, and several pitchers of quality beer is quality time indeed.

2. Leon Degrelle, *Campaign in Russia: The Waffen SS on the Eastern Front, "Front de l'est"*, (Newport Beach, CA, Inst. for Historical Review, 1985). The Institute for Historical Review is probably one of the most shameless Holocaust denial organizations out there. Therefore, although Degrelle's book provides some insights into events in the Korsun' Pocket, everything he wrote should be viewed in this light.

3. David Glantz, *Atlas of the Korsun'-Shevchenkivskii Operation: The Cherkassy Pocket*, (published by David Glantz, 2003). Detailed maps of the Eastern Front during WWII are extremely hard to come by. Even the ones you can get leave a lot to be desired. Glantz's atlas is an invaluable resource for any student of this period of the Russo-German War, including, as it does, both German and Soviet maps of the all the important battlefields (it even includes detailed orders of battle for the Red Army in January and February 1944).

4. John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin: Stalin's War Against Germany, Vol II*, (London, Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1983). This two-volume work is a great read and a good source of information on the big picture vis-à-vis the Eastern Front.

5. David Glantz & Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*, (Lawrence Kansas, University of Kansas Press, 1995). Yes... another book by David Glantz. I own nearly his entire collection. Based as it is, primarily on information from Soviet archives, I have found it in perfect counterpoint to the large number of readily available works on the same campaigns based primarily on German sources. The picture that emerges is much more even-handed than I could get any other way.

**An Additional Note on Topographical Information**

Information on the topography around Lisyanka, especially the course of the Gniloi-Tickitch and the location of Hill 239, was obtained through the following website: "www.fallingrain.com".

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