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After Action Report

Russian Reconnaissance in Force by Tank-Mounted Infantry

Early in October 1943, the German 196th Infantry Regiment occupied a defensive position in a lightly wooded area twenty miles north of Kiev. Although the flanks were well covered, the regiment's position was weak because the loose sandy soil did not permit construction of proper fortifications. Furthermore, the Russians held the high ground, a flat ridge some 2,000 yards to the north. German defensive preparations were done in textbook fashion, (i.e. mutually supporting strongpoints echeloned in depth), except that no antipersonnel mines were laid. It was not indicated if this was due to sloppiness, lack of time, or lack of mines. Antitank mines were laid on the north-south road in the second defense echelon, but it is unknown if these mines were dug-in or simply strung across the road in a daisy chain. As the road continued deeper into the German defenses, it was covered by several roadblocks, each consisting of a dug-in 50mm antitank gun.

On 5 October the Russians began running a sap towards the German line. Rainy weather and heavy ground fog masked the digging until an observer spotted broken earth in the vicinity of Advance

Position A (see map on next page). Later in the day Russian artillery fired smoke shells on the forester's house and road intersections. Anticipating an attack, German artillery and mortars shelled suspected Russian assembly areas, including Advance Point A. When the expected attack did not materialize, the Germans sent out a night patrol to reconnoiter the sap, but the probe was driven back by heavy Soviet fire.

During the next two days, under the cover of intermittent rain, the Russians advanced the sap another 500 yards to Position B. German mortar fire, attempting to interdict the advance, drew violent Russian counter battery fire as well as barrages on road intersections near the fringes of the forest. Russian patrols, screening the sap at night effectively, kept German reconnaissance parties at bay.

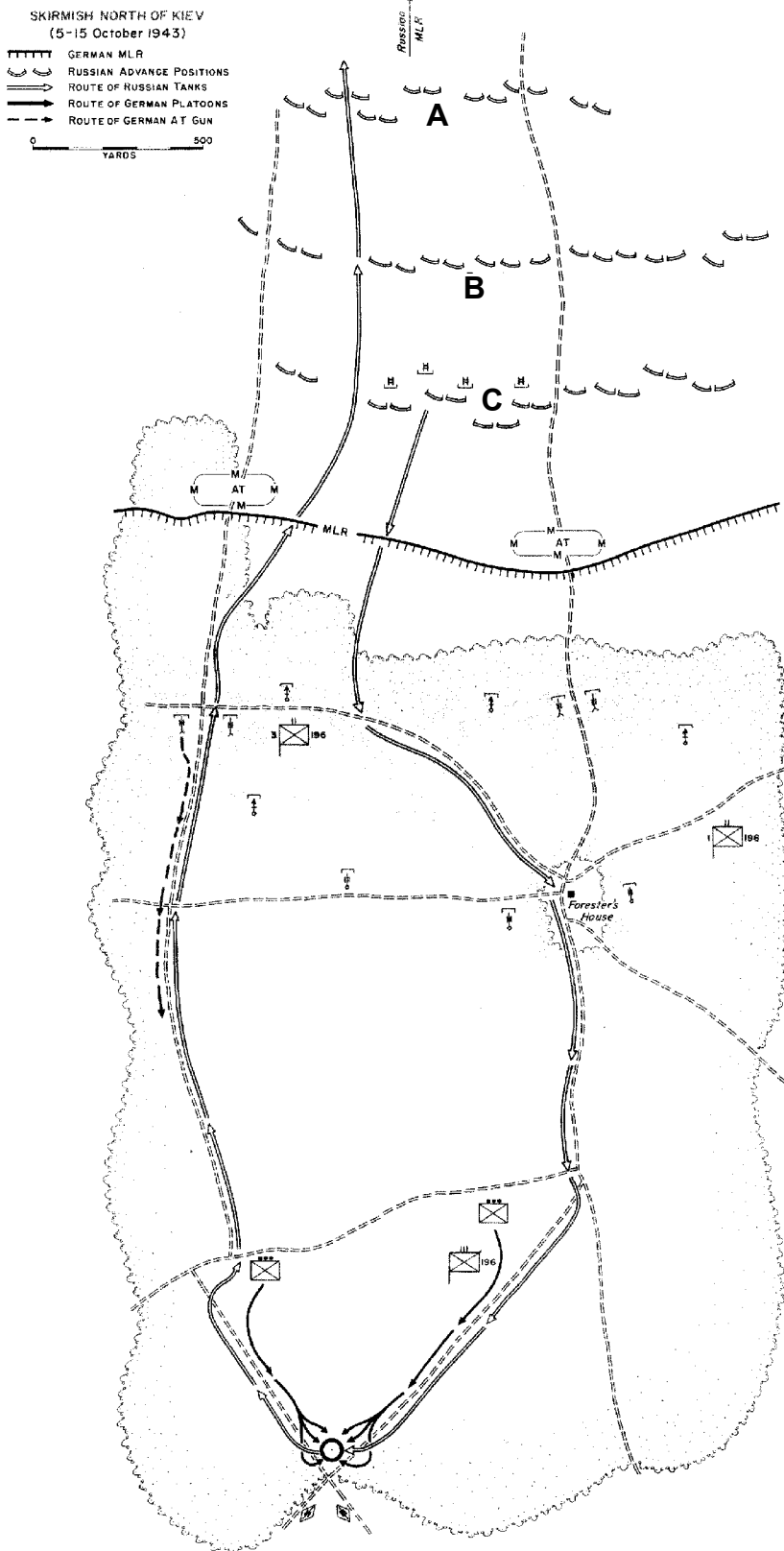
By 10 October the Russians were at Advance Position C, only 500 yards from the German line. Desperate for intelligence, the Germans sent out a risky daylight probe. Under the protective cover of mortar and artillery fire, the reinforced patrol advanced scarcely 100

yards before it was beaten back by accurate mortar fire.

When the weather finally cleared, the Germans could see all three Russian advanced positions, which appeared deserted. Still unable to get a patrol close to the sap, the Germans harassed the positions with intermittent mortar and heavy weapons fire. While the Germans gained nothing from their patrols, Russian reconnaissance parties roamed at will, accurately reporting, among other things, the presence of antitank mines on the road.

The weather again turned bad, and for the next three days heavy rains masked Russian entrenching work. The German dogged efforts to get a patrol to the saps finally succeeded on 12 October when, shortly after dusk, a detail finally reached the fringes of Position C. They did not stay long. Out of the darkness emerged three Russian patrols, supported by nine light machine guns. The ferocity of the attack and heavy volume of automatic fire forced the Germans to beat a hasty retreat.

The heavy rains continued



Toward noon of the next day, in a driving rain, a 3-man German patrol crawled into the forward Russian position. The trench was in reality a shallow ditch. It was deserted and had been deserted for some time. The conclusion was obvious; the patrol leader immediately returned to his lines and reported the position as a dummy. It was an effective red herring, for it had occupied all German attention in the sector for nearly a week. What the dummy masked remained a mystery. Perhaps, it was a diversion for the abortive tank attack of the previous evening. It was in fact the final stage of an elaborate deception. Unknown to the patrol, the Russians observed them entering the position, allowed them to reconnoiter and return with a report.

On the Russian side of the lines, during the afternoon of 14 October, a 20-man patrol, including an officer and two NCOs, was selected from a rifle company resting behind the lines. They were all veterans and native to the Kiev region. Each man drew a two-day food and ammunition ration, a semi-automatic rifle, and six hand grenades. The officer was issued a two-way radio. He and his NCOs were armed with machine pistols.

The patrol assembled in a trench near Position A. There they were given the following briefing:

into the evening of 13 October, when, at 2300 hours, the Russians cut loose with a savage artillery barrage. For the next two hours the entire sector was raked end to end with a continuous bombardment. As the shelling reached a climax, the German regimental CP received

frantic messages from the forward outposts. Tanks! Mortar and artillery fire was called in on suspected Russian assembly points. The blind shelling seemed to work, because within a short period the tanks were heard withdrawing.

You will proceed to Advance Position C where you will join four tanks that have been dug in (the "H" shaped symbols). Tomorrow you are to mount the tanks, advance on the German positions facing us, penetrate them, and drive into the wooded enemy rear area. Nothing

can delay your forward progress since everything depends on lightning speed. Knock down whatever gets in your way, avoid prolonged encounters. Your primary mission is to gain information about German positions, how they are manned, and where the enemy artillery, mortars, and obstacles are placed. Don't take prisoners until your return trip; one or two will suffice. You must create fear and terror behind the enemy lines and then withdraw as swiftly as you came.

Later that evening, the patrol reached the vicinity of Position C. The tanks, along with their crews, had been dug in by engineers and were well camouflaged. The patrol was now split into five-man squads, each of which was assigned to a tank. The men then dug-in close to the tanks, with orders to remain covered and silent, especially at day break.

The next day started with a light haze that developed into a thick afternoon fog. Visibility was less than 300 yards. At approximately 1600, per the peculiar Russian doctrine of launching attacks with direct verbal orders, an officer appeared and ordered the patrol to move out. As the tank engines fired, the camouflage nets were removed and the infantrymen jumped on their respective tanks. Within minutes the tanks backed out of their pits, formed a single column, and raced towards the German line at top speed. Surprise was absolute. The tanks crossed the German first echelon trenches without taking a shot.

Once into the second echelon defenses, the Russian tanks cut cross-country through heavy under-

brush to skirt the German antitank mines before taking to the road. By the forester's house, the tanks surprised a German water detail of two ration trucks. The German drivers fled into the woods as their vehicles were literally flattened by the speeding tanks. Without missing a beat the tanks proceeded south another 1,000 yards and took the right fork in the road. After proceeding another 1,000 yards they came to a crossroads and stopped. The Russians dismounted and prepared an all around defense on ground with a commanding view of the intersection. The tanks formed the core of the position with the infantrymen dug in on the perimeter. Radio contact was established with base and messages exchanged.

As it turned out, the Russians set-up hardly 700 yards away from the German regimental CP. Before long several German infantry platoons, equipped with close-combat antitank weapons, surrounded the Russians. The Germans were held at bay, however, by the tanks, which had a commanding field of fire out to 150 yards. Thus pinned, the Germans sent a runner to fetch one of the 50mm ATGs. The 50mm had no prime mover at the roadblock; it was going to take time to manhandle it into position. Division was called for help. At 1800 hours, two assault guns clanked into position south of the tanks and immediately opened

fire, wounding several Russian riflemen. Within ten minutes the Russians mounted the tanks and sped off in a northerly direction, guns blazing in all directions. They left behind their wounded comrades, which indicates panic, but these veteran troops may have been simply obeying orders to avoid prolonged engagements.

It was approaching dusk and the 50mm ATG crew was still laboring to get its gun to the intersection. A low rumble ahead prompted the gun chief to call a halt. It was the Russian column, bearing down at top speed. With no time to set-up and shoot, the chief ordered the gun pulled off the road. This was done barely in time to avoid the fate suffered by the ration trucks earlier that day. The crew remained under cover until the last tank swept past, then quickly swung the gun onto the road and fired. They scored a hit, but the round ricocheted, bowling off two of the mounted infantrymen. This was the battle's parting shot, for the speeding tanks reached their lines without further mishap

The Russian plan was meticulously prepared and its deceptions were brilliant. When the sap was first discovered, the Russians faked an attack drawing German mortar and artillery fire. This revealed German artillery strength and the registration of their pre-set concen-



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trations. Then the Russians moved in six tanks and withdrew two, fooling the Germans in believing the entire force had left. By screening the sap from German reconnaissance, the Russians masked the greater digging done to hide the tanks. Then, by allowing a patrol into a dummy portion of the sap, fooled the Germans into believing the entire effort was a deception

Although the plan was brilliantly conceived, the execution was flawed. The two-day raid lasted only an afternoon and yielded just two flattened trucks. Issuing the patrol a radio proved a blunder. The halt at the crossroads to establish radio contact allowed the Germans to bottle up the force. If the raiders had continued moving, they could have bagged the considerable prize of a regimental command post. It is

unknown if the radio was given to send intelligence or receive orders. If the patrol commander was awaiting orders it is reasonable to assume that in this instance, as in so many others, the Russian lower echelon command either lacked the imagination or the trust of higher echelon command to continue an action beyond its immediate scope.

Scenario notes: Although the report refers to "Russians," Soviet is a more accurate description of the Red Army forces involved. A reasonable guess on the Soviet tanks would be T-34s armed with 76.2mm guns. The German assault guns were probably *sturmgeschütz* armed with high velocity 75mm guns. The German infantry platoons involved at the crossroads could have been regular troops, or a hasty collection of staff personnel cobbled from the regimen-

tal command post. In either case, it is doubtful they had *panzerfausts*, their antitank weapons more likely consisted of hand-held Teller mines, sticky mines, Molotov cocktails, or grenade bundles.

Map notes: the little diamond shapes at the bottom of the map represent the final positions of the SP guns. The "H" like symbols by Position "C" represents the start-off positions of the Russian tanks. As to terrain, the ground gently sloped up towards the north, culminating the Russian-held ridge 2,000 yards away. The woods were thin on trees and heavy on undergrowth.

by Edward Morris