

Kursk '43 - Notes

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I. Designer Notes

Kursk '43 as a Panzer Campaign has been perhaps the longest title in development of the series to date, and involved more people at various stages than any other. It began with the map that was largely created by Dave "Blackie" Blackburn and each of the 114,000 hexes of the map was evaluated four times, each for: 1) Drainage, then 2) Topography next 3) the roads, rail towns and finally the 4) Fields, Forest, Labels and other features. We're not really sure how many hours went into it, but I still chuckle at the time, when Blackie told me after one particularly long session of staring at the map, that he could see "hexagons on the cat"! The result is the largest Panzer Campaign Map yet to be released.

The Order of Battle was team effort where Wig Graves spearheaded the German side from his numerous sources that include captured Microfiche information from the National Archive. Jim Dunnam began the framework for the massive Soviet OOB. But later, Mike Avanzini, using the "Order of Battle of the Soviet Army" from microfiche, created a new version of the Soviet OOB from scratch. Given the size of the OOB, Greg "Sturmer" Smith then became involved to assist with resolving the number of smaller units. Our goal was to retain the historical detail that went into the OOB, but to have a game OOB that was playable. We included battalions that could be combined from smaller sized units. This way the game offers the best in playability as well as flexibility for player style.

But, even with the best efforts to keep the size of the OOB manageable, the game was still very large. We have received feedback from players on previous games that told us that while they loved the big campaigns, it took a long time to play them - even a single turn. To address this John Tiller took an idea from Squad Battles, "On Map (combat) Results" and brought it to this series. So now the combat result dialog has been replaced with actual shot results right on the map, without a dialog showing more information than most players want or need. Players who liked the old way better with the dialog and extra information can still access it by un-checking the On Map Results from the setting menu.

One of the main game interface improvements for Kursk is the addition under the A/I menu of a "Faster A/I Processing" setting. This setting turns the sound off while the A/I is moving and also speeds up the tempo of the move. The combined effect of On Map Results the effect is to reduce the play time to a fraction of the amount it used to take. These changes will be imported into the previous games in the series in the next round of Panzer

Campaigns updates, and will be the default method of play.

With each new game in the series, we like to add an element or two which helps to capture the flavor of that battle. For this game we added two features, the first of which is a Demolition Unit, as an OOB flag. This feature is used to represent the "Goliath" and SdKfz 301 Demolition vehicles that were used on the Ninth Army sector of the Kursk battle, where these vehicles were used to clear minefields. They can also be used to assault stubborn defensive positions such as bunkers. While largely experimental vehicles whose effect on the overall battle was not really that great, we felt it was worth representing in the game and something unique to this battle.

Another factor that impacted this battle were breakdowns, or more specifically a higher number of breakdowns for the Panther tank, which was new in the German arsenal and didn't quite have the bugs worked out of it yet. Vehicle Breakdown has been a game feature since the fourth title in the series, Tobruk '41, was released. The Breakdown is dependent upon the value in the Parameter Data, and it is possible that a unit will lose strength as it moves. So for Kursk we added the ability to flag Low Reliability in the OOB. Units with Low Reliability increase their chance of breakdown at a higher than normal rate.

Here is an interesting quote from Heinz Guderian, then Inspector General of Armored Troops: *"I spent June 15th worrying about our problem child, the Panther; the track suspension and drive were not right and the optics were also not yet satisfactory. On the next day I told Hitler of my reasons for not wishing to see the Panthers sent into action in the East. They were simply not yet ready to go to the front."*

The Glantz & House book "The Battle of Kursk (1999) was the primary source of information for this game. For the maps, we used "Atlas of the Battle of Kursk" (1997) that is available directly from Col. Glantz. While much of the map information in the atlas is the same as in the book he co-authored with House, the atlas has 74 maps, presenting great detail including daily situations map. All these are shown on easy to read and uncluttered 11x17 inch page format. In some of the operation areas, the unit positions and defenses are laid out on copies of 1:50,000 scale topographic sheets. As far as we can ascertain, these are the most detailed battle maps available anywhere for Kursk, and were far easier to use than those in the published sources.

I'd be remiss in not mentioning one additional source of info not yet available to the public. A few years previously, I became aware of a book being written entitled "Kursk: The Battle of Prokhorovka". I contacted the author; Christopher A. Lawrence of The Dupuy Institute, we discussed a number of issues surrounding Kursk via email. Chris is extremely knowledgeable on the battle and recounted information he had learned from touring the battlefield himself as well as from extensive research from German and Soviet military archives. This book, which will be of interest to East Front military history fans, will be published by Westview Press. It should be available in the Fall 2003.

Looking over the list of scenarios we're presenting in the game may cause some people to ask about other battles that occurred in, or around, our game map during different time periods such as, the Orel Counter Offensive, Operation Rummyetsev, or even Manstein's

Backhand Blow. These we consider as separate battles, and if players wish to build them with the editing tools that are included with the game, that's great. In fact, designers will find there have been some interesting changes and additions to these tools with the Kursk game. At some later time, we could combine pieces of our Kharkov map with our new huge Kursk map, and then, maybe add on parts like the Mius River to create another game covering these campaigns. This would involve more research, a new OOB, and all depends on the desire of the public to support the effort needed to produce another title in the series, in this interesting area of the Russian Front.

However, for this game we focus on Kursk, the German attack on the bulge in the lines in early July 1943. For this, the fighting was mainly the attacks at the top of the bulge by the Ninth Army, and at the bottom by Army Group South. We've included a very large Full Campaign, for those who want to investigate the bigger picture. And we've included smaller campaigns, covering the North and South battles separately, as well as smaller Day One actions. We have also created scenarios at the high water mark, in each of the critical sectors, and trust with these you will have all you need to explore the Battle of Kursk.

II. Scenario List, and Overviews

#00_Started.scn	Getting Started: Recon in Force
#0705_01_Kursk_Full_Battle.scn	0705_01: The Battle of Kursk
#0705_02_North_Battle.scn	0705_02: North Sector Campaign - "Not One Step Back"
#0705_03_South_Battle.scn	0705_03: South Sector Campaign - "Welcome to the Fascists"
#0705_03a_South_Battle.scn	0705_03a: South Sector Campaign
#0705_04_Bobrik.scn	0705_04: Rout of the Rifles
#0705_05_Maloarkhangelsk.scn	0705_05: Seize Maloarkhangelsk
#0705_06_Cherkasskoye.scn	0705_06: A Gaping Hole
#0705_07_Ternovka.scn	0705_07: Bleed them White
#0705_08_Belgorod.scn	0705_08: The Long Right Flank
#0707_01_Ponyri_N.scn	0707_01: The Stalingrad of Kursk
#0707_01a_Ponyri_N.scn	0707_01a: The Stalingrad of Kursk
#0710_01_Prokhorovka_S.scn	0710_01: Clash of Steel at Prokhorovka
#0710_01a_Prokhorovka_S.scn	0710_01a: Clash of Steel at Prokhorovka
#0710_02_48th_PzK_S.scn	0710_02: 48th Panzer Korps Dual Missions
#0710_02a_48th_PzK_S.scn	0710_02a: 48th Panzer Korps Dual Missions
#0711_01_III_PzK_S.scn	0711_01: III Panzer Korps at the Apex
#0711_01a_III_PzK_S.scn	0711_01a: III Panzer Korps at the Apex

Getting Started: Recon in Force

Voronezh Front on the south face of the Kursk Bulge, July 4th 1943: The first shots fired in the battle in the Kursk offensive, were actually fired on the day prior to the big attack. Here, along the southern face of the bulge, a reconnaissance-in-force was launched in an area where the main German and Russian line was separated by a wider zone of outposts, and strong points, many up to Battalion size. The task for elements of the 48th Panzer Corps was to advance and sweep away these strong points at Gertsovka, and Butovo, and determine the location of the main Russian line, so the full weight of the offensive could fall upon it. Fierce fighting raged in the waning hours before the main battle, and Soviet Guards fought hand-to-hand in a contest they could not win, but perished in unequal combat rather than abandon their positions. [Size, small]

0705_01: The Battle of Kursk

Operation Citadel, Kursk Salient, July 4th 1943: It was patently obvious to both sides that the "pinching off" of the huge salient around Kursk was to be the target of the next German "summer offensive". Despite this fact, the attack was still to go ahead, but not quite as planned. Hitler wanted his new "superweapons", the Panther and the Elefant, to debut here. Consequently, the start date of early May was pushed back, and then further back, until it ended up in July. During all this time the Russians dug in, deeper and deeper, on both shoulders of the salient. By the time the attack started, there were seven defensive lines, including dug-in anti-tank strongpoints, anti-tank ditches, and millions of mines had been laid. The Soviets knew exactly what was planned and, for the first time, were prepared in depth for the huge assault. When the storm broke, they were ready, but despite this, it was to be a very close contest, with neither side giving any quarter. [Size, very large]

0705_02: North Sector Campaign - "Not One Step Back"

North of Kursk, July 5th 1943: Operation Citadel was the old, well-proven German recipe of a pincer operation. Hitler's plan was simple enough, basically to encircle the Soviet forces in the Kursk area by means of a well-coordinated, rapid thrust of two attacking armies from the north and south, then to annihilate the Soviets by concentric attacks. The northern jaw of the pincers was to be the Ninth Army under command of Gen Walter Model. Its task would be to strike in a south easterly direction, from the area south of Orel, to link up on the high ground to the east of Kursk with units from Army Group South. Model had serious objections to the plan, he had evidence of mile after mile of elaborately prepared defenses in the exact path of the proposed offensive. But everyone knew that nothing could withstand a German Blitzkrieg of this magnitude, the Soviets, however, had different ideas, and were prepared in depth for the huge assault. Their orders included the phrase, "Not one step back! Stand to the death!" They were determined to prove the victory at Stalingrad was no flash in the pan. [Size, large]
Note: This scenario has some Demolition Units – Goliath's.

0705_03: South Sector Campaign - "Welcome to the Fascists"

South of Kursk, July 5th 1943: Operation Citadel was the old, well-proven German recipe of a pincer operation. Hitler's plan was simple enough, basically to encircle the Soviet forces in the Kursk area by means of a well-coordinated, rapid thrust of two attacking armies from the north and south, then to annihilate the Soviets by concentric attacks. The southern jaw of the

pincers was to be the Fourth Panzer Army, from Field Marshall Manstein's Army Group South, under command of Gen Herman Hoth. It was to strike from the area north of Kharkov towards Kursk, with its eastern flank protected by Army Detachment Kempf. Its armada of tanks was to smash through the defensive lines of the Voronezh Front, mainly from the Sixth Guards Army then, after linking up with Ninth Army from the northern thrust, they were to smash the encircled Soviet forces. The Soviet armies had been preparing themselves for several weeks, they knew the German plan of attack, and they knew when the blow would fall. Their plan was to bleed the Germans white before launching massive counter attacks all along the Eastern Front. Commissar Kruschev concluded a briefing the day before with the phrase, "And now to work! Prepare to welcome the fascists!" The scene was set for the start of a titanic struggle in the east. [Size, large]

0705_03a: South Sector Campaign - "Welcome to the Fascists"

Same as 0705_03 with easier to reach objectives and victory levels and later Soviet troop arrivals.

0705_04: Rout of the Rifles

Central Front on the north face of the Kursk Bulge, July 5th 1943: The main assault, in the north on the first day, had three panzer divisions and four infantry divisions, with constant support by aircraft that severely taxed the Soviet 29th Rifle Corps northwest of Ponyri. The result of the day's action, saw elements of one Soviet rifle division routed, but the drive spearheaded by 20th Pz Div stalled under intense fire at the town of Bobrik. [Size, small]
Note: This scenario has some Demolition Units – Goliath's.

0705_05: Seize Maloarkhangelsk

Central Front on the north face of the Kursk Bulge, July 5th 1943: The German XXIII Corps, on the eastern flank of the Ninth Army, was given the task to confuse the Soviets as to the real German focal point of the attack, by attempting to seize the town of Maloarkhangelsk. The effort failed to make a major penetration, and the defenders not only halted the drive, but also launched local counterattacks along the front. [Size, small] Note: This scenario has some Demolition Units – Goliath's.

0705_06: A Gaping Hole

Southern front, July 5th 1943: The 48th Panzer Korps was facing a dogged defence from the 22nd Guards Rifle Corps. The guardsmen were refusing to lie down and die and their depleted ranks were taking a murderous toll on the Korps' advance. However, on the left flank, the 3rd Panzer Division struck swiftly, and viciously smashed through the second echelon of the Soviet defenses. This daring thrust ripped a huge hole through the 22nd GRC....a hole too large to be easily repaired. [Size, small]

0705_07: Bleed them White

Southern Front, July 5th 1943: The 52nd Guards Rifle Division of the 23rd Guards Rifle Corps was deployed at the most critical point in the corps sector. It was astride the road that ran from Tomarovka to Oboyan, and eventually to Kursk. Its defenses had been painstakingly constructed and were 8-12 Kms in depth, with sizable anti-tank and armor support from Corps and Army reserves. A very formidable defensive region indeed. In fact, its 8,000 plus men were facing the cream of the German Army, three superbly equipped SS Panzer-Grenadier Divisions of the II SS Pz Korps. The defense was based on the premise that the entire 52GRD would be sacrificed after inflicting as much damage as possible on the advancing Germans, to "bleed them white". [Size, small]

0705_08: The Long Right Flank

South Eastern part of the Southern Front, July 5th 1943: The III Panzer Korps was having difficulties around Belgorod. The plan was to cross the Severnny Donets River near Belgorod, and then push north east to perform its primary mission of protecting the right flank of Fourth Panzer Army. In fact, close to Belgorod, the 81st Guards Rifle Division contained the German effort, forcing some units to redeploy further south to try their luck there. This they did, achieving several limited bridgeheads, with the 7th Panzer division enjoying the best of the day advancing about 6 Kms. This was ominous to the Soviets whose defense was not ripped apart, but the bridgeheads were a cause for concern. It was equally ominous, maybe even more so, to von Manstein at Army Group South HQ because, as yet, the right flank was unprotected. [Size, small]

0707_01: The Stalingrad of Kursk

Central Front on the north face of the Kursk Bulge, July 7th 1943: The most fiercely contested point on the north face of the Kursk salient occurred around the village of Ponyri, a critical town that German veterans referred to as "the Stalingrad of the Kursk salient". Here a bitter struggle raged for three days. The 18th and 9th Panzer divisions, along with the 292nd Infantry division, were thrown back five times by the Soviets who were supported by a full spectrum of self propelled guns, sappers, and other detachments who left the battlefield a landscape of smoking German panzers. [Size, medium]

0707_01a: The Stalingrad of Kursk

Same as 0707_01 with easier to reach objectives and victory levels.

0710_01: Clash of Steel at Prokhorovka

Vorohnezh Front on the south face of the Kursk Bulge, July 10th 1943: After a week of grinding forward through the stifling Soviet defenses, Hausser's II SS Panzer Korps was pressed to begin a hasty attack toward Prokhorovka piecemeal with the forces they had at hand. The German tide at the Battle of Kursk was at hand, coming to a climax when tanks of

the 5th Guards Tank Army clashed in a melee of massive scale in what would be the largest tank battle the world had ever seen. [Size, medium]

0710_01a: Clash of Steel at Prokhorovka

Same as 0710_01 with easier to attain victory levels.

0710_02: 48th Panzer Korps Dual Missions

Vorohnezh Front on the south face of the Kursk Bulge, July 10th 1943: After five days of fighting, the hard-pressed the Soviet 1st Tank Army was re-organizing the defense line. Although the weakened force held the line, it was backed by a number of fresh rifle divisions. The Germans detected a weakness at the junction of the 6th Tank, and 3rd Mechanized Corps, and to exploit this decided on "dual missions". The 11th Panzer Div would continue to drive northward for Oboyan, while the 3rd Panzer Div and Grossdeutschland were to turn west and destroy the Soviet force along its flank. The question was; "Did they have enough force to carry out both missions at the same time in their weakened state." [Size, small]

0710_02a: 48th Panzer Korps Dual Missions

Same as 0710_02 with easier to reach objectives and victory levels.

0711_01: III Panzer Korps at the Apex

Vorohnezh Front on the south face of the Kursk Bulge, July 11th 1943: After a week of trying, Army Detachment Kempf was finally able to penetrate through the dense fortifications of the Soviet 7th Guards Army. However, it could not yet perform its primary mission of right flank protection for the II SS Panzer Korps' drive on Prokhorovka. At dawn on the 11th, the 6th Panzer Div struck with Tigers of the 503rd Panzer Detachment, tearing through the 305th Rifle Division and lunging northward in dramatic fashion. There was new hope that they might fulfill their mission. [Size, small]

0711_01a: III Panzer Korps at the Apex

Same as 0711_01 with easier to reach objectives and victory levels.

III. Kursk, The Moment of Truth

By Wild Bill Wilder

It Had to Happen

It seems now that the battle of Kursk was really inevitable. It had to come to this. The two

opposing sides had been hammering at one another for two years. The pendulum had swung one way and then the other. Sooner or later, there would be a decisive battle that would decide the final course of the war. It would take place in southern Russia in an uneven circle of some 75 miles with the town of Kursk at its center. Though the fighting never reached it, Kursk would be the infamous name attached to this mighty series of battles.

Kursk was in essence a show of strength. The German army would stand toe to toe with the Russian bear in a slugfest to the bitter end. It was not a contest of courage or will. If it had been it would have ended in a draw. Both forces demonstrated clearly that they had the will and the desire to win. Ultimately it was a conflict in which skilled warriors with high-tech equipment would fight a larger swarming horde of lesser-trained, but equally motivated soldiers, tankers and airmen in a fight to the finish.

Oh the war would go on, of course, but this would be the last great offensive action of the German army in the East. From Kursk on to the end, the Wehrmacht began a bloody trek back to whence they had come two years earlier.

A New Effort

The path that had led both forces to this point was marked with danger signs for Germany from the start. The first winter in Russia was for the Wehrmacht a nightmare. The second winter was a calamity of major proportions. In a battle that lasted for six months, one tenth of the entire Germany army was lost.

That meant one soldier in ten had disappeared from the German ranks. The vaunted German 6th army and entire divisions of allies were simply sucked off the face of the Motherland as with a giant brown vacuum cleaner. They were gone. The only remains were the blackened hulks and torn bodies that littered both the city and the surrounding countryside. Divinity mercifully covered the entire grim spectacle with a blanket of white as if to give the combatants a moment of peace.

Now it was 1943. General von Manstein, in a masterstroke compensated somewhat for the horrendous losses suffered in the fighting for Stalingrad with the recapture of Kharkov in March. The spring thaw then slowed movement to a crawl and halted any advantages to the Germans to capitalize on the opportunity. Army Group South with its victory had given new impetus to Hitler and the OKW.

The new plan that was generated was Manstein's "backhand stroke." He would allow the Russians to enter the Donetz basin and then begin a sweeping movement north from Kharkov that would place the Soviets in the same peril that his fellow soldiers had fallen into at Stalingrad. When OKW got wind of the idea, it was changed. Another plan quickly arose that seemed to the higher command to be much more effective and final.

Since there now existed a salient or bulge of Russian forces that had protruded itself into the German front lines, why not cut it off? Instead of a sweep from the south by one Army Group, two would participate and form giant pincers at both extremes of that bulge.

Well equipped and with the newer weapons and tanks, the German army would deal the Bolsheviks such a blow that the whole Russian offensive would stall. Then either Hitler could negotiate a peace of sorts with Stalin or time would be bought to bring more devastating weapons to the table of war.

Hitler's Concern

Hitler for once hesitated. He was not sure. The loss at Stalingrad seemed to have taken the blind assurance for which he had been known away from him. He wanted to win this one. He knew his armies had to give him a victory or it would be all over. In addition, the losses suffered in and around Stalingrad had so weakened the offensive punch of the Wehrmacht that it would be some months into 1943 before anything like the earlier German offensives could be executed.

So in order to be certain of a victory, he would need time to prepare his attacking forces. This period of preparation was to end in May, then postponed for a month, and then another. The newest tank in the German inventory, the Mark V Panther was in production, but would enough of them be ready in time?

The introduction of the Tiger had startled the Russians, much as the T-34 had the German tankers in 1941. Hitler believed in this new tank, designed specifically to kill that evil beast. It would be the best medium tank of its day. But it had problems. The rush to get it off the assembly lines and into action would be the source of much grief to German armored commanders as the battle got under way.

The Germans had amassed a powerful force. To the north, under von Kluge (the 9th Army) were poised six armored and five infantry divisions with all their support units. In the south, the brilliant General von Manstein would provide two armies, the Fourth Armored and Detachment Kempf. Together they mustered eleven armored and five infantry divisions.

Two new pieces of armor would have their baptism of battle at Kursk. They would be the Ferdinand or "Elephant," a monster turretless self-propelled piece with some of the thickest armor plating imaginable, and the "Panther," specifically designed to counter the Russian T-34. Tragically, neither weapon would do well in this fight, though the Panther was destined to become perhaps the best all round tank of the Second World War.

Some of the most intricate and deadly defenses ever imagined were prepared and done so in great depth. The Russians wanted the Germans to attack. They wanted to bleed and kill the German army. This was a showdown that would please the Soviets.

There was intense debate over the outcome of such a titanic battle among the high command in the German army. Even Hitler admitted to his staff that his stomach churned at the thought of such a gamble. He apparently recognized that the fate of the war in Russia would hinge on this momentous conflict.

Still, there seemed to be no other choice. The Fuhrer despised retreat and desperately wanted to go back to the offensive. This was the ideal place. April had been the ideal time. But it was July, and it was too late. Like a giant machine set in motion, the plans and preparations had come too far to stop now. The battle for Kursk would take place.

Russian Anticipation

By the end of June, the Germans were finally ready. But so were the Russians. Through an intricate and reliable spy network known as "The Lucy Ring" the Russian high command was well informed about the German plan and began stuffing the Kursk bulge with every weapon and man it could spare.

The forces grew until elements of three Russian "Fronts" were packed into a tiny area. It included Rokossovsky's Central Front (the northern sector), Vatutin's Voronezh Front (Southern sector) and Konev's Steppe or Reserve Front. Remember, the term "Front," when referring to the Soviet army, was the equivalent of an army group, not a battle line as the word suggests.

It would be Marshall Georgi Zhukov who would coordinate the defenses and counteroffensives at Kursk. With information supplied by the infamous spy ring within the higher echelons of German command, Zhukov was fully aware of the enemy's intentions. As early as April 12th, he conferred with Stalin in Moscow.

Quietly listening, Stalin puffed his pipe and nodded his head. Though the Premier considered Zhukov a threat to his authority, there was no refuting his talents as a military leader. They were agreed. The area in the salient would be strongly reinforced with three concentric belts of mines, antitank guns, artillery and fortified infantry positions. In reserve would be a huge force of tank-heavy units for a swift and brutal counterattack.

Thus the German high command was unaware that an attack in great force into Kursk was precisely what the Russian military desired. As time passed, and the ground dried from the spring thaw, the Germans still did not come. Excellent! Now Zhukov began to work in earnest. Organizational tables and communications between units were much improved. Better radios, automatic weapons, antitank guns and an enormous amount of mines (2,500 anti-personnel and 2,200 antitank mines per mile of defensive front) were brought into the salient.

Whole anti-aircraft and artillery divisions were formed and moved to the front to give the Supreme Command more mobility with better control and higher density of fire. Tank production was increased, with units in the Kursk area having top priority.

By the summer of 1943, the Russians had five full tank armies ready for action. Each army included two tank corps and one mechanized corps. Over one million soldiers were prepared to fight. In the air, the aircraft wings were flying improved Yaks and Sturmoviks. Each of the four Fronts now had its own air arm of 700 to 800 aircraft.

In actuality, the defenders outnumbered the attackers in every area. While no sets of figures found in historical documents match exactly, it is estimated that the German forces at Kursk numbered 900,000 men, 2,500 aircraft, 10,000 artillery pieces and 2,400 tanks.

On the Soviet side of the ledger, there were 1,350,000 men, 2,650 aircraft, 20,000 artillery pieces and nearly 4,000 tanks and self-propelled guns. Numerically then, considering the standard table of odds (an attacker should have a 3 to 1 advantage against the enemy and a 5 to 1 advantage against well-prepared defenses), the Germans were defeated before they began.

A Thunderous Roar!

On July 5th, the moment came. With a massive roar of artillery and swooping German aircraft, the deciding battle got under way.

The mighty German armored spearheads swept forward into a sea of mines. Minefields were everywhere. The columns continued. Flying low overhead were specially equipped tank-killing Stukas, armed with 37mm cannon that could easily penetrate the lightly armored tops of Russian tanks. From the other side came the Yaks and Sturmoviks, wreaking the same havoc on German armor.

The dreaded T-34s were present, in such numbers that German tank crews described their mad charges as suicidal, yet effective. Knowing that range was their enemy against the 88mm guns of the Tigers, the T-34s and other Soviet armor rushed ahead and closed with the enemy. They came so fast and so many that even the most proficient German tank crews could not stop them all. They were almost like human-wave assaults dressed in thick steel. Once at close range, even the vaunted Tiger found itself vulnerable to an armor-piercing 76mm shell.

Explosions from dying tanks came as rapidly as the rat-a-tat of machine gun fire. Both in the north and south, tanks were going up in flames every few seconds. Frightened peasants living in the area ran for their lives, screaming and covering their ears to shut out the mighty crescendo of death.

There were times when the smoke from burning vehicles blotted out the sun. Never before or since had an action of this vicious magnitude been fought in such a reduced space. Aircraft constantly fell from the sky, like stricken birds, the flames and smoke of their fiery destruction lacing the air above. German gunners claimed over 400 Russian planes shot down in one day.

The Shadow of Doom

At first, the inexorable weight of the German attack in both directions seemed to be succeeding. The tragedy was as they advanced their numbers were greatly diminished. Thus after covering a few miles an attacking group would have its strength cut by one-third or more,

drastically reducing its effectiveness.

German tank commanders had standing orders that if their tanks were disabled, they were not to abandon them, but continue to fight. Such orders were suicide. One of the essential qualities of a tank is its mobility. Take it away and it becomes a large inviting target. The hundreds of antitank guns and Soviet assault crews made quick work of such steel invalids.

In the north, von Kluge's forces penetrated nine miles of the deadly enemy defenses. It had taken five days to do it. By this time, however, the German juggernaut had come to a standstill. Manstein's armies in the south did better. Though getting off to a slow start, they gradually picked up momentum. Their high point came at the great tank battle of Prokhorovka.

Here over 1,500 tanks entered into one of the most intense confrontations of armor ever seen. The Germans broke through, even though they had suffered horrendous casualties. They had, however, smashed or badly crippled no less than ten Soviet tank or mechanized Corps, or upward of 20 enemy divisions.

As the success of the fight hung in the balance, Hitler made a startling announcement. Allied landings had taken place in Sicily. Fearing the weakness of his Italian allies, the Fuhrer made immediate plans to withdraw the very units needed to complete the task and send them to the west.

Von Kluge put up little protest. He already felt beaten and unable to continue in the north. In the south, however, General von Manstein cried "foul," and earnestly pleaded to keep his units. Hitler finally agreed that the fighting could continue to finish off the Soviet forces already engaged. His removal of the very units needed to accomplish that brought the battle of Kursk to a bloody close.

Germany had given its best. Its casualties included 120,000 men and over 1,500 tanks, many of which could not be recovered for repair. These would prove to later be irreplaceable. Not that the Soviets had not suffered either. Their losses included over 200,000 casualties and over 1,500 tanks. Many of those, however, were recovered and repaired, thus minimizing the armor losses.

So the battle of Kursk became a doorway, a doorway of retreat, through which the German Army, once the almighty conqueror of the Russian Steppes, would begin a painful, shameful retreat for over 1,000 miles back to their shattered homeland. Like angry baying hounds, the Russian now had the taste of blood, and would pursue them relentlessly.

Kursk would mark the end of the great German offensives. It would also signal the beginning of the Russian recovery of its land and its dignity. And no one could tell a soldier of the Motherland that revenge is a dish served cold. The heat of their anger and resentment would fire their courage and enthusiasm to achieve a final smothering victory over the evil fascist invaders. Though it would go on for nearly two more years, the outcome of the war between Germany and Russia was decided at Kursk.

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