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Strategic Operations

As was the case in the southern area of the Eastern Theater, the Luftwaffe was committed in Combat Zone Center primarily in direct and indirect support of the Army. The only real difference was that in Combat Zone South Luftwaffe forces were specifically assigned the exclusive mission of air support by the highest command authority, the high commands of the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe. In the central sector, however, the delimitation of air operations to support missions for the Army was the natural result of tactical developments on the ground. No German air units could be spared for systematic, continuous operations against strategic targets, since every available plane had to be thrown into action against the incessant Soviet attacks and the immense supplies of Russian tanks, artillery, multiple rocket launchers, and other materiel.

Keenly aware of the need to destroy the sources of Soviet military power, the responsible Luftwaffe command in the central area--at first the VIII Air Corps and later Luftwaffe Command East--nevertheless launched repeated air attacks against strategic objectives. These attacks, although strategic in character, caused only slight, temporary interruptions in the Soviet armament industry, and were really mere pinpricks which had no strategic impact upon the course of the war.

In Combat Zone Center, several strategic missions were carried out in 1942. German air forces made three small-scale attacks in January against Moscow, but with little effect; on 6 February they struck the aircraft industry at Voronezh and an automobile factory in Gorki which was presumed to be manufacturing tanks. On 2 March German planes again bombed the aircraft plant at Voronezh, and on 6 March attacked the capital. Three days later, two German aircraft attacked an aircraft engine factory in Rybinsk. Toward the end of the month Moscow was twice bombed by the Luftwaffe, and on the latter date (30 March) two raids were also made upon the oil refinery at Kalinin.[62] On 6 April Moscow and an aircraft factory in Rybinsk were successfully attacked, and in May the Luftwaffe bombed a Soviet automobile factory and an aircraft plant at Gorki. Night missions were carried out on 16 June against airfields and railroad installations in the Moscow area.

No further strategic missions were made until October, the final strategic efforts of 1942, when Soviet rail and road centers in the Kalinin-Toropets area were bombed.[63] The few independent missions were carried out with very weak forces and, except for the attacks on Soviet concentrations, could have had no real strategic effect. It is therefore virtually meaningless to consider them as true strategic operations in the full sense of that term.

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Some interesting studies which were made indicated clearly, however, that German Luftwaffe leaders were aware of the need for strategic operations. About summer of 1942, Luftwaffe Command East prepared a number of special strategic studies for systematically conducted operations against the Soviet armament industry in the optimistic hope that suitable flying units would, after all, be available at some future date for missions of this sort. From the point of view of effective aircraft ranges, the area served by Luftwaffe Command East appeared to be especially suitable, and, by submitting complete plans for such operations, the staff of this command hoped to interest the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe.

Special efforts were to be made against long-distance transmission lines carrying electric power from the deep interior of the Soviet Union to the industries in the general area of Moscow which were recovering from recent air attacks.

Reconnaissance aircraft photographed Soviet power lines, and the intention was then to send out planes using so-called electric cable bombs (Seilbomben) to interrupt the flow of current as completely and permanently as possible. The plans for these attacks were prepared with the assistance of the Luftwaffe Administration Office of the Reichs Air Ministry (Amt LD des Reichsluftministerium). Goering instructed personnel of this office to study and reprocess the already available target data on the Soviet armament industry in collaboration with the Reichs Ministry for Armaments and War Production (Reichsministerium fuer Ruestung und Kriegsproduktion). Although the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe was keenly interested in the matter and was currently informed on the status of work done in preparation for such strategic operations, the studies were still incomplete at the end of 1942.

Air Transport Operations

While airlift operations during the first few months of 1942 successfully sustained certain temporarily isolated German strongpoints, the ardent efforts to supply the encircled troops at Velikiye-Luki by air proved to be in vain. This was not due, however, to a failure on the part of the Luftwaffe to airlift sufficient supplies to the beleaguered forces. The prime reason for the loss of this Army force was Hitler's utter refusal to permit the unit to attempt a breakout while there was still time to do so. Its subsequent annihilation was due in large part to the hampering effects of bad weather and climate upon the relief forces sent forward to liberate the garrison and to the crushing superiority of Soviet forces, which daily

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compressed the small group of German defenders into an ever more narrowly confined space and simply smothered them through sheer weight of numbers.

The drop area had decreased in size so much during the last weeks of the battle that more than 50 percent of the containers dropped by the Luftwaffe fell into Soviet hands. Nevertheless, the high morale and spirit of self-sacrifice among German airmen during this period was so marked that it virtually defied description. Glider pilots carrying special troops and materiel dashed down into the German-held parts of the town in the full realization that they would then have no chance to escape from the pocket and would have to share the fate of the doomed garrison.

On the whole, Luftwaffe air transport operations in Combat Zone Center were successfully accomplished during 1942, at least insofar as weather and material conditions permitted. False impressions were given, however, to the highest command levels with respect to the German Air Force's ability to carry out logistical operations by air. In Combat Zone South this was to have a disastrous effect.

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Chapter 5

THE FOURTH AIR FLEET IN COMBAT ZONE SOUTH

The Turn of the Year 1942

The General Military Situation

By November of 1941, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South had advanced farther to the east than any German army group, but its achievement had been costly in men, animals, and materiel. The front line of Combat Zone South ran approximately from a point east of Kursk to a point just east of Belgorod, southward along the eastern bank of the Donets River beyond Izyum, thence across the river to the estuary of the Don River near Rostov. Army Group South had five field armies, the Second, Sixth, Seventeenth, Eleventh, and First Panzer. On the left (northern) wing was the Second Army under the command of Generaloberst Maximilian Freiherr von Weichs. South of it was the Sixth Army under Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau, flanked on the right by the Seventeenth Army of Generaloberst Hermann Hoth.* To the south (right) of Hoth was situated the First Panzer Army of Generaloberst Ewald von Kleist, holding the lower bend of the Donets River and the Rostov area. General der Infanterie Erich von Manstein commanded the Eleventh Army in the Crimea.

Kleist's First Panzer Army thrust into Rostov on 20 November 1941. The position was none too tenable, and within a week Soviet counter-attacks at this point were so severe that von Rundstedt was compelled to ask Hitler if the First Panzer Army might not be withdrawn to the Mius River. The Fuehrer immediately ordered Kleist to stand fast, which prompted Rundstedt to tender his resignation (effective as of 3 December 1941). However, his successor, von Reichenau, could do no better, and soon found that he too had to ask Hitler for permission to withdraw Kleist's unit to the Mius position./ This time Hitler approved.[1]

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*Commanding General, Seventeenth Army, 5 October 1941-21 April 1942. The next commander was General der Infanterie Hans von Salmuth.

/See Maps Nos. 3 and 4. A heavy Soviet attack was made from several sides of the city of Rostov on 28 November 1941.

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The general exhaustion of Army Group South's troops, the lack of winter clothing, shortages of replacements and supplies, and over-extended lines of communication made it mandatory for the army group commander to give his forces a rest so that reserves could be built up behind the Sixth and Seventeenth Armies.

By mid-January several crises appeared along the Eastern Front. Soviet forces, now strong enough to launch massive counterattacks on a wide front from Leningrad to the Black Sea, made serious penetrations of the German lines along the southern boundary of Army Group North near Ostashkov and another simultaneous drive north of Rzhev. The Fourth Army front (Combat Zone Center) was also thrust back by a substantial Soviet breakthrough which advanced beyond Sukhinichi.* German defense efforts were hampered by the exhaustion of combat troops, shortages of personnel and materiel, and sub-zero weather.

In Combat Zone South, hard fighting German units were able to hold a continuous front line extending from the vicinity east of Taganrog northward to the Mius River, to a point east of Debaltsevo and Artemovsk, northward to a position south of Yama and along the west bank of the Donets to the east of Balakleya, thence along the Donets to the area east of Kursk.[2] Army Group South was fortunate in that its rear areas were inhabited by Ukrainians, who were often hostile to the Communist regime and generally refrained from partisan activities.† This freed German ground combat troops in the Ukraine for full-time commitment on the fighting front. The German Sixth Army (Army Group South) repulsed Soviet breakthrough attempts in early January at Belgorod and Volchansk, and by midmonth had established a reasonably stable line. The front was manned, however, by Wehrmacht units which were greatly decimated.

On 18 January 1942 a new crisis forced the Luftwaffe to shift its operational emphasis to the area east and southeast of Kharkov. There the Red Army forces of Marshal Semen Konstantinovich Timoshenko achieved a deep breakthrough of the German lines on both sides of Izyum, a breach which was rapidly expanded to more than 50 miles in breadth, opening the way for advances upon Dnepropetrovsk (on the Dnepr River), Krasnograd, and Poltava. These developments immediately threatened the German Sixth and Seventeenth Armies, their communications routes, and those of the First Panzer Army.[3] The gravity of the situation is

*See Maps Nos. 3 and 4.
†See Map No. 11.

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shown in the following diary notations of Generaloberst Franz Halder, Chief of Staff of the German Army:

> The two penetrations [on either side of Izyum] have been consolidated to form a large breakthrough. The Soviet Russians are threatening rail communications between the First Panzer Army and the Seventeenth Army. Sixth Army and First Panzer Army are giving all possible support to the point of endangering their own situations to the extreme. Extremely crucial days are ahead before this situation is relieved. [4]

By 28 January enemy forces had reached a point 12 miles to the east of Dnepropetrovsk on the railroad line connecting that city with Stalino, 30 miles to the southeast. This threat called for immediate action. In the defense, the Sixth Army was assisted by the provisional Army Group (Armeegruppe) Kleist,* newly created for the defense of this sector. Immediate Wehrmacht countermeasures were handicapped by adverse weather and acute shortages of men and equipment. Nevertheless, Army Group South was able to shore up its shoulders around the penetration and slow the Russian advance. By the first week in February it had become clear that the Soviet forces were unable to exploit the situation created by their breakthrough at Izyum, and, having exceeded their supply lines, were gradually exhausting themselves. [5] Icy winds and heavy snowfalls swept relentlessly against ground forces operating in this area. [6/]

IV Air Corps units supported Army Group South, especially the Seventeenth Army, in this bitter and crucial struggle, concentrating all of their available air power against enemy forces which had broken into the German rear. The Luftwaffe carried out these operations despite the most difficult weather conditions. Sometimes Luftwaffe units airlifted supplies to isolated strongpoints, while at other times they attacked detraining or detrucking Russians, and on yet other occasions they interdicted the battlefield, especially around the salient area, all with excellent results.

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*Hastily improvised from the Seventeenth Army and parts of the First Panzer Army and placed under von Kleist's command.

/See Figure No. 44. See Map No. 14.

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By 10 February the Soviet breakthrough at Izyum was sealed off, removing for the time the danger to the vital Dnepropetrovsk-Stalino railroad line. The newly-established front line then ran from the northern edge of Slavyansk to Varvarovka on the Orchik River, northward to Yuryevka, to a position 12 miles west of Krasnopavlovka, then northward almost to Taranovka, abruptly curving to the southeast and crossing the Donets River southwest of Krasnyy Liman. From thence the line ran along the northern side of the Donets, joining the old line of 17 January running down from the vicinity of Belgorod.*

Army Group South began in the closing days of February to implement its plan to eliminate the Izyum salient by allowing Timoshenko's forces to wear themselves out, and then, with such reinforcements as could be mustered, to attack them from the north and the south, pinching off the bulge. Generaloberst von Kleist's armored divisions were to provide the mobile forces for the execution of this operation, and were accordingly given the highest priorities for acquisitions of men, tanks, and necessary materiel.†

German forces in the southern sector generally had better success in defending their lines against the Soviet winter counterattacks than did Wehrmacht forces in other parts of the front, but throughout the month of February Army Group South could not restore the breakthrough area. Although many enemy units had been forced to withdraw from the salient, German counterattacks failed to capture the large towns of Barvenkovo, Lozovaya, and Krasnopavlovka, which left the important supply railroad from Dnepropetrovsk to Kharkov under Russian control. Fortunately for Army Group South, however, Russian forces could not utilize this line because the Slavyansk section, linking this road with the network north of the Donets, was held by the German 257th Infantry Division.†† This was to be of decisive importance in subsequent actions, and the contention for this strongpoint continued until it was finally settled in favor of the Wehrmacht on 17 May 1942.[7]

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*See Map No. 9.

†The Seventeenth Army was temporarily placed under Kleist's command so that his armored divisions could function in a more closely coordinated manner.

††The 257th Infantry Division accumulated 42 days of combat between 1 February and 30 April 1942.

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Figure 44
Icy winds and drifting snow at a
German airfield in Russia, 1942

Figure 45
Ground crews clearing snow at a
German airfield in Russia, 1942

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IV Air Corps units were able to fly only a few support missions during February because of the continuously adverse conditions, including cold, snowstorms, low cloud ceilings, and deep snow drifts on the tactical airfields.* Ground service personnel rolled these fields after each snowfall, but strong winds often frustrated their efforts. German ground crews serviced their aircraft even in sub-zero weather, when parts were brittle, tools could scarcely be handled, and skin stuck to any piece of metal.

March was to be a time of preparation and consolidation for Army Group South.† Unexpected thaws held up several Russian ground attacks during the month and permitted the Wehrmacht to rest its forces. Air operations were carried out by the Luftwaffe as required by the prevailing tactical situations and as permitted by changeable weather.

The Situation in the Crimea at the Turn of 1942

On 26 December 1941 Soviet forces crossed the Straits of Kerch and landed on each side of the city of Kerch. The XXXXII Corps of the German Eleventh Army was thereby greatly endangered, and there was a possibility that it might be cut off from the rest of the army. Eleventh Army immediately ordered XXXXII Corps (under Generalleutnant Hans Emil Count von Sponeck) to throw back the Russians before they could consolidate their positions. The 46th Infantry Division was at once committed to action in the Kerch area, and within two days managed to master the situation. Meanwhile, the 4th Rumanian Brigade and 8th Rumanian Cavalry Brigade were ordered to Feodosiya to ward off any Soviet landing attempts in that area. Count Sponeck was nevertheless beset with anxiety over the possibility that his corps might be cut off and enveloped, and he continued to seek permission to evacuate the peninsula.

The German LIV Corps prepared for the launching on 28 December of what was to have been the final attack upon the city and fortress of Sevastopol, but Russian landings at Kerch caused the operation to be postponed. On the 29th reports came in that Russian troops were also moving ashore at Feodosiya on the Crimean Peninsula, and that the German and allied forces available at that point were too weak to throw

*See Figure 45.

†Editor's Note: Field Marshal Fedor von Bock assumed command of Army Group South on 17 February 1942 after the sudden demise of Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau.

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them back.* In addition, communications were disrupted between the Eleventh Army and its XXXXII Corps, which was now isolated in the center of the Kerch Peninsula. Manstein feared that the Russians might intend to push ahead to seize part of the Dzhankoy-Simferopol rail line, thereby cutting off the main logistical support route for German forces in the Crimea. The question arose whether Wehrmacht forces from Sevastopol could be transferred to Feodosiya in time to halt the expansion of the Soviet foothold.

Sponeck, alarmed by these developments and believing the position of the XXXXII Corps to be untenable, ordered the evacuation of the Kerch Peninsula. General von Manstein immediately countermanded the order, but his communication was never received by the XXXXII Corps. During the ensuing withdrawal, large amounts of virtually irreplaceable heavy equipment and arms had to be abandoned, and the 46th Infantry Division had to move with great speed to reach the comparative safety of the Parpach narrows. Fortunately for the Wehrmacht, the Russians did not follow up the advantages which lay ahead at the time of the German withdrawal. 8/

By 4 January 1942 six Soviet divisions had been identified in the area of Feodosiya, and more troops were arriving hourly. The Eleventh Army was especially concerned about the problem of evacuating the thousands of wounded personnel from Simferopol, should the Russians push onward to the center of the Crimean Peninsula. //

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*See Maps Nos. 2, 9, and 16.

/Editor's Note: Manstein claims that the Russians never saw the unique strategic opportunity to cut the lifeline of the Eleventh Army and annihilate it in the Crimea, but concentrated on recapturing the Crimean area piece-meal, the Kerch Peninsula first, destroying such German forces as they could in the process. See Generalfeldmarschall a. D. Erich von Manstein, Verlorene Siege (Lost Victories), Bonn: Athenaeum Verlag, 1955, p. 243. Hereafter cited as Manstein.

//Editor's Note: The Eleventh Army's concern for the hospitalized men at Simferopol increased when it was learned that those left behind at Feodosiya were brutally put to death by the Russians. Some were beaten to death, while others were doused with water and left in the open to freeze. See Manstein, p. 246.

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Initially, the German Army High Command considered these reverses to be tactical in character, believing that although the situation was admittedly critical, it could nevertheless be restored in reasonably short order. The heavy commitment of Soviet ground, air, and naval forces, however, soon revealed the strategic relationship between the Soviet operations in the Crimea and those in other parts of the Eastern Theater of Operations. Manstein,* reflecting after the war on this situation, commented:

> The Soviet landings on the Kerch Peninsula, which occurred precisely at the moment when operations of the Eleventh Army on the northern front of Sevastopol had reached the decisive stage, very soon proved to be something more than a mere diversionary maneuver.
>
> Soviet radio stations announced that the operation was part of an offensive conducted according to the plans and by direct orders of Stalin, and was designed to recapture the Crimean Peninsula.
>
> It was announced that the offensive would end only after the destruction of the Eleventh Army on the Crimean Peninsula had been achieved.
>
> That these announcements were no empty threats was soon proven by the strength of the forces committed in these operations, behind which could be felt the motivating power of Stalin's brutal will. 9

Russian soldiers began to land at Yevpatoriya on the western side of the Crimean Peninsula on 5 January. To counter this move, the 150th Infantry Regiment was diverted from its mission against Sevastopol and sent at once to Yevpatoriya, where it settled the issue within two days, killing or capturing virtually the entire Soviet force, among which were hundreds of armed partisans. Meanwhile, Soviet forces carried out another successful amphibious operation at Sudak. There, a force of about regimental size had come ashore and was receiving steady reinforcement by sea. This offered a clear threat to the southern flank of German-Rumanian units.

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*Generaloberst 1 February 1942; Field Marshal 1 July 1942.

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The principal sources of danger, however, came from the enemy forces at Feodosiya and Kerch. Once the Straits of Kerch had frozen over, the Russians were able to move immense quantities of supplies and reinforcements in a remarkably short time.

In the critical situations at the turn of the year, Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering ordered General der Flieger Robert Ritter von Greim* (Commanding General, V Air Corps, whose headquarters had been transferred from the Rostov area to Brussels at the end of November 1941) to organize a tactical operations staff from members of his headquarters and to proceed with haste to the assistance of the Fourth Air Fleet at Poltava./ Goering ordered Greim to employ his unit in support of the German Army's defensive operations in Combat Zone South.

In Poltava, the staff of Army Group South informed Greim of the immense command and communications problems besetting General der Flieger Kurt Pflugbeil's IV Air Corps. These difficulties, added to the vast area of operational responsibility, made it impossible for one air corps (such as Pflugbeil's) to accomplish its mission without outside assistance. While General von Greim was working on these problems, he was summoned to the Reichsmarschall's splendid residence, Karinhall, where on 7 January 1942 Goering gave him a personal briefing on the mission of the V Air Corps.[10]

Because of the increasingly ominous situation on the Crimean Peninsula, Generaloberst Loehr (Commanding General, Fourth Air Fleet) diverted the new tactical operations staff of General von Greim, then enroute to Poltava, to Sarabuz Russkiy in the Crimea, where the Eleventh Army had established its headquarters. After arriving there on 15 January 1942, a discussion was held concerning the general situation and the mission of the Luftwaffe in coming operations.// As a result of this conference, the Fourth Air Fleet established Special Staff Crimea (under von Greim's command) to support Eleventh Army operations, and assigned the following units to this special Luftwaffe organization:[11]**

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*Greim became a field marshal and the last Commander in Chief of the German Luftwaffe.

/Part of Greim's staff was made up of Fourth Air Fleet personnel who had first-hand knowledge of the area and the situation.

//Editor's Note: Weather conditions on this front were extremely bad in early January, and air support for Eleventh Army units was always in doubt. Therefore, many operations had to be planned without the expectation of Luftwaffe assistance.

**See Chart No. 4.

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4th Squadron, 112th Strategic Reconnaissance Group	- at Nikolayev

Tactical Air Command

Headquarters Staff, 77th Fighter Wing	- at Sarabuz
3rd Fighter Squadron, 77th Fighter Wing	- at Sarabuz
2nd Dive-Bomber Group, 77th Dive-Bomber Wing (from 19-23 January)	- at Sarabuz
3rd Group, 77th Dive-Bomber Wing	- at Sarabuz
3rd Group, 27th Bomber Wing (from 19-23 January and after 2 February)	- at Kherson
3rd Group, 51st Bomber Wing (from 19-23 January and after 9 February)	- at Nikolayev
1st Group, 100th Bomber Wing (after 26 January)	- at Saki[12]

Air Command South (Col. Wolfgang von Wild) was also included in this unit, since it controlled a torpedo-bomber squadron and air-sea reconnaissance units which could be transferred to the base at Saki, where they would be invaluable in anti-amphibious operations.

The Fourth Air Fleet did not have to concentrate its entire available air power in a single effort in the Crimea until the very existence of the Eleventh Army was threatened by Soviet landings on the Kerch and Crimean Peninsulas at the turn of the year 1941-42. A paucity of forces and adverse weather prevented the Luftwaffe from stopping these early Russian invasions. Special Staff Crimea thus had to take action to check future enemy breakthroughs along the Parpach narrows so that the siege on the land side of Sevastopol could be maintained, and plans could be laid for the reconquest of the Kerch Peninsula.*

Operational strengths of the assigned Luftwaffe groups were extremely low, owing to the intense cold, heavy snowfalls, and the resultant inadequate servicing and supply activities. Heating equipment for men and aircraft was therefore in critical demand by all ground service organizations. Fighter and dive-bomber groups, normally having 20 to 30 aircraft, had average operational strengths of only 12 to 15 planes, and bomber groups had but 6 or 7 operational aircraft out of a

*See Map No. 16.

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total of 20 to 30 planes. The 3rd Group, 51st Bomber Wing had only 4 planes operational, and the 4th Squadron, 122nd Strategic Reconnaissance Wing had only a single plane operational out of its 14 aircraft. On some days there were no reconnaissance aircraft operational at all. Ironically, the bad weather, which precluded all but a few scattered missions, helped to improve the operational level of German flying units, since during such periods of relative idleness for the aircrews ground service personnel were able to put additional efforts into the servicing of aircraft, making increased numbers of planes available for action.

As early as 8 December 1941 Hitler had outlined the mission of Army Group South and its supporting air units for the immediately ensuing period.* He ordered the group to capture Sevastopol as soon as possible in order to free the Eleventh Army for other, as yet undefined, tasks. This was to be a prelude to a general offensive against the area of the lower Don and Donets Basin, the capture of which would open the way for an advance into the Caucasus. Hitler directed the Luftwaffe to support this operation by disrupting major Soviet communication centers and supply installations through the destruction or damaging of such important cities as Leningrad, Moscow, Gorki, and Stalingrad. Tactical air support was to be provided as fully as possible for German ground forces. 13

After regrouping, the German XXX and XXXXII Corps and the Rumanian VII Corps were finally ready to prepare their offensive along the eastern front in the Crimea. The plan of operation entailed recapturing Feodosiya first of all, and then a steady conquest of the entire Kerch Peninsula. Wehrmacht forces in the Crimea were severely hampered, however, by shortages of many types of supplies and by the fact that they had a bare minimum of armored equipment. Moreover, they faced an enemy that outnumbered them by more than two to one.

The attack opened on 15 January 1942 and progressed very well, but against stubborn opposition. German units were soon advanced to a line extending approximately from Koktebel, 9 miles southwest of Feodosiya, to Petrovka, 6 miles northwest of Feodosiya, to Set Assan,/ 16 miles northwest of Feodosiya, and from thence to the Sea of Azov. Feodosiya was taken by 18 January, and two days later the offensive had moved to a line extending from Dalniye Damyshi, 7 miles northeast of the city of Feodosiya, to Dzhanfora near the Sivash Sea, where German ground

*Fuehrer Directive No. 39, 8 December 1941.

/Editor's Note: The German name "Set Assan" is used in the text since the precise Russian or English equivalents cannot be determined.

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forces were stopped by the well-developed Parpach defense line, still occupied by strong Soviet forces.*

The Soviet air forces were extremely active over the eastern part of the Crimean area, particularly during the early daylight hours. Their fighters operated from airfields at Feodosiya, Bergovoy, Kerch, and Tamanskaya, and their bombers from fields in the Krasnodar-Krymskaya area. Their attacks were directed mainly at advanced German positions, but missions were also occasionally flown against targets deep in Wehrmacht rear areas, such as Sarabuz. During favorable weather some missions were flown by the Russians from the still operational airfields within the confines of the Sevastopol fortress area.

Bad weather, weak operational strengths, and the tactical situation on the ground forced Special Staff Crimea to concentrate upon more carefully defined areas. All of its available airpower was committed in support of Army operations in the eastern sector of the Crimea. Dive-bomber units of the Tactical Air Command were directed to strike enemy pockets of resistance, artillery batteries, troop concentrations, and assembly positions in the line of advance of the XXX and XXXXII Corps. Bombers were to be used against targets at sea and in seaports, especially against any loading or unloading operations at enemy dock installations.†

The Luftwaffe's few available fighters were used in concentrated attacks in the areas of Kerch and Sevastopol, but no particular results were achieved, because Soviet flyers rarely accepted aerial combat and usually fled to the protective fire of their own antiaircraft guns, especially in and around Sevastopol.

Special Staff Crimea also had to release units for commitment in the Izyum area after the (previously mentioned)†† Soviet breakthrough on 19 January 1942. Among these units were the 2nd Group (77th Dive-Bomber Wing) and the 7th Group (52nd Fighter Wing), as well as two additional groups selected to support the Seventeenth Army in the Izyum-Valuyki area, the 3rd Group (27th Bomber Wing) and the 3rd Group (51st Bomber Wing).

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*For location of the Parpach Line see Map No. 17. See also Figure 48.

†See Map No. 16.

††See Map No. 9 and pp. 153 and 154.

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Because the Soviet offensive near Izyum threatened to roll up the front of the Seventeenth Army and to cut the supply route of the Sixth Army and the First Panzer Army, every ground and air unit available was needed to stem the tide. Likewise, all replacements and supplies which could be mustered were needed in that sector of the front.[14*] Therefore, the Eleventh Army (whose units were so worn down that many companies were without commissioned officers and could put only 15 to 20 men on the line) had to postpone its attack on the Parpach Line until 26 January, and to restrict itself to conservative operations designed to force the enemy into the Parpach narrows.[†] Here, despite the fact that replacements were slow in arriving and that some German companies had only 40 to 50 men out of a normal complement of 150 to 200, the Wehrmacht had a chance to seal off the peninsula at its thinnest point. Manstein describes this problem and the decision to delay his offensive:

> It was certainly not timidity on our part which caused us to thus restrict our objectives, but rather the realization that, in view of the stupendous efforts we had been forced to exact from our troops, continued excessive demands could have resulted in the most serious reverses.[15]

An attack against Soviet forces near Sudak was stalled by heavy snows in the Yayla Mountains, which blocked the German Army's approach routes and eventually held up the conquest of this area until 28 January. The Eleventh Army limited its actions to these operations and to those necessary for the defense of the Parpach Line sector after 25 January 1942.[16] German units also took pains to bolster their positions around Sevastopol. New major enemy attacks were expected in both the Sevastopol and the Parpach areas, where aerial reconnaissance had detected a continuous forward flow of Soviet reinforcements, including some U.S.-made fighter aircraft.[17††]

As long as the ports of Kerch and Kamysh-Burun remained open, Soviet reinforcements moved in by sea, many of them from Novorossiysk on the Black Sea coast. After the ports froze over, vehicular traffic of all kinds began to move across the ice roads of the Straits of Kerch.

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*See Map No. 9 and pp. 153 and 154.

†A tank battalion and two bomber wings earmarked for the support of the Eleventh Army were sent to Army Group South for use in another sector. See foregoing comments on air units.

††See Map No. 16.

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These movements were observed by the Luftwaffe. Such large numbers of reinforcements came in that by mid-February of 1942 two Soviet army headquarters and 13 divisions were on hand in the Parpach Line area. 18 Soviet air forces were not neglected in this buildup, and large numbers of Lend-Lease aircraft were included in the reinforcements. Periodically, as many as 150 Russian fighters were based on fields west of the Straits of Kerch, while another 150 were based west of the Straits.

Eleventh Army fears of a Soviet attack in the Parpach area were somewhat allayed when brief thaws prevented the employment of mechanized equipment. One of these thaws lasted from 8 to 13 February, with temperatures of about 49° Fahrenheit, and turned the entire terrain into a sea of mud, halting immediate Soviet offensive plans as well as their logistical support via the Straits. [19]*

About 15 February the Soviet ports were again open for traffic, and a light frost had improved road conditions so that preparations for an offensive could be continued. Prisoner-of-war statements indicated that the Russians intended to launch massive attacks from the Parpach Line on 23 February, the official Red Army Day. There was also a strong possibility that the enemy might begin a simultaneous offensive from the area of the Sevastopol fortress, despite the narrowness of that base. German commanders therefore had to consider the idea that the Russians might undertake a combined effort to gain absolute mastery of the Crimean Peninsula and the Black and Azov Seas. /

In the German defensive situation, the most important missions of Special Staff Crimea were:

(1) To maintain reconnaissance over the Black Sea and the coastal areas of the Crimean Peninsula.

(2) To interdict Soviet supply and troop movements going by sea and by the ice road toward the west.

(3) To strike troop assemblies and concentrations in the Parpach position and in the rear areas, especially around Kerch.

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*See Figure 46.

/The Russians already had virtual naval supremacy on the Black Sea. The political position of Turkey prevented Germany from bringing really effective power to bear in that body of water.

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Figure 46
German courier vehicle traveling through mud
on the Eastern Front, spring of 1942

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(4) To carry out fighter attacks against Soviet airfields close to the front lines.

Matters were complicated by the fact that the 1st Group (100th Bomber Wing), designated as a mine-laying unit for Special Staff Crimea, had no training in antishipping operations, while the 3rd Group (27th Bomber Wing) often had no bombs or detonators suitable for air-sea attacks. Further, the operations of the 3rd Group, 51st Bomber Wing, which was especially trained for antishipping attacks, and which had reverted on 9 February to the command of Special Staff Crimea, were also curtailed because of a dearth of the right types of aircraft bombs. Over-extended supply lines also made it impossible to prepare the Saki airfield in time for the 3rd Group, 51st Bomber Wing so that the group scarcely saw combat action. Icy runways added to the conditions which hampered these operations.

Night interdiction missions carried out by integrated bomber forces against Soviet supply ships entering the port of Sevastopol were frustrated by bad weather and the poor condition of Saki airfield, which was not equipped to conduct night operations. Daylight attacks on the fortress could not be carried out except under the most promising conditions because of the great strength of enemy ground antiaircraft defenses.

On 11 February 1942 Goering ordered the dissolution of Special Staff Crimea. Elements which were drawn from the V Air Corps, parts of which were to be used again in another sector of the Eastern Front, reverted back to their original corps headquarters.[20] At midnight, 18 February, Col. Wolfgang von Wild's Air Command South (with headquarters at Saki) assumed command over the remainder of Luftwaffe units in the Crimea.[21] Since enemy landing operations were to be expected at any time and in any place along the sea fronts, Air Command South's chief mission was to cooperate with German Army and Navy forces in maintaining the surveillance of enemy activities.

Special Staff Crimea might have exercised a decisive influence upon the situation in the Crimea, but could not do so because:

(1) Special Staff Crimea was organized under emergency conditions and was therefore designed only to meet local exigencies. It also lacked adequate supply services and a staff signal officer to supervise communications.

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(2) The ground organization of Special Staff Crimea was faulty, and lacked the necessary supplies to carry out its mission, resulting in a low number of operational aircraft.

(3) Supply lines were overextended and transportation was critically short. Air transport was available to the staff only for the most urgent needs.

(4) Airfields on the Crimean Peninsula were not prepared for operations.

(5) Heating facilities and night equipment were lacking.

Special Staff Crimea's operations would have been enhanced by using airfields on the Crimean Peninsula. This would have reduced flying distances to the targets, increased the penetration ranges of bomber forces, and increased substantially the number of missions which could have been flown. Because of the aforementioned unsatisfactory conditions, however, these Crimean airfields could not be used and, to complicate matters further, communications difficulties prevented a smooth integration of the organization.

Special Staff Crimea did quite well, despite its problems, up to the time of its dissolution. Between 19 January and 18 February 1942, it sent 1,089 aircraft--this included 256 bombers, 579 fighters, 233 dive-bombers, and 21 reconnaissance planes--into action with the following results:

Soviet Aircraft Destroyed:

Shot down in the air	23
Destroyed on the ground	44
Total	67

Shipping Sunk or Damaged in the Black Sea:

Total tonnage 25,000

Ships counted were either sunk or so badly damaged that their total loss could be assumed. In addition, 1 pilot boat was badly damaged and 1 E-boat lightly damaged.

Port installations at Kerch and Kamysh Burun were damaged by hits from a number of large-size bombs.

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Destruction or Damage of Ground Targets:

Motor and horse-drawn vehicles	335
Railway trains	14
Locomotives	7
Fuel-tank trucks	10
Artillery batteries (including 3 antiaircraft)	14
Fuel depot	1
Cantonment camp	1
Supply depot	1

Troop and materiel concentrations, headquarters, and defense installations were also attacked with good to excellent results.

Quantity of Bombs Dropped on Targets:

Total . . . . . 718,740 lbs.

German Losses in the Operations:

1st Group, 100th Bomber Wing . . . . . 2 He-111 aircraft

One member of the downed crews made his way back to his own lines[22] from Kerch through the Parpach line of fortifications.

The heavy Soviet offensive began along the Parpach front on 27 February following weeks of apparent quiet, which were in reality weeks of intense crisis and tension.[23] Russian forces achieved local penetrations, especially in those sectors held by Russian units,* but the Eleventh Army was able to prevent a massive enemy breakthrough into the interior of the Crimean Peninsula. General von Manstein praised the great defensive

*Editor's Note: One of the problems besetting Rumanian units was that they had little enthusiasm for the war. After the Wehrmacht had assisted them in regaining their former territories, which had been lost to the Soviet Union just before the war, many Rumanians considered their interest in the war ended. Some, however, could see that a victorious and menacing Soviet neighbor would only tear their country asunder once again. For these persons, among which was Field Marshal Ion Antonescu, a German victory was far preferable to a Russian one.

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stand made by the German troops, who bore up under exceedingly fierce attacks against a numerically superior enemy.[24] Unexpected thaws periodically relieved the situation by miring down the general area to such an extent that offensive operations could make little headway.[25]

On 9 April 1942 the Russians launched their last major attack in the Parpach area, an attack in which they committed 6 to 8 infantry divisions, supported by approximately 160 tanks. Within two days this assault was repulsed with heavy Russian losses by the Eleventh Army, supported by combat units of the Luftwaffe. The mastery of this attack by the Wehrmacht finally exhausted the Soviet offensive capability in this area.[26]

Operations in Combat Zone South, Spring - Summer 1942

Army Group South

Most of the dangers from Soviet ground attacks had clearly subsided by April of 1942. The Wehrmacht had thrown up a brilliant defense in containing these attacks, and the winter offensives had been costly to the Soviet forces in both men and materiel. Reconnaissance indicated that the Red Army was suffering from logistical problems in certain areas, and contact with Soviet Army personnel indicated that they were beginning to show deficiencies in training, equipment, and morale.

The Wehrmacht High Command's main objective for 1942 was to remove the economic and material support of the Soviet Union by seizing the Caucasus oil region. On 5 April 1942, Operation BLAU (Blue) was drawn up,* designed to achieve the German strategic aims in three stages. While Army Group Center held its lines, Army Group North was to seize Leningrad and link up with the Finnish allies. At the same time, Army Group South would carry out a penetration of the Caucasus. Once this had been accomplished, an advance beyond the Caucasus could be undertaken.

Initially, however, the various army groups had to regroup and to consolidate their positions in preparation for the new offensives. In the Crimean area, the Eleventh Army had to recapture the Kerch Peninsula, while the northern elements of Army Group South had to liquidate the salient before the group could take an active role in a Caucasus operation.†

*See Appendix II.

†See Maps Nos. 9 and 2.

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After this was done, Army Groups Center and South were to cooperate in two giant pincer movements, the first to consist of a drive to the East from Kharkov to link up with a northern army sweeping along the Don from Voronezh and Orel. From this point a second movement could be launched down the Don River to meet another German thrust from the Taganrog area. These operations would be facilitated if Army Group South could seize Rostov-on-the-Don and the area immediately east of Rostov.[27]

German intelligence indicated that the bulk of the Soviet forces were massed in the south, and any Russian offensive to be made in the spring was expected to come from that quarter. On 16 April General von Manstein asked that the preliminary operation for the recapture of the Kerch Peninsula be postponed until at least 5 May in order to permit the Eleventh Army to reequip its organizations and to secure adequate replacements for the impending operation. Some units in the Eleventh Army were at less than 40 percent of their required fighting strength. The operations against Sevastopol were therefore planned to begin about mid-June.

Fourth Air Fleet Operations in Early Spring 1942

The Fourth Air Fleet was obliged to employ all of the units of the IV Air Corps in support of operations west of Izyum during March and April, just as it had done in support of the defensive stands to stop the Soviet breakthrough in January and February. During this entire period, however, Soviet inroads in the Crimean area forced the Fourth Air Fleet frequently to divert its forces for the support of the weak units of Air Command South in the Crimean and Black Sea areas. Here, the main emphasis for Luftwaffe attacks centered upon the ports of Sevastopol, Kerch, and Kamysh Burun, the presumed Soviet supply and embarkation ports of Anapa, Novorossiysk, and Tuapse, and seaborne traffic from these places bound for the Crimea.

The few attacks carried out by the weak air forces could scarcely halt the Soviet supply movements by land or sea. Individually considered, the attacks were usually highly successful, but their cumulative effect on Russian supply traffic in the entire Black Sea area amounted simply to that of nuisance raids.

Units of the IV Air Corps were also employed during this period to interdict Soviet rail traffic east of the Donets River, and even in

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counter-partisan operations in the vast forest tracts south of Bryansk.* These air operations are mentioned to emphasize the heavy demands which were made upon the weak forces of the Fourth Air Fleet, and to illustrate the great diversity of missions which both the Luftwaffe and the Army were required to handle.

In addition to the above, missions were also flown in April against industrial targets, including an explosives factory at Tambov, an aircraft engine factory in Voronezh, and a gun factory and tractor plant in Stalingrad. However, the great majority of missions flown by the Fourth Air Fleet were clearly in support of the German Army, which had become dependent upon air power in all phases of its operations and in all areas of the crucial defensive warfare waged by Army Group South. Air support became, in fact, the basic prerequisite upon which depended the success of efforts to repel major Soviet attacks.

Operations Around Kharkov, 1942

Spring arrived late in the East in 1942; on 21 March, the first day of spring, temperatures were about 13° below zero Fahrenheit. In early April heavy snowfalls were still typical of the daily weather reports. These weather conditions and the weakness of Army Group South made it mandatory to restrict the envisioned plan for the annihilation of Soviet forces west of the Donets River.[28] An attack was planned under the code name FRIDERICUS (Frederick), in which the provisional Army Group Kleist/ would drive to the north and northwest to join hands with the Sixth Army at Izyum, thus enveloping the enemy forces west of that point. This operation, planned for mid-May, was to be supported by the IV Air Corps of General der Flieger Pflugbeil.[29]

It was highly probable that the Soviets, sensing German preparations for an offensive, would take offensive action of their own by launching a spoiling attack, probably from the Izyum salient, which offered such a favorable base for operations. On 9 May, while Manstein was beginning his Crimean offensive for the recapture of Kerch, Russian ground forces, enjoying a great numerical superiority over the German defenders, suddenly struck near Volchansk and threw back units of the Sixth Army. Another major enemy thrust was made three days later from the vicinity of Alekseyevka toward Krasnograd. The startling aspect of this latter

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*See Map No. 11. See also p. 103.

/First Panzer Army and Seventeenth Army.

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attack was that the Russians were for the first time spearheading their drives with massed armored equipment. These operations were designed to corner German forces around Kharkov as a basis for a drive across the Dnepr River. German ground forces, supported by Fourth Air Fleet units, fought valiantly to stop these assaults. The earliest successes were noted around Volchansk, where air units helped to slow the impetus of the Red Army, but the advances on Kharkov, especially in the southern combat area, continued, and the penetration widened hourly. [30]*

The size of the new Soviet offensive, the shock of its speed, and its initial successes on either side of Kharkov were rude awakenings to the German command. Enemy forces involved in the Kharkov offensive consisted of 6 to 7 infantry divisions, 3 or 4 armored divisions, and a cavalry division, followed by 4 infantry divisions, a motorized brigade, 3 corps with a total of 8 cavalry divisions, and 4 to 6 armored brigades. Soviet forces attacking east of the city were comprised of 12 infantry divisions and 3 armored divisions, followed by a second line of a cavalry corps of 3 divisions, an infantry division, and 2 motorized brigades. [31]

It was indeed a spoiling attack, and Army Group South was obliged to draw upon forces which it had held in readiness for the planned offensive, Operation BLAU. By utilizing these forces and by calling upon the Fourth Air Fleet for all the support it could muster, the Germans were able to stop the Volchansk drive east of the highway running from Belgorod to Kharkov, but the attack south of Kharkov grew to "alarming proportions."[32]/ By 15 May both Krasnograd and Taranovaya had fallen to the Russians, and the railroad junction south of Kharkov had come under heavy enemy attack. This new crisis again forced the German command to make a difficult decision. It was clear that units required for the pincer movement against Izyum were needed for the defense of Kharkov, so that the operation against Izyum could hardly be carried out in its original form. According to Generalmajor Hans Doerr:

> The German command therefore took the daring decision to carry out its planned offensive in the form of a single envelopment, thus in an attack from the south only,

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*Editor's Note: The Kharkov area was the scene of a tremendous logistical buildup for the impending German offensive. For this reason the Soviet attack was doubly dangerous to the Wehrmacht.

/See Maps Nos. 10 and 15.

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and to commence the attack on 17 May. This involved the assignment of the main mission to provisional Army Group Kleist (First Panzer Army and Seventeenth Army). The expanded mission of the provisional army group called for a drive from Barvenkovo to Balakleya in order to establish contact with the southern outposts of the Sixth Army, which, it was hoped, were still capable of holding out until then.[33]

As the crisis around Kharkov mounted, a major tank battle took place on 17 May to the east of the city, where Army Group South faced Soviet forces armed with large numbers of new tanks. The number of Russian armored brigades brought in at this point was astounding! Field Marshal von Bock estimated them to number at least 8 to 9 tank brigades, with an additional 7 or 8 tank brigades opposing the LI Corps.[34]

Units of General Pflugbeil's IV Air Corps (of the Fourth Air Fleet), heavily reinforced by units sent in from the VIII Air Corps (then supporting Eleventh Army operations in the Kerch Peninsula), intervened with great success in the northern area of Soviet penetration west of Izyum. There, the VIII Corps of the German Sixth Army had fallen under heavy assault by three Russian armies. Only with the timely tactical support of the reinforced IV Air Corps was the VIII Corps able to blunt this dangerous drive and frustrate Russian intentions toward Kharkov. Ultimately, the attacks of the IV Air Corps became one of the most important factors in preventing the envelopment of Kharkov by the Red Army.

From 17 May, the day on which the provisional army group of von Kleist began its counterattack from the south, units of the IV Air Corps gave effective support to the southern flank of the German defenses around Kharkov. IV Air Corps planes bombed and strafed Soviet troops and armored vehicles in advance of the German LII Corps, which was attacking in a northwesterly direction from Slavyansk.* Despite the concentration of powerful armored units, Russian forces were unable to counter the attacks of Kleist's forces and those of the Sixth Army,/ largely because of the air support by the IV Air Corps, units of which were often at the scene of action in less than 20 minutes after the request had been made. Sharp German defensive work enabled the Wehrmacht to hold Merefa, southwest

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*See Map No. 15.

/Since 6 January 1942 under the command of General der Panzertruppe Friedrich Paulus.

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of Kharkov, and to gain ground at Teranovka, which gave Army Group South the security it required to continue with its plans to envelop Soviet units which had penetrated into the area south of Kharkov. 35*

While operations against Volchansk were still in progress, Kleist's FRIDERICUS offensive against the Izyum pocket made steady progress. By 19 May the serious Soviet threats east of Kharkov were largely relieved, and on the following day the VIII Corps of the Sixth Army was able to begin counter thrusts of its own. On 24 May the Sixth Army and Kleist's provisional army group effectively sealed the pocket west of Izyum, while the IV Air Corps carried out direct assaults upon the pocket and flew interdiction missions to the east and southeast.

Frantic efforts by the Russians to break out of the German encirclement threatened to cause serious trouble on 25 May, and two enemy divisions were, in fact, able to make good their breakthroughs and to withdraw in the direction of Petrovskaya. Here they came upon the rear of the German 384th Division, holding the Donets River line, which was under heavy Soviet attack about nine miles north of Petrovskaya. At this moment the superb support by dive-bombers was brought to bear upon the enemy forces which had escaped from the encirclement, and both divisions were annihilated. 36 All other internal attempts to break out of the German enclosure as well as external attacks through Izyum and Savinitsi were repulsed. 37

The Soviet capability to resist in the pocket west of Izyum was greatly influenced by the concentrated and devastating aerial attacks of the IV (reinforced) Air Corps. † Extremely heavy losses in men and materiel were inflicted upon these Russian units by the almost around-the-clock assaults from the air. With the exception of small, isolated groups, the tightly enveloped, badly decimated, and demoralized Soviet forces capitulated on 26 May. By 28 May all resistance came to an end, thereby ending the struggle for Kharkov and the Donets River bend. 38

Other Luftwaffe units also played a part in this victory. Batteries of the Flak Artillery employed their guns in direct fire against vehicles and armored vehicles, and performed with great effectiveness as regular field artillery during indirect fire missions under the direction of artillery observers. Heavy (8.8 cm.) flak batteries were particularly successful

*See Map No. 15.
†See Figure 47.

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Figure 47
Generalmajor Rudolf Meister awarding Knight's Crosses to exceptional flyers of the IV Air Corps in Russia, May 1942

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during envelopment operations in closing off bridges and in interdicting river ferries north of Izyum. In the course of these battles, they destroyed extremely strong Soviet cavalry forces. [39]

Typical of the splendid showing made by Luftwaffe flak units are the examples cited in the following reports submitted by the I Flak Corps to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe:

> In the sector of the VIII Corps, Lieutenant Klaiber of the 1st Battalion, 9th (Legion Condor) Flak Artillery Regiment, by his exceedingly strenuous personal efforts, his dashing and energetic direction of the efforts of his flak combat team, mastered all difficulties encountered in the defensive battles of the 62nd Division during the period of 16-19 May. His action decisively affected the outcome of these battles. By carefully planned fire he destroyed 20 heavy and super-heavy Soviet tanks, thereby removing the threat of a breakthrough by armor in this area toward Kharkov. [40]

A report submitted on 20 May 1942 contained the following:

> During battle in the area around Kharkov, the 9th Flak Division destroyed 107 Soviet tanks by 20 May. The 91st Flak Division has registered its 101st tank destroyed in the Eastern Theater, and the 1st Battalion, 12th Flak Regiment, its 100th tank.
>
> With a heavy flak gun, Lieutenant Reichwald* destroyed within a few minutes on 18 May, six attacking Soviet tanks, bringing his total up to 27 in the Russian Campaign. [41]

Between 12 and 28 May the I Flak Corps shot down 33 Soviet aircraft and destroyed 124 tanks, while in the same period the 2nd Battalion, 24th Flak Regiment raised its theater total to 110 tanks, thereby passing the mark of 100 tanks set by the 2nd Battalion, I Flak Corps. [42]

The Wehrmacht announced that 240,000 Russians had been captured in the battle for Kharkov, and that 2,026 guns and 1,249 tanks had

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*Awarded the Knight's Cross on 7 August 1942. See also Figures 31 and 32.

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been either captured or destroyed. The Russians, contrary to their usual custom, also admitted the defeat with rare frankness, claiming that it had resulted from immense German superiorities in numbers of divisions,* in artillery, and in air power. The Soviet High Command reported that 70,000 of its forces had been captured and 5,000 killed in action. Claiming a successful outcome of their operation, the Russians declared that the losses were more than offset by the fact that they had upset the German timetable for a spring offensive toward the Caucasus.[43] There was also another point to the Soviet statement, as Generaloberst Halder pointed out:

> The frank admission of their defeat was the first warning by the Soviet Russians to their allies not to expect them to bear the brunt of the German attacks alone in the coming summer. However, it will not be their last warning.[44]

Although many serious crises developed during the operations around Kharkov, the daring German counterattack (FRIDERICUS) changed the defensive struggle into the first large-scale battle of envelopment and annihilation of 1942, and gave the German armies the Donets Basin as a staging area for the planned summer offensive against southern Russia.[45]

The Reconquest of Kerch, May 1942

At the end of 1941 the Kerch Peninsula was lost to the German forces. Only by exerting the utmost efforts was the Eleventh Army able to prevent the Red Army from pushing far beyond the juncture of the Kerch and Crimean Peninsulas and causing a much greater catastrophe./ Thereafter the Wehrmacht was obliged to bolster its defenses along the narrows of the Kerch Peninsula, west of the Parpach fortifications, and to maintain itself on a constant alert against amphibious landings which might outflank its lines.

The repulse of the last major Soviet attack in the Parpach area in early April 1942 had lent a new impetus to Eleventh Army plans for the recapture of the entire Kerch Peninsula. Von Manstein thus organized this new offensive (Operation TRAPPENJAGD [Bustard Hunt]) and assigned to it all of the units he could muster.[46] These forces included the Rumanian VII Corps, the German XXX and XXXXII Corps, which commanded

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*Actually, Soviet ground units badly outnumbered the German ground forces in this area.

/See Maps Nos. 9 and 16.

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the 22nd, 28th, 46th, and 50th Infantry Divisions, and an additional two divisions, the 132nd and 170th, earmarked for positions on the right flank.* Manstein was keenly aware of the weakness of his assault force, and had to reckon with the possibility that once it had breached the 12-mile-deep Parpach positions,/ the Russians would prepare a secondary line, making ample use of their massive numerical superiority, which would stop the German attack dead in its tracks. A prompt Red Army counterattack could then open the way to a great catastrophe.

Since January of 1942 the Russians had developed the Parpach Line into an exceedingly strong row of reinforced concrete fortifications. Therefore, the first phase of any German operation had to be the breaching of these positions by a frontal attack. Past experience had shown that a difficult task of this sort could succeed only with strong air support, and the German Army High Command therefore decided to commit powerful air units in the operation, particularly in the opening phase. This desire found expression in a note drafted 17 April 1942 by the Chief of Staff of the Luftwaffe:

> The attention of the Fourth Air Fleet must be drawn to the necessity of providing strong air support at all times to repel Soviet attacks from Sevastopol (probably against the 18th Rumanian Division).
>
> In connection with preparations for the attack against the Kerch Peninsula, which will probably be launched only early in May, the attention of the Fourth Air Fleet must be drawn to the following:
>
> Until the opening of the attack Soviet supply movements to the Kerch Peninsula must be seriously disrupted. Owing to the short distance from Novorossiysk to Kerch, it will often be impossible to attack ships in time, once they have been reported at sea. Emphasis in logistical interdiction operations will therefore be placed upon attacks against the ports of Kerch, Kamysh Burun, Novorossiysk, and Tuapse. Despite these intensified operations against supply movements to the Kerch Peninsula, Fourth Air Fleet must continue to increase the operational strength of its units. For

*See Map No. 17. The 170th Division was at first to remain on the northern wing of the front in order to deceive the Russians, and was to be quickly shifted to the south once operations got underway.

/See Figure 48.

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Figure 48
The Parpach Line, 1942

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Figure 49
A command post before Kerch, May 1942, l. to r.: Field Marshal von Manstein, General der Infanterie Woehler, Generaloberst von Richthofen, Col. Torsten Christ, a Rumanian liaison officer

Figure 50
Destruction in harbor area of Kerch by VIII Air Corps, May 1942

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this purpose, the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe will assign adequate numbers of aircraft to bring the units up to authorized strengths. . . .[47]

The Fourth Air Fleet insured that its flying organizations, especially He-111 units, would not lack aircrews by drawing personnel from the fourth (training) group of each wing. It immediately implemented this by directing that aircrews which were not fully qualified for navigation would be used in missions during good weather, generally under the leadership of experienced flight or squadron commanders. To enhance the striking power of the unit, the 55th Bomber Wing was also placed under the direct control of the Fourth Air Fleet.

On the Crimean Peninsula several tactical airfields were quickly prepared and stocked with supplies, which would insure the shortest flying distances possible for German air units and enable them to carry out a maximum number of missions per day. Arrangements were also made through the Chief of Luftwaffe Supply and Administration to secure air transportation for critical supplies and items in case they did not arrive in sufficient quantities by road and railroad for the beginning of the operation.

Antiaircraft defenses were especially strengthened at these tactical air bases by transferring in a large number of light flak batteries for close air defense. Ju-88 and He-111 groups selected for the attack were equipped to carry the BSK-36 bomb containers for the SD-2* fragmentation bombs, and large numbers of these items were requisitioned. Hitler placed great confidence in SD-2 bombs for use against personnel targets, but the best results from these missiles could only be expected if they were used in large quantities.[48]

The Fourth Air Fleet also took action to regulate the supply of all sorts of bombs and ammunition, so that shortages would not occur during the campaign, even in the case of unexpected contingencies. These calculations were made, however, on the assumption that the Kerch Peninsula operation would last about 14 days. The German Command ordered very heavy bombs for attacks against Soviet artillery batteries, and it conducted

*SD-2 bombs were small, 2-pound, fragmentation-type bombs, and were usually dropped in masses upon troop concentrations, shelters, or motor vehicles. BSK-36 containers were just one type of container used to hold large numbers of antipersonnel and incendiary bombs.

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tests to determine whether such bombs could create breaches in the large Russian antitank ditches.

General von Manstein's insistence upon the development of a powerful concentration of air power during the first part of the offensive was reflected in the selection of the best equipped close-support corps in the Luftwaffe (the VIII Air Corps) for the job. On 1 May 1942 units of this corps were transferred to the Crimea, where its commander, General der Flieger Wolfram Freiherr von Richthofen, assumed control of all air activities in the area. Von Richthofen had personally directed the close-support training of the VIII Air Corps, and no organization in the Luftwaffe had more close tactical support experience or a better record in such operations. Although the VIII Air Corps was technically situated within the operational area of the Fourth Air Fleet, it functioned directly under the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, with immediate command responsibility being vested in General von Richthofen, who collaborated closely with the Eleventh Army commander.

According to instructions, the VIII Air Corps attacked in early May all of the Soviet airfields which were believed to be operational on the Kerch Peninsula and in the nearby Caucasus area.[49] Repeated attacks were also made against the ports of Kerch, Kamysh Burun, and Novorossiysk, through which supplies were forwarded to the Soviet armies operating on the Kerch Peninsula.

The operation for the reconquest of Kerch entailed a massive breakthrough of the Parpach Line, with the XXX Corps pushing rapidly to the east to outstrip the withdrawing Soviet forces to its north. Once the XXX Corps was securely ahead of the Russian units, it was to hook sharply to the coast of the Sea of Azov, allowing most of the enemy forces from the Parpach positions to be enveloped and captured, and thereby facilitating the continued march toward Kerch.[50]*

TRAPPENJAGD commenced on 8 May with simultaneous ground assaults and a merciless dive-bomber and bomber attack upon the deeply organized Parpach positions.[51] VIII Air Corps bomber and dive-bomber units dropped bombs of all sizes on the fortifications, while ground-attack squadrons attacked every enemy movement which could be observed in Soviet rear areas. In the meantime, Luftwaffe fighters drove Soviet aircraft away and established a clear air superiority over the field of battle.

*See Map No. 17. See also Figure 49.

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Luftwaffe flak units went into action with good effect, destroying pinpoint targets such as bunkers and artillery observation posts.

Massed attacks by the VIII Air Corps--its units flew over 2,000 sorties with excellent results--in support of the Eleventh Army helped German ground forces to achieve deep penetrations in the right flank area on the first day of battle, a penetration which they succeeded in expanding into a major breakthrough on the following day.[52] Enemy lines were soon pierced at many points. The advance of the southern (right) wing proceeded according to plan, and, despite a day or two of bad weather, the XXX Corps was able to make its turn toward the north with little difficulty. On 11 May the 22nd Infantry Division had reached the coast of the Sea of Azov and completed the envelopment of the Soviet Fifty-First Army, a force consisting of eight divisions.[53] The VIII Air Corps played a most important role in this operation.*

The Wehrmacht announced on 12 May that 29,000 Russians had been captured, along with 220 guns and 170 tanks in the Kerch Peninsula. On this same day, a massive Soviet spoiling attack against Kharkov required the withdrawal of most of the Eleventh Army's air support for the defense of the hard-pressed Sixth Army to the north.[54]

The Eleventh Army continued to advance rapidly toward the Straits of Kerch, the Rumanian 8th Cavalry Brigade striking toward the southeast in the direction of Kiz-Aul. By 15 May the harbor and city of Kerch were in German hands, and the next day the mopping up was accomplished by the 170th Division and the 213th Infantry Regiment. Northeast of the city small units held out with great tenacity until 19 May, when these diehards were either killed or captured.† More than 150,000 prisoners were taken in the campaign as well as huge quantities of materiel. With the recapture of Kerch, the first major offensive in the Eastern Theater of Operations in 1942, the Eleventh Army could turn its attention to the bastion of Sevastopol.[55]

All branches of the Luftwaffe had played their part in achieving this victory, and General von Richthofen's outstanding leadership was acknowledged in the following words of the Eleventh Army Commander:

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*See Figure 50.

†Isolated groups of Russians fought on in the Kerch area under the threats of fanatical Commissars.

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The VIII Air Corps, which also included strong flak artillery forces, was, by virtue of its composition, the most effective and powerful Luftwaffe force available for close-support operations. Its commanding general, Freiherr von Richthofen, was certainly the most prominent Luftwaffe commander we had in World War II. He demanded terrific performances from the units under his command, and he personally supervised from the air every important action in which they were engaged. He was to be found at all times with the foremost Army units at the front, where he gained personal impressions on existing possibilities for the support of Army operations. Collaboration was always excellent with him, both during my assignment in command of the Eleventh Army and later in my assignments in command of Army Groups Don and South. I recall with most sincere admiration and gratitude his performances and those of his air corps. [56]

The Conquest of Sevastopol, June - July 1942

A few weeks before the offensive began against the Kerch Peninsula, plans had been laid to bring all artillery and heavy weapons to bear upon Sevastopol as soon as Operation TRAPPENJAGD had come to a successful conclusion. [57] The task was by no means an easy operation.

Following the fall of Kerch on 15 May, von Manstein was faced with the problem of capturing Sevastopol, which had been sealed off on the land side since mid-November of 1941, but which constituted a persistent and dangerous threat to the southern flank of the German Eastern Front.* The Sevastopol area had been carefully developed by the Russians as a land and naval fortress, and the port of Sevastopol served as a base for the Soviet Black Sea Fleet./ The possession of this area by the Soviet Union also endangered the Rumanian oil fields, which were of vital importance in the Reich's conduct of the war. As a first step, von Manstein immediately ordered the XXXXII Corps to secure the Kerch and Crimean Peninsulas, while all other forces were transferred to the vicinity of Sevastopol. [58]

Since the investment of the fortress, repeated efforts to capture it had either failed or had been necessarily discontinued. Von Manstein now prepared to remove this trouble spot. Merely to have continued to

*See Map No. 9.
/See Map No. 18.

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maintain the investment would certainly have tied down strong German and allied forces without achieving the objective of eliminating the fortress and naval base, especially since no suitable German naval units were available with which to sever Sevastopol's sea communications. Soviet airfields within the fortified area would also have been constant threats to the German-held territories along the Black Sea and to the Rumanian oil region. To keep these air bases under constant control would have required a considerable commitment of vital German air power.

But Sevastopol was also important in terms of Russian ambitions and policies in the Middle East. Almost a century before, this had been recognized by Baron Cesar de Bazancourt, who wrote in his L'Expedition de Crimee (The Crimean Expedition):

> Owing to its central position in the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula also dominates the Asiatic coastline, the Danube estuary, and the exit to the Straits of Bosporus leading to Constantinople. The overall interests of the war. . . . indicated the importance of the Crimea, the key to all Russian dreams, since Sevastopol is the arsenal of Russian naval power in the Black Sea. It is here that Russian ambitions brood incessantly, keeping one watchful eye on the entrance to the Bosporus and the other on the Asiatic coastline. [59]

Sevastopol has often been described as the strongest land and naval fortress in the world. [60] Its main defenses were directed seaward, with powerful defensive positions extending along the coastal area from Mamashni through Cape Kherson to Balaklava. Its land defenses consisted of two converging belts of fortifications, the outer perimeter of which encircled the city at a distance of 9 to 12 miles, running from Balaklava to Belbek. The inner belt of forts circled the inner city and the port south of Severnaya Bay at a distance of 3 miles. Innumerable defense installations of all sorts were distributed throughout the entire fortress area, and virtually no part of the terrain was without its fortifications.

To the north of Severnaya Bay were 11 strongpoints, some of which were of modern construction, named the Stalin, Maxim Gorki I, GPU, Cheka, Ural, Don, Volga, Siberia, Molotov, North Fort, and Lenin forts.[61]*

*See Map No. 18.

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Since November of 1941, almost the entire local population of the area had participated in the intensive work on Sevastopol's fortifications. Russian civilians blasted hundreds of bunkers and gun and mortar positions out of the rugged, rocky, and vegetation-covered terrain, and laid numerous mine fields throughout the area. To increase the strength of these defenses still more, they constructed additional field fortifications such as antitank ditches and barbed-wire entanglements.[62]

The fortress was defended by the Soviet First Maritime Army under the command of General Ivan Yefimovich Petrov. The Red Army forces in the area consisted of approximately 7 infantry divisions, a dismounted cavalry division, 3 naval infantry brigades, and 2 tank battalions.[63] Besides these units and the coast artillery batteries, about 70 artillery batteries, comprising 10 light artillery regiments, and a special artillery regiment of four battalions were placed within the fortress area. The heavy guns of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet also contributed to the defensive fire power of the fort.[64]

About 60 Russian aircraft were moved into the area to support the Soviet forces at Sevastopol. Most of these planes were obsolete land-based aircraft, although there were a few antiquated seaplanes. These planes were usually employed in night operations since they were inferior in speed and maneuverability to the opposing German models. Initially, these Soviet planes were based at the few available fields within the confines of the fortress, but they were soon forced to leave when these airfields came within the range of German flak units.

The Eleventh Army took all necessary measures to speed up the preparations for the capture of the fortress, and organized three attack forces for the accomplishment of that mission. These forces were positioned in the north, center, and south. The main effort was to be in the north during the initial phase of operations, and the objectives of this undertaking were to be accomplished in the shortest possible time. The northern attack force, consisting of the LIV Corps (22nd, 24th, 50th, and 132nd Divisions), was to secure the northern shores of Severnaya Bay and the range of hills at Gaytani.* The southern assault force, the XXX Corps (28th Light Infantry Division, 72nd and 170th Infantry Divisions), was assigned the task of occupying the Sapun Hills to the east and southeast of Sevastopol. The Rumanian VI Corps comprised the holding forces

*See Map No. 18.

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in the central sector, which were to preserve stability there while operations proceeded in the north and south. The entire Crimean Peninsula had to be captured by German forces if the Wehrmacht expected to succeed in the Caucasus. On 5 January 1942 Generaloberst Loehr, Commander in Chief, Fourth Air Fleet, described the significance of this area to the Luftwaffe:

> If we were compelled to evacuate the Crimea, the Luftwaffe would be deprived of its bases for operations against the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and for effective operations in support of the spring offensive. The Soviet air forces, in contrast, would regain their operational bases for attacks on Germany's Rumanian oil sources.[65]

Von Richthofen's VIII Air Corps was again designated to support the Eleventh Army, this time in the offensive against Sevastopol. As long as this air power was available to von Manstein, the Russians could hardly reinforce Sevastopol without interruption, while the Luftwaffe would be free to add its weight to that of the German artillery by bombing repeatedly the city and port of Sevastopol, its defenses, supply facilities, and airfields.

On 1 June Hitler flew to Poltava and laid out the plan of attack for the coming period. Sevastopol was to be attacked on 7 June, the same day as the offensive in the Volchansk area. Once these operations had taken a favorable turn, or in any event not later than 12 June, the remaining part of the Izyum salient was to be attacked. Operation BLAU* could then proceed as planned about 20 June.

The infantry assault against Sevastopol was to be preceded by five days of artillery fire, during which time the Luftwaffe was to soften up all targets detected within the fortress area. The great importance attached to air support for the Army attack, and the decisive role air support was expected to play are evident in von Manstein's comments:

> The center portion of the entire front of the fortress did not seem propitious for a decision. Combat in the forest terrain would also prove to be too costly, because the full force of artillery and air support, our two main trump cards, could not be brought completely to bear in the area.[66]

*See Map No. 10 and Appendix II. See also p. 169.

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The Eleventh Army decided to alter its mode of fire preparation for the opening assault by dispensing with the usual heavy artillery barrage (such as was invariably used by the Russians for an attack) and by using, instead, coordinated air strikes and sudden heavy artillery concentrations, directed at strongpoints, shelters of reserve forces, and supply routes.

The Luftwaffe assigned some flak units to German heavy artillery batteries, which were fairly vulnerable and had no antiaircraft defenses. Most flak units, however, were earmarked for ground firing assignments against bunkers. The heaviest field artillery pieces were brought up for the attack. Many of these were 190 mm. in caliber, several as large as 305-350 mm., and some were even 420 mm. Besides these batteries, there were two huge 600-mm. guns and the famous 800-mm. "Dora" gun. The latter was originally designed for use against the strongest fortifications of the Maginot Line, but, as events worked out, it had not been required for that purpose. This costly masterpiece of ordnance had a tube 100 feet long, a carriage two stories high, and took 60 railway cars to move it into position. Special railroad tracks had to be laid for this purpose. Two flak batteries were assigned to this gun and kept on constant alert for its protection. [67]*

On the evening of 1 June the VIII Air Corps had its forces ready for action at the airfields north of Sevastopol. These forces consisted of a strategic reconnaissance squadron, 2 Army tactical reconnaissance squadrons, 4 fighter groups, 3 dive-bomber groups, and 7 bomber groups, about 600 aircraft in all. [68] The concentration of these units proceeded without interference by Soviet forces. The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe also assigned a numerically weak force, Air Command South (Col. Wolfgang von Wild), to the VIII Air Corps to strengthen still further the air combat units for the attack.

Air support operations were planned in detailed discussions between the staffs of the Eleventh Army and the VIII Air Corps. Manstein requested the following:

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*Editor's Note: The cost of manufacturing such weapons as the "Dora" gun was almost prohibitive, and the subsequent problems and expenses involved in moving the gun into position, protecting it, and maintaining it virtually offset its contributions to the Wehrmacht.

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(1) Air defense operations by the Luftwaffe to prevent the Soviet air forces from supporting Red Army units in the area.

(2) Repeated daylight and night attacks against the fortress of Sevastopol to break the morale of the Soviet defenders.

(3) Direct support by the VIII Air Corps for spearhead units of the German Army, with main emphasis first upon the LIV Corps area during the opening day. Emphasis was then to shift, as required, to the XXX Corps or VI Corps areas.

(4) The neutralization by aerial bombardment of Soviet artillery deployed in the rear areas and within the inner fortifications, and the observation of Soviet batteries for German counter-battery fire.

(5) The interdiction by air of Soviet seaborne supplies and reinforcements.

Richthofen considered the best way to support Eleventh Army's attack was to break the morale of the Russian defenders of the fortress. To this end, Soviet troops in this area were to be kept under extreme pressure, without respite, during the period of German artillery fire preparations, so that "without allowing a pause for mental recovery their morale would collapse at every point of attack, while suffering exceedingly heavy losses."[69] In order to accomplish this, von Richthofen assigned the majority of his units to attack missions against the fortress area. Organizations selected for these undertakings were:

2 groups, 51st Bomber Wing
2 groups, 76th Bomber Wing
I Group, 100th Bomber Wing
III Group, 1st Air Wing
I, II, III Groups, 77th Dive-Bomber Wing
II, III Groups, 77th Fighter Wing
III Group, 3rd Fighter Wing
3rd Squadron, 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Group
3rd Squadron, 13th Tactical Reconnaissance Group

Since German fighters had established a clear aerial superiority in the Crimean area, there was no real necessity to assign air defense missions to Luftwaffe flak units, with the exception of those batteries which were selected to protect super-heavy artillery guns. These large artillery pieces were highly vulnerable and likely to come under hostile air attack. Most flak batteries, however, were given ground combat assignments.

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The first air strike was to be carried out against Russian shelters south of Wolf Gorge in the northeastern and southeastern suburbs of Sevastopol and against the villages of Shablykina and Bazova. This attack was to be made by two bomb groups, drawn from the 77th Dive-Bomber and 76th Bomber Wings, and I Group, 100th Bomber Wing. The first bombs were to be dropped 2 July at 0600 hours and the last at 0630 hours.

From 0700 to 1700 hours all units, except the III Group, 1st Air Wing, were to carry out repeated attacks, by squadron, against the city area of Sevastopol. The III Group, 1st Air Wing was to keep flight size units over the battle area after 0600 hours in order to destroy enemy antiaircraft and field artillery. Fighter forces were ordered to maintain roving flights during this time over the entire combat area to prevent hostile air action against German ground or air forces.

The 1st Squadron, 13th Tactical Reconnaissance Group was to support the fire of German flak and field artillery batteries in accordance with requests by the LIV and XXX Corps, and the Rumanian VI Mountain Corps. The 3rd Squadron, 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Group was to maintain a surveillance of the coastal areas of the Black Sea from Yevpatoriya to Feodosiya, patrolling as far as 24 miles at sea, in order to observe the effects of German aerial attacks in the designated target areas.

Air Command South* was assigned various missions in the sectors outside the area of direct attack (Sevastopol) in order to prevent Soviet landings and to interdict supply movements along the coastal areas. To do this effectively, it had to attack Soviet naval forces in the Black Sea. Air Command South also had to maintain reconnaissance over the Feodosiya-Novorissiysk-Krasnodar-Starominskaya-Yeysk-Grumatikovo area and seaward to the east of 32° longitude and south of the 46th parallel, with especial emphasis upon the area around Sevastopol. Sea reconnaissance aircraft were to be armed with bombs and torpedoes. 70

Final preparations were made with extreme care. Air support missions were examined in detail by the Eleventh Army, the LIV and XXX Corps, the 22nd, 24th, 72nd, and 132nd Divisions, and the Rumanian

*This included the II Torpedo Bomber Group, 26th Bomber Wing; 1st Group, 77th Fighter Wing; and 4th Squadron, 122nd Strategic Reconnaissance Group.

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Mountain Corps. On the afternoon of 1 June, General von Richthofen made thorough explanations of the operation to all participating Luftwaffe commanders and assigned missions to the several air units.

The prospects for success in the attack seemed to be good. All organizations were ready for action, and favorable weather forecasts caused an air of optimism concerning the impending air operations. High-pressure conditions with few weather disturbances were to prevail during the first five days of the attack. The days were to be brighter, with little chance for precipitation. In the ensuing five days, however, some changes were to be expected, including the development of a few areas of disturbance, with some heavy thunderstorms. Days with really poor visibility, however, were expected to be few in number during this time, and some missions were foreseen for every day of the latter five-day period.[71]

The artillery preparation, the heaviest concentration of massed artillery ever laid down by German forces in the Eastern Theater of Operations, commenced on 2 June 1942.[72] Hundreds of batteries, among them the heaviest caliber guns and giant howitzers, hammered at Soviet positions, while units of the VIII Air Corps launched their first bombing attack with full force. At the first sign of daylight, bombers and dive-bombers of the VIII Air Corps, taking off in wave after wave, delivered their cargoes of death and destruction on the Russian forces, while reconnaissance aircraft flew low over the battlefield to make direct reports to air and artillery commands concerning points of stubborn resistance. At the same time, the few Soviet flyers who, with great courage, went into action in their ground-attack planes were immediately pounced upon by German fighters and sent down in flames.

General von Richthofen was able to see the drama unfolding from a raised platform from which he directed his air operations. Each dive-bomber and bomber attack could be followed above the dense brush and forest so that the bombing accuracy could be estimated. New decisions, based upon observed effects of the aerial attacks, were constantly radioed to units in the air, and, on many occasions, Richthofen asked for situation reports from the air in order to secure a clearer perspective of the problems. Only after the sun had sunk below the horizon of the Black Sea was there a brief pause in the battle. During the night, however, aircraft were readied in haste for the resumption of operations with the first flush of dawn.

In these attacks, most of which lasted about 20 minutes, thousands of bombs were dropped. Planes flying in to the attack scarcely had time to reach attack altitude before they had reached their target areas. Anti-aircraft guns of the Russian defenders were quickly silenced by the

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Luftwaffe, and after the first few days only a few isolated flak bursts could be seen in the cloudless skies.*

The tactics employed against Soviet airfields in the fortress area are interesting. These airfields, upon which were stationed about 60 obsolete aircraft, were within the field of view of the VIII Air Corps command post.[73] During the late spring and summer, these planes caused enormous dust clouds when they revved up their engines, giving German observers a certain indication of intended takeoffs. Although these bases were beyond the range of the regular field artillery, a few Luftwaffe flak units were moved into the foremost German positions. From here the flak guns were just able to reach the targets. Firing charts were prepared for sudden fire concentrations.

The moment large dust clouds were observed above the airfields, information concerning the target area and the fire command was radioed to the flak batteries, and within 30 seconds projectiles from these batteries, arriving in flat trajectory, rapid fire, began to burst on the target, exploding amid the Soviet air units just as they were about to take off.

German air units in flight were sometimes redirected to these fields by a brief radio message, consisting merely of Z-1 or Z-2 (Z indicating immediate target, and 1, 2, and so on, representing the target designation).

Soviet air units based within the extended fortified area, at Rostov-on-the-Don, at Krasnodar, Anapa, Gelendzhik, Tuapse, and Polti, were better able to participate in the defense of Sevastopol, and they were assisted by 20 light and heavy antiaircraft batteries within the fortress area.[74]

Attacks for the period 2 to 6 June were planned to inflict heavy losses on Soviet forces and to wear down their morale, while those after 3 June were designed to place special emphasis upon the destruction of permanent fortifications, field fortifications, and supply depots. Areas of main air effort were assigned in accordance with the overall attack plan:

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*Thirteen batteries in and around Sevastopol were immediately silenced, while 26 other batteries were attacked with good results.

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(1) From 3 to 6 June, in support of advance of XXX Corps in the south.

(2) 4 June, in support of the Rumanian Mountain Corps in the center.

(3) 5 June, in support of the LIV Corps in the north.

During the period 2-6 June, the VIII Air Corps committed the following number of aircraft in combat: 723 aircraft on 2 June, 643 aircraft on 3 June, 585 aircraft on 4 June, 555 aircraft on 5 June, and 563 aircraft on 6 June.

These planes delivered 2,264 tons of explosives and 23,800 incendiary bombs on targets in the Sevastopol area. The core of the fortress was attacked with good success by bombs of all sizes. In one case, the 77th Dive-Bomber Wing cut off the city water supply by destroying pumping installations, water reservoirs, and the electric power station. At the same time, thousands of propaganda leaflets were dropped upon the Russian defenders to shake their spirits and morale.

In comparison with the air units attacking other Black Sea ports, such as Novorossiysk, and Soviet airfields in the Caucasus, those units operating over Sevastopol were exposed to relatively small risks. Nevertheless, the strain on personnel and materiel during the few days of attack was enormous. Individual aircrews were compelled to fly numerous sorties daily. Once they were loaded with fuel, Ju-88 planes flew three to four air strikes before crew members left their aircraft. Bombs were then loaded with incredible speed during each interval, and the units were soon in the air again.

Then followed a brief period of deathlike sleep for the crew members, while nearby their engines were being replaced and tested with a deafening noise. These constant operations caused a very severe strain upon personnel and materiel. That they could be carried out without interruption was a tribute to the "unknown soldiers" of the ground services, who proudly and faithfully performed their duty, by day and night, often without sleep, cheerfully accepting responsibility for the safety of "their crews."

Strong forces of the VIII Air Corps and artillery batteries bombarded the entire defensive area of Sevastopol without pause on 2 June, while German ground forces drove across the Kamyzhil Valley and the

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Belvek Valley, gaining a foothold in the hills commanding the area just to the south of this area.[75]

But air strikes were not merely confined to the fortress area. Soviet airfields in the western Caucasus and the Black Sea ports were taken under constant attack, the objective being the destruction of all aerial and seaborne support for Sevastopol. Luftwaffe Capt. Herbert Pabst, a participant in those battles, gives his personal account of the action:

> But then the telephone rings. The message: Takeoff at 0500 hours tomorrow morning for a large-scale attack against ports on the Caucasus coast. . . .
>
> Out of bed at 0400 hours. A wash, coffee, one fried egg, and then into the cars to drive out to our planes. At top speed we fly eastward over the Crimea. Then the Kerch Peninsula: everywhere destroyed villages, burned-out vehicles, the terrain plowed over by bombs, innumerable pits, trenches, and other positions. The Russians are digging like moles, as though hard work were nothing to them. Shortly before reaching Kerch we land at a forward airfield to refuel. Then we take off again, flying southward across the Black Sea, climbing higher and higher, with nothing around us but clouds, and the sea below.
>
> Altitude 13,000 feet. Suddenly, punctually to the minute, the fighters are with us which are to escort us from here on. We are still climbing in a wide arc. We don our oxygen masks in order to remain wakeful and fresh. Below us nothing but water. Then the coast comes into sight and we see the port which is our target. With quiet engines up in the blue skies, we approach our target. Yes, there are the ships at the jetty! We set our diving vanes and adjust our sights. Our dive becomes steeper and steeper. Then they discover us and we see the muzzle flash of their antiaircraft guns. Altitude 17,000, 13,000, 10,000 feet. In front of us black puffs of antiaircraft shells are bursting. I swerve my plane to the left to take shelter above a cloud and dive blindly through it. Then we are at 6,600 feet and I again see the jetty before me. Speed boats have started their engines and are dashing out to sea in wild curves. 1,100 feet! A large ship alongside the pier comes into my sights. I press my thumb. Now we level out and immediately our plane shoots upward

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at a sharp angle. The Russian antiaircraft guns are firing wildly and blindly. I start to climb in a zigzag course. Then the flames of a bomb striking in the middle of the ships can be seen. Flying away toward the sea we can observe blood-red flames and black smoke rising at an angle with the wind. Flames and smoke of other explosions from hits on other vessels follow, made by squadrons which followed us.

Our fighters drive off a few "Ratas"* which have meanwhile taken to the air.[76]

The Luftwaffe dropped its heavy and super-heavy bombs on the Sevastopol area and nearby defensive positions. Numerous hits inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy and many fires broke out. Oil depots on the shore of Severnaya Bay were great masses of flames and smoke.

German ground forces, supported by the VIII Air Corps, launched their attack (Operation STOERFANG)/ on 7 June. Von Manstein describes the unusual scene of battle:

. . . just as the first morning light was beginning to spread a golden hue in the skies and the shadows of night were paling in the valleys, our artillery struck out with full force to open the attack by our infantry, while units of the air wings hurled themselves at their assigned targets. The sight was overwhelming! It was a unique case in modern warfare that the commanding general of an army was able to view the entire field of battle. In the north were densely wooded sections which hid from view the fierce battles in which the forces of the LIV Corps were engaged. Just beyond the forests were the hills south of Belbeck Valley, which was to be so hotly contested later

*Editor's Note: A Polikarpov 1932 design, radial-engine, single-seat, low-wing fighter with a top speed of about 300 m.p.h. During the Spanish Civil War, Loyalist flyers dubbed it "the Fly" (Mosca), while Spanish Nationalist and German Legion Condor pilots called it "the Rat" (Rata). Whatever its name, it was no match for German aircraft of either period. See William Green, War Planes of the Second World War: Fighters, Vol. 3, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962, pp. 161-165.

/Operation Sturgeon Catch.

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> in the battle. Looking west one could see the hills of Gaytani. Behind them, in the far distance, the skyline was lit up by the exit of Severnaya Bay into the Black Sea. In clear weather it was even possible to see the tip of Kherson Peninsula, on which we were destined to find remains of ancient Hellenic culture. In the south towered the ominous Sapun Hills and the rocks of the coastal range. All around the vast arc of the fortress front, however, the flash of muzzle fire was visible at night, and during the day one could see clouds of rock and dust, hurled into the air by the blast of our own heavy artillery shells and the bombs of our attacking aircraft. Truly, it was a fantastic setting for a gigantic play.[77]

From early morning on, dive-bombers of the VIII Air Corps maintained a constant series of attacks upon Soviet positions in the line of advance of the infantry. In the next few days emphasis was placed upon eliminating the Russians' chief defensive weapon, their artillery. Reconnaissance planes were useful in directing dive-bombers to these targets, and within the first days of the attack on the northern flank, many of the Russian artillery positions were silenced. Soviet antiaircraft batteries were so heavily bombed that only occasionally could an isolated antiaircraft shell burst be seen in the cloudless skies. The destruction of Russian antiaircraft positions permitted the Luftwaffe to support advancing German ground forces with relatively little opposition. German air units also attacked and sank a number of Soviet naval and merchant vessels in and around the Crimean Peninsula waters.

On 11 June German infantrymen in the southern sector, supported by Luftwaffe units, jumped off to the attack on Sevastopol. Fine advances were made in both northern and southern sectors, despite continuous shelling by all available and serviceable Soviet artillery batteries.[78] Two days later, with amazing spirit and resourcefulness, the 16th Infantry Regiment of the 22nd Infantry Division took Fort Stalin and opened other strongpoints north of Severnaya Bay to attack.[79] The LIV Corps pressed home its attack with vigor, and by 17 June a number of other key positions had been taken, including Forts Cheka, GPU, Siberia, and Volga. Meanwhile, in the southern sector, the XXX Corps pushed on to the Sapun Hills, and in the ensuing days the 72nd Infantry Division took Chapel Mountain, North Nose, and the Ruins, while the 170th seized Kamary.[80] The VIII Air Corps took an active role in all of the foregoing battles.

On 19 June all of the territory north of Severnaya Bay was under German control except the batteries situated at the tip of the point of

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land north of the mouth of the bay.[81] Days of hard and bitter fighting by both Wehrmacht and Rumanian troops had gradually reduced the numerous Soviet defense installations and drawn the ring ever more tightly around the city and naval port of Sevastopol. Both attackers and defenders fought with a tenacity and fanaticism which could scarcely be matched in either earlier or later battles of the war.[82]

As early as mid-June the High Commands of the Army and Luftwaffe considered withdrawing the VIII Air Corps from the Crimean area for commitment in the Ukraine, but this idea was stoutly contested by the Eleventh Army, which considered air support by the VIII Air Corps to be an absolute necessity for successful operations in the Crimea. In the end, the Eleventh Army's views were adopted.[83]

The entire shore and territory north of Severnaya Bay had fallen into German hands by 21 June, and the following day the main effort was shifted to the south in the area of the XXX Corps. Soviet leaders, perceiving these changes, also began to transfer what artillery they could from the central (Rumanian) sector to face the serious threat from the southern front.[84]

The Eleventh Army had secured almost the entire outer defenses of the Sevastopol fortress by 26 June, and Russian units had been forced to take shelter in the interior of the fort, where they were bombarded by artillery and aerial bombs day and night. Enemy forces around Inkerman had been forced from position to position along the Sapun heights to the vicinity of Balaklava.

The effect of highly successful bomber attacks against the scarcely visible Soviet batteries nestled in the rugged terrain,* of area bombing against concentrated tactical reserves, and, above all, the results of the annihilating dive-bomber attacks on pinpoint targets in the fortress area were decisive factors in the eventual victory by the German Army. The attack by a Luftwaffe lieutenant in which a direct hit was scored on the eastern turret of the heavily armored fort Maxim Gorki I, thereby putting it out of action, was of momentous importance. By disabling this turret, the requisite conditions were set up for a successful attack by the right wing of the German ground forces.[85]

*See Figure 51.

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Using the heaviest types of bombs available, German dive-bombers damaged the hostile armored defensive works and enabled the infantry to secure key jump-off positions for their attack upon the inner defensive perimeter.

On 29 June the decisive attack was opened on the inner core of the fortress. For purposes of deception, as well as to shake Soviet resistance, General von Richthofen had employed all of his air units during the evening hours of the two days preceding the attack on the fortress against fortified positions in the Sapun Hills. Reconnaissance planes were also used for these strikes when practicable. Two concentrated attacks were made against the Sapun heights, both of which were successful. German infantrymen, in their first assault, gained a foothold in these hills and quickly expanded their gains to the west and southwest. The capture of the Sapun Hills enabled the Wehrmacht to lay massed artillery fire upon both the inner fort and the border fortifications. The way was also opened thereby for the final assault by the 28th Light Infantry Division, which seized the English Cemetery* south of the city, and by the capture of Fort Malakov, the taking of which had cost so much blood during the Crimean War in 1856.

The Russians were soon exhausted from the constant bombardment and able to resist at only a few points, and then for relatively brief periods. All Luftwaffe units were sent out to pursue retreating Russian troops and inflicted very heavy losses upon them.

Besides German air units, Luftwaffe flak batteries played an important role in the battle for the Sevastopol fortress. Heavy and light flak batteries, some of them situated in the foremost lines, destroyed enemy bunkers and pockets of resistance, and halted Soviet counterattacks by direct fire. By neutralizing enemy defense installations on the southern shore of Severnaya Bay they facilitated the crossing by the infantry. Their heavy and continuous fire upon the city, port, and airfields of Sevastopol caused grievous losses in personnel and material to the Soviet forces as indicated in the following statistics: 23,751 sorties were flown, and 20,528.9 tons of bombs were dropped over the targets. The Luftwaffe destroyed 123 Soviet aircraft in the air and 18 on the ground. German air attacks also destroyed 611 motor vehicles, 10 tanks, 20 bunkers, and 38 guns; silenced 48 artillery batteries; damaged or destroyed 28 barracks and industrial works; detonated 11 ammunition dumps; destroyed 1

*A burial place for British soldiers of the Crimean War. See Map No. 18.

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observation post, 1 bridge, 10 oil depots, and 1 antiaircraft artillery barge; damaged hundreds of vehicles, 24 bunkers, and 7 guns; partially destroyed 43 artillery batteries; damaged 2 barracks and industrial works, 1 bridge, 2 destroyers (heavily), 10 coastal vessels, and 2 cargo ships totalling 12,000 gross register tons. Vessels sunk by German air units included 4 destroyers, 1 submarine, 3 E-boats, 6 coastal ships, and 4 cargo vessels with a total gross register tonnage of 10,800 tons.

German aircraft losses totalled 31 planes. At the same time a survey indicated that Luftwaffe flak units in the Sevastopol area had expended 181,787 rounds of 8.8-cm. ammunition and 231,146 rounds of smaller caliber ammunition.[86]

Despite a seemingly hopeless situation, the Soviet defenders of Sevastopol fought with tenacity. A report submitted on 3 July 1942 by the VIII Air Corps to the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe indicates the solid character of the Russian defensive system in and around Sevastopol. The VIII Air Corps was obliged to undertake entirely new modes of action against a Soviet defensive position equipped with all of the most modern means:

> . . . It was necessary to attack and destroy armored batteries of the strongest types, defense installations and fortifications, innumerable bunkers and field positions distributed in a confusing system of trenches, and powerful defense positions built into the steep cliffs. To provide a hard core for the defense, the Russians, in addition to the armored batteries, had emplaced heavy batteries, some of them of the heaviest types, in addition to numerous rocket launchers and mortars. Armored railway trains would emerge from the shelter of deep tunnels to deliver their fire.
>
> The Soviets had also built up exceedingly strong antiaircraft artillery to protect the fortress against aerial attack.[87]

Captain Pabst has given a graphic description of the assault upon the Sevastopol fortress:

> Then I participated in the attack on Sevastopol in as many as seven missions per day, first with one group, then with another. . . . On one occasion I motored to the front with Woletz, to Fort Maxim Gorki. It was a

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terrific fort of steel and concrete, chiseled deeply into the rock.

The mountain was terribly plowed up by the heaviest bombs, craters yards deep, torn armor plating and shattered concrete walls. The dead were lying there, black and mangled in the blazing sun, while prisoners were cleaning up. A wide open passage into the mountainside was evidence of the last blasting [by the Russians], and deep down in the underground passages there were still Russians who refused to surrender. From an adjacent hill came the rumble of artillery fire. We drove farther forward over the furrowed roads. On the northern shore of Severnaya Bay were shattered houses, some still burning, empty roads, and then the bay, across which was Sevastopol, seemingly within arm's reach. . . .

Farther to the east could be heard the shrieking of dive-bombers attacking the firing positions at Inkerman. There, our comrades were hurtling down into the steep valleys. Then flaming explosions rose into the air, together with mushroom-like smoke clouds, and the sound of muffled detonations and the light rattle of machine gun fire were audible. Amid fire and smoke the Soviets remained in the rocks, and continued to fire. . . . Yes, the Soviet Russians fired, but their fire was nothing compared to the tremendous impact of thousands of tons of bombs hailing down upon their rocky retreats without letup. Our attacks continued unabated. At times it was hard to decide where to dive in to attack without ramming other aircraft. On low-level missions, where was a plane to fly without fear of being rammed by other aircraft from higher up, or flying into bursting shells or bombs from friendly artillery or aircraft? . . . In spite of cloudless skies, there was so much smoke and dust over Sevastopol that it was impossible to see even three hundred feet. . . . Strongpoint after strongpoint fell, followed finally by the city itself. The Russians endeavored to hold the city, but soon the black clouds from explosions rose from its center. Within a few hours the city was a sea of flames. It burned down, and all that was left was immense mountains of debris. This was the greatest battle of materiel I ever witnessed, probably the greatest that was ever fought in this war.[88]

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The city became a symbol of determination and will power on the part of both the defenders and the German attackers. The stout resistance encountered by the VIII Air Corps and the Eleventh Army is described by Lt. Col. Werner Baumbach, one of the top German bomber pilots:

> Earth, water, rock fragments, steel, and cement were intermingled with bleeding corpses. And yet, the Russians continued to cling to their ground, their native soil, with unparalleled tenacity. [89]

On 1 July 1942, following a sudden concentration of artillery fire and an exceptionally heavy simultaneous air attack, German infantrymen breached the final inner defense perimeter in the southern and eastern outskirts of Sevastopol and the last resistance in the center of the city collapsed. The German and Rumanian flags were then hoisted high above the port on the remains of a gutted building. Sevastopol, the strongest military fortress in the world, was under German control, conquered by exemplary cooperation between German and Rumanian forces, and between ground and air arms. [90]

The 18th Flak Artillery Regiment played an important role in the conquest of the fortress. It shot down 22 Soviet aircraft and destroyed two more on the ground. In addition, it either destroyed or put out of action 355 bunkers, field fortifications, fortified houses, and larger defense systems. Batteries of this regiment helped to demolish the forts Bastion I, Stalin, Molotov, Volga, Balaklava, and GPU, the Maxim Gorki armored works, and to blast six tunnels of the Inkerman fortifications. The 18th also destroyed 44 Soviet artillery batteries, 10 guns, 10 antitank guns, 93 machine guns and mortars, 12 observation posts, and 105 vehicles, while its well-directed fire neutralized or silenced 62 batteries, 13 guns, 2 mortars, and a coastal fort, and set on fire or destroyed numerous ammunition dumps, fuel and oil dumps, supply bases, and bunkers. Within Sevastopol it also demolished an electric power station and numerous personnel and aircraft shelters, and its fire damaged or sank several vessels in the vicinity of Sevastopol. [91]

A few pockets of resistance, headed by fanatical Commissars, remained for a day or two after the fall of the fortress, especially on the Kherson Peninsula, but by 4 July even these feeble efforts had been

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silenced.[92*] In the entire Sevastopol operation, the Wehrmacht took more than 100,000 Russian prisoners, as well as 622 guns, 26 tanks, and 141 aircraft.[93/]

Lessons Learned From the Battle for the Sevastopol Fortress

All descriptions of the battle for Sevastopol clearly indicate that the Luftwaffe was again employed exclusively in support of the Army. Even attacks on Soviet airfields in the fortress area and in the Caucasus region served the specific purpose of preventing hostile air action over the operational area of the German Army on the ground, while missions against seaborne targets were merely interdiction operations to isolate the fortress from the sea, cutting the only Soviet supply route to the bastion and preventing counteraction by sea against German targets on the shore.

The primary objectives of an air force in offensive operations against fortresses or so-called permanent fortifications are as follows:

(1) To establish air superiority over the fortress area. An actual struggle for air superiority did not develop during the battle for Sevastopol. Both numerically, and with respect to quality, the Soviet air forces within the fortress area were clearly inferior to those of the VIII Air Corps. The Soviet air forces from outside areas, supporting the defensive battle, followed no established pattern and developed no power concentrations in their attacks against the German airfields at Saki, Sarabus, Eupatoria, Kitay, Simferopol, and German supply installations. Most of the attacks were carried out at night and did little damage.

The VIII Air Corps thus had clear air superiority from the outset of the contest, and after a few days this air superiority was even expanded to uncontested air supremacy.

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*Editor's Note: Various estimates indicate that between 650,000 Chechens and Crimean Tatars from the Crimean area were resettled to other parts of the U.S.S.R. during World War II because Soviet leaders adjudged them to have been guilty of disloyalty or "failing to support the Soviet war effort." The Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic and the Crimean Autonomous Republic were abolished in 1946 and, because of the drastically reduced population, both were reorganized into an Oblast or district.

/See Figures 52, 53, and 54.

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Figure 51
Dive-bombers of the VIII Air Corps bombing Soviet strong points outside of Sevastopol, June 1942

Figure 52
Air interdiction of Soviet supply route to Sevastopol, June 1942

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Figure 53
Harbor installations at Sevastopol destroyed
by the Luftwaffe, 1942

Figure 54
Sevastopol harbor on 28 July 1942

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(2) To keep the fortress area under surveillance. Aerial reconnaissance in the fortress area was, for all practical purposes, completed by 1 June 1942. All that then remained to be done was to maintain current surveillance of the entire area of operations by aerial photography, in order to detect any improvements or reinforcements of the existing systems of fortifications and to observe the effects of German fire in the designated target areas.

Stereoscopic air photos proved to be particularly valuable. These were reproduced and distributed to army units, where they greatly facilitated the negotiation by German ground forces of gorges, antitank ditches, and similar natural and man-made obstacles. Reconnaissance was faithfully maintained, and air units participating in such missions gave concise and current reports on changes in the situation and on the effects of German action against targets.

(3) To provide air support for artillery preparations and infantry assaults. German air power was used during the artillery preparation and the infantry attacks to support German ground forces. These air operations did not fulfill the expectations of all units or forces operating in all areas. The effects of bombing, even with 3,000- to 3,500-pound bombs, upon permanent fortifications were usually not sufficient to destroy the positions, even in the case of direct hits. Completely destructive effects by bombing were obtained only in attacks upon batteries in open emplacements.

Significant successes were achieved in all attacks against firing batteries, especially against those situated in terrain full of gorges where artillery observers were unable to spot them and German artillery was unable to reach them with fire.

The greatest successes were achieved in attacks immediately preceding the German infantry and engineer assaults on the ground, attacks made directly ahead of the spearhead units. Such attacks improved the morale of the German assault forces and lowered that of defending Russian forces. Similar results were obtained by ground-attack units in support of the infantry, then fighting its way through the depths of fortified zones.

The prerequisite for success in combined attack operations lies in detailed daily conferences between participating air and ground commands, covering all aspects of any cooperative efforts.

(4) To interdict the battlefield. German air forces were to support the ground forces in operations to isolate the fortress of Sevastopol,

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which had been under seige on the land side by German and Rumanian forces since November of 1941. After 1 July 1942 the Luftwaffe held air supremacy over the fortress area, which precluded any possibility of a systematic logistical support by Soviet air forces of the beleaguered Sevastopol.

Only the sea front remained. Since the Soviet Black Sea Fleet had complete mastery of the sea and vastly outnumbered the weak, light naval units of Germany and Rumania, the Russians were able to exploit the natural advantages of their naval port, which was strongly fortified. They used this facility with exceptional skill and were careful in the use of sea lanes. The Luftwaffe was to interdict this area by denying the Russians use of this port and its installations through heavy bombing attacks, torpedo attacks against sea traffic, and small arms fire.

This mission was assigned to Air Command South. Although Colonel von Wild's forces achieved relatively good results, the losses they inflicted upon the enemy had little more than a nuisance effect when compared with the overall tonnages of Soviet shipping on the Black Sea. These shipments amounted to 200,000 gross register tons, and surely indicated that Soviet seaborne traffic had not been cut off.[94] Nevertheless, since Soviet supply and naval operations in the vicinity of Sevastopol were relatively light, it would be beside the point to consider whether it might not have been wiser to have assigned stronger forces to Air Command South for its operations against seaborne targets.

The success of the battle on the land side of the fortress, which was achieved only through the decisive support given by strong forces of the VIII Air Corps, justifies the decision of the German command to place main emphasis upon support of the land front ahead of the attacking infantry.

It can be said that the Luftwaffe fulfilled its mission in the battle for Sevastopol:

> In the attacks, the Luftwaffe struck the first breaches against permanent and reinforced field fortifications by bombing attacks, dive-bombing attacks, and fighter-bomber attacks, and then by destructive bombing effects made it possible [for German units] to push through the fortified zones.[95]

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Chapter 6

THE LUFTWAFFE IN THE BATTLE FOR STALINGRAD

The March to Stalingrad and the Caucasus Oil Fields

Objectives, Strategic Concentration, Organization

Although plans for an offensive into the Caucasus had been considered by the Operations Staff of the German Army High Command as early as October 1941, the developing crises on the Eastern Front caused Hitler to set them aside in November. Then the Wehrmacht's failure to take Moscow late in 1941 and the serious character of the Soviet winter counteroffensive of 1941-42 compelled the German High Command to put off the Caucasus enterprise until sometime in 1942.

The objectives and plans for a large-scale summer offensive, Operation BLAU (Blue), slated to begin as soon as weather and terrain conditions permitted, were set forth on 5 April 1942 in Fuehrer Directive No. 41, a design drafted by Generaloberst Halder, but which was clearly drawn up in accordance with specific instructions from Hitler.[1]* Besides the destruction of as many Soviet units and as much enemy materiel as possible, the new plan called for the conquest of the vital Caucasus oil region, an objective which Hitler had repeatedly emphasized.

According to Directive No. 41, elements of Army Group South were to prepare for extensive operations by undertaking phase 1 of plan BLAU, a drive by the German Second Army from the area southwest of Livny toward Voronezh, while the Fourth Panzer Army executed a curving sweep to the south, and then eastward, from the vicinity of Kursk, linking up with the Second Army along the Don River at Voronezh, thus entrapping an entire Soviet army. Once this action had been completed, phase 2 of the operation would commence, a bold dash down the west side of the Don to meet the northeastward driving units of the Sixth Army. After this had been successfully accomplished, the way would be open for the third stage, a massive roundup of Russian units in the bend of the Don

*See Appendix II. See also Figure 55. The operation was slated for 27 June 1942.

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Figure 55
Conference at Poltava before the summer offensive, 1942, l. to r.: Col. Heusinger, Generalleutnant Paulus, Hitler, Generaloberst von Weichs

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River. The termination of this entire operation would then allow German forces to make the long awaited advance into the Caucasus, seizing the oil regions, including Baku and the shores of the Caspian Sea, an economic objective. *

The Luftwaffe mission under Directive No. 41 was as follows:

> Besides providing direct support for army operations, the mission of the Luftwaffe is to protect the [German Army's] strategic concentration in Combat Zone South, especially the Dnepr River railway bridges, by assigning additional air defense forces to these areas.
>
> If the Russians are detected in the process of carrying out concentration movements, their main routes of approach and the rail routes into the operations zone will be interdicted by [air] operations extending far into their rear. For this purpose, main emphasis will be on destructive attacks against the Don River railway bridges.
>
> The Luftwaffe will initiate the offensive action by concentrated attacks using massed air forces against all Soviet air forces and their ground organizations found within their [the Luftwaffe's] attack area.
>
> Provisions will be made to insure the maintenance of conditions allowing rapid transfers of air units to be made to the central and northern zones of the [Eastern] theater of operations. As far as possible, existing ground service installations essential for this purpose will be kept in operational condition. [2]

The Fourth Air Fleet (controlling the IV and VIII Air Corps and Air Command South), under the command of Generaloberst Alexander Loehr, was responsible for accomplishing the above missions; it was further strengthened by the additional assignment of the I Flak Corps (Generalmajor Otto Dessloch). [3/]

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*See Maps Nos. 2 and 19.

/See Chart No. 4.

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The IV Air Corps, commanded by General der Flieger Kurt Pflugbeil, was already operating in the area southeast of Kharkov and received the task of supporting future operations of the German Sixth Army, while the VIII Air Corps (directed by Generaloberst Freiherr von Richthofen) was ordered to support Generaloberst von Weichs' Second Army. The VIII Air Corps, with the exception of a small staff which had already begun preparations for the summer offensive as early as the end of April, was heavily engaged in battle against Sevastopol until 5 July. The entire headquarters of the VIII Air Corps, together with some of its units, was transferred to the Kursk area on 23 June, prior to the end of the Crimean operations.*

The arrival of large numbers of replacements and materiel in the concentration area of Army Group South (extending from Taganrog on the Black Sea to Kursk) raised the spirits of German combat leaders, but several weeks were still required in which to complete preparations for the southern offensive. Moreover, troops which took part in the battles around Kharkov at the end of May 1942 had to be rested and rehabilitated.

As usual, the plan of attack was prepared through detailed discussions between air and ground commanders. Air liaison officers were carefully instructed concerning their missions and informed about the particulars of the opening assault. Problems of air-ground cooperation were covered with the above-mentioned officers as well as all unit commanders. Camouflage, deception, and the very important matter of security were most heavily stressed. In this latter aspect of preparations an exceptionally regrettable breach of security regulations occurred.

On 19 June, a few days prior to the opening of the attack, a Fieseler "Storch" (Fi-156 "Stork") courier aircraft, carrying Maj. Joachim Reichel, a General Staff officer and Chief of Operations of the German 23rd Panzer Division, apparently lost its way and was shot down in the immediate vicinity of the front. The plane was sighted by a German forward artillery observer as it came down in no-man's land, and a patrol was sent out to search for the officers and for certain valuable documents, including the corps' orders for the coming attack, which Major Reichel, contrary to all

*Von Richthofen arrived in the Kursk area 24 June 1942, and was succeeded as Commander of the VIII Air Corps on 3 July by Generalleutnant Martin Fiebig. Richthofen then assumed command (19 July 1942) of the Fourth Air Fleet.

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existing regulations, had taken along with him. 4* The patrol soon found the aircraft but no sign of the two officers. However, not long thereafter two freshly-filled graves were located a short distance from the site of the downed aircraft, and one of the bodies found therein was identified as that of the Major. 5/ But all of the secret documents and materials pertaining to the impending operation were missing and were presumed to have fallen into Soviet hands. 6

Security measures within the Wehrmacht seemed to require considerable improvement, and the General Staff itself fell under a barrage of severe criticism. 7 Field Marshal Keitel, highly chagrined over this breach of security, was the first to report the incident to the Fuehrer, who straightway ordered any officers directly involved with the Major's incident to be tried as "accomplices." 8 But Field Marshal von Bock also had a long talk with Hitler on the evening of 25 June, and helped to tone down the matter. 9//

Wehrmacht leaders were somewhat comforted by the fact that no immediate enemy countermeasures were detected against German

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*Editor's Note: Major Reichel took with him a typed sheet indicating the 23rd Panzer Division's disposition for the coming attack and a map board showing the placement of divisions of the XL Corps and its objectives for phase 1 of Operation BLAU. More crucial was the fact that the Major knew the overall plan for the offensive, and, if taken alive, might have been tortured into revealing all. If this happened (a matter still open to question), it would help to explain the subsequent great successes by the Russians around Stalingrad.

/Editor's Note: Carell mentions that no uniforms were found, the bodies being in their underclothing and apparently in poor condition. The possibility thus remains that it might have been a Soviet trick, especially since the Major's orderly could not make a positive identification. See Paul Carell, Hitler's War on Russia (translated from the German by Ewald Osers), London: George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1964, pp. 480-482. Hereafter cited as Carell.

//Editor's Note: Brought to trial were General der Panzertruppe Hans-Georg Stumme, CG, XL Corps, and Lt. Col. Gerhard Franz. Both were later transferred to the Afrika Corps. XL Corps was taken over by General der Panzertruppe Leo Freiherr Geyr von Schweppenburg.

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concentrations in Combat Zone South, but this was scarcely conclusive proof that the Soviet Command was really unaware of the German plans.[10] It can be assumed with certainty that the plans for Operation BLAU had not escaped Soviet notice. The secret orders, so carelessly lost, must have confirmed Russian suspicions of German intentions by revealing hitherto unknown details, thereby allowing the Red Army to prepare counteractions which adversely affected the conduct of Wehrmacht operations. This probably also helped to account for the stiff Russian resistance encountered by German forces during the early stages of the offensive, and for the heavy German losses in personnel and materiel.

The entire incident emphasizes the enormity of the burden of responsibility that rests upon those persons who must safeguard information regarding future operations, and the crucial importance of observing the strictest security measures. Obviously, aircraft crossing over combat sectors are not proper repositories for secret orders.

Operation BLAU

Army Group South (Field Marshal von Bock) opened the first stage of its summer offensive at 0215 hours on 28 June,* using the Fourth Panzer Army and the Second Army in the northern sector, and the Sixth Army in the southern sector. These forces were none too strong for the job at hand, and required some Hungarian backing to defend the flanks.

Cooperating smoothly with Luftwaffe units, the Second and Sixth Armies broke through the Russian lines near Kursk and Izyum, respectively, across a front 180 miles wide. Ground-attack planes of the VIII Air Corps carried out continuous attacks in advance of the front-line infantry units, while twin-engine fighters destroyed enemy air power at its source by attacking Soviet airfields.

Luftwaffe units, particularly bombers of the IV Air Corps, subjected Soviet headquarters, command posts, troop reserves, concentrations, and marching columns to a hail of bombs. They also made heavy strikes on railroad routes, especially the junctions at Voronezh

*The attack was scheduled for 27 June, but was postponed because of heavy rains which drenched airfields and prevented air units from taking off. The Sixth Army began its thrust to the northeast along the Oskol and Valuy Rivers on 30 June. See Maps Nos. 19 and 21.

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(an industrial center), Michurinsk, Svoboda, and Valuyki, in order to prevent the forward movement of Russian reinforcements and materiel. Large numbers of Soviet bombers were sent into action in a desperate effort to halt the advancing German divisions, but whenever they appeared they were quickly dispatched by German fighters.

During the evening of 28 June a heavy downpour fell upon the northern part of Combat Zone South, drenching troops and softening up still more the already soggy roads and airfields. Nevertheless, German flying units took off on their attack missions as long as it was humanly possible, while light and heavy Luftwaffe flak batteries reduced Russian bunkers and fortifications, and knocked out observation posts and rail installations for German Army infantry and armored units.*

While Russian resistance stiffened against the Sixth Army, enemy forces withdrew from the Second Army front to strengthen the defenses at Voronezh.[11] On 5 July Second Army forces reached this point, from which they established a bridgehead across the Don River a few days later. At the same time, steps were taken to strengthen its front along a line extending from Livny to Voronezh, thereby freeing motorized units for a thrust to the south along the west bank of the Don to link up with Sixth Army forces pushing northeastward from the vicinity of Kharkov.

By 5 July the northern flank of von Weichs' Second Army fell under heavy counterattacks in which the Russians threw into action a large number of British-made tanks.[12] The most fiercely contested point on this front was Voronezh, and battles for the bridgehead there lasted for weeks after the second phase of Operation BLAU had gotten underway. The success of the second stage was, of course, considerably dependent upon whether German forces could keep the Red Army from breaking through Second Army positions and penetrating to the rear areas, thereby endangering the overall operation.†

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*Editor's Note: There was to be no massive roundup of Soviet troops, since, although strong rear-guard actions were staged west of the Don, the main body of the Red Army withdrew in great haste to the east. See Halder, Diary, VII, entries of 30 June-7 July 1942.

†Editor's Note: Halder attributes von Bock's insistence upon taking Voronezh to an undue influence by his subordinate commander (in this case General Hoth), whom he believes was allowed too much latitude. Hitler did not favor efforts to seize Voronezh if the cost seemed too high. See Halder, Diary, VII, entries of 5-10 July 1942.

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Besides supporting the eastward and (later) southeastward drives of the Sixth and Second Armies, Luftwaffe units, especially the VIII Air Corps, were needed to support the threatened northern front of the offensive. In so doing, they struck Soviet railroads and rail junctions, and, most important of all, active Russian tactical airfields. At these bases German fighters reaped a rich harvest.

On 8 July alone, Luftwaffe fighters operating in the northern part of Combat Zone South shot down 33 enemy planes and set another 35 on fire. On the following day, the 76th Bomber Wing attacked Yelets with good results, and the rail junctions at Tambov and Povorino. On the same day, German fighters shot down 40 Russian planes in this area, and on 10 July, 19 out of an attacking formation of 20 Russian aircraft were shot down by fighters of the VIII Air Corps. Flak units also rendered invaluable services in providing direct ground fire and air defense fire.

As the Fourth Panzer Army continued its advance and turned toward the southeast, German air units constantly had to shift their bases to ever more distant sites in order to operate from airfields immediately behind the army spearheads. This was especially true for close support air units.[13] In such circumstances it was no longer possible for the VIII Air Corps to conduct simultaneous operations in the Voronezh area. A temporary air organization had therefore been formed on 10 June, under Col. Alfred Buelowius, to provide for such a contingency. This unit was designated Tactical Air Command North* (Luftwaffen-Gefechtsverband Nord) and had the mission of supporting, under Fourth Air Fleet directions, the ground operations of the German Second Army in the Voronezh area and those of the adjoining Second Panzer Army (Generaloberst Rudolf Schmidt) of Army Group Center, just to the north. This air command was later required to support the defensive battles of the Hungarian Second and Italian Eighth Armies on the Don.

The 76th Bomber Wing (under Lt. Col. Ernst Bormann), the 27th Bomber Wing (under Lt. Col. Hans-Henning Freiherr von Beust), one tactical reconnaissance group, and elements of the 51st Fighter Wing were initially assigned to Tactical Air Command North. Dive-bomber units were assigned on a temporary basis, as required, but a number of Hungarian and Italian reconnaissance and fighter units were later permanently assigned to the command.

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*Called "North" because it was assigned to the most northerly sector of the Fourth Air Fleet's zone of operations.

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On 24 June 1942 Generaloberst Loehr, Commander in Chief of the Fourth Air Fleet, assumed the additional command of Wehrmacht forces in the Balkans, a post he held after Richthofen took personal command of the Fourth Air Fleet in mid-July. Loehr, a former Austrian officer who was born in the Balkans, knew that area well, and was uniquely equipped for his post by his exceptional linguistic abilities.

Generalmajor Guenther Korten, Chief of Staff, Fourth Air Fleet, remained at his post for a while thereafter, but, after a brief period of orientation, assumed command in July of the I Air Corps from General der Flieger Helmut Foerster.* His position as air fleet chief of staff was then taken by Col. (GSC) Hans-Detlef Herhudt von Rohden. 14

After the Tactical Air Command North arrived on the scene and began operations, the VIII Air Corps was transferred south with all haste to the Rossosh area, about 120 miles away, to support the rapid advance of Hoth's Fourth Panzer Army toward the southeast.

The first phase of the German summer offensive began on 28 June from the area east of Kursk. The Second Army, on the left wing, drove northeastward toward Livny, then to the east and southeast in the direction of the first major objective, Voronezh. Meanwhile, the left wing of the Fourth Panzer Army swept ahead in an arc to the northeast to meet the Second Army at Voronezh. This point was reached by 2 July, but heavy Soviet counterattacks prevented the capture of the city for several days.

While this operation was underway, the Sixth Army jumped off on 30 June from the area northeast of Kharkov, crossing the Oskol River, and linking up with the right wing of the Fourth Panzer Army on the upper reaches of the Valuy River. The completion of this juncture on 7 July laid the foundation for the third part of the summer offensive. Few Russian prisoners were taken, however, since most Soviet units withdrew to the east in time to avoid encirclement.

By July most German units in Combat Zone South were making preparations for phase 3 of Operation BLAU. Because of the vast area to be covered, Army Group South was divided into two separate commands,

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*At the end of July the I Air Corps was withdrawn from the northern sector of Combat Zone South and transferred to Poltava, where it was reorganized as Air Command Don (Luftwaffen Kommando Don).

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Army Group "A" and Army Group "B."* Personnel selected for the nucleus of Army Group "A" began to arrive in Poltava by the end of May, and when the group assumed control over its own operations in early July an advance unit was sent to Stalino, the group's future headquarters. This army group, which was taken over on 7 July by Field Marshal Wilhelm List, included the Seventeenth Army and the First Panzer Army.†

On 9 July Army Group "B" was established from Army Group South, and on 13 July Generaloberst Maximilian Freiherr von Weichs assumed command. Assigned to this group were the Second and Sixth Armies, the Fourth Panzer Army, and the Hungarian Second Army. Standing in reserve were the Italian Eighth (then being activated) and Rumanian Fourth Armies.

Army Group "A" was to play an important role in phase 3 by launching an eastward attack through the Russian positions and across the Donets River from the Taganrog-Artemovsk area. From there it was to push rapidly ahead to the bend of the Don, where it was to cut off retreating Soviet units by linking up with the Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army of Army Group "B" driving along the western side of the Don River in the direction of Stalingrad. The Second Army was to hold the new front line from the area south of Orel to Voronezh, while allied units were given the responsibility of providing flank protection and seizing secondary objectives. The Hungarian Second Army was to reinforce the line west of the Don from Voronezh to Svoboda, while the Italian Eighth Army covered the Chirskaya River line. Meanwhile, other elements of Army Group "A" were to take Rostov-on-the-Don and establish strong bridgeheads over the Don for the projected Caucasus campaign.††

The offensive in Combat Zone South proceeded according to plan. The Fourth Panzer Army and the Sixth Army, especially the latter, were given heavy air support. By 10 July the Fourth Panzer Army had carried its attack as far forward as the Kantemirovka area and the Don River between Novaya Kalitva and Ostrogozhsk, while the Sixth Army even succeeded in crossing the Don and establishing three small bridgeheads on the eastern

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*Editor's Note: Some German staff officers attribute this reorganization to a desire on Hitler's part to exercise a much closer control over army operations during the coming summer offensive. Bock's removal as Commander in Chief of Army Group South by the Fuehrer may therefore have been as much a matter of expediency as of personal animosity.

†Editor's Note: The Eleventh Army and the Rumanian Third Army were in the Crimea.

††See Maps Nos. 19 and 21.

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shore, just south of Voronezh. A few days later, the First Panzer Division stood in the Millerovo area.

The rain-soaked ground seriously hampered the advance, especially the movement of supplies. This also had an adverse effect upon the forward transfer of air units and the construction and development of wire communications networks, thereby affecting the operations of all types of organizations.

By the second week of the offensive, Generaloberst Halder and the German High Command were able to clearly observe the change in Soviet tactics. Marshal Semen Konstantinovich Timoshenko issued an order in early July in which he stressed the importance of delaying the Germans and inflicting heavy losses upon them, but warned that Russian units should be alert and take care to avoid encirclements. Timoshenko emphasized the value of a connected front in preference to a tenacious defense of every foot of ground. In his view the most important requirement for the Red Army defenses was to evade enemy pressures with flexibility, without risking heavy losses.15

The rapidly advancing forces of the First and Fourth Panzer Armies were constantly supported by tactical units of the two air corps. These air forces also had to reconnoiter daily for new advance bases, some of which were within range of Soviet heavy weapons. To meet supply and replacement requirements, multi-engine units of the VIII Air Corps were transferred to bomber bases of the IV Air Corps.

German flying units repeatedly attacked Soviet columns, assembly areas, and rail routes leading to the front (including railway trains and rail installations), and placed special emphasis upon the Don and Donets River bridges. Russian airfields were also worthwhile targets, and on 13 July German fighters downed 12 Soviet bombers as they were taking off from an airfield east of the Don. On the same day, Luftwaffe ground-attack planes destroyed 20 Soviet aircraft in a single attack on the Kamensk airfield. The number of sorties which German flyers could make in a day was seriously reduced by the frequent necessity of moving to more advanced airfields, as well as by poor communications and the slow arrival of supplies and replacements.*

*The great distances involved in German supply movements were already causing severe difficulties. See Maps Nos. 1 and 21.

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Air transportation had now become a factor of primary importance for the Army as well as for the Luftwaffe, and frequently for the armored forces. On 12 July alone the Luftwaffe airlifted more than 200 tons of fuel to German panzer units.

The speedy action required in effecting individual and unit transfers, and in carrying out combat and supply operations, demanded new procedural methods and new regulations.[16] Conventional modes of operation had become obsolete, and improvisations had to be made within every sector of both combat and communications zones. While every conceivable practical measure was put into force to improve the speed and capacity of the German supply system, the Luftwaffe ranged over the Stalingrad and Caucasus areas, and attacked especially those Soviet transport routes essential to the transport of oil to the Russian forces.

With its left flank moving along the Don River, the Fourth Panzer Army* drove rapidly ahead to Kalach-on-the-Don and Kletskaya.[/] The First Panzer Army had taken a more southerly direction and had meanwhile reached the Don River between Novocherkassk and Tsymlyanskiy.[17] These forces had succeeded in establishing bridgeheads across the lower reaches of the Don River.[18]

The Seventeenth Army had also staged its attack. While its left flank units thrust ahead toward Voroshilovgrad, evacuated by the Russians on 17 July 1942, its center and southern units wheeled to advance toward the Don River northeast and southwest of Rostov.[19]

On 21 July the drive commenced against Rostov-on-the-Don. Soviet forces had already evacuated their positions in the outpost areas and German troops were able to advance virtually unopposed until about midday, when they met sharp resistance at the inner perimeter defenses of the Soviet bridgeheads. The VIII Air Corps went into action to destroy the Russian forces at these points.[20] On the following day the German offensive at Rostov continued to make good progress. German forces had taken all of the antitank ditches around the city and destroyed all of the required

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*Transferred with a corps of infantry to Army Group "A" on 13 July 1942.

/The Fourth Panzer Army's work in this sector was hampered by the Soviet demolition of the Don bridges.

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bridges. Wherever Soviet forces gathered they were bombed by German air units, spreading confusion and panic in many places. Under the heavy ground and air attacks, the Russian forces gave way and began to retreat across the Don in great disorder, abandoning all of their larger pieces of equipment and weapons. By the end of the day, the foremost German Army elements were within 1,800 yards of the city, and bridgeheads on the southern side of the city had been firmly established.

In the Sixth Army area German troops continued to push steadily to the south to position themselves for the general advance to begin on 23 July. The general sentiment among these forces was one of confidence. The Fourth Panzer Army, for some reason, did not pursue the attack with vigor in the southern sector, although Soviet resistance seemed to be comparatively light.[21*]

In a directive dated 23 July 1942,/ Hitler abruptly changed the course of the German offensive in the southern part of the Soviet Union by ordering a continuation of the attack, but in two widely divergent directions. Army Group "A" was directed to advance into the Caucasus, with Army Group Ruoff// (Seventeenth Army and the Rumanian Third Army) attacking across the western Caucasus, along the Black Sea coast, and seizing the Batum oil region. The First Panzer Army together with the Fourth Panzer Army (Army Group "B") were to capture the oil districts of Maykop and Groznyy, from which points they could advance to the mountain passes of the central Caucasus, and finally drive ahead as far as Tbilisi and Baku on the Caspian Sea.

Army Group "B" was assigned the mission of capturing Stalingrad and establishing a defensive line along the Don River, with plans for the capture of Astrakhan to be worked out after the conquest of Stalingrad. The Eleventh Army was to be withdrawn from the Crimea for the capture of Leningrad, while two motorized divisions were slated to be transferred from Army Group "A" to France.[22]

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*See Maps Nos. 21 and 22.

/Editor's Note: This was the famous Fuehrer Directive No. 45, which revolutionized the entire conduct of operations in Combat Zone South.

//Editor's Note: An army-type organization, temporarily established, and involving more than a single army. This was not a standard army organization and varied according to requirements and special conditions.

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On 23 July the 13th Panzer Division drove completely through Rostov, and by evening it had even crossed the Don River. In the northeast, Kleist's forces had reached the outskirts of Rostov, while the Motorized Division "Grossdeutschland"* approached the Don east of the city. During this time, the 3rd Panzer Division advanced 18 miles to the south against slight resistance and established a firm bridgehead across the next river to the east.† Yet, despite this favorable progress and the general weakening of the Soviet Don River defenses, Generaloberst Hoth was wary of the extended position of his advanced units and wanted to abandon the Fourth Army's two bridgeheads over the Don.[23] In the course of these movements around Rostov the IV Air Corps carried out around-the-clock missions against Soviet troop units.

The city of Rostov, under constant ground assault and repeated aerial attacks by units of the IV and VIII Air Corps, finally surrendered on 24 July.†† In the struggle for the city, Luftwaffe units were especially effective in bombing the Don River bridges and the Bataisk rail installations.[25]

Meanwhile, the Sixth Army continued to make excellent progress to the east, and its main body had moved very close to the Don River. Thus, Army Group "B" advanced according to schedule. Fierce resistance was encountered at only one point, and there literally every Soviet soldier fought to the very end.[26]

Although flying units of the VIII Air Corps rendered invaluable service to the left wing of von Weichs' army group, VIII Air Corps flak batteries achieved excellent results in ground combat. This was particularly marked in actions against the numerous Soviet tanks operating in the area and against the obstinately attacking Russian close-support

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*Editor's Note: Formed in early 1942 by expanding the former independent Panzer Grenadier Regiment "Grossdeutschland," a unit which had been in operation in Combat Zone Center in the Soviet Union.

†Editor's Note: Probably the Mechetka River.

††Editor's Note: Rostov actually capitulated on 23 July 1942, but several small pockets of resistance continued to cause trouble until they were cleaned out on the following day.

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aircraft, especially the IL-2 "Stormoviks."* Flak artillery forces formed the hard core of the successful German defenses against Russian attacks along the northern sector of Combat Zone South. The I Flak Corps (Fourth Air Fleet), controlling the 9th and 10th Flak Divisions, submitted the following action report on 19 July 1942:

> On 19 July 1942, the 2nd Battery, 19th Flak Artillery Regiment, commanded by First Lieutenant Goelkel, destroyed 18 heavy tanks at the Voronezh bridgehead within two hours in repelling a Soviet armored attack, thereby bringing its [the Battery's] total up to 40 tanks.[27]

On 26 July the 153rd Flak Artillery Regiment (operating in the Voronezh area) destroyed 130 tanks by direct fire in bitter, close combat. During these engagements the gun crews were themselves often exposed to murderous fire by the advancing Russian troops. An order of the day issued on 29 July 1942 by the Second Army described the intensity of these antitank battles and the heroism of the individual German gun crews:

> In the fierce defensive battles fought on 29 July 1942, a gun crew of the 3rd Battery, 19th Flak Artillery Regiment, attached to the 168th Division, rendered conspicuous service. Under the Chief of Section and Chief Gunner, Sergeant Back and Corporal Schrippel, the gun crew destroyed 11 Soviet tanks by gunfire, while themselves exposed to extremely heavy fire in the foremost line. This brought up the battery's score to 40 tanks destroyed in eight engagements.[28]

At this juncture, the Fuehrer, obsessed with the old Russian proverb that "Mother Russia" could only be defeated if the invading army crossed the Volga, decided to abandon the steady and methodical offensive of the two army groups in Combat Zone South, and to concentrate, instead, upon two separate efforts, one against Stalingrad and the Volga and the other a thrust into the Caucasus. To facilitate this, two panzer divisions from the Fourth Panzer Army were immediately transferred to the Sixth Army to assist in the drive on Stalingrad. Army Group "A" was then to envelop any Russian forces who had made good their escape across the

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*Editor's Note: A heavily-armored ground-attack plane that was widely used by Soviet air forces. Designed by Sergei Vladimirovich Ilyushin, Soviet People's Commissar of the Aircraft Industry, it was the world's first armored fighter and fighter-bomber aircraft.

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Don by rapidly securing the area immediately southeast of Rostov. Once this was accomplished, the Black Sea coast could be captured and the Soviet Black Sea Fleet thereby denied its bases of operation. The stage would then be set for the march into the Caucasus.

Meanwhile, Army Group "B" was to continue onward toward Stalingrad, thence down the Volga to gain the territory between the Don and Volga Rivers, and, ultimately, capture the port of Astrakhan at the Volga estuary.[29]

By 2 August the Sixth Army's drive toward Stalingrad began to falter because of inadequate personnel and materiel replacements, and because of steadily stiffening Soviet resistance. In some sectors the Russians were even counterattacking. South of the Don, the Fourth Panzer Army had begun to wheel to the northeast, where it would meet little opposition.*

Above the scene, the VIII Air Corps concentrated on the railroads and Volga River traffic near Stalingrad, and on moving Soviet supply columns which could strengthen enemy forces and adversely affect the Sixth Army. The IV Air Corps remained in support of Kleist's forces by keeping railroads north of the Caucasus under surveillance. Flak batteries of the I Flak Corps were committed, as usual, in ground combat in the most advanced positions. General von Richthofen credited the rapid advance of German panzer spearheads to the fine support given by flak artillery units, an example of which is cited in the following report:

> During the battles fought in the Ternovaya-Krivorozhye-Tilinov/ area near the Kalitva River, the 1st Battalion, 12th Flak Artillery Regiment, using its total force of five batteries, succeeded in preventing the escape of strong Soviet forces from a pocket formed by German motorized units. In determined, independent action, in which all officers, noncommissioned officers, and men put forth their utmost efforts, this battalion destroyed or captured Soviet forces which had already escaped from the pocket.

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*See Map No. 22.

/Editor's Note: The precise location and name for Tilinov cannot be determined. Therefore, the German place name is used.

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This reopened the main supply highway for the panzer division and resulted in the complete isolation of the pocket. At a cost of only small losses, a large number of Soviet Russians were killed and wounded and 1,330 prisoners taken in close, bitter combat. The materiel captured included 140 horse-drawn vehicles, 94 trucks, 15 multiple rocket launchers, 10 heavy and light artillery pieces, 1 observation post, 19 mortars, 15 machine guns, large quantities of small arms, and a liaison plane.

Generalmajor Breith, commanding the panzer division, and General der Panzertruppe Geyr [von Schweppenburg], commanding the panzer corps in whose zone the flak batteries were committed, especially commended the courageous action and exemplary behavior of the [flak] battalion.[30]

The Drive into the Caucasus and the Kalmyk Steppe

After taking Rostov, German Army forces crossed the lower reaches of the Don in the last 10 days of July, advancing across the river between the Don estuary and Tsimlyanskiy on a front 150 to 180 miles in breadth. These units advanced swiftly on the northern fringes of the Caucasus.

With scarcely a pause, units of the IV Air Corps attacked Soviet forces retreating into the Caucasus, dispersing their columns. German airmen also bombed masses of enemy troops at river crossing points, thus preventing the Red Army from establishing itself in new positions in the area. Especially devastating bombing strikes were carried out against congested traffic on the Rostov-Baku railroad line. Ports along the Black Sea were bombed by two locally organized German night nuisance bombing squadrons.

The southeastward German advance reached the Manych River by 27 July, and soon thereafter German troops seized the towns of Proletarskaya and Salsk.[31] Wehrmacht ground offensives in the area, especially those of the armored forces, were supported by the Luftwaffe, which bombed and strafed Soviet troops in the area between the Don and Sal Rivers. On 30 July, just as the XXXX Panzer Corps of the Fourth Panzer Army had firmly established its bridgehead across the Manych River--an important point for the continued drive toward the Caucasus--the Fourth Panzer Army was given a new mission. The new orders transferred the army to Army Group "B," with instructions to seize Stalingrad by a drive from the

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south of the Don River through the Kalmyk Steppe. This change was soon to be felt in the southern area.*

German assault forces crossed the Krasnodar-Stalingrad railroad line on a wide front on 5 August, capturing the Tikhoretsk rail junction and the rail section south of Voroshilovskiy, thereby severing one of the most important communications routes between the Black and Caspian Seas.

As the eastern flank units of Army Group "A" approached the upper reaches of the Kuban River, twin-engine fighters and bomber units again went into action in support of their operations. Army Group "A" pressed forward at an incredibly fast pace, and very soon had established brigeheads across the Kuban. Twin-engine fighter units flew repeated high- and low-level missions in support of the German panzer and mountain infantry units, then battling to expand their bridgeheads over the Kuban River,† while Luftwaffe bombers struck heavy blows against communications networks in Soviet rear areas.

Day and night, German flyers carried out their repeated attacks against the Baku-Armavir railroad, and by 10 August, German and Rumanian forces had taken the important center of Armavir and had the northern foothills of the Caucasus range under firm control. In this offensive, German and allied troops also captured Krasnodar, the capital of the Kuban region, and Maykop, the center of the western Caucasus oil district, although in the latter place, the Russians had extensively destroyed the oil-producing installations.[32]

The German advance pressed relentlessly onward to the southeast, south, and east. On 14 August, Georgiyevsk fell to German Army units, heavily supported by dive-bombers and twin-engine fighters, and on the 22nd, mountain troops of the Wehrmacht hoisted the German war flag (Reichskriegsflagge) over the pinnacle of Mt. Elbrus, 18,481 feet high.†† This spectacular and extraordinary feat of mountaineering boosted German morale at home and abroad, but had little tactical significance.

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*See Map No. 20.
†See Map No. 20.
††See Figure 56.

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Figure 56
The pinnacle of Mt. Elbrus in the Caucasus Mountains

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Since 10 August the IV Air Corps had increased its efforts against Soviet evacuation and embarkation movements in the coastal areas of the Black Sea, especially the ports of Anapa, Novorossiysk, Gelendzhik, and Tuapse. During these operations as well as in ground combat the IV Air Corps made a major contribution to the overall success in the Caucasus campaign.

Batteries of the I Flak Corps also achieved very good results in ground fire during the advance into the Caucasus, assisting the Seventeenth Army and the First Panzer Army to maintain their forward momentum. The following distribution table shows the relatively heavier allotment of flak forces to the Seventeenth Army Sector of Army Group "A."

In the Seventeenth Army Sector	In the First Panzer Army Sector
Hq, 17th Flak Division	1st, 3rd, 4th, and 5th Batteries, 7th Flak Regiment
Hq, 42nd Flak Regiment	77th Light Flak Regiment
1st Bn., 4th Flak Regiment	279th (Army) Flak Battalion
1st and 3rd Batteries, 86th Flak Regiment	1st, 2nd, and 3rd Batteries, 616th Flak Battalion
1st, 2nd, and 3rd Batteries, 89th Flak Regiment	
2nd Bn., 241st Flak Regiment	
275th (Army) Flak Regiment	
7th Battery, 291st Flak Regiment	
1st, 2nd, and 3rd Batteries, 775th Flak Regiment	
8th and 9th Batteries, Luftwaffe Flak Training Regiment[33]	

While the eastern flank units of the First Panzer Army battled across the Terek River and along the northern foothills of the Caucasus toward the Groznyy oil center, right wing (western) elements of the army, assisted by Rumanian units, had taken possession of the Taman Peninsula and, on 6 September, seized the important seaport of Novorossiysk.[34]* Red Army troops put up an exceptionally tenacious resistance in the Maykop area, and First Panzer Army units encountered stiffening opposition along the Turukh River sector.

*See Maps Nos. 19 and 20.

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North of the First Panzer Army, a Fourth Panzer Army force, consisting of armored, motorized, and cavalry units, had driven deeply into the Kalmyk Steppe in an operation designed to protect the extended open flank and rear of the First Panzer Army, which was then advancing on Groznyy.*

As the march into the Caucasus progressed, it became increasingly difficult for the Wehrmacht to move forward enough essential supplies, especially fuel, to the fighting forces. Tippelskirch's Geschichte des Zweiten Weltkriegs (History of the Second World War) includes an interesting description of this problem:

> . . . the first supply difficulties developed already during the advance, and these difficulties gradually evolved into a chronic calamity. At times fuel supplies were so low that they had to be transported by air. Supply routes had become so long that the supply columns used up virtually all the fuel they could carry in order to cover the long distances.
>
> Finally, the paradoxical situation came about that camel caravans had to be pressed into service for the transportation of fuel supplies. . . .[35]

Generaloberst Halder noted that Hitler was displeased with his generals, especially those in the Caucasus, as early as 30 August. The lack of progress of Army Group "A" was highly displeasing to the Fuehrer, who sent Generaloberst Alfred Jodl, Chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff, to confer with Field Marshal List. When Jodl concurred with the judgments of List, Hitler was extremely upset, and immediately vented his wrath on German Army generals as a group, whom he viewed as inflexible and "lacking in the proper fighting enthusiasm." On the 9th, List was requested to resign, whereupon Hitler assumed the additional role of Commander in Chief of Army Group "A." Generalleutnant Hans von Greiffenberg, the Chief of Staff, remained in the field as the Fuehrer's executive officer.[36]

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*Editor's Note: At the end of 1942 these forces were in the Yashkul area east of Elista.

/Editor's Note: Hitler then wore three hats as Commander in Chief of the Wehrmacht, Commander in Chief of the German Army, and Commander in Chief of Army Group "A," besides his political offices as Reichs Chancellor and Fuehrer (Leader), chief of state.

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In spite of continued air support, neither the First Panzer Army, driving toward Groznyy, nor the Seventeenth Army, advancing through the mountains north of Tuapse, made any appreciable headway in October. Heavy rains made the roads almost impassable and seriously hampered all offensive operations. [37]

Air support for the Caucasus operations was provided by the IV Air Corps, and was directed mainly against Soviet oil centers. Targets selected for bombing were the Groznyy oil region, the Baku-Groznyy and Kizlyar-Astrakhan railroads, and Soviet shipping on the Caspian Sea. In early November the IV Air Corps went into action in support of the First Panzer Army in its drive on the important industrial town of Ordzhonikidze, and the Seventeenth Army in its offensive toward Tuapse. Because of the difficult terrain, unfavorable weather conditions, and stubborn Soviet resistance, both of these operations bogged down in the initial phases. Luftwaffe support was not substantial enough to materially alter the situation.

The bomber forces available to the IV Air Corps varied in strength from one to three groups, and acted in response to directions from the command post in Kerch and the main (forward) command post in Maykop. These weak air units attacked the oil area of Groznyy and, according to aerial reconnaissance, achieved good results. Moreover, their losses were slight because of the weakness of Soviet fighter and antiaircraft defenses in the target areas. However, the air power available to the IV Air Corps was inadequate for the effective interdiction of Soviet shipping in the Black and Caspian Seas, as well as rail traffic south of the Caucasus range and from Baku to Astrakhan. As a result, the Luftwaffe could achieve only localized and temporary interruptions of Soviet logistical movements.

The crucial battle for Stalingrad and the resulting necessity to air-lift supplies in ever greater amounts to the encircled Sixth Army made it mandatory to employ all of the bomber units of the Fourth Air Fleet in air transport missions.* This left the IV Air Corps with weak tactical support units for the Army operations in the Terek area and the drive on Tuapse.

At the end of November 1942, the IV Air Corps Headquarters transferred to Salsk in order to give more active support to the attack

*See Map No. 23.

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for the relief of German forces in Stalingrad. Air units remaining in the Caucasus, a few reconnaissance and harassing aircraft, were transferred to Air Command Caucasus, the newly designated command of General Dessloch and his I Flak Corps. [38] The bulk of the flak units were also withdrawn at this time from the First Panzer Army area.

No important changes occurred in the ground situation in the Caucasus region to the end of 1942. Army Group "A" had completely exhausted its striking capability. The forces of the First Panzer Army had come to a halt along a line extending generally from Elkhotovo to a point just east of Mozdok, where they had taken up defensive positions, while the Seventeenth Army, in the area north of Tuapse, had been unable to carry its attack farther forward than a line extending from Novorossiysk-Erivankaya-Goryachiy-Klyuch to Shaumyana and Samarskoye.*

With its weak forces, the Fourth Air Fleet was unable to accomplish its assigned mission of simultaneously supporting Army Groups "A" and "B." The divergent directions of the advances of these armies--Army Group "B" carried out the attack on Stalingrad, while Army Group "A" plunged deep into the Caucasus--expanded the operational area of the Fourth Air Fleet to enormous proportions, compelling it to divide its forces. The VIII Air Corps was thus assigned to the Stalingrad effort, while the IV Air Corps was directed to support the Caucasus operation. Once the battle for Stalingrad had ended and the Red Army had begun its massive counteroffensive at the Don River, it was necessary to permanently concentrate all available air power in support of the Don River front, with the attendant result that no really effective air support could be provided for German forces in the Caucasus.

Another reason for the declining striking power of the Luftwaffe was the complete failure to get materiel and personnel replacements to the fighting front. In any case, however, the attacks of Army forces were bound to fail since the defensive capabilities of the Russians were steadily increasing as the effective German air support decreased. This meant the frustration of all hopes to achieve the objective in the Caucasus, the seizure of the Soviet Black Sea coastline. [39]

Apart from a few attacks against supply lines deep in the Soviet rear and installations in the Caucasus oil region, the IV Air Corps expended its entire effort in direct support of ground operations. The

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*See Maps Nos. 13 and 20.

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necessity of releasing units to other commands could only lower the striking power of the corps. Remaining units were thus overworked and suffered accordingly. The operational status of assigned aircraft was, of course, bound to decline.

The German Offensive Against Stalingrad

During the month of July 1942, Army Group "B" had made good progress in its offensive toward Stalingrad, and by mid-August the Sixth Army had advanced as far as a line extending roughly from Kalach to Kletskaya. The Fourth Panzer Army had meanwhile dispatched mobile units from its bridgehead at Tsymlianskiy toward the east in a thrust which carried them far into the Kalmyk Steppe in the direction of Elista. This covered the north flank of the First Panzer Army's advance into the foothills of the Caucasus mountains.* The XXXVIII Panzer Corps of the Fourth Panzer Army had wheeled to the northeast toward Kotelnikovo, and, together with the IV Rumanian Corps, began a concerted drive in the direction of Stalingrad. [40]

As the German forces approached the city, Soviet resistance increased apace. On 21 August, with continuous support from the VIII Air Corps, the Sixth Army launched a new attack and succeeded in establishing a bridgehead across the Don River north of Kalach. By 6 September, soldiers of the Sixth Army had thrown back fiercely resisting Russian units and carried their attack forward to a line extending from the western outskirts of Stalingrad-Rynok to Kachalino and thence to Kletskaya. [41]

At 2310 hours on 22 August the 16th Panzer Division reported to the headquarters of the XIV Panzer Corps that the reinforced 79th Panzer Regiment had reached the Volga River, and that a company of the 2nd Panzer Regiment had occupied Spartakovka against initially weak, but steadily stiffening Soviet opposition. In this battle, the VIII Air Corps provided excellent support. [42]

German troops were in position at the Volga River, thanks in large part to units of the Fourth Air Fleet, and it seemed as though one of the two major objectives of the summer offensive had been achieved. The

*See Maps Nos. 22 and 23.

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attack by the VIII Air Corps on 23 August is described in the diary notations for that date by General von Richthofen:

> The attack completely paralyzed the Russians and enabled von Wietersheim's* panzer forces to advance 36 miles practically unopposed. At 1600 hours these units reached the Volga River. A very narrow wedge was driven forward, which will undoubtedly be under Soviet attack from the right and the left from tomorrow on. During this time, units of the VIII Air Corps flew a total of 1,600 sorties, delivered 1,000 tons of bombs on targets, and downed 91 Soviet aircraft, losing only 3 German planes. . . .[43]

On the 23rd, the heavy Soviet counterattacks, which had been expected by the Fourth Air Fleet, succeeded in isolating the XIV Panzer Corps and a regiment of the 9th Flak Division supporting its advance to the south in a narrow sector bounded in the rear by the Volga River.† These flak batteries were invaluable in the critical defensive battles which followed. Supplies were in great demand at this time, especially tank fuel and ammunition, which had to be air-dropped to the enveloped panzer corps.†† Within a few days, however, forces of the Sixth Army, following up the advance, were able to drive to the east to free the panzer corps.[44] While the Sixth Army succeeded in this effort, it was unable to penetrate far enough to the north to secure absolute control of the Don River bend south of Kremenskaya, and the Russians continued to threaten the Wehrmacht by maintaining a bridgehead on the German side of the Don.

Certain Luftwaffe organizational changes were made at this time. On 26 August, Generalleutnant Guenther Korten, at the instructions of the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, relinquished his post as Chief of Staff of the Fourth Air Fleet and took command of Air Command Don. This organization made its headquarters at Kharkov, with an advanced command post at Starobelsk on the Don River and another temporary command post

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*General der Panzertruppe Gustav von Wietersheim, Commander of the XIV Panzer Corps called Gruppe Wietersheim.

†Editor's Note: At this point the Don and Volga Rivers come within 36 miles of each other.

††Editor's Note: There was an acute shortage of motor vehicles, which meant that the bulk of German supplies in the Don-Volga area had to be brought in over a limited-capacity, single-track railroad running from the Donets Basin.

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at Valuyki. The unit took over the mission of Tactical Air Command North (Colonel Buelowius) in support of the defensive ground operations in the northern sector of Combat Zone South. Air Command Don, however, did not act under directions of the Fourth Air Fleet, but functioned independently of that command. The center of main effort was around the Voronezh area. Ground services and supply functions in the area were to be handled by Air Administrative Command Kharkov, now a part of Air Command Don.

The number and type of air units designated for assignment to Air Command Don were to be varied according to the current mission of the organization. Thus, on 17 August 1942 units earmarked for Air Command Don consisted of 2 bomber groups and 1 fighter group, but by 29 August this was reversed, 1 bomber group and 2 fighter groups being assigned.[45] The strongest air forces, however, were made available to the VIII Air Corps in the Stalingrad area.

Of all the Luftwaffe organizations, the VIII Air Corps was the only real close-support corps. Led through June 1942 by Freiherr von Richthofen,* it had a profound effect in the Western campaign of 1940, and in the East in 1941 and 1942. Richthofen was the staunchest advocate of tactical air power for the support of ground operations, and his previous assignments as Commander of "Legion Condor"† in the Spanish Civil War, as Chief of the Special Purpose Air Command in Poland, and in the campaigns of 1940-42 gave him considerable knowledge of close-support operations. This corps, which after Richthofen's elevation to Commander in Chief, Fourth Air Fleet on 24 June 1942 was under the command of Generalleutnant Martin Fiebig, was the best trained air unit for close support of advancing German and allied ground forces in the vicinity of Stalingrad.[46]

The VIII Air Corps gave continuous support to the Don River crossing. Several hundred planes were assigned the mission of protecting friendly forces against Soviet air attacks, while units of the 9th Flak Division were stationed in positions to protect bridge construction operations and troop crossings of the Don at Vertyachiy north of Kalach. Only weak Soviet air units attempted to interfere with German operations during this phase. Fighters of the 3rd Fighter Wing "Udet" inflicted very heavy losses on the Russians, and the entire period was characterized by a continuous and clear German air superiority. Ground-attack and dive-bomber units were committed again and again in the areas ahead of

*Generaloberst 1 March 1942.

†The German military contingent assisting General Franco's Nationalists.

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the broad front of the German Fourth Panzer Army and motorized units advancing northward across the plain between the Don and Volga Rivers.

Tactical air strips were constructed on the plains, close behind the front and near the main supply routes, enabling air units to deliver large amounts of supplies close to the logistical support lines and Army installations.

Airfields and landing strips were prepared and stocked for operations by every available means, including improvisations. Supplies were transported by rail as far forward as Taganrog, Mariupol, Stalino, and Makeyevka, and occasionally even to Kharkov. From there they were transported by air to the advanced airfields. Nine Ju-52 groups and one He-111 group were assigned to the task of airlifting supplies to the armies at the Don River. The He-111 aircraft served at the same time as tow planes for cargo gliders. These air transport groups carried 42,000 tons of supplies, 7,000 tons of which were for the German Army, to areas immediately behind the front.[47] According to the Chief of Air Transport Services, German air units carried a total of 33,397 tons of supplies for the Luftwaffe, of which 9,492.6 tons were bombs and aircraft ammunition, 20,173 tons aviation fuel, and 3,731.8 tons spare parts and equipment. Supplies airlifted for the German Army amounted to 9,233.4 tons, including 1,787.8 tons of ammunition, 4,615.6 tons of motor fuel, and 2,830 tons of equipment. In addition to these items, the Luftwaffe carried 27,044 troops to the front area and evacuated 51,018 casualties.[48] Only by airlifting supplies to advanced airfields was it possible to continue the tactical air support operations for the Fourth Panzer Army and the Sixth Army, the latter of which was then engaged in very heavy combat.

The actual strength of the VIII Air Corps varied considerably, for it was often required to release air units on a temporary basis to reinforce the IV Air Corps in the Caucasus or to support the German forces in the Voronezh area. Normally the VIII Air Corps had 2 or 3 bomber wings based at Morozovsk and Tatsinskaya, 5 or 6 dive-bomber groups and 1 or 2 ground-attack groups which operated from tactical airfields and airstrips, and a twin-engine fighter group and 3 or 4 fighter groups situated near the front on both banks of the Don.

Meanwhile, units of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Rumanian Fourth Army located east of the Don River fought their way ahead, joining allied forces advancing from the south, west, and north, thereby virtually closing the ring around the sprawling city of Stalingrad and its numerous industrial centers. In the last days of August 1942, the battle for the city began.

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The first heavy air attack was launched on 3 September against Stalingrad to coincide with the first big ground assault. Day and night Ju-88 and He-111 groups, operating at 6,600 to 13,000 feet, dropped their hail of bombs on the city, while dive-bombers carried out intermittent attacks. These bombers were provided with fighter escorts, even though there was practically no evidence of Soviet air activity. Initially, Russian ground defenses also were very weak, but grew increasingly stronger, particularly with respect to fire from light and medium antiaircraft guns.

Apart from detected artillery and multiple-rocket batteries, the main targets for Luftwaffe air attack were the rail installations in what was called the large circuit and the industrial works known as the Red October, Red Barricade, and Dzerzinsky tractor factories. These giant industrial establishments had all been developed as powerful centers of military resistance. Although the Russians held only about one-third of the town area, they defended that portion with fanaticism, almost with the fervor of a religious crusade.[49]

The area held by the Red Army forces was bounded on the east by the Volga River, and every night the Russians dragged whatever their units needed across the river. Bitter struggles ensued for every house and every block of buildings, for individual cellars, and even for a tiny portion of a factory wall. The Luftwaffe had to bomb with minute precision to avoid striking its own troops, who were often in adjoining cellars or behind a wall or abutment only a few yards from the targets.*

Every single building had been identified on the aerial photos of the city, and every German pilot was assigned his specific target, marked with red arrows on the picture. Each pilot approached his target with the city map in hand, and no one was permitted to drop a bomb until the target had been positively identified and the position of German ground targets ascertained. Yet, despite these hotly contested points, some parts of the city continued to function as if no war were taking place. Colonel Rudel describes this rather unusual situation:

> . . . Flying over the western city areas, we are strangely impressed by the quiet and almost normal activities there. Everyone, including civilians, moves about as if he were in the farthest rear area.

*See Figure 57.

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> The entire western sector of the town is under German control. Exceptionally bitter fighting continues only in the small area in the east toward the Volga River, where the Soviet pockets of resistance are located. . . .[50]

Continuous air strikes were also flown against the Soviet airfields east of the Volga, against rail routes to Stalingrad, and against Volga shipping. The VIII Air Corps also employed four to six Rumanian bomber squadrons equipped with He-111 and Italian Savoia aircraft, and a few Rumanian fighter squadrons equipped with Me-109's and I.A.R. 80 and 81 aircraft.*

Flak forces committed in the Sixth Army area at Stalingrad were the 9th Flak Division and the 91st Flak Regiment, both under the command of the VIII Air Corps. These units were used extensively in ground engagements against Soviet tanks and heavy weapons. The combat commitment of flak batteries at Stalingrad is described in the following account by the Commander of the 9th Flak Division:

> . . . Exceedingly heavy losses were inflicted on the attacking German forces by mortars firing from the ruins within the city and by strong artillery forces firing from positions across the Volga River. The graveyards near the field dressing stations grew at an alarming rate!
>
> Losses in officer personnel, . . . were extremely heavy, and the 9th Flak Division alone lost four battery commanders in one day.
>
> . . . the Russians attempted again and again to break through to the south by attacks along the narrow strip of land between the Volga and Don Rivers. Batteries of the 9th Flak Division achieved excellent results in repelling

*Editor's Note: I.A.R. 80 and 81 fighters were Rumanian-made fighters, and the only ones turned out in substantial numbers in Rumania during World War II. A 1937 design, the first fighting models appeared in Rumanian air units in 1942. By 1943 production was curtailed to permit the production of Me (Bf) 109's. The 81 was an advanced model of the I.A.R. 80, both of which were low-wing, one-place fighters with top speeds of about 320 m.p.h., armed with four 7.7-mm. machine guns and two 20-mm. cannons. See William Green, War Planes of the Second World War: Fighters, Vol. 3, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1962, pp. 123-124.

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these attacks. Heavy flak batteries destroyed a large number of Soviet tanks, and light batteries, which had an excellent field of fire in the level plains, inflicted heavy losses on Soviet infantry units, thereby greatly relieving the critical situations which developed repeatedly through the Russian attacks.

. . . British tanks (probably the Churchill model), . . . were encountered here for the first time in the Eastern Theater.[51]

All of the German bombing attacks against Soviet supply routes produced but temporary interdictions. In each instance, rail traffic was resumed within a few hours, so that trains were soon able to carry forward material and personnel replacements for the front combat sectors.

During this phase of operations all of the most important targets for the Luftwaffe were ground objectives in the advance of the German and allied armies. The few attacks flown against ships and oil installations in Astrakhan, Kamyshin, and Saratov, efforts to mine the Volga River in the Soviet rear areas, and the barges and cargo vessels sunk on the Volga--these were generally deep in the Soviet rear--were but mere pinpricks, which could never cause a really significant impact upon the overall situation.

In the opinion of the author, it would have been wiser at this juncture of affairs to have employed every available aircraft against the ironclad Soviet front, and to have delivered as effectively as possible every available bomb on key targets such as Soviet centers of resistance in Stalingrad. These strongpoints had by this time turned Stalingrad into a veritable fortress, bolstered by numerous Russian batteries east of the Volga River and other Red Army units which incessantly attacked the German and allied holding line in the north, between Dubovka and Kachalino.*

The forces available to the Fourth Air Fleet at this time were too weak to enable it to simultaneously carry out its central tasks of isolating the battlefield and directly supporting the Army in combat, missions which involved operations in both the Stalingrad and Caucasus areas. It was of paramount importance at this stage to force a positive decision in the

*Situated north and northwest of Stalingrad respectively.

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ground battle for Stalingrad. Direct support action at the fighting front was therefore of the essence. It was precisely at this point that sufficient force had to be applied to wear down and defeat the Russians. [52]

Because of the complete inferiority in types of aircraft available and in numerical strength, the Soviet air command at Stalingrad was on the defensive. Therefore, Russian fighter operations never exceeded the scale of mere harassing raids. The Luftwaffe found remarkably little opposition in the air during the early part of the fighting. On the ground, however, matters were different.

German air units found it impossible to neutralize Soviet artillery and other heavy weapons, which were present in great numbers. Apparently, the Red Army had inexhaustible supplies of ammunition, employed highly flexible tactics, and was able somehow to withstand all countermeasures.

It was impossible to stop the broad flow of Soviet supplies because they were moved largely at night and along lesser known routes, so that they were almost completely protected against German combat action.

Enemy forces holding the few strongpoints inside Stalingrad were regularly rotated and continuously reinforced at night, and these troops were thoroughly familiar with all of the details of local conditions. Although the Russians were outnumbered at these points by the attacking German forces, the general circumstances, including a secure Soviet supply system, placed the Russian forces in a superior position.

German forces committed to capture the last Soviet bastions in Stalingrad were the same units which had attacked in the previous large-scale summer offensive. In spite of their excellent performances, they had been excessively employed for a long time. For a considerable period of time the Sixth Army had received an insufficient amount of supplies, and necessary improvisations to improve this situation, which would probably have been feasible, had not been introduced. Work on the security and stabilization of supply routes proceeded very slowly. One of the most pressing problems was the critical shortage of ammunition, particularly for artillery and heavy weapons, in the Stalingrad area.

The German attacks in this general area were small- to medium-sized operations, local in character. Owing to an insufficiency of troops and supplies, and other adverse circumstances, these attacks produced meager and purely temporary results, despite the heroic courage

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displayed by German soldiers who offered their lives in the cause.* A lengthy conversation between General Paulus and the Chief of Staff of the VIII Air Corps (Col. Alfred Buelowius) at the end of September 1942 indicated that there was a general agreement concerning these matters. They believed that there was no chance to employ the long-range strategic units available to the air command because of the small size of the targets inside Stalingrad. Circumstances, they agreed, made it compulsory to use strategic air power only against such objectives as Soviet supply routes and installations, the ground service organization of the Soviet air forces, and enemy artillery batteries laid east of the Volga River. 53/

Operations by tactical air units were carried out in consonance with existing tactical principles of ground-attack organizations: one flight attacking, one flight providing cover from above, and one protecting the flanks, all in rotation. Using these tactics, it was possible to provide support for all army attack operations throughout the day. Large-formation air strikes of group to wing size were generally restricted to periods just prior to the beginning of ground attacks. Most of the targets attacked at that time were pinpoint targets.

From its advance command post in Stalingrad, the VIII Air Corps could view the terrain over which German ground forces were attacking and on eastward as far as the Volga River. ++ This command post was immediately adjacent to an Army observation post and the plotting center of an observation battalion, which made it possible to immediately inform units in the air of changes in the situation, to give them new items for orientation, and to direct German airmen to specific Soviet pockets of resistance. A small-scale grid superimposed upon aerial photos served as a basis for air orientation.

Moreover, close and smooth collaboration between the Luftwaffe and the Army observation posts made it possible to find the location of every newly detected enemy battery east of the Volga, and, with the Army's help (especially the observation battalion), to plot its position on grid maps for early air attacks. These activities were especially important because the Soviet batteries fired only on occasion and then not longer than 30 to 45 minutes from a given position.

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*See Figure 58.

/The author does not concur with the point of view expressed here by General Paulus and Colonel Buelowius.

++See Figure 59.

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Figure 57
German flyer taking off for air
reconnaissance over Stalingrad

Figure 58
German infantry squad in Stalingrad
ready to attack, December 1942

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Figure 59
VIII Air Corps command post near Stalingrad. General der Panzertruppe Hans Hube above. Generaloberst Freiherr von Richthofen below.

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Inasmuch as the Wehrmacht's intelligence interpretation indicates that its situation on the ground and its methods of attack cannot be considered adequate reasons for the failure to take Stalingrad, it is well to note Generaloberst von Richthofen's commentary, which may help to explain how the failure came about by a faulty and impractical commitment of ground forces:

> If I have a small fire and five buckets of water, I throw all five buckets onto the fire. Then I have the assurance that it is out. But, if I try first with one bucket, then with the second bucket, and then with the third, I have used up all my water, but the fire is not extinguished.
>
> . . . It is an actual fact that the efforts to liquidate strongpoints in Stalingrad were nothing but combat patrol operations on a somewhat larger scale. 54

German Army artillery often ceased firing by noon because of ammunition shortages, and it had become a standing joke in the Stalingrad area that "hundreds of batteries are in position before the city, but each of them has only one round of ammunition."55 Flak artillery units bore the brunt of the attacks, and the efforts made by the Army were never commensurate with the requirements in this brutal, close-combat action. Assault units were often depleted in short order after their commitment.

All of these armed patrol operations, quite apart from the locally superior tactics of the Russians, were doomed to failure from the outset because of the inadequate forces committed in the initial attacks, for the followup, and for the consolidation of gains. 56

Much has been written about the bitter and arduous struggle for Stalingrad, some of it in voluminous epic form, and some of it clearly tendentious in intent. Few authors have presented a more logical, clear, and concise description of those events than General der Infanterie Kurt von Tippelskirch:

> And now, at the beginning of October, a battle commenced for the city which was to last two months, and which defies all attempts at description. During the battle the city was gradually reduced to a gigantic heap of rubble. Supported by tanks, assault guns, flame throwers, artillery, and dive-bombers, German infantrymen and engineers used hand grenades and knives to fight their way through this waste of rubble from house

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to house, cellar to cellar, and from one heap of debris to the next. The gigantic industrial works had been turned into forts. The more ruins were created, the more cover the defenders were able to find. The tenacious Russians succeeded time and again in repairing with ant-like industry two ponton bridges across the Volga River each time the bridges were destroyed by German dive-bombers or artillery fire. On the eastern bank they moved exceptionally powerful artillery forces into positions from which the guns were able to support the desperately pressed [Soviet] defenders with their fire.

Repeated orders of the day by Stalin and Timoshenko fired the defenders to fanatical resistance. . . .

In mid-October, a large-scale attempt was made to bring about the fall of the city. According to Hitler's views, all that was needed was a gigantic armed patrol type of mopping-up operation. Therefore, five engineer battalions taken from the Zone of the Interior and from divisions stationed in reserve behind non-German forces to reinforce and secure the Don River line were moved forward by air to reinforce the attacking units. The assault on the city, which commenced on 17 October, actually made considerable progress. In the northern sector the attack was carried forward to the Volga River, and only one day after the opening of the attack Moscow reported that the situation at Stalingrad had deteriorated considerably. Until the end of the month the German pressure was maintained which, through heavy air attacks and the conquest of the river bank on the ground, virtually brought traffic on the river to a standstill. Then, however, the newly committed forces were also burned out. The city was almost in German hands.* But, because of the heavy losses incurred, only a small percentage of which were replaced, and then by personnel who were at first not inured to the rigors of this kind of combat, the effective strengths of all [German] units were considerably reduced, and, in some cases, organizations sank to one-quarter of their authorized strengths. 57

*The Russians were able to hold out only in a few places in the northeast sector of the city.

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The Soviet Drive into the German Flanks

All of the German air attacks against the Soviet supply routes failed to prevent the gradual increase of Russian forces in the Stalingrad area, and by the end of October Red Army forces in the city were even able to resume the attack from the few positions which they still held. Artillery batteries still in place on the eastern bank of the Volga River supported these attacks, while large numbers of Soviet troops crossed the river in all sorts of boats to help sustain the assaults. Although the VIII Air Corps employed all of its available aircraft in repeated attacks against these troop movements, it was unable to prevent the arrival of enemy reinforcements.

In November the weather deteriorated considerably, which further reduced the operational possibilities of air units engaged in the attacks against the Russian forces. Unfortunately, this was at the very time when the demands for air support were increasing. Again and again the Commanding General of the Fourth Air Fleet tried to persuade the Army command at all levels to concentrate its forces for an all-out attack on Stalingrad in order to clear up and stabilize the entire situation in the Don River bend and Stalingrad area as soon as possible. [58]

In the drive to conquer Stalingrad, the defending flanks had been considerably weakened. Neither Army Group "A" nor Army Group "B" had adequate forces to hold their extended front lines. While Army Group "A" remained committed in the northern Caucasus, facing Soviet forces to the south, Army Group "B" had the dual responsibilities of taking Stalingrad and defending the northern (left) flank of the front. Holding this flank were the weak German Second Army in the Voronezh sector and immediately south of it the Hungarian Second Army, while the Italian Eighth Army stood in immediate proximity to the units attacking the city of Stalingrad.

Entries in the diary of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff indicate the great anxiety felt by the German High Command about the Don River front. By 16 September 1942 Hitler had ordered the 22nd Panzer Division and the 113th Infantry Division to be transferred from the Sixth Army sector to back up the Italian Eighth Army, where a Soviet attack seemed most likely to occur. [59] This line was further bolstered on 10 October when the Rumanian Third Army was moved up into the Don River line between the Sixth Army and the Italian Eighth Army. [60]

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The Chief of Staff, VIII Air Corps was able to obtain a personal impression of the Rumanian Third Army from discussions with the Rumanian Third Army staff personnel. He soon discerned how grave were the threats of a Soviet penetration, or even a breakthrough, in the areas held by this poorly equipped unit.

The Rumanian Army was equipped with Austrian, French, and German weapons, some of which dated back to World War I. Its artillery was especially outdated. Each division's antitank defenses consisted of one horse-drawn antitank battalion armed with German 3.7-cm. guns, which were known to be inadequate for combat conditions on the Eastern Front in 1942. These divisions, moreover, were assigned defensive fronts of 15 miles or more in breadth. Ammunition supplies for their units were meager, and no arrangements existed to insure a resupply after expenditure of the basic loads. All other logistical plans were illusory, since the Wehrmacht had no ammunition supplies for these types of weapons, which were not standard in the German Army.

In their fortitude, the Rumanian soldiers were similar to the Russians, especially in the matter of frugality and in their ability to withstand all manner of privations. The average soldier was of peasant stock, respectable and loyal, and in every way a good fighter, providing he was properly led. Officers in the lower ranks, however, were poorly trained, had nothing in common with their subordinates, and were by no means as willing to make sacrifices as were their men. The average Rumanian officer lacked a hard military schooling and had not secured the confidence of his men, an indispensable factor in difficult situations.

Officers in the higher ranks had received French training, but they lacked initiative, depended too heavily upon the receipt of orders, and were rarely able to make independent decisions in precarious circumstances. To make matters worse, they were totally unfamiliar with German methods of command. The command staff of the Rumanian Army was fully aware of these problems, and recognized that, with outmoded equipment, troops which were inexperienced in combat, and immense defensive responsibilities out of proportion to the strength of Rumanian units, it would be unable to conduct a successful defensive battle. It hoped, however, with the support of the reinforcements promised by the German Command, to be able to offer tenacious resistance for a time.[61]

The reinforcements upon which the Rumanian Army was relying consisted of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps (Generalleutnant Ferdinand Heim), which controlled the Rumanian 1st Armored Division, the German 22nd Panzer Division, and a German reconnaissance battalion.

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The Rumanian 1st Armored Division was concentrated about 70 or 80 miles west of the Don River in the Chernyshevskaya-Malakhov-Petrovka area, and was outfitted with French Renault tanks of the 1920's and antiquated radio equipment. Considering the fact that the division also had but one or two days' supply of ammunition, it could be truly said that the unit's combat value was nil. The 22nd Panzer Division, however, was also far from combat ready. Neither it nor the motorized reconnaissance battalion were able to give full assistance to the operations of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps in its hour of need. Generalleutnant Heim recognized this state of affairs and knew only too well what an impossible mission would await his panzer corps if the Russian attack came too soon.*

Throughout the month of October the Soviet Command launched probing attacks all along the Don positions from Voronezh to the bend in the Don River west of Stalingrad.† These attacks were primarily aimed at the Hungarian, Rumanian, and Italian armies, which were seriously deficient in heavy and antitank weapons. At several points these forces had been compelled to withdraw, which should have warned the German Command that this area could not be neglected. Although German ground forces, with Luftwaffe support, had always been able to restore the situation, it was abundantly clear that this sector of the front could not withstand a full-scale Soviet attack. It was also clear that air power alone could not decide the issue at this point.

On 25 October the Red Army began to construct bridges over the Don River at various places. Hitler then ordered the improvement of German and allied positions by the establishment of a number of switch positions.62†† On the following day he expressed a growing concern that the Russians might launch a winter offensive through the areas held by

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*Editor's Note: Mice had chewed the insulation off the radio wires in tanks of the 22nd Panzer Division while it stood in reserve, hampering the unit's communications. Besides this, the division was strung out for 120 miles between the area south of Stalingrad and the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps area at the time of the attack. The motorized reconnaissance battalion was badly understrength and arrived too late to assist the panzer corps in its critical defensive battles. It later became involved in retrograde movements when the VIII Corps of the Sixth Army swung back its left wing.

†See Maps Nos. 13, 22, and 23.

††Editor's Note: Positions established so as to connect parallel defensive lines. These are run at a diagonal to the main lines of resistance.

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Germany's allies, with the intention of cutting off units north of the Caucasus by a rapid push toward Rostov-on-the-Don. This seemed particularly likely in view of strong Soviet troop movements along the Don River from north of Stalingrad and the newly constructed Soviet bridges over the river.

Luftwaffe Field Divisions were to be committed with the allied armies as stabilizing factors. Hitler directed that these divisions be stationed in the rear of each of the front areas held by allied forces, thereby relieving German Army combat units on the line from additional responsibilities.[63*]

Early in November, Luftwaffe reconnaissance photos showed that the Russians were constantly increasing the number of bridges being thrown up over the Don River in front of the Rumanian Third Army. The Fuehrer therefore ordered the Luftwaffe to make additional heavy air strikes upon all of these bridge sites and Russian troop assembly areas in the wooded tracts along the northern banks of the Don River.[64/] In most cases these very urgent missions could not be carried out because all of the available units of the VIII Air Corps were being utilized in support of the Sixth Army's drive to take Stalingrad. Yet the VIII Air Corps committed elements from time to time, especially after early November, and as soon as weather and ground conditions permitted, against reported Russian assembly areas.

Unfortunately for the Wehrmacht, the Soviets at this time were also launching increasingly strong attacks against the northern flank of Army Group "B," between the Don and Volga Rivers, and the German Army and Air Force succeeded only with extreme difficulty in preventing a breakthrough.

Aerial photographs made by reconnaissance units of the Fourth Air Fleet gave increasingly strong reasons for supporting the idea of an

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*During the winter of 1942, the IV Luftwaffe Field Corps was established.

/Editor's Note: The Luftwaffe flew regular attack missions against the Don River bridges, the largest of which was near the village of Kletskaya. Antiaircraft defenses were especially strong at these points, and many of the gun crews were made up of women. German attacks delayed the Russians, but destroyed bridge sections and pontons were soon replaced. See Hans-Ulrich Rudel, Trotzdem (Nevertheless), Waiblingen, Wuerttemberg: Verlag Lothar Leberecht, 1950, pp. 69-70.

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intended large-scale Soviet attack, and these developments were followed with considerable anxiety by the air fleet. Since the Rumanians had the weakest sort of antitank defenses (to the author's knowledge only four 75-mm. horse-drawn antitank companies), the Fourth Air Fleet on its own discretion dispatched a motorized flak battalion to support the antitank defenses in the area.[65] However, all of these and similar measures were naturally just patchwork, since the fighting strengths and quality of units which were thus made available were inadequate for the situation.

Surveillance of the entire Kletskaya-Logovskiy-Frolovo area by the Luftwaffe was difficult and risky because of the extremely heavy concentrations of Soviet antiaircraft guns, yet from October 1942 on, reconnaissance results presented an increasingly clear picture of enemy assembly movements north of the Don River. The Soviet rail route from the north through Frolovo to Stalingrad was soon operating at full capacity, and German flyers saw large numbers of Russian troops detraining at every suitable point north and south of Frolovo, sometimes along open stretches of track where little concealment was possible. These Red Army units then moved toward the Don, traveling mostly at night, and approached their bridgeheads on a widely extended front. Night reconnaissance detected enemy vehicular movements, including tank columns, traveling at night with full headlights on. According to Col. Lothar von Heinemann of the VIII Corps:

> There was no way of knowing when these movements began since the Soviets cleverly exploited periods of bad weather and the dark of night to carry out their movements.* That the movements were discovered at all was due largely to chance. . . .[66]

The accidental discovery of the Russian concentration north of the Don is dramatically portrayed by Generalmajor Hans-Detlef Herhudt von Rohden:

> A Ju-88 unit [of the Fourth Air Fleet] was on a strategic reconnaissance mission over railroads north of the Don River bend, returning southward from Tambov. The low cloud ceiling was almost unbroken. Flying at low level, the plane broke through the cloud cover. At an altitude of 165 feet, cloud wisps streaked by, but the ground was visible. Like long phantom fingers, tracer shells suddenly

*Editor's Note: See USAF Historical Study No. 176, pp. 42, 46, and 48.

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> noticed widely spaced dark groupments, in between them massive shapes; tanks! The same picture presented itself everywhere. The weather was as bad as could be . . . What was happening could only be conjectured. In the minds of experienced crew members of command staff personnel, and of the squadron leaders, however, there was no room for doubt. Secretly, and cleverly, under cover of bad weather, the Russians were concentrating forces here north of the Don River bend.[67]

From then on, continuous day and night reconnaissance by all available units was given first priority in the Fourth Air Fleet. Although the Soviet assembly had not been discovered in its initial stages, and although it was impossible to determine precisely when it had begun, it was now crucially important to know when the movement was completed. This could be determined by various signs indicating final preparations for the attack.

It was also most important to take immediate steps to insure VIII Air Corps support to repel the imminent Soviet attack, by examining the distribution of VIII Air Corps forces and by tightening up the contacts between the Luftwaffe and the ground forces which would probably have to resist these attacks. Ground units primarily involved were the Rumanian Third Army and the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps.*

There was no need to change the distribution of air forces, and all units were within favorable striking ranges of the probable main areas of attack. Checks were made to insure that units would be quickly transferred, if necessary, from fields which were too near the front and about to be overrun. In addition, supplies were stockpiled at a tactical airfield in the Bokovskaya area, west of Kletskaya, which had been previously prepared for a group or two, so that large-scale supply operations could begin at once if required.

In accordance with discussions with the Rumanian Third Army, air liaison teams were attached to that army's headquarters, to the headquarters of each of its corps, and to the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps to insure secure communications. Teams required for this purpose were either withdrawn from the Stalingrad front or were taken from the scanty available reserves.

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*Editor's Note: "Panzer Corps" is a meaningless title for this unit, since it consisted mainly of the 22nd Panzer Division with only 45 tanks and the Rumanian 1st Armored Division with 40 captured Czeck tanks.

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All during the early part of November the VIII Air Corps carried out attacks against reported Russian troop concentration sites in front of the Rumanian Third Army.[68] German intelligence reports indicated that the Soviet forces in the concentration areas were still short of artillery ammunition, although by 12 November the Russians had moved large numbers of heavy guns into firing positions.* German commanders in the area hoped only that the Red Army would not be able to achieve a deep and serious penetration of the front.[69]

By 14 November Russian ground-attack planes had attacked several German and allied airfields and railroads, the increasing vigor of these attacks suggesting that a general attack might not be far off. The weather was still bad, with freezing rains and poor visibility.

Meanwhile, Luftwaffe bombers successfully attacked Soviet supply lines leading into Stalingrad in an effort to cut off logistical support to the Russian defenders of the city. Most of the air power was utilized, however, in actions designed to break up Soviet assembly points across the Don.[70] The tactical support forces of the IV Air Corps were ordered to attack the coastal areas of the Caucasus. Appropriate orders were issued by mid-November for General Dessloch to assume direction of the air operations in that sector so that, upon the opening of the Soviet Don offensive, von Richthofen could immediately move to the endangered area to take personal charge of the operations of the VIII Air Corps and the Rumanian Air Corps.[71]

Two composite flak batteries were released from the I Flak Corps and moved up behind the Rumanian Third Army to reinforce the Don front.† While the Luftwaffe was able to give some ground support in the form of flak units, it found itself increasingly less able to give air support because

*Editor's Note: Artillery, called by Stalin the "God of Battles," was used in massive amounts to prepare the way for Red Army attacks. German commanders usually assumed, and generally rightly, that until a preponderance of artillery was in the area, together with substantial supplies of ammunition, a general offensive by the Red Army was unlikely.

†Editor's Note: The greater part of the I Flak Corps was employed in the Caucasus area.

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of the ever more critical situation in distant Africa.* The 76th Bomber Wing, commanded by Major von Friedeburg,† was thereupon transferred to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel.

Richthofen held a lengthy telephone conversation on 16 November with Generaloberst Kurt Zeitzler†† expressing his deep concern over the need for a change in combat tactics in the Stalingrad area. He remarked that if it was impossible to resolve the issue while the Volga was choked with ice and the Stalingrad defenders were in dire straits, it would be impossible to settle the matter at all, especially inasmuch as the days were becoming shorter and the weather gradually worsening. Richthofen reported to Zeitzler that the command and troops at Stalingrad were so reluctant to carry out the necessary attacks that nothing short of an infusion of new spirit would enable them to achieve anything. He therefore suggested that the present commanders who had proven their abilities be sent on leave and that other qualified officers be given combat assignments as their deputies. Although Zeitzler agreed with Richthofen's viewpoints and promised to report them to Hitler, there was little cause for optimism.[72] Richthofen doubted that the higher commands would have the necessary firmness to carry out his idea, or that the Fuehrer would approve it, and, in his diary, he noted the increasingly ominous situation along the Don:

> The Russians are moving their assembled forces steadily forward. Allegedly they are doing so because our air forces are attacking them so heavily in their rear areas. I am more inclined to believe that they are moving forward in preparation for their attack.[73]

Seven Soviet battalions opened their attacks on the morning of 18 November, achieving some slight penetrations, which were eliminated by nightfall. By this time, however, it was already too late to save the day for German and allied forces in the Stalingrad-Don River area by any great, decisive command measure, since it can be shown in retrospect

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*Editor's Note: By November 1942 the Americans had landed in North Africa, Montgomery had scored a great victory with the British Eighth Army at El Alamein, and Rommel was insisting strongly to the Fuehrer that German forces in Africa must be either significantly strengthened or the position abandoned. Rommel favored the latter course of action. See Goerlitz, Vol. I, pp. 367-373.

†Editor's Note: At the time of publication of this study, the Editor was unable to obtain further identification of this officer.

††Chief of Staff of the German Army 25 September 1942 to 20 July 1944.

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that although the German Supreme Command had long had grave and persistent fears of an impending large-scale Soviet offensive across the Don, and assumed that the allied armies could muster no effective defense against such an attack, yet it took no direct steps to provide these armies with necessary personnel and material reinforcements. Doubtless this was because no reinforcements were available, with the possible exception of a few extremely weak and poorly equipped German reserves.

It appears completely inexplicable, however, that Hitler and the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe made no provisions which would have enabled them to commit the strongest air forces against any threat likely to develop in this area, ruthlessly stripping other theaters for the purpose. Obviously the Fourth Air Fleet was unable, with its forces, to strike an annihilating blow against Soviet concentration movements or assemblies for a major offensive, much less to stop a Russian offensive once it began. It was also obvious, as has been repeatedly shown in practice, that the Luftwaffe was the only force which could have been quickly rushed to the critical area in force by the Supreme Command.[74] Air power is the only reserve of power which can be brought to bear immediately (providing, of course, that appropriate advance preparations have been made, including the development of technical and supply services and the stockpiling of fuel supplies for such contingencies).[75]

Although Hitler and the Wehrmacht High Command did nothing to implement greater security measures for the Stalingrad area, the fact remains that the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe was at least guilty of gross negligence. Here was Goering's opportunity to lead the way by effectively influencing the course of an important military operation, yet he sat idly by until the catastrophe struck.

Early on 19 November 1942 the Russians opened a heavy artillery preparation of several hours duration. Then, at 0400 hours, taking good advantage of the spell of bad weather which precluded full-scale operations, the Red Army opened its long planned major counteroffensive,* jumping off from its Don River bridgeheads at Kletskaya and just west of Serafimovich to drive deep into the rear of the Rumanian Third Army.[76] The full blow of this offensive struck an army with especially sensitive flanks, with little maneuverability because of fuel shortages, and which was low in ammunition and far beneath its fighting strength after many

*Editor's Note: Third Russian Assault Army with the Fifth Russian Armored Army: 2 armored corps, 2 cavalry corps, and countless infantry divisions (the latter in the second wave).

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months at the front. The weak forces of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps available as a tactical reserve were hardly a tactical reserve force, and were unable to halt the tremendous Soviet advance. At Stalingrad, however, the attack was halted immediately, and forces of the Sixth Army were moved in to seal off the breakthrough.

In the Fourth Air Fleet's war diary the events of 19 November are recorded as follows:

> . . . Rain, snow, and ice-forming have completely prevented air operations, and the VIII Air Corps, from its command post at Oblivskaya, can direct only a few single aircraft to the attack. It is impossible to close the Don River bridges by bombing. It is not even possible to gain an insight into the situation by aerial reconnaissance. We can only hope that the Russians will not reach our rail route, our main supply artery.
>
> . . . urgently needed transfers [of air units] are as yet impossible because of the miserable weather. We must have good weather soon, otherwise there is no longer any hope.[77]

Despite the bad weather and poor visibility, units of the VIII Air Corps were sent into action, operating individually, in pairs, or in flights, primarily against the advancing Soviet tanks. The weather precluded any formation attacks, which therefore made it impossible to effectively interdict the Soviet movements across the Don.[78]

It had become necessary to evacuate the tactical airfields between the Don and Chir Rivers, the fields from which German dive-bombers, ground-attack, and tactical reconnaissance units had been operating. In some cases the last aircraft were leaving their bases when the first shells of Soviet tanks struck the fields.[79]

Besides the breakthroughs near Serafimovich and Kletskaya, great pressures were exerted from the north and northwest upon the left flank of the Sixth Army. On 20 November the Russian breakthroughs were widened in a southwesterly direction, and, despite confusing reports, it was clear that sizeable enemy armored units were operating in the rear of the XI Corps of the Sixth Army and the Rumanian Third Army, scattering one and a half Rumanian corps and forcing the XI Corps to withdraw its left wing to Ventsy, southeast of Kletskaya. The flank of the Sixth Army, including its command post, was now severely threatened by the

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Soviet advance from the west and northwest.* For the protection of the bridge at Kalach, which was viewed as the initial Soviet objective, the Sixth Army established a bridgehead on the western bank of the Don with its front facing westward.

No organized resistance was possible for the Rumanian Third Army, with its weak forces and poor defensive positions. Through the gentle snowfall and over the lightly frozen ground the Soviet armor rolled onward, penetrating all positions in their wake in depth, and creating panic and confusion among the poorly equipped defenders.[80] The chaos wrought by the Soviet offensive is described by Col. Hans-Ulrich Rudel:/

> Pursuant to an alert report, our wing took off one morning in the direction of the Kletskaya bridgehead. The weather was bad: a low cloud ceiling, a light snowfall, the temperature probably around -4° Fahrenheit. We were flying low. What was that coming toward us? At best we were but half way to our target. Are they Russians? No, Rumanians! Some of them were still throwing away their small arms in order to be able to run better! A terrible sight foreboding ill. . . . It was only some distance farther on that we sighted the first Soviet troops. We attacked with bombs and gunfire, but what was the use of it if nobody was any longer offering resistance on the ground? Helpless fury held us in its grip, and our minds conjured up terrible pictures. How was this catastrophe to be stemmed? With infinite bitterness I dropped my bombs and fired my guns into the endless yellow-green attack waves roaring toward us from Asia and Outer Mongolia. . . . Our attacks against such masses were nothing more than a drop in the ocean, but that was a thought upon which I could not afford to dwell at the moment.
>
> On our return flight we again sighted the fleeing Rumanians. It was fortunate that I hadn't a single round left with

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*See Map No. 24.

/Germany's most highly decorated flyer, holding the unique award of the golden oak leaf to the Knight's Cross with oak leaves, swords, and diamonds.

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which to halt this cowardly flight. . . .* The Soviet advance rolled onward, unopposed, to Kalach, and with the seizure of Kalach they had now closed a semicircle around our part of Stalingrad.[81]

The airfields in the Kalach area at the Don River bend, especially those from which tactical reconnaissance units had been operating, were overrun by the Red Army. Of the 2nd Dive-Bomber Wing, only a weak group escaped. The ground-attack units managed to take off at the last moment with their commander, Lt. Col. Hubertus Hitschhold. It was unavoidable, and had to be accepted, that much materiel and highly valuable air equipment, sometimes evén personnel, had to be abandoned in the wake of the dreadful Soviet pressure.[82]

With a motley assembly of troops from all arms of the German Army, including military musicians, cooks, and other service personnel, Luftwaffe ground service units, air signal units, and flak artillery, a new defense line was with great difficulty established along the Chir River. One sector of the Chir River line, extending upstream and downstream from Oblivskaya, was held by troops under the able command of Col. Reiner Stahel, an officer who had already become famous for his outstanding "pocket" defense operations.[83]

Units of the VIII Air Corps took off again and again from the overcrowded airfields at Oblivskaya, Morozovskaya, and Tatsinskaya to support the weakly held defense line along the Chir River./ German and allied air units achieved especially great success in attacks upon Soviet cavalry forces, which were encountered in large numbers. Because of weather conditions, the VIII Air Corps and the Rumanian Air Corps could only fly 150 sorties. There was a great feeling of regret among these airmen that conditions did not permit them to hunt down and destroy all of the invading Soviet armored units. They were able, however, to carry relatively large quantities of supplies to isolated Rumanian forces.[84] In this respect, the foresight of the Fourth Air Fleet in stockpiling supplies for future emergencies proved to be of incalculable value. Because of this action, there were no ammunition shortages or fuel shortages for the air operations.

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*Because of his personal bitterness at that time Rudel's judgment of the Rumanians is excessively harsh. It must be affirmed that there were also very good Rumanian units, which stood up under the most difficult tests of battle. See the notations of 26 November and 1 December 1942 in the Richthofen Diary and in the Fourth Air Fleet War Diary.

/See Figure 60.

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Figure 60
Me (Bf)-109's taking off on a mission,
Eastern Front, November 1942

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The confusion prevailing at the opening of the Soviet offensive prompted the higher levels of command to allow a maximum freedom of action to the lower commands. Not one of the air units which transferred from their bases to new airfields failed to continue in action, and all of them justified the confidence which had been placed in them. Some Luftwaffe units even remained too long at their fields in efforts to expend the last of their available supplies on combat before abandoning them to the enemy. Only tactical reconnaissance units based near the original main line of resistance were taken completely by surprise.

Considering the magnitude of developments, materiel losses were relatively slight and had no really adverse effect upon unit operations. Most of the losses initially assumed to have been incurred at the beginning of the Soviet attack were not confirmed later, as is usually the case in such situations. Often units believed to have been lost because of catastrophic circumstances turn up again at a later date. 85

The VIII Air Corps headquarters was probably better informed on the current situation than any other command agency in that area because of the constant arrival of excellent reports from air signal liaison teams, air reconnaissance, and other intelligence units. Contact with the Sixth Army was interrupted for a time because of the transfer of the army headquarters staff to Nizhne-Chirskaya. Despite smoothly functioning internal communications, which helped the air corps carry out small unit attacks against oncoming Soviet spearheads in the desperate hope of stemming the momentum of the offensive, the VIII Air Corps had been unable to obtain from the Sixth Army a clear indication of its operational intentions.* The measures being implemented by the Sixth Army were therefore largely unknown. In reviewing the events of this time, the author believes that the Sixth Army actually took no countermeasures which were of decisive importance.

VIII Air Corps leaders did not expect the Russian ground forces to achieve such significant initial successes, or that they would suddenly, and for the first time, adopt German armored tactics in the offensive. On the second day of the attack, Soviet forces driving swiftly southeastward from Serafimovich reached Kachalinskaya and linked up with Red Army units pushing toward the southeast from Kletskaya. Elements of

*The VIII Air Corps was organized and equipped so that it could function almost independently if necessary.

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the first force thrust southward toward the Chir River, threatening Oblivskaya, its airfield, and the VIII Air Corps command post. Here, excellent defensive arrangements had been made by the Commander of the 99th Flak Regiment, Col. Eduard Obergethmann, using his own units, Luftwaffe ground service personnel, and elements of the air signal service.[86]

The Sixth Army had other problems besides the onrushing enemy masses from the northwest. On 20 November the Fifty-First Soviet Army situated between Beketovka and Krasnoarmeysk on the Volga thrust westward across the Kotelnikovo-Stalingrad railroad line and advanced as far as the vicinity of Businovka, overrunning the Fourth Panzer and Fourth Rumanian Armies (under the command of Generaloberst Hermann Hoth). Threatened by a general Soviet offensive along its northern perimeter from Yerzovka on the Volga to Sirotinskaya, and along its entire northwestern and western front by the Russian armies moving from Serafimovich and Kletskaya, the Sixth Army now faced encirclement by a possible juncture of these units with the Soviet Fifty-First Army advancing from Businovka.[87] In the northwest, the Sixth Army was obliged to withdraw its left wing (XI Corps) during the night of 20 November to better defensive positions along the line Sirotinskaya-Ventsy-Golubinskiy.

On 21 November a serious crisis began for the German Sixth Army. Red armies which had rushed southward across the Don had turned 90° toward the east and began to threaten the very rear of the German and allied forces which had recently been assaulting Stalingrad. Early that morning, a Russian armored unit of 40 tanks attacked the bridgehead at Kalach, but, being repulsed, headed toward the northeast, and by noon was within a few miles of Golubinskiy, the command post of the Sixth Army. Shortly thereafter, another Soviet armored unit captured without a fight the bridge at Kalach, the most important bridge over the Don in that area and the main route from Stalingrad to the west, when German security forces mistook the Russian armored forces for a German panzer unit which was equipped with captured Soviet tanks and which had made regular use of the bridge.[88]

From this point, one crisis followed another in rapid succession. The Russians were able to build a massive bridgehead east of the Don, where they linked up with the Soviet Fifty-First Army, which had driven from Businovka, across the Tsaritsa* and Karpovka Rivers, severing at the same time the major railroad link between Stalingrad and the west.[89]

*This is not the larger Tsaritsa River, but is the small Donskaya Tsaritsa west of Stalingrad.

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After the seizure of the Kalach bridge and the arrival in force of Russian units on the Don between Verkne Chirskaya and Golubinskaya, German and allied forces (XI Corps) in the bend of the Don were cut off. They were also too weak to fight their way out against two massive Soviet armies, which left but one choice: withdrawal toward the east into the bend of the Don River. The especially important bridges of Perpolnyy and Akimovskiy, which crossed the Don behind these entrapped forces, were secured by bridgeheads, facing toward the west, established by the 384th Infantry Division. On the 22nd, however, the overwhelming Soviet pressure proved to be too great and the XI Corps was again forced to withdraw, this time back to the Don in the direction of Stalingrad.

Late in the afternoon of 22 November 1942, the Commander of the Sixth Army, General der Panzertruppe Friedrich Paulus, sent a doleful message to his superior at Army Group "B" command post:

> Army surrounded. Despite heroic resistance, the entire Tsaritsa valley, the railroad from Sovietskiy to Kalach, the Don bridges there, the heights on the west bank of the Don to Golubinskiy, Olsinskiy and Krayniy have fallen into the hands of the Russians. Additional forces going ahead from the southwest via Businovka toward the north, and especially strong forces from the west. . . . Stalingrad and the North Front strong combat patrol activity, attacks on IV Corps and 76th Infantry Division repulsed. . . . Army hopes to be able to build up West Front east of the Don at Golubaya sector.* South Front of army east of the Don still open. Whether Golubinskaya can be closed through a substantial weakening of North Front to establish a thinner line from Karpovka via Marinovka is questionable. Don frozen up and crossable. Fuel will soon be exhausted. Tanks and heavy weapons then immovable. Ammunition situation strained. Food provisions sufficient for 6 days. Army intends to hold remaining area from Stalingrad to Don and has made all preparations thereto. Supposition is that closure of the South Front succeeds and adequate provisions will be flown in. . . . Attacks against the West not promising because of strong enemy forces and terrain difficulties.[90]

*Editor's Note: This sentence is not entirely clear, since there is no Golubaya sector east of the Don. Golubaya is located in the bend of the Don River, southwest of Sirotinskaya.

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Besides the Sixth Army, elements of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Fourth Rumanian Army, and countless smaller units were completely enveloped in and to the west of Stalingrad in a pocket extending approximately 30 miles in length from east to west and about 24 miles in width from north to south. There were also about 12,000 men of the Luftwaffe encircled in this area, including most of the 9th Flak Division, with 11 heavy and 19 light artillery batteries, their supply trains, signal units, and equipment,* elements of the Third Fighter Wing, and the 12th, 14th, and 16th Tactical Reconnaissance Groups. Along with these units were a number of radio and air signal liaison teams.[91]

*According to General der Flakartillerie (Ret.) Wolfgang Pickert, on 20 December 1942 the surrounded batteries of the 9th Flak Division still had 37 8.8-cm. guns, 162 2-cm. guns, 49 3.7-cm. guns, and 3 5-cm. guns.

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Chapter 7

THE TRAGEDY OF STALINGRAD

The Problem of Airlifting Supplies for the Stalingrad Pocket

No effort will be made here to examine the mistakes of omission or commission and other command issues in the German Army Command which led to the encirclement of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The problem under review here deals with the influence which the concept of air transportation, and the possibility of applying that concept at Stalingrad, had upon the decisions taken at higher leadership levels, including the Wehrmacht High Command.

The question of whether the Luftwaffe should be required to airlift supplies to the Sixth Army hinged upon the decision taken between two possible courses of action. First of all, it had to be determined whether the Sixth Army was to fight its way out of the envelopment by a drive toward the German lines. If this was to be done, the timing of the breakout was of decisive importance. On the other hand, if the Sixth Army was to establish itself within perimeter defenses to hold the Stalingrad area until relieved (at some date in the future), then airlift operations were the only hope for the unit's survival.

The decision could be made by any one of several persons, including Hitler, as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Commander in Chief of the German Army, by Generaloberst von Weichs, Commander of Army Group "B," or, after the change in commands became effective,* by Field Marshal von Manstein, Commander of Army Group Don. The decision also could be made by General Paulus, Commander of the Sixth Army, the command most directly affected, and who had the responsibility of making his decision without regard for orders from higher headquarters if the necessity arose. [1]

*Editor's Note: By 27 November 1942 the Sixth Army was under the command of Army Group Don.

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Hitler's decision could have been greatly influenced by Generaloberst Kurt Zeitzler, Chief of the Army General Staff, his closest advisor, by Goering and his Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, Hans Jeschonnek, and by all high level Army and Luftwaffe field commanders, including the commanding generals of the Fourth Air Fleet, Army Group "B," and Army Group Don. Moreover, Generalmajor Arthur Schmidt, Chief of Staff of the Sixth Army, all corps commanders under the Sixth Army, and all Luftwaffe commanders instructed to support the Sixth Army might have brought their weight to bear in the matter. Air force commanders involved were the Commanding General of the Fourth Air Fleet (Richthofen), the Commanding General of the VIII Air Corps (Fiebig), and the Commanding General of the 9th Flak Division (Generalmajor Wolfgang Pickert), the latter of which was enveloped with the Sixth Army.

What person should make the decision was immaterial. The important thing was a clear-cut, unequivocal, and, above all, quick decision based upon a careful and dispassionate assessment of the existing situation. This assessment, in turn, would have had to be based on actual capabilities of the Wehrmacht and upon available forces. It was obvious that the Sixth Army could hold out only if supported by an air logistical operation of sufficient size, the duration of which could not be determined in advance, but which would certainly have to be maintained for several weeks.

The decision for the army to hold its positions was thus intimately linked with the question of the possibility of carrying out an airlift operation.

Should the Sixth Army Attempt a Breakout?

In examining this question it is essential to consider first of all what those commanders likely to be most immediately involved in the operation had to say on the subject.

In a number of conversations between Fiebig (Commander of the VIII Air Corps) and Paulus and Schmidt of the Sixth Army, Fiebig repeated again and again that he did not think it possible to supply the Sixth Army by air.[2] On the evening of 21 November 1942, two days after the opening of the Soviet counteroffensive, General Fiebig remarked, "Supply an entire army by air? Impossible! Our aircraft are heavily engaged in Africa and on other fronts. I must warn against exaggerated expectations."[3]

On the following night he reiterated his convictions:

> I must repeat once more: You are relying too heavily on airlifted supplies. I have again examined the question

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> from all angles, and, on the basis of my experience, have arrived each time at the conclusion that it is simply impossible to supply the Sixth Army by air. The actions of the Russians and the effects of the weather conditions of a Russian winter are unpredictable. I tell you this earnestly, so that you will know our views, . . .[4]

Generalmajor Pickert, commanding the 9th Flak Division, also considered it impossible to airlift enough supplies to maintain the Sixth Army, and expressed these views in unmistakable terms to General Paulus and to the Commanding General of Army Group Don during the first few days after the envelopment.[5] Pickert's diary describes a conference held on 22 November at 1800 hours in Nizhne-Chirskaya in the presence of Paulus, Schmidt, Generaloberst Hoth (Commander, Fourth Panzer Army), and Pickert. The discussion was between Schmidt and Pickert, with Paulus remaining silent or assenting to what Schmidt said. Schmidt, says the diary, oriented Pickert on the situation and asked for his decision. When Pickert replied that Sixth Army should break out immediately toward the southwest, Schmidt considered this to be impossible because of lack of fuel, and felt that the attempt would end "in a catastrophe as had been the case with Napoleon." Pickert promised firepower [? - the word is illegible] for the operation "with approximately 160 man-hauled 2-cm. guns, ammunition to be carried by personnel." However, says Pickert, "the decision to hold perimeter defenses and not to break out for the time being remained in effect, because [the troops] are tied to Stalingrad through orders."

According to the diary, Schmidt then stated that Sixth Army would establish perimeter defense "and get our supplies by air," to which Pickert objected on the ground that it was impossible to supply an entire army by air, particularly so because of the weather. (Pickert did not then know that General Fiebig had earlier told Sixth Army that to supply an enveloped army by air was "utterly impossible.") But Schmidt was adamant. He replied that "it simply has to be done," and even declared that his men could help with the supply problem by first eating the numerous horses inside the pocket.

The highest ranking Luftwaffe officer in the area, Generaloberst von Richthofen, who commanded the Fourth Air Fleet (the unit assigned to support Army Group "B" and to transport supplies to the Sixth Army), told von Manstein, on the occasion of the latter's assumption of command over Army Group Don, that he believed full air logistical support of the Sixth Army could not be indefinitely maintained even with favorable weather. He had communicated the same idea to Goering, noting, however,

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that he was unable to judge what forces and means the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe still had at his disposal. [7]

A further indication of Richthofen's views can be seen from his diary notations of 21 November 1942:

> The Sixth Army believes that it will be supplied by the air fleet in its hedgehog* positions. Every effort is being made to convince the army that this cannot be done because the required amount of transport space is not available. In the same way I have tried to convince the Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe, the Army High Command, and the army group. [8†]

General Fiebig's diary indicates that neither Richthofen nor Jeschonnek considered it possible to carry out the immense operation of supplying the Sixth Army by air. [9††] These views, and those of Fiebig, were later confirmed by Generals Paulus and Schmidt in the course of a discussion at the Gumrak airfield on 11 December 1942, but both Army men were quick to add that "all causes which might hamper air supply operations because of weather, enemy action, and so forth, were immaterial to them. All that interested them was the total tonnage." [10]

In this connection it must be clearly stated that neither Paulus nor Schmidt was in any way justified in attempting to shift responsibility from their shoulders for the decisions concerning the Sixth Army by brushing aside the warnings of Pickert and Fiebig. Each of these Army officers should have included these warnings as given factors in their appraisals of the situation, and should have drawn from them the appropriate conclusions for their momentous decisions. General Schmidt's refusal to recognize the inadequacy of existing air transport facilities, and to include this factor in his considerations leading to the final decision,

---

*Editor's Note: All-around perimeter defenses called hedgehogs or Igelstellungen by the Wehrmacht.

†All through the night of 21 November 1942, von Richthofen held lengthy telephone conversations with the VIII Air Corps, Generaloberst Jeschonnek, General Meister, the Sixth Army, and other responsible agencies, trying to clear up the idea that an entire army could be adequately supplied by airlift operations.

††The idea that Hitler's order obliged the Sixth Army to remain in perimeter defense contrasts with the above interpretations.

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can be explained by the nervous anxiety arising from the difficult situation in which the Sixth Army was placed, but it cannot be condoned. Enemy action, possible enemy action, transportation space available, climate, and weather conditions should have been more carefully considered in the deliberations.

By the time the Sixth Army had been fully enveloped (the afternoon of 22 November), orders from Hitler must have already robbed General Paulus of his mental freedom of decision. This is the key to his radio report of 1800 hours on the 22nd stating that the Sixth Army was establishing perimeter defenses and would await supplies from outside, since it would otherwise be hard to assume that so wise and experienced an officer as General Paulus had not realized by the afternoon of 22 November, at the latest, the seriousness of his situation. However this may have been, it is clear that the Sixth Army's leaders did not appreciate the impossibility of supplying that unit by air. [11]

Luftwaffe officers were not the only ones who urged the Sixth Army Commander to decide upon a breakout. These views were also strongly held by many army commanders in the pocket, who urged Paulus to take quick action to break out of the encirclement. Pickert's diary notations of 27 November indicate the convictions of one of the leading commanders in the pocket, General der Artillerie Walter von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, Commander of the LI Corps:

> . . . Struggle of Paulus against Seydlitz, who is urgently pressing Paulus in efforts to persuade him to break out and break through. Seydlitz considers this to be the only possibility to save the army for which Paulus is responsible. He recommends disregarding the order to hold Stalingrad because the Fuehrer's order "to hold" is certainly overtaken by events and was based on inadequate appreciation of the actual situation. [Sixth] Army Headquarters is completely ignorant of what is being done from the outside to free the army, and when such action is intended. Hitler's appeal of 26 November was not known at the time of these deliberations. [12]

In his recommendations to Paulus, General Seydlitz used the phrase "Take the course of the Lion" (Machen Sie die Loewentour) in unmistakable reference to the occurrence of 23 November 1914, almost

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28 years before to the day, when General Karl von Litzmann,* achieved his breakout from Russian encirclement. According to Heinz Schroeter in his work Stalingrad bis zur letzten Patrone,/ Seydlitz and other commanders expressed themselves boldly to Paulus, demanding an immediate order to break out. The following description is given of a meeting held at Sixth Army Headquarters://

> The army commander was seated on the window ledge drinking soda water; the lines in his face were deeper, more clearly defined. The others were smoking. General Schmidt leaned with folded arms against the bunker wall. . . .
>
> "A breakout is our only chance," said General Hube (XIV Panzer Corps).
>
> "The Soviet's northern defenses are no obstacle," opined General Strecker (XI Corps). "Litzmann would not have stopped to think twice. We can't just remain here and die."
>
> General Heitz (VIII Corps) interrupted, "I would rather get through with five divisions than perish with twenty."
>
> General Jaenecke (IV Corps) followed the trend: "Reichenau would have brushed aside all doubts."
>
> The army commander cut him short with an, "I am no Reichenau."
>
> Jaenecke thereupon stepped up to the army commander, stressing by gestures his next remark: "Our policy is a breakout."

---

*The "Lion of Brzeziny," who made a daring breakout from a strongly encircled position on 23 August 1914.

/Stalingrad Until the Last Cartridge.

//It cannot be stated unequivocally whether this situation conference took place in this precise form, with all of the commanding generals at the Sixth Army Headquarters. Generaloberst a. D. Jaenecke confirms, however, that the views expressed were correctly stated, although he cannot recall whether the conference took place in which all of the commanders were together at the same time.

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The Chief of Staff [of the Sixth Army] supported himself upon both hands placed on the situation map. "The policy of soldiers is obedience," he said.

And von Seydlitz then made his statement: "In any case, we must get out of here. It is our duty to stake all on one card. I have already done so."

Five generals looked at von Seydlitz. Two days ago he had ordered his corps, the LI, to destroy all surplus equipment and all bulky material which could not be carried along. He himself had set an example for his men by burning everything he had besides the uniform he was wearing, everything, including his second pair of trousers and his second overcoat. . . .

The army commander was under severe pressure. Everything depended now exclusively upon his decision. As General Jaenecke later recounted: "This was one of those hours in a man's life when blood must be stronger than the heart, and it was such an hour that was envisaged by Fontane when he set forth the ethical value of General von Yorck's action with the passage: 'There are times for obedience and waiting, and there are times when action is the prime duty. I have sworn loyalty to the king. However, I am unwilling to forsake natural loyalty in order to maintain my sworn loyalty.'"

. . . "We must obey," said the Chief of Staff [Schmidt].

Paulus replied, "I shall obey."[13]

Paulus believed that it was the responsibility of the Supreme Command to examine by staff procedures all possible angles in the problem, including the matter of whether it would be possible to move in sufficient quantities of supplies to the Sixth Army, and then to issue him appropriate orders. He believed the Sixth Army could only report its requirements for logistical support to the higher commands, but did not have the duty of judging whether, in fact, the airlift could be accomplished. Paulus made this crystal clear with his statement, "I am unable to take this decision for the army, since it presupposes the non-fulfillment of the army's request for relief and supplies, and the necessary basis is not available for proof of such non-fulfillment."[14]

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Seydlitz refused to accept this decision as binding and addressed a memorandum to the army group, demanding that the Sixth Army should break out contrary to Hitler's decision, and in recognition only of its responsibility to the German nation. Paulus, he pointed out, should act as Yorck von Wartenburg had acted.* For this purpose, Seydlitz offered to place himself at von Weich's disposal. "To remain inactive," he declared, " is a crime from the military viewpoint, and it is a crime from the point of view of responsibility to the German people. . . ."15

After his return in 1955 from many years of Soviet captivity, General Jaenecke declared that during the crucial period at Stalingrad "nothing was left undone to draw attention to the dangers of the obviously imminent Soviet offensive operations," but Hitler remained deaf, and was unable to bring himself to decide in favor of the radical solution, which would then very probably have been possible. The plan would have been to destroy all communications from the Caucasus and Stalingrad while withdrawing behind the Don River, thus leaving the Russians to cope with the manifold difficulties of supply and the approaching winter. But, "the moment when this would have been possible was allowed to pass, and fate took its course."

As soon as it was possible to evaluate the new situation, all five German corps commanders urgently pressed the army commander, Generaloberst Paulus/ to immediately break out southwestward, in the direction of Kotelnikovo-Rostov, with the left flank units driving along the Don River. The foundation for this recommendation was clear and simple. Everything that the army lacked in the way of ammunition, fuel, and rations would have been moved toward the army through Rostov.

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*Editor's Note: The reference is to Field Marshal Hans David Ludwig Count Yorck von Wartenburg (1759-1830), a great Prussian officer, who led the advance upon Riga as part of the allied army under Napoleon in 1812. He soon became disillusioned, decided to reject his own sovereign's orders and to lead his corps in a war of liberation against Napoleon. He thus neutralized the allied Prussian Army on 30 December 1812, risking his life and position for his country. He took a great risk and became a national hero. A descendant of this man, Col. Claus Philipp Shenk Count von Stauffenberg, was the principal figure in the 20 July 1944 plot to kill Hitler. Yorck and Stauffenberg are favorite subjects of discussion in the new Bundeswehr schools.

/Editor's Note: Paulus did not become Generaloberst until 1 December 1942.

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Every day that the army waited, it was pointed out, "could only serve to further complicate the situation, quite apart from the difficulties of the coming winter."

General Jaenecke further declared that in view of the firm weather conditions the supplies currently available would have sufficed for the initial stages of the breakout operation through the immediate Soviet envelopment, and that the personnel were still fit for such action. Fully realizing the situation, the troops were eager for action and capable of the utmost performances. With the deep penetrations in the lines, the Russians had not yet consolidated and stabilized their positions. Jaenecke, with his IV Corps, was to lead the breakout attack and had conferred frequently with Generaloberst Paulus concerning the possibilities of success and the necessary regrouping movements.

Jaenecke constantly reiterated: "Break out as fast as possible and we shall go through the Russians like a hot knife through butter." General von Seydlitz, knowing that Jaenecke was a friend of Paulus, frequently requested that he use his influence on Paulus to come to an immediate decision for a breakout, which Jaenecke did "with all emphasis."

Jaenecke states:

> It was especially clear that the breakout would make it possible for the entire southeast segment of the German front to take action, and that it would prevent the Russians from accomplishing their several missions without interference. Another point that was unmistakably clear was that the heavy losses which were to be expected because of the overall situation would definitely be smaller than the losses which would positively result if the entire pocket were starved out.
>
> What was required at this juncture in the Stalingrad pocket was a forceful commander in harmony with his chief of staff. Unfortunately, this factor was lacking.
>
> In spite of his high intelligence, Generaloberst Paulus was far too pliable to cope with Hitler. I am convinced that this is the real and deeper cause of his failure.[16]

As is known today, the Russians believed at the time that a German breakout would have constituted the gravest threat for their entire operation.

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Following their efforts to reduce the entire pocket in a reverse drive from the Kalach area, they naturally considered it their primary mission to push back further the newly established German lines in the adjacent areas. This was to make it increasingly difficult for German forces from outside to relieve the units trapped in the pocket. This, however, gave the Sixth Army a comparative respite for a time. From the Soviet point of view, the Sixth Army was already "on ice" and would continue to consume its last available supplies.

The principal source of concern to Sixth Army was for fuel for tanks, assault guns, and antiaircraft guns, the decisive weapons in both attack and defense. Experience has shown that more fuel is always available than can be proven by calculation, since every commander hoards some for emergencies, and has more than the minimum or even the standard allowances. The possibility always exists to reallocate these supplies for the main combat elements at the moment of the breakout.

Although fully aware of the enormous risks involved in an offensive solution of the problem, all Army field commanders in the pocket, and many outside, considered a breakout to be the best chance. According to General Jaenecke, however:

> Generaloberst Paulus, to the contrary, saw only Hitler's Sword of Damocles over him, and knew that there had already been suggestions to have Seydlitz replace him.* This, I am firmly convinced, together with the mentality of the Commanding General of the Sixth Army as I knew it, is the deeper reason why the decision to break out was not taken. I know that in this severe criticism I differ from the views of very wise commanders, whom I hold in high esteem. Furthermore, I am just as convinced that Hitler, had he encountered a resolute decision to break out, would have changed his mind, just as he did later in similar situations on several occasions, and that Generaloberst Paulus would have received a radio message reading: "The Fuehrer approves your measures. . . ."[17]

Like von Seydlitz, Jaenecke warned Paulus of the consequences of failing to take decisive action by continuing perimeter defense operations:

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*Editor's Note: See footnote pertaining to Paulus as the new Sixth Army Commander on p. 173.

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I myself said to Paulus, "Military history will not exonerate you of blame for not having, on the basis of your better knowledge of local circumstances, given the order to break out contrary to the Fuehrer's directives." However, Paulus stated again and again that he, as the former Chief of the Operations Division of the Army General Staff, had been trained in the conviction that armies were bound to carry out Hitler's orders, since otherwise the direction of military operations by the High Command would be rendered impossible. [18]

On 22 November the Sixth Army was still under the command of Army Group "B" (Generaloberst von Weichs), which, from the beginning of the crisis along the Don, was in close accord with the viewpoints of the Chief of the Army General Staff (Zeitzler). At 1845 hours on 23 November, von Weichs sent a teletype message to Zeitzler, recommending the withdrawal of the Sixth Army "as recommended by General Paulus." Weichs believed that an entire army could not be supplied by air, and thought that no more than a tenth of the daily logistical requirements for the Sixth Army could be delivered in this way. Moreover, he estimated that forces required for a relief drive from the outside could not be assembled and ready before 10 December. In the opinion of the Commander of Army Group "B," the Sixth Army could take such action only in the next few days, since its supplies were rapidly dwindling, and Soviet attacks on the pocket gave the unit no respite. In the words of von Weichs:

If the Sixth Army breaks out in a southwest drive, however, I am confident that this will relieve the entire situation.

Now that I have lost the Rumanian Third Army, the Sixth Army is the only force still available to me with which I can harm the enemy. Driving initially southwest, with its right flank units then following the railroad from Chirskaya to Morozovskaya, the operation will also break up the pressure in the Sadovoye-Kotelnikovo area. Finally, what is left of the striking power of the Sixth Army represents an indispensable increase of strength for use in establishing a new line of defense and preparing for a counterattack.

I am not blind to the fact that the recommended operation would result in heavy losses, particularly in materiel. However, no matter what happens, these losses will be

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less than the sacrifices we shall have to make if the army is starved out in Stalingrad, which is unavoidable under existing circumstances. 19

On 21 November Field Marshal Erich von Manstein received orders at his Eleventh Army Headquarters to make preparations for assuming command over the Sixth Army, the Fourth Panzer Army, and the Rumanian Third Army to be included in a new command, Army Group Don. By this time, however, Manstein was informed that the Rumanian Third Army and the Rumanian Fourth Army south of Stalingrad had been broken by a powerful Soviet counterattack.* Although he did not take full command of Army Group Don until 27 November, Manstein submitted his views to Zeitzler on the 24th, confirming the views of von Weichs:

> It is probably still possible for the Sixth Army to break out in a southwesterly drive. To leave the army in Stalingrad would constitute an extreme risk because of the ammunition and fuel situation.
>
> However, since the most favorable opportunity for a breakout has, in our opinion, already been allowed to pass, it would nevertheless be wiser from the operational viewpoint to wait until the intended relieving forces can commence their attack. However, this would only be the case if the movement of adequate supplies to the Sixth Army by air can be counted upon. The decision hinges upon this question.
>
> The operation to restore the situation must be carried out with the forces which are to be moved in by early December. To achieve a decisive success, however, it will be essential to maintain a constant forward movement of reinforcements since the Soviets will also employ strong reinforcements.

---

*Editor's Note: Army Group Don was organized between 22 and 27 November 1942 under Manstein's command, with Generalmajor Friedrich Schulz as Chief of Staff. This command was comprised of the Sixth Army, the Army Group Hoth (Fourth Panzer Army and Rumanian Fourth Army), and elements of the Rumanian Third Army, many of these greatly under normal strength.

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> An unsupported breakout operation . . . might become necessary if it proves impossible to assemble the new forces because of strong enemy pressure.
>
> A daily movement of 400 tons of supplies by air was stated as an indispensable condition if the risk was to be accepted of having the Sixth Army hold off from an immediate breakout operation.
>
> In these discussions I left no room for doubt that the risk of leaving the Sixth Army in Stalingrad temporarily does not dare be taken if the stated supply movements cannot be guaranteed. 20

Therefore, German leaders along the entire front, with the exception of the commander of the enveloped army and his chief of staff, held the firm conviction that, since the Sixth Army could not be adequately supplied by an airlift, it should break out at once.

By 24 November the Sixth Army began to retire its forces in the northern sector of the pocket in order to release troops for the consolidation of southern defenses, efforts which were only partially successful. Soviet forces closely followed up these withdrawals, putting especially heavy pressure upon the northwestern sector and across the frozen Don River, where they even achieved some penetrations into the pocket. In the southern part of the pocket a force of about 100 Russian tanks penetrated almost to the center of the encircled area.* A shortage of ammunition and heavy weapons was already apparent to German commanders in the area.

Richthofen did not believe that the Russians would be able to exploit the German abandonment of the Volga positions in case of a breakout, since ice had started to break up on the river. By the time the Soviet forces were able to cross in large numbers, the Germans could have reinforcements near the positions, moved in from the Donets area. Shipping across the Volga might in the meantime be interdicted by air attacks.

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*This is probably an exaggeration, despite reports making this claim.

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West of the Don River, Soviet armored forces had already reached the railroad* at several points, while weak German holding forces, comprised of ground elements of the VIII Air Corps, did their best to slow the Russian advance. Red Army infantrymen, following up the armored spearheads, covered about half of the distance between the Don River and the railroad on a broad front, and to the southwest, south of Bokovskaya, Soviet troops had already launched their attacks upon all sides of the isolated 22nd Panzer Division. During the night, however, the division managed to fight its way out to the southwest across the Chir River, the northern side of which had by then been occupied by the Russians.

Richthofen's repeated insistence that the Sixth Army abandon its Volga position and break out toward Bokovskaya fell on deaf ears. He reiterated these views to Zeitzler and Jeschonnek, but the Fuehrer insisted that the Sixth Army was capable of further resistance and ordered the Volga line held. On 25 November Richthofen noted the reduced size of the Sixth Army's bridgehead over the Don River in the northern sector of the pocket, and urged Reichsmarschall Goering (then in Paris) to influence Hitler to allow a breakout to the southwest. Hitler refused to reconsider the situation, thinking that his armies would perhaps never reach Stalingrad again if they once withdrew. In his war diary, Richthofen added:

> . . . I maintain my differing views. However, orders are orders, and everything will be done pursuant to the orders received. It is a tragedy that none of the locally responsible commanders, although they allegedly possess [Hitler's] confidence, are still able to exercise any influence at all.
>
> Frederick the Great always burned his fingers when applying similar methods in remote theaters of operations (Lewald, Bevern, Finck, Fouqué), and achieved success

*Editor's Note: The railroad running from Morozovsk (Morozovskaya) eastward, north of the Chir River to Bassorgino and Stalingrad.

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with other methods (operations of Prince Henry of Prussia, and the Duke of Brunswick).*

As things are at present, one is, from the operational point of view, nothing more than an overpaid non-commissioned officer. . . .[21]

Despite contrary recommendations by his air fleet commanders in the field, Goering, perhaps after some initial hesitation, unconditionally affirmed to the Fuehrer the possibility of supplying the Sixth Army's needs by air. It is difficult today to ascertain whether Jeschonnek was as supremely confident as Goering of the efficacy of such huge air logistical operations, or whether he thought such undertakings should be contingent upon certain specified conditions, such as enemy action, the ground situation, weather, and the duration of the task. Unfortunately, none of Jeschonnek's personal notes are now available--he was never a prolific writer--which might shed additional light on the issue. The opinions of other officers on Jeschonnek's ideas at the time vary considerably. Many of these reports are lacking in precision and are highly controversial in character.[22] It can be assumed, however, that Jeschonnek made no positive stand against the airlift, since this would have created a serious disagreement with Goering, some record of which would have been found in the documents.

Probably Hitler based some of his thoughts upon data supplied by Jeschonnek, and it is probable that Goering's assurances to Hitler were not as unconditional as they seem in retrospect to have been, since a "disappointed" Reichsmarschall later announced his intention of court-martialing his Chief of Staff and his Chief of Luftwaffe Supply and Administration as those "responsible for the Stalingrad catastrophe."[23] Jeschonneck did, in his well-known manner, first point out all sorts of dubious factors and express certain reservations, but he made no clear-cut contradiction of the idea of carrying out a vast airlift operation. This could

*Editor's Note: General Lewald was beaten in 1757 by the Russians at Gross-Jaegerndorf, East Prussia; Bevern was conquered by Count von Daun near Breslau in 1757; Finck capitulated at Maxen, Saxony, in 1759; and General Fouqué was conquered near Landeshut, Silesia, in 1760. Prince Henry, however, conquered at Freiburg in 1762, as did the Duke of Brunswick and others near Minden and Klosterberg. See Chester V. Easum, Prince Henry of Prussia: the Brother of Frederick the Great, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1842, pp. 37-43, 118-121, 129-134, 196-200.

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be explained by the fact that Jeschonnek always considered it to be his sole duty to execute to the letter, without criticism, the desires of his Fuehrer.[24]

From presently available sources it is impossible to determine the precise times of the conference or conferences between Hitler, Goering, Jeschonnek, and possibly Milch and Zeitzler, concerning the airlift idea. It is thus difficult to establish whether Jeschonnek reported to Hitler (in the presence of Zeitzler) before or after he had seen Goering. In all probability, Goering went directly to Hitler, as he had so often done, without discussing the pros and cons of the matter with his Chief of Staff. Without knowledge of the limiting factors in such an operation, Goering might have made impossible promises. General Zeitzler reports on the conference with Goering and Hitler:

> I was present when he [Goering] reported to Hitler, "My Fuehrer, I report to you that the Luftwaffe will supply the Sixth Army by air."
>
> I interjected, "That the Luftwaffe cannot do."
>
> Goering replied, "You are not qualified to judge that matter."
>
> I then asked, "Reichsmarschall, do you know what quantities of supplies have to be daily flown in to the army?"
>
> Goering replied uneasily, "Not I, but my staff."
>
> Thereupon I gave him more detailed information on the matter, and he answered, "That I can do."
>
> I replied in turn, "That is a lie."

Needless to say, this led to a very heated debate, which was finally cut short by Hitler with the words, "The Reichsmarschall has reported to me that the air supply movement will work. I must believe his reports. My decision [to hold Stalingrad and supply it by air] remains unchanged."[25*]

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*Editor's Note: Hitler told Zeitzler that if the airlift would not work Goering should tell him. See Zeitzler's commentary of 11 March 1955 (Karlsruhe Document Collection) concerning this matter.

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Field Marshal von Manstein makes the following assessment of Hitler's decision to carry out an airlift for the Sixth Army:

> It is thus established that the affirmative reply given by Goering to Hitler on or before 23 November was wrong. I am in no position to judge whether the reply was due to an erroneous assessment of existing capabilities, or of self-aggrandizement on the part of Goering, a promise frivolously given to Hitler. Whatever the cause may have been, Goering was solely responsible. It was, however, also Hitler's duty to examine the reliability of the declaration made by Goering. In the first place, he knew Goering, and secondly, he was very well informed on the strength, etc., of the Luftwaffe.[26]

While the author concurs with Manstein's reference to Goering's "frivolous promise," he does not do so for the same reasons. Goering's character was such that an "outsider" might have arrived at the same conclusions as Manstein. It appears far more likely, however, that the Reichsmarschall, the second man in the nation, whose prestige in the eyes of the Fuehrer had been steadily declining, might have wished to reestablish himself with Hitler by making him an unqualified promise. He may also have wished to dispel Hitler's distrust of the capabilities of the Luftwaffe, which was a natural outgrowth of Goering's exaggerated claims of success by air units. He may also have sincerely believed that he could accomplish the airlift operation to satisfaction, just as he had done in some instances in the past, by combining the influences of his several offices and adding to it his own brutal energy. It is quite possible that he thought his honor was at stake.[27]

Apart from the Reichsmarschall's unconditional promise, Hitler was doubtless also influenced in his thinking by the Luftwaffe's successful achievement of supplying German troops in the pockets of Kholm and Demyansk.* In evaluating these airlift operations, however, far too much stress had been placed upon the successful side of the outcome. Either intentionally or unintentionally, the brilliant impression created by this unique operation was allowed to overshadow the disadvantageous factors.

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*In the winter of 1941-42 and in the following spring, the weak garrison of Kholm and about 100,000 men enveloped in the pocket of Demyansk received their supplies for weeks and months by airlift alone. See pp. 74-86.

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Little importance had been attached to the cardinal fact that the Luftwaffe was at that time much stronger, had suffered no serious losses in materiel and irreplaceable personnel, and was obliged, even then, to rob training establishments of their aircraft and instructors in order to carry out the mission. This seriously strained the entire structure of the Luftwaffe. Furthermore, during the operations to Kholm and Demyansk the German Air Force had possessed air supremacy.

When the decision was made to supply the Stalingrad pocket by air, the Luftwaffe as a whole, and particularly elements in the Eastern Theater of Operations, was weaker in operational strength than it had ever been, while the Soviet Air Force had steadily increased in strength. Consequently, it was expected that airlift operations to Stalingrad would suffer more heavily from enemy air attacks than the earlier air supply operations.

Since forces operating in Tunisia were also dependent at this time upon large amounts of air transportation, especially to move reinforcements to the front areas, it should have been obvious to all that the Luftwaffe's ability to accept responsibility for the supply of the considerably larger Sixth Army, composed of 240,000 to 270,000 men, for any length of time was out of the question. Experiences in Russia had given clear indications that it was also equally impossible for Hitler to fulfill his second promise, that of relieving the Sixth Army by ground action.[28] Ground reserves could not be readied in time for such an undertaking. Thus, both ground and air efforts, launched with inadequate forces, without reserves, and under compulsion to adopt all sorts of improvisations, could only end in failure.

Much of the fault can also be assessed to the dictatorial methods of command at the highest military headquarters. The Chief of the Luftwaffe Operations Staff had no role in the deliberations concerning the airlift operations, and Hitler's orders were passed directly to the Sixth Army, jumping the army group headquarters.

Hitler was also the one who ordered the Fourth Air Fleet to supply the beleaguered army. Thus, he was, as Supreme Commander of the Wehrmacht, the person upon whom the major share of the blame for the tragedy must be placed, despite the influence of Goering and other advisors.[29] The Fuehrer was motivated by two factors only: his obsession to hold ground at all costs, and the great prestige attached to

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the name "Stalingrad." Manstein points out that Hitler himself has provided a clear answer to the question of blame:

> After my numerous futile requests that Hitler should personally visit our area of the front to obtain an on-the-spot impression, or should at least send the Chief of the Army General Staff or General Jodl,* to the area for this purpose, I was ordered on 5 February to report at the Fuehrer's Headquarters.
>
> Hitler himself opened the conference more or less as follows:
>
> "I alone am responsible for Stalingrad. I could perhaps aver that Goering gave me inaccurate information on the supply-carrying capabilities of the Luftwaffe, and could thereby unload part of the responsibility on him. But he is the man I myself have appointed as my successor. I therefore cannot burden him with the responsibility for Stalingrad."
>
> It was certainly a commendable action that Hitler, in this instance, unconditionally admitted his responsibility and made no effort whatever to find a scapegoat. However, this favorable aspect of things was offset by the fact that he unfortunately failed to draw the logical inferences from this disastrous defeat resulting from his methods of command for the future conduct of operations. 30

In the analysis of the problem whether a perimeter defense or a breakout operation would be the best course of action under the conditions, it is also probable that Hitler was influenced by the Commander of the Sixth Army, General Paulus, and his demands for airlifted supplies. 31 At the time Hitler's decision was given to "hold Stalingrad" (22 November), neither Goering nor Jeschonnek could have been able to give such assurances of air support. Nor had Hitler been able to assure the Sixth Army that he would "do everything possible to insure the delivery of sufficient supplies by air for the army, and that it would be relieved in time." 32

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*Chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff.

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By the 24th, however, it was clear to the Army and Luftwaffe General Staffs that the Luftwaffe could not carry out the mission.

The Commander in Chief of the Luftwaffe was deeply concerned about the fate of the Sixth Army and the accomplishment of the transport mission as he had promised Hitler. The great disappointment felt by Goering in connection with the Stalingrad catastrophe can be noted in the following illustration of an experience of the Chief of Wehrmacht Forces South (also the Second Air Fleet), Field Marshal Kesselring:

> On the evening of 21 December 1942, during an official visit to Fuehrer Headquarters near Rastenburg, East Prussia, I called on Reichsmarschall Goering in the Fuehrer's bunker. I knocked at the door of the room reserved there for Goering. General [Karl] Bodenschatz, at that time attached from the Luftwaffe to Hitler's Headquarters, opened the door and asked what I wanted. Behind him I could see Goering sitting at his writing desk. He was sobbing aloud and time and again fell forward onto his desk. While I remained standing in the doorway, Bodenschatz endeavored to obtain an answer to my question from Goering. Goering asked me into the room. Without taking any notice of me, he continued his loud lamentation for several minutes. Then, interrupted repeatedly by some sort of a weeping cramp, he asked me several questions and finally dismissed me to abandon himself once more to his sorrows.
>
> Later I heard from officers of the Wehrmacht High Command that very bad reports had arrived concerning Stalingrad.[33]

Airlift Operations in Support of the Sixth Army

The Fourth Air Fleet had two difficult major missions to accomplish in the battle for Stalingrad, airlifting supplies to the encircled Sixth Army and providing air support for German ground forces fighting against the Soviet units advancing along both banks of the Don River.* The success of each mission was contingent upon the satisfactory fulfillment of the

*These forces were vastly superior in strength to the German units in this area, and enjoyed almost unlimited logistical support of all kinds.

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other. Thus, to undertake an airlift operation of even approximately the required scale, it was first essential to assist the ground forces in establishing a defensive line along the Chirnaya River, a line which had to be held if the base supply airfields at Morozovskaya and Tatsinskaya were to be kept operational for the commencement of the airlift.*

The closer the supply bases were to Stalingrad, the greater would be the number of sorties which could be flown each day to the pocket, and the more certain would be the possibility of fulfilling the Sixth Army's logistical demands. The most urgent requirement outside the pocket was, therefore, to insure that these bases were not taken, by establishing a contiguous front and by halting the advancing Red Army. If the Wehrmacht failed to achieve this, a much larger relief force would have to be assembled for the drive to the pocket, and this force would stand a much greater chance of being worn down before it could establish contact with the surrounded soldiers. As far as the Luftwaffe was concerned, any failure would surely force a prolongation of the airlift to Stalingrad, placing a greater burden upon all Fourth Air Fleet units, and causing a diminution in the total amount of supplies brought in to the airheads in the pocket. [34]

The VIII Air Corps (Fiebig) was directed to concentrate its forces primarily against Soviet units attacking the Chir River defense line. Here, strong Soviet tank and cavalry forces driving from the north and east toward Kalach had overrun the airfields immediately behind the front lines in the Don River bend area, and the tactical reconnaissance squadrons stationed there had been largely destroyed. The two or three dive-bomber groups of the 2nd Dive-Bomber Wing had suffered such heavy losses that remaining elements which arrived farther to the rear at Morozovskaya formed only one operational group.[35] Pursuant to orders, the ground-attack group assigned to operate ahead of the Sixth Army was moved westward on 20 November 1942.

A high percentage of the technically-qualified ground personnel of tactical reconnaissance, dive-bomber, and fighter units had been forced into the Stalingrad pocket along with air signal units and the 9th Flak Division. Therefore, new ground service units had to be organized on a provisional basis on the airfields west of the Chir River. This was made increasingly difficult, however, because most of the equipment for aircraft and aircraft maintenance had been lost in the hasty evacuations at overrun airfields. Practically no aerial photography equipment, including maps, equipment for development and interpretation of aerial photos,

*See Maps 25 and 26.

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and other auxiliary items were available. Fully serviceable motor vehicles had also become a rarity, and fuel was in very short supply in critical areas. The various organizations in such places soon fell to quarreling over the available supplies.

The soggy airfields were overcrowded and were virtually without wire communications, command being exercised by means of radio and liaison aircraft. The VIII Air Corps' command post was situated at the Oblivskaya airfield, close behind the thinly-manned main line of resistance. There, despite many difficulties, the VIII Air Corps managed to reorganize its badly mixed up units, to establish new units, and to reinforce organizations with highly qualified personnel (some of whom were brought in by air) from other combat areas. The corps was thus soon able to help slow down the Soviet advance all along the Chir River line, particularly around Kalach. In repeated attacks, VIII Air Corps units inflicted heavy casualties upon the Russians, especially Soviet cavalry troops, and gained valuable time for the German forces to consolidate their positions. During these actions some airmen flew as many as 10 to 14 sorties daily. [36]

An instance of a close defensive action occurred at the Oblivskaya airfield. One morning the crack of rifle fire was heard coming from Luftwaffe ground personnel engaged in action with Soviet regulars. A weather plane thereupon alerted the remainder of the field by firing red signal rockets. A Soviet cavalry division was approaching virtually unopposed, and had succeeded in infiltrating through some gaps in the German defense lines where no continuous front had been set up. The field's dive-bomber squadron (led by 1st Lt. Heinz Jung-Klausen), which had earlier been surrounded in the Stalingrad area, immediately took off to defend the base. Since no German ground forces were on hand in the area, it fell to the Luftwaffe to destroy the Soviet artillery by air power before it could be brought into position for firing, and to strafe the Soviet cavalry's horses in order to deprive these units of their mobility. Late in the afternoon, however, a more serious menace appeared in the form of tanks. These were attacked individually by German dive-bombers, with the last tank being destroyed at the very edge of the airfield. [37]

Only a few fighter, dive-bomber, and reconnaissance planes remained within the Stalingrad pocket after 22 November 1942, while Luftwaffe technical personnel who had become separated from their units had assumed responsibility for ground services at the airfields within the pocket, especially at Pitomnik airfield. Key technically-qualified personnel, however, were flown out of the besieged area as soon as possible, since their services were urgently needed at the base supply airfields.

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On 30 November the VIII Air Corps was relieved of all of its combat missions and ordered to concentrate upon the task of flying supplies in to the Sixth Army.* This was an honorable, but most difficult, assignment, which had to be accomplished even if the Russians threw in everything they had to prevent it. Security for the operation was of the essence.[38]

As Commander of the Stalingrad Air Supply Operations, General Fiebig had the responsibility for the concentration and operations of the largest possible number of transport aircraft and for the provision of fighter escorts during the supply missions. This change in responsibility had to be made because the existing air base command, on account of the composition of its staff, was unable to cope with the task. The staff of the VIII Air Corps, on the other hand, had wide experience in the control of large air forces and in cooperating with the most essential fighter escort units. Moreover, it possessed the required command machinery, the signal services, and a very good weather service organization.

Aircraft designated for use in the airlift operation were grouped according to type. All He-111 aircraft were placed under the command of the 55th Bomber Wing with headquarters at Morozovskaya airfield, while all Ju-52 and Ju-86 aircraft were placed under the wing commander of an air transport wing, with headquarters at Tatsinskaya airfield.[39] Each of these tactical commands was assigned four to five groups under available bomber or air transport group command staffs, irrespective of original parent organizations. This insured simplified and clearly defined chains of command, and improved servicing and maintenance of aircraft, since each airfield from then on handled only one type of aircraft.

To prevent overcrowding the fields--this was partially a precaution against Soviet air attacks--orders were issued that defective aircraft were only to be repaired if the work could be completed on the airfield within two days. More seriously damaged planes were to be shipped out for repair in the rear Luftwaffe administrative area commands or in the Zone of the Interior. In order to secure the greatest possible percentages of operational aircraft, a new term, Kesselklar (cleared for flight into the pocket), was coined. This term certified that an aircraft was operational under the current operating conditions. Previously, the standard

*Responsibility was transferred from the Commandant, Air Base Area Tatsinskaya to the VIII Air Corps. The Commanding General, VIII Air Corps was redesignated Luftversorgungsfuehrer Stalingrad (Commander of Stalingrad Air Supply Operations).

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term, Einsatzbereit (Operational), had been used. This implied that a plane with one set of alternate instruments malfunctioning was not ready for combat operations.

To insure proper supervision of air traffic to and from the base supply airfield in the rear areas, two aircraft clearing points were set up. One was at Kirovograd for He-111 planes, and another was at Saporozhye for Ju-52's. Every aircraft en route from the base supply field to the Zone of the Interior or any other destination for repair purposes had to clear at these places. These points registered each aircraft coming from or going toward the combat areas, expedited the servicing of these planes, and provided flight information for the outgoing aircrews.

Command over the tactical support units of the VIII Air Corps was transferred to Air Division Donets, a staff organized on the spot under Generalleutnant Alfred Mahnke, with a headquarters first at Morozovskaya and later at Tatsinskaya. This division had the same mission as the VIII Air Corps: to operate against advancing Red Army forces, especially in front of the Chir defense line.*

Day and night the Ju-52 transport groups (directed by Col. Hans Foerster)/ flew their supply missions from Tatsinskaya, while He-111's of the 55th Bomber Wing (under the able command of Col. Berhard Kuehl) carried out their part of the day and night mission from Morozovskaya to the pocket. Whenever weather permitted, units of the 3rd Fighter Wing ("Udet") under Maj. Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke provided escorts for the transports as far as inside the Stalingrad area. The 27th (He-111) group (Maj. Hans-Henning Freiherr von Beust) operated from airfields at Millerovo.

However, in spite of every effort by the commanders, and although the aircrews sought their way to Stalingrad even during snowstorms, sleet, and all sorts of adverse weather, the airlift operation was unable to deliver even approximately the quantities of rations, ammunition, fuel, and other supplies demanded by the Sixth Army.

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*Later some elements of the VIII Air Corps were directed to fly supplies to the Fourth Panzer Army, which had commenced an attack for the relief of the enveloped army.

/Later replaced by the experienced Air Transport Commander, Col. Fritz Morzik.

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Ground personnel worked tirelessly to increase the number of missions flown. Inconceivable and seemingly insurmountable difficulties were mastered by cooperation between all concerned. All personnel of all ranks, from the commanding general down to the lowest member of the ground services, were motivated by a single thought: everything possible was to be done to help their comrades of the Sixth Army inside the pocket.

The only difficulties which could not be completely surmounted were those caused by weather conditions. Even with the best of intentions and utmost efforts it is impossible to escape the difficulties arising from snowstorms, ice formations, and fog. These weather and climatic conditions which heralded the beginning of the Asiatic winter were the first factors which placed the airlift mission to the Sixth Army in jeopardy.[40] All of the responsible Luftwaffe combat commanders had warned the High Command of the hampering effects of adverse weather.

By early December snow and ice had coated every airfield and all out-of-doors equipment and aircraft. Nevertheless, He-111 aircraft continued to take off. Ju-52 units scheduled to fly on 2 December, however, did not commence operations until after 1130 hours, when they were able to take off with proper escorts. Heating equipment was lacking for many of the transport planes, and thawing out frozen aircraft by other means was most time consuming.* Despite these problems, however, a good spirit of camaraderie helped to surmount many difficulties.

During the night of 4 December 1942, transport aircraft were thawed out with all possible speed, but were unable to take off because of a heavy fog. Every air and ground crew was anxious to get the badly needed supplies to the men trapped in the pocket. Finally, about 17 He-111's and 50 Ju-52's carrying about 140 tons of ammunition, fuel, and food managed to make the trip. This performance, carried out under the worst of weather conditions, could hardly be surpassed.

On the following day 36 Ju-52's flew into the encircled Sixth Army area, some making completely blind takeoffs. At the Pitomnik airfield, within the pocket, the ceiling was only 400 feet and lowering, with visibility ranging up to 2,200 feet. After 1000 hours conditions worsened considerably, yet Luftwaffe transport planes continued to land, some of them making as many as seven attempts in the process.[41]

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*Ground service units were forced to abandon much of their equipment inside the Stalingrad pocket when they were flown out.

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By 8 December temperatures had dropped and dense fogs were encountered throughout the entire Stalingrad area. On that day, about 70 He-111's delivered 140 tons of supplies, while Ju-52 units had difficulty in accomplishing their missions unescorted because of heavy Soviet fighter attacks. The slower Ju-52's carried only 60 to 70 tons of supplies that day to the Stalingrad area because enemy fighters were able to scatter and decimate the units.

On the Chir River front, penetrations were made by Soviet tank forces south of Nizhne-Chirskaya in an effort to widen the breach between the Sixth Army and the remainder of Army Group Don. In this area, the 11th Panzer Division destroyed 45 Russian tanks without losing a single tank of its own. The Stalingrad fortress area had meanwhile been under increasing Soviet pressure since 4 December, and penetrations had been made in the northwestern sector around Dmitriyevka. Dangers from this quarter were relieved on 8 December by Luftwaffe bombers and dive-bombers, which attacked with good results and sealed off the penetrations. During this action the 3rd Fighter Group shot down 32 Russian aircraft.[42]

On the following day lower temperatures prevailed throughout the entire operational area of the Sixth Army. Occasional snowfalls and dense fogs precluded air operations, but Soviet ground attacks continued, especially against the northwestern sector of the Chir River line. The Stalingrad area remained quiet. On 9 December Tatsinskaya was twice attacked by Soviet aircraft, which destroyed four Ju-52's, 75 tons of fuel for the Army, and 6,000 rounds of ammunition.[43*]

Two days later General Fiebig boarded an He-111 aircraft and flew from Morozovskaya to the Stalingrad pocket, a trip taking about an hour. There he conferred with the Sixth Army Commander, Generaloberst Paulus, and his Chief of Staff, Generalmajor Arthur Schmidt, who, realizing their grave responsibilities, took a decidedly unequivocal attitude. A sober evaluation of the situation indicated that the Sixth Army's food supplies were about at an end, and that the reserve stocks due to be issued on 16 December would only last for two days. By that time contact with Army Group Don had to be established.

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*Ju-52 units had lost 32 aircraft up to this time, while an additional 11 planes were unserviceable because of damage. He-111 units had lost 15 aircraft. Personnel losses amounted to 100 aircrewmen.

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Troops in the pocket had been on one-third rations since 23 November, and their general physical condition had deteriorated considerably. Although the effective infantry strength was still 40,000, casaulties were increasing daily. Altogether, about 270,000 persons were still within the pocket.

Supplies delivered by air were quite inadequate, and fuel, light field howitzer ammunition, and rations were urgently needed. In front of German defense lines Soviet troops walked freely about, because the defenders were unable to waste their meager ammunition in shooting at them. This had to be saved for warding off attacks.

Heating was one of the most pressing problems. Two-thirds of the troops on the line had no prepared bunkers, and many slept in holes or upon the frozen ground on their single blankets, some without any cover.

At Paulus' request, Fiebig informed Generaloberst von Richthofen and Generalmajor Friedrich Schulz of Army Group Don about the Sixth Army's acute supply shortages and the necessity of pulling its divisions out of the line for a rest. On the following morning Richthofen carried the message to the Commander in Chief of Army Group Don, Field Marshal von Manstein. [44]

While Manstein was gravely concerned for the Sixth Army in the pocket, he was also anxious about his extended Army Group Don. If Soviet units could drive through in force between the right flank of Army Group "B" (Italian Eighth Army area) and the left flank of Army Group Don (Rumanian Third Army area) in the direction of Rostov, they might thereby interdict Manstein's logistical routes and isolate the greater part of Army Group Don.

In early December Army Group Don was positioned along a line extending roughly from Veshenskaya to Serafimovich to the Chir River and thence southward to the area east of Kotelnikovo. On the left flank was the Rumanian Third Army, and to the right of it Army Force Hollidt,* the German XXXXVIII Panzer Corps, the Fourth Panzer Army (Hoth), and the Rumanian Fourth Army.

*Editor's Note: Army Force Hollidt was composed of several divisions and auxiliary troop units assembled into a combat force under the command of General der Infanterie Karl Hollidt.

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On 12 December the ground/air operation for the freeing of the Sixth Army began. The drive was spearheaded by the LVII Panzer Corps of the Fourth Panzer Army, supported by units of the VIII Air Corps, which had received orders to give equal support to the combat operations on the ground and to the airlift to the pocket. The hope that the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps would join in the drive was soon abandoned because Soviet inroads along the Chir River front obliged it to continue its defensive battles. The VII and VI Rumanian Corps covered the flanks of the spearhead units in the assault. [45]

During the first day of the attack for the liberation of the enveloped Sixth Army,* the VIII Air Corps only delivered 80 tons of supplies to the Stalingrad pocket, but it achieved significant tactical successes in support of the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps against Soviet armored forces which had crossed the Chir River south of Surovikino and penetrated German lines to a depth of four miles. [46]

A bright, clear winter day dawned on 17 December, with temperatures down to 5° Fahrenheit. The ground was now more suitable for armored operations, especially by the newly arrived 17th Panzer Division, situated in the left wing of the Chir River defenses. Unfortunately for the Wehrmacht, the Soviet Command also welcomed the improved conditions for strengthening the pressures against both the Stalingrad pocket defenses and the Chir River line.

Since the Luftwaffe had to carry out night combat operations against the Red Army and since it was unable to provide adequate fighter escorts for the transport aircraft, only He-111 planes carried supplies into the pocket. It was thus not surprising that only a few Heinkels made it against the strong Soviet fighter opposition and the heavy antiaircraft fire. It was a dangerous risk to divert air forces for combat missions at a time when the Sixth Army's supplies were already at a dangerously low level, but General Fiebig declared, ". . . it must succeed! The alternative is unthinkable." [47]

While the Luftwaffe attempted to carry out the airlift to Stalingrad, Soviet forces redoubled their efforts against the Chir River front. The

*The relief attack by the LVII Panzer Corps included for the first time an entire battalion of the new "Tiger" tanks. These were not enough to give the desired impetus to the attack, which was borne by relatively weak forces, chiefly the 6th, 23rd, and later the 17th Panzer Divisions.

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attacks which began there on 12 December were successful within two days, and the last German-held bridge over the Don was demolished by Wehrmacht Engineers on 14 December. The question remained whether the lower Chir front could hold out long enough to allow the Fourth Panzer Army to reach and free the Sixth Army. 48

By 17 December the LVII Panzer Corps had driven far to the northeast in the direction of the Stalingrad pocket, and it appeared that a rapid advance might enable it to make contact with the surrounded German forces. Moreover, the supply situation had improved somewhat, although it was still far from adequate.

Heavy fog, especially over the Tatsinskaya, and low cloud ceilings over the takeoff area hampered air activities on 18 December, a day of intense crisis on the ground. No missions were flown by Ju-52's, the Ju-86's could not be started, and only 5 He-111's reached the pocket during daylight hours. The daily supply delivery amounted to only 10 tons, although 60 tons was possible if the night could be properly utilized for the airlift.

East of the Don River, the LVII Panzer Corps had achieved no decision in its advance and had run into heavy enemy resistance. Red Army units encircling the Sixth Army appeared ready to withdraw some of their forces for use in strengthening the opposition to the Fourth Panzer Army's drive. On the left wing of the Chir River line, Soviet forces were engaged in a massive attack upon the Italian Eighth Army of Army Group "B" and the Rumanian Third Army of Army Group Don. The Italian positions were shattered, and the Rumanians appeared unable to check the stream of Soviet troops. This immediately endangered the flank of Army Force Hollidt, and, thereby, the entire Army Group Don.

Aware of this critical situation, and the inadequate logistical situation of the Sixth Army, Manstein insisted that the Army High Command allow the Sixth Army to try a breakout on its own, coordinating this operation, insofar as possible, with the Fourth Panzer Army. Hitler quickly turned down this appeal.

Manstein thereupon sent his Intelligence Officer, Maj. (GSC) Hans Georg Eismann, to confer with the Sixth Army Command concerning the possibility of immediately implementing Operation WINTERGEWITTER (Winter Storm), a plan for a breakout by the Sixth Army as far as the

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Tsaritsa River.* During these discussions, Generalmajor Schmidt rejected the breakout idea as a "catastrophic solution," and confidently declared that, "The Sixth Army will still be holding its position at Easter. You just have to supply it better." The final word on the matter came from Generaloberst Paulus, who stated emphatically that the idea had been, in any case, expressly forbidden by the Fuehrer's orders. 49/

With Soviet forces posed for three drives: eastward on Nizhne Chirskaya, southward toward the bridge at Bytonskaya in the direction of the Fourth Panzer Army, and westward, with the objective of rolling up the Chir front as far as Morozovskiy, the time had come for a decision concerning the liberation of the Sixth Army. The time appeared to be most opportune for an undertaking of this sort, and most responsible German commanders believed the delays would not help to strengthen the fighting capacity of the Sixth Army, but would only seal its fate. Manstein continued, however, to try to reach the beleaguered force with the Fourth Panzer Army.

During the night, VIII Air Corps transports flew an additional 70 tons of food into the Sixth Army area.

The tactical situation brightened on the 19th. The LVII Panzer Corps had penetrated across the Aksay sector to the Myshkova valley, just 30 miles from the southern front of the Stalingrad pocket. The moment now seemed opportune for a breakout attempt by the Sixth Army. Along the lower Chir, Luftwaffe planes destroyed more than 60 Soviet tanks, some of British manufacture, which enabled Army Group Don to stabilize its front in that area. Army Force Hollidt shortened its lines in order to establish better defensive positions.

The 19th was propitious for the airlift. Low-hanging clouds provided good conditions for the air transport operation, while they adversely affected air combat missions in the area. In the course of the day, 73 He-111's, 50 Ju-52's, and 13 Ju-86's delivered a total of 270 tons of supplies to the Stalingrad pocket, 220 tons of which were rations for the Sixth Army.

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*The Donskaya Tsaritsa.

/Supplies needed for the breakout effort were 1,800 tons of rations and 4,000 tons of fuel. These demands by the Sixth Army were clearly beyond the accomplishment of the VIII Air Corps.

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At noon Manstein again appealed to Hitler to allow the Sixth Army to try a breakout. General Fiebig lodged a similar appeal to the Fuehrer at Fourth Air Fleet Headquarters at Novocherkassk, stressing the Luftwaffe's inability to transport the huge amounts of food and fuel requested by the Commanding General of the Sixth Army as a prerequisite for any breakout effort. [50]

Hitler admittedly approved of a southwesterly drive by the Sixth Army to establish contact with the Fourth Panzer Army, but he insisted that the enveloped army was to maintain its eastern, northern, and western fronts around Stalingrad. He thought this was possible once a corridor to the Fourth Panzer Army had been established for logistical support. As Manstein points out, however, the Soviet offensives against the right wing of Army Group "B" made it impossible to think of maintaining two armies, the Fourth Panzer and the Sixth Army, for any length of time east of the Don River. Moreover, the Soviet drive from the north in the direction of Rostov would threaten not only the Sixth Army, but two entire army groups, Army Group Don and Army Group "A," whose rear lines of communications would be gravely endangered. It was also impossible for the Sixth Army to employ its total striking force in the southwesterly breakout operation while holding its original lines around Stalingrad. This might have been possible for a day or two until the German intentions became clear to the Soviet Command, but even this was doubtful.

The risks involved were indeed great, and it became increasingly clear that the Luftwaffe could not build up the fighting power of the Sixth Army by an airlift; certainly it could not maintain the army's original fighting strength. Paulus was quite right when he stated that the Sixth could not carry out a breakout--he doubted that his force could do so under any conditions because of logistical handicaps--as long as Hitler insisted upon holding Stalingrad. [51]

By evening of 19 December, the awaited answer to Manstein's request for permission for a Sixth Army breakout had not been received from the Fuehrer. Manstein thereupon assumed responsibility for the matter and issued orders to the Fourth Panzer Army and the Sixth Army to make immediate preparations for the implementation of Operation WINTERGEWITTER, the plan for a southwesterly breakout designed to establish contact between these two armies. Once the Sixth Army had reached Fourth Panzer Army units on the Donskaya Tsaritsa River, the second phase of the plan, DONNERSCHLAG (Thunderclap), which entailed the evacuation of the Stalingrad pocket by sectors and a simultaneous drive to the

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southwest and the main German lines, was to go into effect.[52*] Paulus had previously agreed that the general situation would require the immediate implementation of DONNERSCHLAG once the objective of WINTERGEWITTER had been achieved.[53/]

On the morning of 20 December 1942, the Soviet Fifth Armored Army, which had earlier broken through the Don defenses at Kazanskaya and had pushed rapidly to the south along the Kalitva River and to the German lines along the Bolshaya River, arrived within striking distance of the Luftwaffe base at Millerovo, the principal base supply center. The 27th Bomber Wing began at once to transfer its units from this field to bases in the south of the new defense line.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Third Assault Army continued its parallel offensive to the east of the Fifth Armored Army and broke through German defensive lines along the Bolshaya River. In the course of these operations two Italian divisions on the right wing of Army Group "B" were routed, and deep penetrations were made into the flank of Army Force Hollidt (left wing of Army Group Don). Soviet forces, especially the Third Assault Army, appeared to be driving toward Morozovskaya, where they probably hoped to link up with Red Army units driving to the west from the area north of Oblivskaya.

In the Fourth Panzer Army area, the foremost troops of the LVII Panzer Corps had succeeded, despite tremendous odds, in crossing the Mishkova River and in establishing a bridgehead on the northern bank. From this point they were able to see the reflected glow from the firing around the perimeters of Stalingrad. Accomplishment of the mission seemed almost within grasp, if the Sixth Army could only begin its breakout effort before it was too late, and before additional enemy forces could be brought to bear against the LVII Panzer Corps. The Sixth Army's attack, however, never took place.

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*Editor's Note: Since the Sixth Army only had enough fuel for a 20-mile dash, plans were made to supply it at the Tsaritsa by truck columns passing through the Fourth Panzer Army so that it could continue its drive to freedom. It was assumed that the breakout attempt would prevent Soviet forces around Stalingrad from going into action against Hoth's relief force. See Manstein, pp. 370-371.

/A longer period of preparation for the second phase was almost sure to invite massive Soviet attacks and prevent fulfillment of the operation.

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Airlift operations were threatened by Soviet ground attacks, which necessitated Luftwaffe units abandoning their prepared airfields for more remote, and in some cases less serviceable, bases. The VIII Air Corps prepared to move its units in the direction of Novocherkassk. If the lower Chir River defenses between Chernyshevskaya and Oblivskaya collapsed, the Luftwaffe would have only Morozovskaya and Tatsinskaya for the continuation of the airlift.

That evening German hopes suffered another blow as reports came in to the VIII Air Corps that Soviet armor had penetrated many parts of the rear of Army Force Hollidt, and that the Red Army had reached the vicinity of the important Donets River crossing of Kamensk Shakhtinskiy. 54

Within two days the German lines had fallen back to the Bystraya River, forming a thin front extending roughly from the Chir to the Donets Rivers. By midday of the 23rd, Army Group Don was obliged to withdraw a division from the Fourth Panzer Army, and to help the Rumanian III Corps and the XXXXVIII Panzer Corps in establishing the new front. This was absolutely necessary at the time, but could only weaken the drive to relieve the Sixth Army. By evening the Red Army was again threatening the German main line of resistance, protecting the base airfields of Tatsinskaya and Morozovskaya.

In the area between the Fourth Panzer Army and the Sixth Army the Russians soon deployed powerful antiaircraft forces, as the German Command had expected, along the western and southwestern perimeters of the pocket and in the intermediate area. Principal emphasis was upon light antiaircraft guns, although all calibers were in evidence. At the same time Soviet fighter units made a concentrated effort against German air transport formations.

Luftwaffe flyers attempted to counter Soviet antiaircraft defenses by constantly changing their flight routes, but this also had the adverse effect of increasing the duration of flights and, consequently, the total consumption of fuel. Within a short time, Russian commanders became aware of the routes which were most suitable, from the German viewpoint, for airlift operations and of the particular flying characteristics of Luftwaffe transport aircraft, and laid their antiaircraft batteries accordingly.

Soviet interceptor attacks became a more serious problem than antiaircraft fire for the Luftwaffe, especially for Ju-52 and -86 aircraft. He-111's, however, were generally feared by Russian airmen because of their well-disciplined flying formations and mutually interlocking fields

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of fire. As a result of this fear, Soviet pilots were generally reluctant to attack He-111 formations, and when they did attack them, did so in a half-hearted manner.

Junkers-52 and -86 planes,* on the other hand, were relatively unmaneuverable, weakly armed, slow, and vulnerable to arms fire, making them easy and popular targets for Russian aviators. Planes of these types made up the bulk of the Luftwaffe's losses in the course of the airlift operation.

Soviet forces continuously attempted to hamper or interdict German air logistical operations through bomber or fighter-bomber attacks against the base airfields or the airheads within the Stalingrad pocket.† Although these attacks often inflicted damage, they were never serious enough to deter or cut off the airlift. The principal factor which adversely affected the airlift was bad weather, not Soviet air attacks.

Between late November 1942 and February 1943 there was scarcely an entire day of clear weather with good visibility in the VIII Air Corps' operational area. Either the base airfields were weathered in so that aircraft could not take off, or fog shrouded the airfields in the pocket so that incoming transports could not land. The most frequent source of difficulty came from rising thick layers of clouds, in which the risk of ice formation between the layers was extremely great. These cloud masses were so thick and extended so far into the air that it was nearly impossible to climb over them. At the same time fair weather was often prevailing over the pocket area, so that it was hard to judge the true state of affairs. Sharp controversies often arose concerning the conditions for

*Editor's Note: The Ju-52 first appeared in 1932 and, for a time, held several records. Used extensively as a commercial transport by the German airline Lufthansa, and by 25 other countries, it was a robust and reliable aircraft. Some were still in operation in the 1950's. It was a low-wing, tri-motor plane, powered by 3 BMW 830-h.p. engines, with fixed landing gear, and a top speed of 189 m.p.h. The Ju-86 was a 1934 design, powered at first by heavy Junkers "Jumo" diesel engines, but after 1940 by gasoline engines. A twin-engine, low-wing, commercial transport, it was successful as a civilian transport aircraft, but, despite its 224-m.p.h. speed, was less robust than the Ju-52 in combat operations and was definitely a second-line plane. See Kens and Nowarra, pp. 344-347, 354-356.

†No Soviet night fighters were used in the area.

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flying and whether a unit should continue to push onward through such cloud formations once they were encountered. In some cases, entire squadrons were lost while trying to get through areas of bad weather. These losses far exceeded the losses due to enemy action.

On the ground the area of greatest concern to the German Command was the important rail and supply depot of Tatsinskaya, and the airfield nearby which was of crucial importance for the continuation of the airlift to the Sixth Army. The Soviet advance had moved southward more than 108 miles in nine days, the same time which had been required by Army Group Hoth* to drive a distance of 21 miles, from Akhsay to the Mishkova River.

Soviet tanks reached the Tatsinskaya airfield on 24 December 1942. They were then just 102 miles from Rostov-on-the-Don, with not even a German corps between them and this important objective. [55] A shell from one of the Russian tanks struck the Wehrmacht's telephone center, disrupting all communications. Soviet tank and artillery fire set fire to a number of Ju-52's on the airfield, and the remaining aircraft barely succeeded in taking off at the last possible moment. One of these planes, carrying the command staff of the VIII Air Corps, took off under heavy fire, with the clouds of snow thrown up completely obscuring visibility. It was a terrific takeoff. The behavior of the transport aircrews at Tatsinskaya deserves special commendation. They mastered the most difficult weather conditions conceivable, and by their great efforts saved 108 Ju-52's and 16 Ju-86's out of a total of 180 aircraft, an almost unbelievable achievement under the conditions. [56]

The planes which escaped the Soviet attack at Tatsinskaya scattered, and landed at several different airfields; some even landed in open country. With great difficulty they were finally assembled at the Salsk airfield for reemployment in the airlift operation, but two valuable days had meanwhile been lost. As Christmas day drew to a close, Salsk was in operation as a base field for the airlift.

The Tatsinskaya disaster was due solely to the fact that the transport planes had remained too long on the airfield, pursuant to Hitler's orders that they were to evacuate the base only if they came under direct enemy fire. Fiebig made urgent appeals to the Fourth Air Fleet for

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*Composed of the Fourth Panzer Army and the Rumanian Fourth Army.

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permission to move the transports, but no approval could be granted. [57] Had the planes left the field even as late as the evening of 23 December, the loss of so many transport aircraft, spare parts and equipment, especially engine-warming wagons, tank trucks, and other valuable items, would have been avoided.

Each airfield lost to the Red Army enormously weakened the Luftwaffe's chances of fulfilling its supply mission to the Sixth Army. Therefore, when Tatsinskaya was lost it was not difficult to predict the end, as far as logistical operations were concerned. This, however, was no secret. The Commanding General of the Fourth Air Fleet, von Richthofen, and the Commanding General of the VIII Air Corps, Fiebig, as well as the Chief of Air Transportation, Morzik, and other aviation experts, had all uttered their warnings at the time the idea of air supply for the Sixth Army was suggested, and all agreed that it could not be done on such a large scale. [58]

The airfield at Tatsinskaya was again brought under German control by a counterattack launched by German Army units on 28 December, but, by then, much crucial time had been lost. In retaking the airfield, the 11th Panzer Division, with Luftwaffe assistance, enveloped and destroyed large numbers of tanks of the Soviet XXIV Armored Corps. Sixty-three enemy tanks were knocked out as they sought to break out of this encirclement. [59] Thereupon the Fourth Air Fleet found it safe to move back to the Tatsinskaya airfield, and immediately restocked it for continuation of the airlift operation.

While this point was being recaptured, however, German forces of the LVII Panzer Corps, fighting for the liberation of the Sixth Army, suffered a severe setback. Superior Russian forces attacked in the Mishkova area and drove the corps back to the Akhsay sector, where it was almost immediately threatened with encirclement by powerful enemy units. Additional Soviet reinforcements continued to move across the Volga, and were soon thrown against the entire Fourth Panzer Army front.* Fighting against tremendous odds, and constantly in danger of being enveloped and annihilated, the LVII Panzer Corps was obliged in a few days to fall back as far as Kotelnikovo, the place from whence the Fourth Panzer Army had begun its drive for the liberation of the Sixth

*Editor's Note: Hitler rejected Manstein's urgent appeal at the end of December for immediate reinforcement of the Fourth Panzer Army.

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Army on 12 December.[60] Thus ended the last hope of freeing Paulus' entrapped army.

After the beginning of January 1943, Army Group Don's operations became more clearly divided into two parts, the isolated, final struggles of the Sixth Army in the Stalingrad pocket, and the defensive battles of Army Group Don in its southern sector, an area equally vital to Army Group "A."[61]

On 1 January 1943 the VIII Air Corps' scope of responsibility was again limited to the air movement of supplies to Stalingrad, employing for the purpose not only its own air units, but certain new organizations equipped with Ju-90's, Ju-290's, and Fw-200's.* General Fiebig pointed out, nevertheless, that the addition of these four-engined aircraft would not materially change the airlift picture, and that the Sixth Army's daily requirement of 550 tons of supplies could not be achieved.[62]

The air transport operation was hampered again on the following day, when He-111 units of the 55th Bomber Wing had to take off at Morozovskaya under the worst conditions imaginable, in a dense fog, to avoid being overrun in a surprise Soviet attack as the Ju-52 units had been at Tatsinskaya. From their new base at Novocherkassk, on the lower reaches of the Don River, the He-111 squadrons could fly only a single daily supply mission since the distance to the pocket was about 210 miles.[63] The second possible factor which could have had a negative influence upon the airlift for Stalingrad, namely, a major change in the location of the

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Editor's Note: The Ju-90, designed in 1937 as a four-engine, long-range commercial transport, was a low-wing, all-metal plane, with retractable landing gear, and powered by four BMW 750-h.p. engines. Carrying a crew of four, it had a top speed of 218 m.p.h. The Ju-290, a modification of this plane, had a longer fuselage, broader wings, and a power plant increase by four BMW 1,700-h.p. engines. The 290, with a top speed of 270 m.p.h., was primarily used as a strategic reconnaissance and transport aircraft. The Fw-200, another four-engined aircraft, with a top speed of 261 m.p.h., was originally produced as a commercial transport for Lufthansa, but, after 1940, efforts were made to convert it into an effective military aircraft. Never very satisfactory, 178 had been produced by the end of 1942. See Kens and Nowarra, pp. 219-221, 388-392. See Figure 61.

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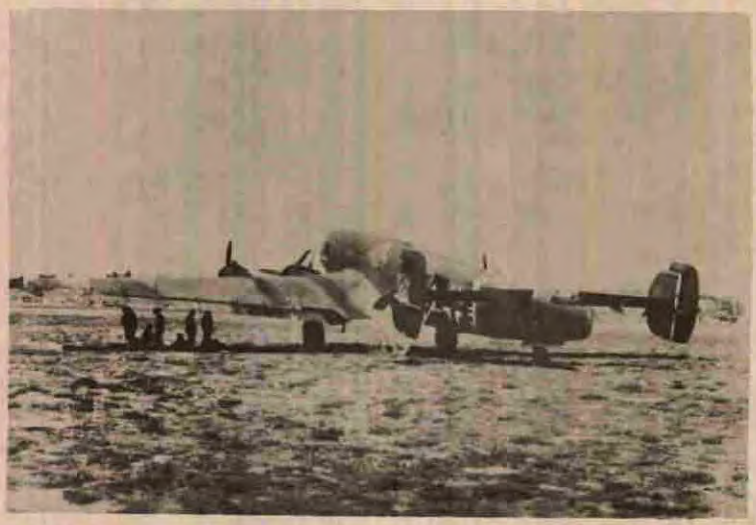

Figure 61
Ju-90 aircraft being used for airlift operations

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German front lines through a westward withdrawal, had become a fact.* Besides the distances involved, each interruption of the already inadequate air supply movement was a grave matter for the Sixth Army, and each emergency transfer of air units meant a loss of equipment to the Luftwaffe.

Difficulties for the Luftwaffe had increased considerably by the turn of 1943. Fighter escorts could no longer be provided because it had become necessary to evacuate fighter airfields near the front. Ju-52 operations therefore had to be restricted to nighttime, and He-111 units had to fly their missions with no fighter cover whatever. Ju-86's, because of their inadequate range, could no longer be used at all.

The last available "Type 1000" air-drop containers, which were especially valuable because of their carrying capacity, had been captured by the Russians at the Morozovskaya airfield. Since the base airfields had been pushed farther to the south and west, the distances to the pocket varied from 196 to 210 miles. This was the maximum range for the Ju-52, which made up the bulk of the transport aircraft, so that an additional effort was required for every ton of supplies delivered. Furthermore, it was now no longer possible to take advantage of short periods of improved weather for all-out transport efforts.†

The airlift was also weakened by withdrawals of air units from the area to stop serious Soviet breakthroughs in other sectors of the front, such as at Voronezh and points farther to the south. In such emergencies, transport units, particularly He-111 squadrons, were obliged to carry out combat missions, thereby reducing the supplies carried into the pocket.

The end of December and the first days of January were days of relative quiet for the Sixth Army, although they were days of immense crisis for the southern German front to the west and south. On 8 January 1943, General der Panzertruppe Hans Hube flew in to the

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*All Luftwaffe commanders in the area of Army Group Don warned of the adverse effect which any change in the ground situation would have on an airlift.

†Forces from the Fourth Air Fleet also had to be committed in support of the Fourth Panzer Army's relief attack. Any withdrawal of air support to the Fourth Panzer Army gave momentary boosts to the airlift, but this narrowed the chances of outside forces reaching the Sixth Army.

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Stalingrad pocket and brought back to Hitler an unmistakably clear picture of the Sixth Army's situation, which apparently made a profound impression upon the Fuehrer. [64]

The next day the Soviet Command sent a demand for surrender to the Sixth Army. This ultimatum was relayed to Hitler, who immediately turned it down. While it was clear that the Sixth Army had no longer any chance of freeing itself, von Manstein points out that it still had an important role to play in the broader context of developments on the Eastern Front by tying down sizeable Soviet combat units which might otherwise have been thrown against the southern sector of Army Group Don or Army Group "A." [65]

Air transport performances had been consistently inadequate, in spite of unstinting efforts by Luftwaffe personnel, but by early January this performance level had dropped still lower. A cold snap in the first part of the month, with temperatures down to -49° Fahrenheit, virtually brought all air operations to a halt. Available heating wagons were scarcely able to cope with such conditions. Sixth Army's condition had reached that of desperation.

The eventual failure of the Fourth Panzer Army to hold the front along the Manych River necessitated the evacuation of the Salsk airfield. The Fourth Air Fleet, anticipating this problem, looked for an alternate base north of the Don from which Stalingrad would still be within range for Ju-52 units. This was by no means an easy task. In the summer of 1942 it had become necessary to postpone the development of airfields west of the Donets River in favor of establishing tactical air bases closer to the front. The manpower and materials available had been insufficient to take care of both areas. By January of 1942, however, the lack of airfields west of the Donets was sorely felt. One relatively suitable site was found at Cherekovo south of the Donets, where an airfield was constructed as fast as possible. [66]

Cherekovo was a corn field north of Shakhty, without ground facilities of any kind, and with very limited billeting space. All loading and servicing operations had to be carried out in the open in sub-zero temperatures. In the first few days every item of ground equipment was lacking, and everything had to be moved in under extremely difficult circumstances. Nevertheless, operations had to continue from this place, since it was the last possible airfield from which Stalingrad was still within operational range of the Ju-52 units.

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With the gradual evacuation of the Caucasus by German forces to avoid being cut off from Army Group Don, it became necessary to transfer the Ju-52 units to Cherekovo. At 0945 hours 15 January 1943 the Fourth Air Fleet issued orders to abandon the Salsk airfield and to complete the movement to Cherekovo by the following morning. In spite of all preparations, however, the movement had an adverse effect upon the airlift program. Just as the existing local problems had been surmounted and supply operations commenced, a heavy snowstorm began, which, with drifts up to 20 feet in depth, brought all operations at Cherekovo to a stop for several days. This was a new problem, and one which was to recur again and again in the course of the airlift operation. [67]

From the statements of responsible Luftwaffe leaders and from the experience of the first few days of the airlift operation, it should have been abundantly clear that the Sixth Army could not be supplied by air. It should have attempted, therefore, to break out while there was time to do so, and strong air forces should have been assigned for the support of this effort. Once the Chir River lines had been lost, however, it would have been difficult to provide adequate air support, since the vital tactical airfields had also been lost to enemy forces. [68]

Field Marshal von Manstein has made the following appraisal of the Sixth Army's opportunities for a breakout:

> If a chance ever existed for saving the Sixth Army after the end of November, when Hitler refused to give Paulus permission for an immediate drive to break through the then undeveloped positions of the Soviet forces surrounding Stalingrad, that chance was on 19 December. Army group headquarters had issued orders to the Sixth Army to exploit every opportunity for a breakout, no matter how difficult the operation might become, and without regard for the serious situation which had meanwhile developed in other sectors of the army group area. . . .
>
> The crucial issue during this period (19-25 December) was whether the Sixth Army could and would carry out the order it had been given. [69]

Thus, Field Marshal von Manstein, in spite of the grave situation in the left flank of Army Group Don and along the right wing of Army Group "B," accepted the risks involved in continuing on the offensive with all available forces--the Fourth Panzer Army--on his right flank east of the Don River, in a northeasterly drive to free the Sixth Army.

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He also submitted frequent requests to higher headquarters to obtain urgently needed reinforcements, especially panzer units, from the First Army in the Caucasus, but without effect. At the same time, Manstein urged Hitler to approve a southwesterly breakout of the Sixth Army in conjunction with the drive toward the pocket by the Fourth Panzer Army, but, not receiving a reply in a reasonable length of time, he issued preparatory orders on his own.[70] The question remains, whether Hitler finally arrived at the conclusion that the Sixth Army ought to try to break out, or whether Paulus, supported by Manstein's orders, decided to break out contrary to Hitler's orders. Since the attempt was never made, the true situation cannot be assessed.*

The Fourth Panzer Army's relief attack was made with relatively weak forces, and with no possibility of obtaining reinforcements. The Soviet forces were throwing in everything they could muster to stop this drive, and offered a constant threat to the flank of the German advance units. For this reason the LVII Panzer Corps (leading the attack) dared not remain in its extended position once the drive had been halted, and Hitler's idea that a long supply corridor could be maintained was out of the question. The only logical objective could have been the freeing and withdrawal of the Sixth Army. Experience also showed that even stronger air units would not have been able to sustain the surrounded army for any considerable period.[71/]

The Sixth Army, on the other hand, doubted that it could withdraw enough forces for the breakout effort from its other sectors, since the Red Army carried out regular attacks in those areas. Speed was then of the essence. If the move had been effected at an early date, the Sixth

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*Editor's Note: Paulus later asserted that a breakout attempt would have made him responsible for the fates of neighboring units as well, and that his colleagues would have been quick to blame him for a failure. He also asked how he could expect obedience from his subordinates if he himself were to become insubordinate. Paulus believed that neither the German Army nor the German nation would have understood his actions at the time had he elected to break out, and that this would have started a "Stalingrad stab-in-the-back legend" like the claim made after World War I about the home front. See Walter Goerlitz, Paulus and Stalingrad (published in German as Ich Stehe hier auf Befehl [I Stand Here According to Orders]), New York: Citadel Press, 1963, pp. 283-286.

/The average daily deliveries to the pocket from 1 to 11 December 1942 amounted to 97.3 tons of goods, and from 13 to 21 December 1942 to 137 tons.

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Army would not have had to consider allocating strong forces to seal off Soviet penetrations in the eastern sectors as it withdrew, step by step, to the west. The Commander of the Sixth Army was doubtless influenced in his decision by the poor condition of his forces, especially after all of the horses in the pocket had been slaughtered and consumed and the coldest part of the winter had set in.

The decisive factor, however, was the fuel situation. Fuel supplies were so meager that Paulus believed a breakout attempt was too risky. The estimated fuel available in the pocket was enough to take the Sixth Army's tanks about 18 miles. Thus Paulus refused to consider a breakout unless the relief force could get within this distance from the pocket. Without question one could not have expected these vehicles to go 30 miles on the fuel available, but the Sixth Army was also in no condition to attempt to wait until its fuel stocks could be built up to 4,000 tons, a feat which was, in any case, impossible.

To have waited for adequate fuel supplies would have meant a failure to exploit the most opportune time for a breakout. It would therefore have been better, and even essential, to make do with what was available, commencing the attack with the fuel on hand, and hoping that additional fuel could be airlifted in during the breakout operation. It is also well known that every unit in the field has more fuel reserves than it reports to higher headquarters, and, even if the Army was unwilling to reckon on this uncertain factor, it was hoped that the Sixth Army's breakout would immediately relieve the pressure on the Fourth Panzer Army, thereby enabling it to come even closer to the pocket. On 19 December it was not at all certain that the panzer army would be able to advance beyond the Mishkova River, but, with Soviet defensive capabilities reduced by a Sixth Army attack, it would almost certainly have been able to advance its lines across the 12 miles which were still lacking. Naturally, certain risks had to be accepted in order to capitalize on this hope, but in the existing circumstances, no hope could have been held for the salvation of the Sixth Army without accepting such risks.

The decisive reason why the fuel situation tipped the scales in deciding that the Sixth Army was to remain in the pocket was the fact that Hitler had a liaison officer in the Sixth Army area who immediately informed the Fuehrer that Paulus considered the fuel supplies inadequate for a breakout attempt, and that he had no chance to group his forces for an attack.

Luftwaffe and Army commanders on the Eastern Front were deeply embittered by the Fuehrer's refusal to allow a breakout operation.

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Probably no Luftwaffe leader was more incensed in this regard than was von Richthofen, who told Jeschonnek, ". . . My confidence in our command is rapidly sinking below zero."[72] In Richthofen's diary appears an interesting commentary on the incredible command difficulties and even patent dishonesty in higher command echelons during this crucial period:

> . . . No matter what I do, I can reach no one! On the whole I haven't telephoned Jeschonnek since 16 December because all of the recommendations submitted by me have been either tacitly rejected or, after oral assurances, have been given [to me], different orders have been issued. Furthermore, I now have irrefutable evidence that certain statements of mine have been reported in the opposite way. I now send only teletype messages--one four-page communication was sent today concerning the situation. In my messages I request directives for the conduct of operations because in the recent past I have heard only futile complaints instead of orders or directives. Probably they were, themselves, at a loss what to do. . . .[73]

In the course of the operation to free the encircled army, Richthofen lodged constant pleas for an immediate and radical solution to the problem. In this view he was supported by Field Marshal von Manstein, but higher commands refused to take action or to agree to independent action by lower commands. Zeitzler even told Richthofen that he [Richthofen] had been the person who had advocated holding the Sixth Army on the Volga, a statement quite contrary to the facts.[74] Most incredible of all, perhaps, was the comment heard by Richthofen through Manstein and Zeitzler that Goering believed the food situation at Stalingrad was "not really serious."[75]

On 23 December 1942 Richthofen telephoned Jeschonnek and demanded that a really radical step ought to be taken to relieve the Sixth Army, namely, withdrawing Army Group "A" from the Caucasus in order to throw these forces into the balance against Soviet units in the Fourth Panzer Army area. Jeschonnek answered with only lukewarm promises, but Richthofen knew that little confidence could be placed in these assurances.[76] The stammerings of Zeitzler in his conversations with Richthofen also indicated an inability to do anything about the Luftwaffe commander's recommendations.[77]

On the evening of 26 December Richthofen spoke with Field Marshal von Manstein about the extremely grave situation for both the Sixth Army

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and the other units of Army Group Don:

> We both complained together. Manstein suggested that the Reichsmarschall himself should assume command over the army group and the Fourth Air Fleet, since he always maintains that the situation either here or at Stalingrad is not as serious as it is constantly reported to be. Manstein's motto: Assign the confident commander to the post he is confident he can satisfactorily fill! The Fuehrer refuses to talk to Manstein on the telephone, to call him to his headquarters for a conference, or to come out here himself. . . .[78]

Plans for a possible breakout by the Sixth Army were actually under discussion at the highest command levels by 19 December, and it is possible that Hitler secretly desired for Paulus to break out on his own initiative, thereby relieving the Fuehrer of the burden of making the decision and placing his own prestige in the balance in an issue concerning a city named after his great opponent.

Von Tippelskirch also mentions that Hitler could not be moved into making a decision by the insistence of Zeitzler, nor could Paulus be moved to decide for a breakout in contradiction of Hitler's orders. Because of the distances involved, Paulus doubted whether his army could penetrate the enveloping ring and still save a large part of his unit. Having no knowledge of the overall situation, he utterly failed to realize that this was his last opportunity to save his force from a fate far more terrible than what the Sixth Army was then enduring or might be expected to endure in case of a breakout attack.* Furthermore, Paulus was not

*Editor's Note: Statements made by Field Marshal Paulus after World War II indicate that he never seriously entertained an idea to break out, but considered obedience to be his highest duty to the German nation. He pointed out that daily communications were sent to him by the High Command imploring him to hold out "just a little bit longer," and that he assumed the fate of Army Group "A" in the Caucasus depended upon the Sixth Army holding its position. See Goerlitz, Paulus and Stalingrad. Interestingly enough, Field Marshal von Bock made the following notation in Paulus' efficiency report on 5 April 1942: "First commanded his army three months ago. Through and through a decent man and a brave soldier, very circumspect. However, he must first prove himself from the ground up as an army commander before it can be determined whether he is qualified for a higher assignment." See Personnel File, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

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the man one could have expected to abrogate military obedience, and he was staunchly supported in his views by his chief of staff. [79]

In the light of subsequent information, there is hardly room for doubt that the bulk of the army could still have been saved if action had been taken on 19 December 1942. For such stakes, German troops would have made incredible performances, despite their weakened condition. Moreover, experience had shown that there was no situation in which the Soviet lower and intermediate commands were more helpless than when faced with a desperate German attack, led by bold and energetic officers. This was proven again just a few weeks later when, under bitter, mid-winter conditions, a force of 4,000 German soldiers succeeded, after weeks of envelopment in the Millerovo area, in breaking through the encircling Soviet forces in a daring night attack, carrying along 12,000 Italians through the impetus of their attack. With a loss of only ten percent of their total strength, they made their way across the trackless, deep snow, their assault guns breaking the trail, to the German lines, a distance of more than 12 miles. Strong Luftwaffe units had begun at dawn to attack the Soviet positions, especially artillery positions, across from the German front. This was sufficient to help the breakout force to cover the last and most difficult part of the way back to safety. [80]

A similar case is that of a smaller German force which had been enveloped in the Oblivskaya sector. Under tactical and weather conditions much like those described above, this force, commanded by an exceptionally courageous officer, Col. Rainer Stahel of the flak artillery arm, battled its way across a distance of more than 60 miles to the German airfield at Tatsinskaya. It had been under constant attack from all sides, with instances of deaths by freezing and starvation all the way. [81]

While the Sixth Army's troops were undoubtedly in a weakened physical condition owing to their starvation rations and the extreme cold to which they had been long exposed, it is doubtful whether the Soviet forces could have successfully resisted a desperate drive by this sizeable German unit which would have been staking everything on a chance for freedom. The courageous fighters of Stalingrad would almost surely have covered the distance of 18 to 30 miles.

Since no breakout was attempted, the renewed sacrifices of the Luftwaffe were also in vain. Hundreds of aircraft and highly-trained aircrews were lost in the prolongation of the airlift. Large numbers of planes and personnel had been drawn from German training establishments, units which were so vital to the life of the entire Luftwaffe. The employment of these in combat was an irreparable measure destined to have a

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retarding effect of fatal magnitude upon the personnel and materiel replacement system of the Luftwaffe up to the end of the war.

The mitigating circumstance in this case was that the Sixth Army would have been forced to surrender much sooner had the airlift not been continued. It was clear to all, however, that the supply of so large an army by air alone was impossible, especially if this continued for any length of time. In attempting to satisfy the requirements of the Sixth Army, the Luftwaffe continued its air supply movements until the air transport service was bled white.

The Final Efforts of the Luftwaffe To Sustain the Sixth Army

During the initial stages of the Russian investment of the Sixth Army the following airfields were within the Stalingrad pocket: Pitomnik, Bassargino, Gumrak, and Gorodishche. In the final stages of the battle, after the Red Army had taken Gumrak, the airfield at Stalingradskiy, very close to the city, was provisionally equipped for operations.

Of the airfields within the pocket, only Pitomnik was really suitable for smooth airlift operations. Here, the available navigational equipment, the powerful radio beacon and direction-finding instruments of the base headquarters satisfied, for the time, the needs of all incoming transport aircraft. The airfield at Gorodishche,* like Bassargino on which elements of a tactical reconnaissance group were stationed, had poor equipment, no devices for night landings, and mediocre servicing facilities. Initially, Pitomnik and Bassargino, despite certain shortcomings, were the only bases suitable as logistical airheads in the pocket. Before long it became obvious that the reception capacities of these bases were inadequate.

In the beginning of the airlift operation two additional fields, which could serve as alternate airfields for night operations, should have been constructed. The lack of these later had very adverse effects, and the Sixth Army itself is not blameless for this situation. Luftwaffe suggestions that an alternate base should be constructed at Gumrak were originally rejected by the Sixth Army because of the field's close proximity to army headquarters. The use of this base was not approved until just before the loss of the Pitomnik airfield.[82] Viewing this problem in retrospect, it is now clear that as many airfields as possible should have been prepared

*This field could never be used at all.

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and placed in operation. This would have enhanced the landing situation and permitted a much greater flow of air traffic to the pocket. The establishment of bases, however, was contingent upon the availability of navigational aids, flying equipment, and technically trained ground crews.[83] Furthermore, each airfield should have been provided with adequate ground defenses, and the Sixth Army should have made every effort to retain its airheads as long as possible, keeping them away from hostile ground action. With respect to air defense, few fighters were available in the Stalingrad fortress area, but relatively strong flak batteries of the 9th Flak Division protected the Pitomnik airfield from serious damage during the frequent Soviet air attacks.

Immediately after Paulus' army was surrounded on 22 November, Generalmajor Wolfgang Pickert, who commanded the 9th Flak Division and was the senior Luftwaffe officer in the pocket, appointed Colonel Rosenfeld* to head Supply Staff Pitomnik, an organization responsible for the daily unloading of transport planes and the distribution of supplies which were later delivered by air-drop. Rosenfeld had had no previous special training in logistical operations.[84]

From the first days of the airlift, Luftwaffe transports landed at Pitomnik with cargoes of food, ammunition, fuel, medical supplies, spare parts, mail, and other items.[85] In the course of these operations, both Lieutenant Colonel Kolbenschlag, Flight Control Officer at Pitomnik, and Major Freudenfeld, Air Signal Officer, rendered outstanding service. Freudenfeld's great inventive skill and energy kept the navigational aids and signal communications operational despite numerous difficulties. He managed to cope with Soviet jamming efforts, with the seemingly eternal failures of German radio beacons, and organized the radio and direction-finding facilities which guided German pilots in to the base through fog and snow.[86]

The blue tents of the medical staff were clearly visible on the field not far from the air base command post and the army supply point. Nearby, at the edge of the airfield, were the bunkers of the hundred men of Supply Staff Pitomnik. While everything was still in order, these hundred men unloaded the aircraft, stacked the food containers south of the airfield, supervised the shipment of casualties for evacuation, and registered loads of the aircraft, which were classified as ammunition, fuel, provisions, or passengers. Nothing was hoarded because the incoming supplies were not even sufficient for the needs of the combat troops.

*Editor's Note: Colonel Rosenfeld, Lieutenant Colonel Kolbenschlag, and Major Freudenfeld could not be more fully identified at the time of publication of this study.

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