

On 31 January 1942, after his soldiers had endured a siege that lasted 73 days, German Field Marshal Friedrich von Paulus surrendered to Soviet forces near Stalingrad the remnants of his encircled Sixth Army plus half of the Fourth Panzer Army, a total of some 91,000 men. In the more recent 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Egyptian Third Army was virtually encircled by Israeli units and only narrowly escaped destruction.

Since 1945, the development of large mobile forces has given an offensive commander the wherewithal to maintain a special sort of freedom of operations and to carry out rapid advances, deep penetrations and swift turning movements. Conversely, a commander defending against such forces must now take swift action and make very sound tactical decisions to turn them away before his own can be encircled and destroyed.

The commander of the German 1st Panzer Division faced this kind of problem in late 1941 on the Eastern Front.

When the German offensive against Moscow came to a halt on 6 December, the 1st Panzer Division was some 15 miles north of the Soviet capital. It was immediately ordered back to Klin and instructed to keep the route through that town open for other withdrawing German forces (see accompanying map). Because deep snow prevented cross-country movement, the highway that ran through Klin was the only route over which mechanized and motorized columns could withdraw.

After fighting the enemy as well as the weather, the division reached Klin where it succeeded in holding that important junction against persistent Soviet attacks until the other German units had passed through. At that point, though, as the division prepared to break contact and withdraw to Nekrasino, it found itself completely surrounded by strong Soviet forces. Its higher headquarters ordered the division to abandon its vehicles, if necessary, and to break through to Nekrasino where it could link up with other German forces.

Unfortunately, on several previous occasions the Soviets had cut the road to Nekrasino, during which times other German units had lost numerous vehicles in

breaking through. These wrecks had piled up on either side of the road with little more than a narrow lane between them.

After ordering a reconnaissance in force, the division commander felt that Soviet resistance was weakest in the area southeast of Klin and that a breakout in that direction would most likely succeed. The terrain, however, was such that practically all of the division's vehicles would have to be left behind, and there were about 1,000 wounded German soldiers in Klin who could not be evacuated without transportation. In addition, despite having lost a lot of equipment, the division still had a large number of vehicles, and the commander was loath to give them up if he could possibly avoid it.

After a short meeting with his staff and senior officers, the division commander decided to keep his vehicles and to break out along the road to Nekrasino, although he knew his units would probably meet strong Soviet resistance. He was also determined to evacuate as many of the wounded soldiers as possible.

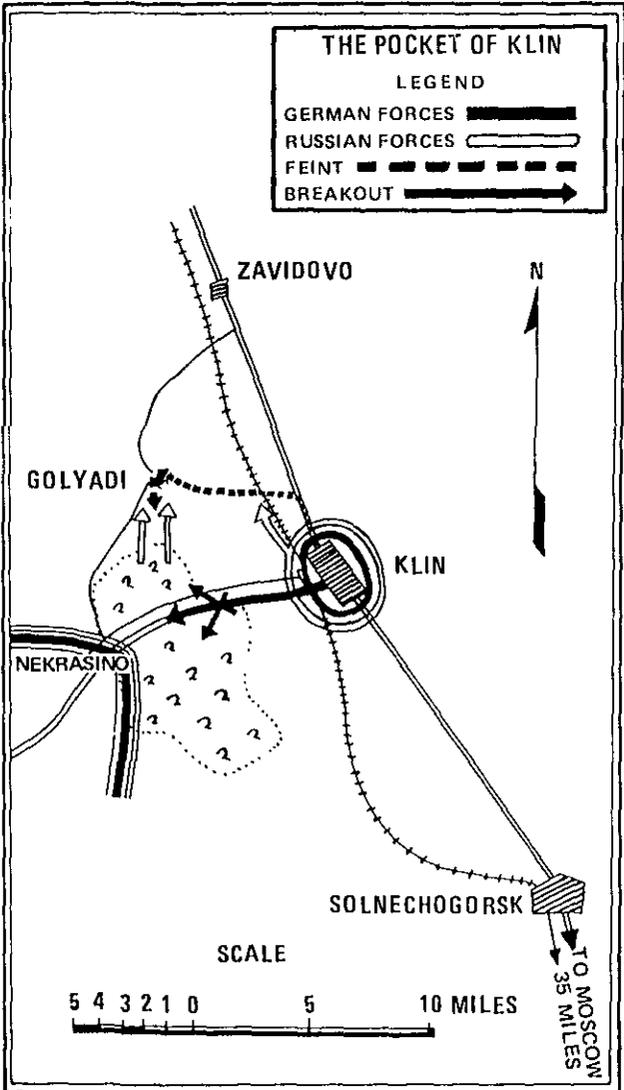
In preparing to break out, the division made good use of its experiences during a previous encirclement at Kalinin. There, after carrying out a feint in one direction that had diverted some of the encircling Soviet forces, the division had succeeded in making a surprise breakout, losing no equipment and suffering few casualties. The great flexibility of its artillery had been decisive. By shifting its fires rapidly from target to target, the artillery had been able to support both the diversionary and the main attacks. Equally important, the division had used in its main effort those tanks that had survived the diversionary maneuver.

DIVERSION

After carefully surveying the situation around Klin, the division commander decided that all the available tanks, one company of armored infantry, and one rifle battalion would conduct a diversionary breakthrough north of Klin, after which the force would pivot toward the west and the town of Golyadi. There, it would turn sharply to the south and attack toward the Nekrasino road.

The main breakout along that road would be launched as soon as the Soviets had reacted to the threat near Golyadi and had begun to pull their forces away from the main road to counter the Germans' turning movement. Initially, the entire division artillery from positions around the railroad station in Klin and all of the available antiaircraft weapons would support the diversionary attack.

The intended deception was completely successful. The German diversionary force fell on the Soviets at Golyadi and caught them by surprise. The Soviets began to shift their forces to meet this German attack, which they assumed to be the main breakout effort. (Incidentally, the attacking German troops had not been told that their effort at Golyadi was no more than a feint. The division commander felt that the soldiers who were carrying out



the feint would not fight with quite the same zeal if they knew that they were being used merely to deceive the Soviets.)

As the Soviets began to shift units from the Nekrasino road, the commander of the 1st Panzer Division decided that this was the appropriate time — about noon of the same day — to launch the main breakout. On a prearranged signal, most of the artillery and anti-aircraft weapons shifted their fires. Only one artillery battalion continued to fire on the old targets to cover the withdrawal of the diversionary force.

The division's armored infantry battalion drove a gap through the Soviet lines, and the units that followed widened it. A number of the tanks that had taken part in the diversionary maneuver had made their way to Klin by this time and were committed on both sides of the road. Under their protection, the wounded soldiers, on trucks and sleds and accompanied by armored personnel carriers, were moved out of the town.

By now, too, the artillery was covering the flanks of the breakthrough column, while in the eastern part of the city combat engineers held off a Soviet attempt to disrupt the breakout. The entire force eventually fought its way through to Nekrasino, where it linked up with other German units.

While the division undoubtedly owed much of its success to the proper employment of its combat elements, strict traffic control permitted it to evacuate a large number of its vehicles, and this really determined the final outcome of the operation. Vehicles that broke down were immediately pushed off the road to keep the column moving without interruption, while a large number of slightly wounded officers and noncommissioned officers were added to the military police to help enforce traffic discipline.

Substantially intact, the 1st Panzer Division emerged from the pocket of Klin taking along its casualties and much of its equipment. Twenty-four hours later, on a different sector of the front, it was again in action.

TACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As can be seen from the above example, the commander of an encircled force has a lot to think about in planning and executing a successful breakout. He should determine the proper time and direction of his breakout only after he considers the following questions:

- What is the earliest possible moment we can launch our attack?
- Where is the enemy weakest?
- What is the shortest route to friendly lines?
- What direction involves the fewest terrain difficulties?
- What hour and what weather conditions favor the attack?
- Should we select more than one direction?

Usually, unless the breakout attempt is coordinated with the approach of a relief column, the unit attempting

the breakout should use the shortest route to other friendly forces. Accordingly, the choice of route is crucial, and the direction that favors the terrain and the weakest enemy resistance should not be chosen unless that route favors a rapid link-up with friendly troops.

The commander must also consider the physical fitness of his troops. If they are in good fighting condition, he might consider a night attack. If the troops are battle-weary, though, the breakout may be best conducted in



the daylight hours to permit better command and control.

A breakout in multiple directions offers only a small chance of success. In fact, it is usually a last ditch effort primarily to disperse the total force so that the smaller units can reach the friendly lines. Such an act of desperation should be considered only in those occasions when a relief force is not expected and the distance to friendly lines is so great that a breakout can no longer be attempted by the entrapped force.

If a breakout attempt is to succeed, an effort must be made to strengthen the combat power of the fighting units at the expense of the support units. The selection of personnel for transfer from support units to combat units may be a slow process, but it is important if the breakout attempt is to stand any chance of success.

In encirclements, for example, the support units usually outnumber the combat forces, and while they may be superfluous to the actual battle, their presence places an additional burden on the commander. Support units can serve as a manpower reserve that can be used to assist the combat units. Care must be taken, though, not to assign too many support troops to a combat unit. The whole

procedure can be counter-productive if these men become a burden to the combat units to which they are assigned. An alternate method might be to form units composed of support troops and to hold them in reserve under tight control.

Engineer activities that are designed to prevent or slow the pursuit by enemy forces over abandoned terrain must be ordered and executed on time. It is advisable to limit such operations to a few key areas. Troops usually have neither the time nor the desire to carry out extensive or time-consuming destruction of material or equipment. On the other hand, the commander must make sure there is no senseless mass destruction of material or equipment, which is characteristic of trapped soldiers.

DECEPTION

Because the success of a breakout also depends on deception and secrecy, as few subordinate commanders as possible should know about the actual breakout plan, and telephone and radio communications must be closely monitored. Radios, though, do offer the best means of deceiving the enemy. Such deception may be accomplished by transmitting false messages about the unit's intentions, SOSs sent to imaginary relief forces, reports intended to confuse the enemy about actual unit strength, misleading requisitions for resupply, and false information regarding drop zones and landing areas.

Feints and false maneuvers go hand-in-hand with the deception plan. Making movements in different directions each night, launching attacks with limited objectives from various points on the perimeter, and stubbornly defending important terrain features can help the trapped unit camouflage its intentions.

Apart from the diversionary plans, the most important tactical consideration is the gradual change from the defense to the attack. As the situation permits, soldiers who can be spared from defensive missions should be transferred to the area selected for the breakout attempt, but some may need a rest before they are again committed. This transfer involves some risk, of course, because it does require the shortening of the defensive lines. Confusion can be lessened if the entire pocket moves in the direction of the attempted breakout. This allows the shifting of forces to be accomplished more easily and reduces the seriousness of minor terrain losses. Additionally, it lessens the feeling of entrapment that many soldiers suffer from if they believe there is no escape and a "last stand" seems imminent.

Of course, the commander and his staff must always be ready to take countermeasures against serious emergencies. It may become difficult for the commander, as the pressure increases, to distinguish between important and unimportant developments. He must bear in mind, therefore, that his reserves are limited and should not be committed unless a major threat develops at a decisive point.

As the time for the breakout nears, and as the tension

within the pocket builds, the commander must become a tower of strength, conscious that his troops are watching his every action. Even his command post's location can be important; it should always be approximately in the center of the pocket. Under no conditions should the operations of an encircled force ever be conducted from outside the pocket.

The soldiers' morale may be bolstered if the commander issues only brief, clear orders, provides reassuring information, and makes frequent visits to critical points on the perimeter. Exaggerated optimism is out of place. Soldiers want to know the truth and usually discover it for themselves, and they will lose confidence in their commander if they believe he is tampering with the facts. Usually, the truth, told without an emotional display, reassures and can even stir the troops to greater efforts.

STEPS

In order, then, the steps to a breakout attempt are as follows:

- Emphasize the defense.
- Establish a chain of command.
- Stabilize the defense.
- Reinforce the combat units with support troops.
- Evacuate nonessential or wounded personnel, if possible, and destroy excess equipment.
- Gradually shift emphasis from the defense to preparations for the breakout effort.
- Form the breakout force.
- Shorten the defense perimeter, while strengthening the sector selected for the breakout.
- Carry out deceptions, including feints or diversionary attacks.
- Execute the breakout.

Today's combat commander can expect to face an opposing force that is built around highly mobile elements supported by strong tank reserves. These forces can conduct high-speed combat operations that favor encircling and destroying their opponents.

Therefore, the commander of a force threatened with encirclement must take immediate steps to break out of his opponent's grasp. And if his tactical decisions are both timely and sound, he can rest assured that he and his soldiers will live to fight another day.



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