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FORCED CROSSING OF THE BUG RIVER, ADVANCE
THROUGH THE RUSSIAN BORDER DEFENSES AND
CAPTURE OF THE FORTRESS BREST-LITOVSK

D R A F T T R A N S L A T I O N

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From the end of April to the beginning of May 1941, the 45th Infantry Division was transferred by rail from France to the Warsaw area. The division was to make preparations for a possible attack on Russia, in accordance with the following order: "The division will capture the railroad bridge across the Bug and the Muchawieoz River bridges; the fortress and city of Brest-Litovsk will be taken by assault so as to enable the Panzorgruppe Guderian to move through the resulting gap and advance along the Brest-Litovsk - Kobryn Rollbahn".

At the beginning of May 1941 the division commander and the regimental commanders were the first elements from the division area sent to conduct reconnaissance operations for several days along the Bug near Brest-Litovsk. They reported:

1. High embankments led to the railroad bridge which was partly held by Russians and partly by our forces. A blockhouse on the Russian side served the guards as shelter; on the German side an earth-covered pillbox with embrasure faced the river. At all times a Russian double sentry was stationed at the red demarcation line on the bridge, while German sentries (local security guards) were posted only at the entrance to the bridge.

2. Most of the terrain west of the Bug was inundated, so that the river could only be approached by way of the railroad embankments and the causeways. According to agreement, the Bug was to constitute the dividing line. The Russians had diverted the river from its original

course through the moat of the western island, with the result that the western island had become Russian territory. Only one casemate (with entrance from the east) at the southeastern tip of the western island was located on German territory. Apart from the railroad bridge there were no permanent crossing points at the Bug.

At the highway bridge which formerly connected Terespol and the western island stood a small wooden observation tower. However, owing to the height of the ramparts on the opposite side, and to the fact that some of the area was very thickly wooded, the tower afforded only a very limited view of the fortress precincts. A higher observation tower was located on the Russian side from which it was possible to command a view of the entire terrain between the Bug and Terespol. Closely behind the tower on our side a new and considerably higher tower was under construction and almost completed.

The ramparts surrounding the fortress were in good condition; at several points concrete constructions went up swiftly behind wooden planks.

The center part of the fortress was encircled by solid buildings several stories high, most of them brick structures and all apparently occupied by large contingents.

There was no traffic across the border; only the railroad ran according to schedule. On the bridge, the German tracks were laid within the Russian tracks but at either end of the bridge the tracks became separated again. The German trains ran up to the Brest-Litovsk station and the Russian trains went up to the Terespol station.

The 45th Infantry Division, had marched as far as Terespol - Biala Podlaska by the end of May. The advance battalion (the 3rd Battalion,

135th Infantry Regiment) was quartered in Terespol. The cavalry division's security detachments previously stationed there moved away. The following preparations were made immediately:

- a. Defenses against a Russian attack.
- b. For our own attack in accordance with the order mentioned above. (Alternative plan mentioned under a. is not discussed in this report).

Available were:

The 45th Infantry Division (standard organization) minus one infantry regiment (corps reserve) and forces detailed to the corps advance detachment (machine gun and infantry howitzer companies of the corps reserve were available for fire preparation).
one battery with two 600 mm guns,
one 210 mm howitzer battalion,
three smoke-producing units with 280 and 320 mm smoke-shell mortars, high explosives and flame thrower fuel),
several antiaircraft combat detachments (with 88 mm guns).

The present picture differed from the first reconnaissance report inasmuch as the high water was now receding slowly. However, the current of the Bug was still quite strong, so that the crossing on inflatable rubber boats was bound to be subject to considerable drifting and loss of time. The new observation tower was ready for use. The concrete fortifications under construction by the Russians were apparently nearing completion. On the western island several old casemates were discernible, but whether troops were quartered there remained doubtful. The center part of the fortress continued to be occupied by a large force; the view of the northern island was

obstructed by the density of the woods, and only a few new dwellings could be detected. However, a number of old casemates could still be assumed on the northern island too. The garrison, particularly the artillery, was engaged in training.

There was no doubt that our attack would encounter a numerically superior enemy; consequently, it was important to rely entirely on the surprise element.

The fire preparation could only amount to one brief, sudden concentration, although the 600 mm guns, owing to their slow cyclic rate, could then only fire a few rounds.

The attack employed:

- the 130th Infantry Regiment on the right,
- the 135th Infantry Regiment (minus the 2nd Battalion and the division reserves) on the left, (see sketch No. 1).

The regiment on the right was given the following order:

Regiment will cross the Bug, take the southern island by assault and forestall the demolition of the Muchawiecz River bridges east of the fortress. The regiment will push through the southern portion of the city and advance to the eastern outskirts.

The regiment on the left received the following mission:

- 1) Regiment will stage a surprise raid in order to capture the railroad bridge across the Bug to and prevent demolition of the bridge;
- 2) it will cross the Bug and take by assault the northern island, the western island, and the center part of the fortress;
- 3) it will push through Brest-Litovsk proper and move up to the eastern outskirts.

The operations of the 135th Infantry Regiment were conducted along the following lines -

Plan of Attack:

- a. Surprise raid to capture the railroad bridge. After arrival of the regiment, sentry duty on the bridge will be taken over by the regiment's assault detachments equipped and armed as home guards, so as to familiarize them with the routine of the Russians. Several days prior to the attack, the rear wall of our pillbox will be removed and a 37-mm antitank gun emplaced in the pillbox, which will enable us to shell the Russian blockhouse at the time of the attack. Our sentries will be slowly moved up to the red demarcation line, and the changing of the guards will be shifted to zero hour, so that four men will be available there to overpower the Russian sentries.

- b. The 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment (minus ~~the~~ Company, the regimental reserve) in conjunction with the engineer platoon of the 135th Infantry Regiment will cross the Bug on inflatable rubber boats; they will first capture the western island, then the center of the fortress and the bridge leading from there to the northern island (North Bridge). The advance company (the 11th Bicycle Company) will be assembled halfway between Terespol and the Bug in such a manner that, after the smoke shells have been fired, the company can ride on bicycles to the Bug. (This measure was necessary because forces could not be assembled on the river banks where they would have become exposed to our own

smoke shells.) The 10th Company, 135th Infantry Regiment, will be assembled in the casemate opposite the southeastern tip of the western island, from where it will advance to the southern portion of the western island.

- c. The 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, in conjunction with the 1st Company of the 81st Engineer Battalion, will assemble at the banks of the Bug just southeast of the railroad embankment so as to cross the railroad bridge or to effect a river crossing on assault boats or pneumatic floats. Strong assault detachments will sail up the Bug to the western tip of the northern island, so that the northern island may be accessible. The battalion will capture the northern island and then advance to the railroad tracks east of the northern island.
- d. The available companies of the corps reserve will be committed at the left bank of the Bug in such a manner that, in coordination with the plan of fire, they will be able to support the river crossing.

The time before the attack was utilized as follows:

1. Camouflaged storing of ammunition in the firing positions;
2. assembling of bridge construction material in the thicket along the river;
3. construction of supply roads through the formerly flooded terrain between Terespol and the Bug;
4. briefing of commanders and subordinate commanders.

During the night of 21 June 1941 troops were assembled according to plan and without enemy interference. The surprise attack was a complete success, and the Russian artillery did not retaliate the

sudden concentration of fire which started at 3:15.

The surprise raid on the railroad bridge was carried out successfully. Immediately following the artillery fire the bridge was captured intact, so that the tanks of the Panzergruppe Guderian were able to roll across by early morning. The commander of the bridge assault detachment, Lt. Zumke, was mentioned in the Wehrmacht communique.

The 3rd Battalion captured the western island and advanced to the center of the fortress; one assault detachment even succeeded in pushing across the North Bridge and advancing as far as the northern island. In the meantime, however, the Russians, who were stationed in the center of the fortress, had recovered from the surprise attack and offered tenacious resistance, which resulted in costly house-to-house fighting. Owing to their overwhelming numerical superiority, the Russians were able, during the course of the morning, to drive the remaining elements of the battalion -- whose commander had been killed shortly after the attack began -- into the fortress church and an adjoining building, where these troops offered heroic resistance.

The 1st Battalion crossed the Bug in force on the railroad bridge and pushed back the enemy from west to east, capturing many prisoners. Here too, enemy resistance developed but gradually; nevertheless, we succeeded in reaching the railroad tracks east of the northern island, and during the course of the morning we captured the northern part of the city. Several Russian tanks tried to escape from the fortress center through the northern island; every one of them was put out of action.

Soon after the enemy had been rolled up on the northern island, combat activity increased when the Russian units emerged from their underground positions, thus forcing the regiment to commit its reserve

(the 9th Company, 135th Infantry Regiment), insufficient as it was.

Upon urgent request, the division made the 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment available at noon; until then the battalion had been the division reserve. It was ordered to penetrate the fortress center via the northern island and the North Bridge. The battalion captured several casemates which had been re-occupied on the northern island, but the attempt to advance across the North Bridge was frustrated by tenacious enemy resistance. At this point, as well as throughout the fighting of the first day, it became almost impossible to determine from which part of the impenetrable maze of buildings and pillboxes the Russians were firing. Moreover, subterranean passages evidently connected many buildings and casemates, since it became necessary to clear them several times a day; nevertheless, new enemy troops continued to swarm in the casemates. Besides, the Russians were quite skilful in camouflaging themselves, particularly when sniping from trees, which was made easy through a variety of proper camouflage clothing.

An assault-gun battery of another division drove past the fortress and offered its support for the attack across the North Bridge. One of the guns remained for a short while at the other side of the bridge but did not succeed in reaching the fortress church. The raging defensive fire made it impossible for the infantry to cross the bridge. Hand grenades and concentrated charges from the upper stories of the buildings hit the other assault guns severely, and since they were open on top, their crews suffered heavy casualties. Consequently, the attack across the North Bridge collapsed.

At the very start, the 130th Infantry Regiment had overrun the southern island and captured the undamaged bridges across the Muchawiecz River east of the fortress. The regiment also overcame the feeble

resistance enemy forces in the southern part of the city.

During the course of the afternoon it became necessary for the 133rd Infantry Regiment (the former corps reserve) to recapture the western island, on which large numbers of enemy forces had reappeared. Their attempt failed to push through to the fortress center from the western island.

During the course of the afternoon the division ordered to evacuate the northern island and the fortress center by nightfall, to change over to defensive positions on the outer ramparts, and to prevent the escape of any encircled Russians. The 135th Infantry Regiment was committed at the northern ramparts between the Bug River and the northern gate. The 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, had been freed by other elements in the city of Brest-Litovsk and took over the eastern part, while the 2nd Battalion, 135th Regiment assumed command of the western part. The northern island was evacuated with practically no interference. The remaining portions of the 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment had been encircled at the fortress church. They failed in their attempt to fight their way through to the western island.

The first day of the attack had not ended in the complete capture of the fortress, but since early morning the Russians were no longer able to obstruct our eastward advance on both sides of the fortress as well as across the railroad bridge and a temporary bridge which had been constructed near the South Bridge. The breakthrough had thus been successful.

The night of 22 June was comparatively quiet; major escapes were not attempted.

Throughout 23 June, sudden concentrations of fire and propaganda

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broadcasts by loudspeakers tried to induce the encircled Russians to surrender. The success was negligible. In late afternoon, a white flag appeared at the fortress center, but only a small number of Russians surrendered. The day was generally utilized to clear the terrain between the railroad and the northern ramparts of scattered enemy elements, particularly snipers in trees.

In the morning of 24 June, artillery hit the enemy again and around noon the division ordered the attack to be renewed by assault detachments, as per sketch No. 2. The 2nd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, advanced in its attack sector, at first up to the Muchawiecz River; pivoting eastward, and in spite of heavy flanking fire from the fortress center, they captured the casemates just north of the North Bridge. The 1st Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, took possession of the buildings and casemates west and southwest of the eastern fort but could not approach the eastern fort itself.

The 133rd Infantry Regiment marched past the eastern fort and advanced up to the Muchawiecz River. The eastern fort proper and one casemate at the banks of the Muchawiecz River remained in enemy hands. Other portions of the regiment advanced across the fortress bridge, where they captured several buildings and relieved the last remaining elements of the 3rd Battalion, 135th Infantry Regiment, in the fortress church.

During the following days, the 133rd Infantry Regiment, aided by the 81st Engineer Battalion, captured the entire center part of the fortress in grim battles. Almost every part of the old buildings with their very thick brick walls had to be prepared separately for assault by means of explosive charges and hand grenades. Hardly any Russian considered the idea of surrender; they fought bravely to the last man.

All elements committed on the northern island were subordinated to the commander of the 135th Infantry Regiment.

On 25 June, new assault detachments equipped with flame throwers were committed for attack on the eastern fort. The entrance to the horseshoe-shaped structure was bombarded with direct fire of antitank guns, infantry guns, and one light field howitzer. Nevertheless, the flame throwers did not get close enough in the level terrain for effective action, on account of the savage defensive fire of enemy infantry guns. Large numbers of 80 mm smoke-shell mortars were moved into position behind the northern ramparts, but their smoke screening of the eastern fort had no results. However, we captured the pillbox at the banks of the Muchawieoz River.

The next day, an 88-mm flak gun was emplaced for attack on the eastern fort, and in addition an assault gun was moved up close to the entrance and fired at the embrasures and the windows. Nevertheless, the tenacious resistance of the garrison did not diminish.

Throughout the morning of 27 June, a dive-bomber squadron attacked the eastern fort. To mark the target, white panels were placed on the outer edge of the moat. Although the bombs hit the mark well, they had but little effect on the solid brick vaults. The one available 1800 kilogram bomb hit only the end of the eastern side of the horseshoe; there still was no weakening of resistance.

During the afternoon further preparations were made for the next day. The plan called for rolling a large number of oil-filled barrels over the slope of the glacis in front of the three inside gates and windows, and igniting them. The aim was still the same as during the previous days: to wear down the garrison while avoiding casualties

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among our own forces. *)

Towards evening, right in the midst of these preparations, the eastern fort's garrison numbering 600 men surrendered. The entire fortress was now in German hands.

We had sustained considerable losses during the battles for the fortress. For instance, during the first three days the casualties of the 135th Infantry Regiment amounted to 250 killed (including two battalion commanders and several company commanders) and 260 wounded.

The division made up of Austrians who fought remarkably well, had fulfilled its mission in very heavy fighting. The breach for the advance of Panzergruppe Guderian was opened early on the first day; a few days later the entire fortress of Brest-Litovsk had been conquered and the division became again available.

*)

The author has placed a question mark next to this paragraph. The feasibility of the operation described is apparently open to question.
