

## **Manstein's Last Victory**

*How Manstein's plan saved the First Panzer Army from destruction during the encirclement at the Kamenets-Podolskiy Pocket, March 1944.*

### **Attack**

In February 1944, the 1st Panzer Army, commanded by Generaloberst Hans-Valentin Hube consisted of four corps, three of which were tank-heavy *Panzerkorps* (a force of roughly 20 divisions). Together with the attached army units, the First comprised over 200,000 men, and was the most powerful force of Field Marshall Erich von Manstein's Army Group South. Annihilation of the First Panzer Army would result in a collapse of the entire South-Eastern Front.

Soviet Marshal Georgi Zhukov realised this and began working to bring about the 1st's decline. Zhukov planned a joint attack, involving his own 1st and Ivan Koniev's 2nd Ukrainian Front. This massive force, over nine armies, was to attempt to outflank and encircle Hube's army, and then, in a repeat of the Battle of Stalingrad, reduce the enemy pocket (in German, *kessel*, meaning "cauldron") to nothing. The attacks were to take place on the extreme right and left of the German front.

Manstein was informed of heavy troop movements all across Hube's front, however with Adolf Hitler's refusal to allow strategic withdrawals, there was little he could do. The Soviet attacks began in early March, with Zhukov taking personal command of Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian front. On 22 March 1944, five Soviet tank corps penetrated the extreme left of Hube's line and poured south between the Zbruch and Seret rivers. The force was racing for the Dniester, in an attempt to outflank and surround Hube's army, and was followed by infantry who quickly began shoring up the corridor.

### **Encirclement**

Both Hube and Manstein realized the danger of encirclement. With the right flank on the Dniester, and the recent Soviet attacks on the left, the First Panzer Army was now in a salient. Manstein requested that the arm be pulled back to avoid encirclement, but Hitler refused, sticking to his "no retreat" order. In a matter of days, Zhukov and Konev's forces had crossed the Dniester and were racing to complete the encirclement. On 25 March 1944, the last supply corridor out of Hube's bridgehead was cut.

The entire 1st Panzer Army was now encircled in a pocket centered around the town of Kamenets-Podolsky. Meanwhile, Hube had ordered all service units south beyond the Dniester, away from the main Soviet attacks which were taking place to the east. Zhukov, seeing this movement to the south, decided that Hube was in full retreat and would soon attempt a breakout to the south. Zhukov stripped units from the encircling forces and sent them to the south side of the pocket. When Hube attempted to attack south, he would be met with a solid wall of Russian guns.

## **Hube's Pocket**

Hube now ordered the pocket to be reduced in size, shortening the lines and allowing an easier defense. Just before the Russians had completed the encirclement, Hube had requested the authority to conduct a mobile defense, a request which was quickly turned down. Once the encirclement was complete, however, things changed. The Soviets sent a terse ultimatum: surrender, or every German soldier in the pocket would be shown no quarter.

While all this was going on, Manstein had been arguing with Hitler for the trapped army to be allowed to attempt a breakout, and that a relief force should be sent to assist in the breakout. After one heated argument, Hitler gave in and ordered Hube to attempt a breakout. The decision for the direction of the breakout was difficult. Hube wanted to attempt to head south, over the Dneister and into Romania. Manstein realized that such a move would rob his army group of a panzer army which was desperately needed, as a long march would be required to move the army from Romania back into the line. A move west would allow the First Panzer Army to rejoin the front almost immediately. Manstein ordered Hube to break out to this.

Hube's army was to break out towards Tarnopol, where relief forces, from II SS Panzerkorps, were to meet them. From Kamenets-Podolsky to Tarnopol was a distance of over 150 miles (250 km), over several rivers and across muddy terrain. To add to this, the west was where Hube expected to meet the strongest enemy resistance. He divided his forces into two columns and prepared to head west.

## **Breakout**

On 27 March 1944, the lead elements of Hube's army moved west towards the Zbruch river. Simultaneously, the rearguard began a fighting withdrawal. 200,000 men were beginning to move. The attack went well. The northern column quickly captured three bridges over the Zbruch, while the southern column was battered by a Soviet counterattack which penetrated deep into the pocket, capturing Kamenets-Podolsky. The loss of this major rail and road hub meant that the escaping Germans had to detour around the city, slowing the movement to a crawl. A counterattack soon cut off the Russians in the city, and the breakout once more got underway. Moving by day and night, the kessel kept moving. Soon bridgeheads were formed over the Seret river.

While Hube's army escaped west, Zhukov and Konev continued to believe that the major breakout attempt would be to the south. He ordered the attacks on the north and eastern flanks of the pocket stepped up. These attacks achieved nothing, and many fell on positions which had been abandoned. Despite the attacks to the West, the Soviets kept pouring men to the southern flank of the kessel in anticipation of an attack that would never come.

On 30 March, Manstein was informed by OKH that he had been relieved of command. His many heated arguments with the Führer had not been forgotten.

## Freedom

Despite heavy snowfalls, low supplies and the fact that they were completely surrounded, the constant movement of Hube's army meant that *kessel fever* did not set in. The troops were still orderly and disciplined, and desertions were almost non-existent. A far cry from the panicked situation within the Stalingrad and Korsun encirclements.

By 5 April, the spearheads of both the northern and southern columns had reached the Strypa River, and on the 6th, near the town of Buczacz, they linked up with the spearheads of Hausser's SS Divisions. In over two weeks of heavy combat, during horrid weather and with few supplies, the First Panzer Army had managed to escape encirclement while suffering only moderate casualties. The quick thinking of Manstein and the operational planning and skill of Hube had resulted in the 200,000 man army escaping the fate of Stalingrad.

The Kamenets-Podolsky pocket is still studied in military academies today as an example of how to avoid annihilation when forces are trapped in a pocket.

## Order of Battle for First Panzer Army, March 1944

1. Panzerarmee (*Generaloberst Hans-Valentin Hube*)

1. Panzer Division (*Generalleutnant Werner Marcks*)

17. Panzer Division (*Generalleutnant Karl-Friedrich von der Meden*)

III. Panzerkorps (*General der Panzertruppe Hermann Breith*)

16. Panzer Division (*Generalmajor Hans-Ulrich Back*)

11. Panzer Division (*Generalleutnant Wend von Wietersheim*)

Kampfgruppe from 1. SS-Panzer-Division *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*

249th StuG Brigade

schwere Panzer Regiment Bäke (*Oberst Franz Bäke*)

schwere Panzer Abteilung 509 (*Oberleutnant Dr. König*)

LIX. Armeekorps (*General der Infanterie Kurt von der Chevallerie*)

96. Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Richard Wirtz*)

291. Infanterie Division (*Generalmajor Oskar Eckholt*)

6. Panzer Division (*Generalleutnant Walter Denkert*)

19. Panzer Division (*Generalleutnant Hans Källner*)

2. SS Panzer Division *Das Reich* - Kampfgruppe (*SS-Sturmbannführer Otto Weidinger*)

StuG Brigade Nr. 276

StuG Brigade Nr. 280

616. Panzerjäger Abteilung

88.Panzerjäger Abteilung

509.Panzerjäger Abteilung

XXIV. Panzerkorps (*General der Panzertruppen Walther Nehring*)

25.Panzer Division(remnants) (*Generalleutnant Hans Tröger*)

20.Panzergrenadier Division (*General der Panzertruppen Georg Jauer*)

168.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Werner Schmidt-Hammer*)

208.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Hans Pieckenbrock*)

371.Infanterie Division (*General der Infanterie Hermann Niehoff*)

StuG Brigade Nr.300

731.Panzerjäger Abteilung

Motorisierte Abteilung Nr.473

XXXXVI. Panzerkorps (*General der Infanterie Friedrich Schulz*)

1.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Ernst-August von Krosigk*)

82.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Walter Heyne*)

75.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Helmuth Beukemann*)

254.Infanterie Division (*Generalleutnant Alfred Thielmann*)

101.Jäger Division, (*General der Gebirgstruppen Emil Vogel*)

18.Artillerie Division (*General der Artillerie Karl Thoholte*)

StuG Bataillon Nr.300

## **Grenadierkompanie**

Ned Merrick

FoW Tourney, Louisville, KY, Jan 19<sup>th</sup> 2008

### **371<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division- *General der Infanterie Hermann Niehoff***

#### **1iC Hauptmann Franz Uber, 2iC Oberleutnant Hans Kedel**

**Grenadier HQ:** Cmd/'SMG/Panzerfaust, 2ic/SMG/Panzerfaust 60

#### **Leutnant Fritz Von Mac**

**Grenadier Plt:** Cmd Rifle/MG/Panzerfaust team, 6 Rifle/MG teams 165

#### **Leutnant Leopold Stolnitz**

**Grenadier Plt:** Cmd Rifle/MG/Panzerfaust team, 6 Rifle/MG teams 165

#### **Leutnant Gerig Ludow**

**Pioneer Plt:** Cmd/Rifle/Pzknck team, 6 Pioneer Rifle teams 160  
*(substitute up to 2 Flamethrower Teams)*

#### **StuG Brigade Nr. 300**

**Tank Plt:** 4 Stug IIIG 380

**Assault Gun Plt:** 3 Stug IIIG 285

#### **Werfer-Abteilungen**

**Rocket Launcher Plt:** Cmd/SMG team, Obs/rifle, 3x15cm NW41 launchers, 130

#### **I./Sch.G 1**

**Air Support:** Hs 129B (Limited, 5 dice) 155

Total: 1500

