

Ned Merrick - Manstein's Last Victory

How Manstein's plan saved the First Panzer Army from destruction during the encirclement at the Kamenets-Poldolskiy 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 in an attempt to outflank and encircle Hube's army'.

Encirclement

Both Hube and Manstein realised 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.

Hube's Pocket

Hube now ordered the pocket to be reduced in size, shortening the lines and allowing an easier defence. 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.. Hube wanted to attempt to head south, over the Dneister and into Romania. Manstein realised that such a move would rob his army group of a panzer army which was desperately needed. 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.

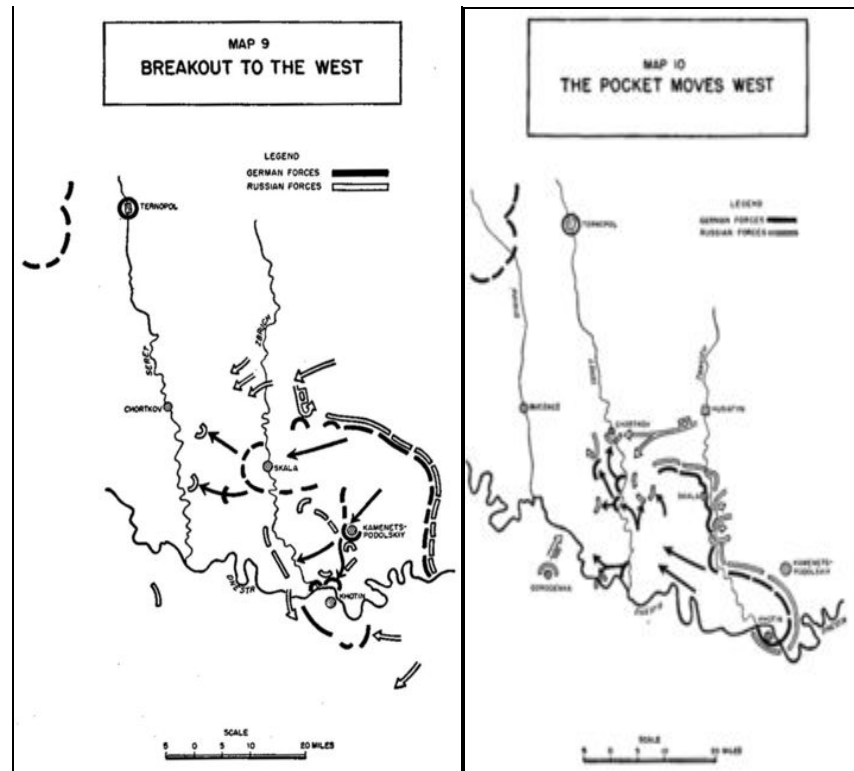
Breakout

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 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.

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.

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. 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.

Ned Merrick
Wolfskrieg 2009
Fortress Eurpoe

Stug Brigade 300

1iC Hauptmann Franz Uber, 2iC Oberleutnant Hans Kedel 2 X Stug III G	190
1. Batterie Leutnant Fritz Von Mac 4 X Stug III G	380
2. Batterie Leutnant Leopold Stolnitz 3 X Stug III G	285
2. Kompanie/Pz. Afkl. Abt. 4 Leutnant Gerig Ludow 3 X Panzer II L	145
Werfer-Abteilungen Cmd/SMG team, field car, Obs/rifle, kubel, 3x15cm NW41 launchers, 3 SdKfz11 halftracks	125
Hvy Tank Hunter Plt 2 Jagdpanther	470
I./Sch.G 1 Hs 129B (Limited, 5 dice)	155
Total	1750



Jagdpanther



Stug III G