

SURVIVORS OF STALINGRAD

EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS FROM
THE SIXTH ARMY, 1942–43

EDITED BY
REINHOLD BUSCH

FOREWORD BY
ROGER MOORHOUSE

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FOREWORD

by Roger Moorhouse

The battle for Stalingrad still carries enormous resonance. Like ‘Kursk’ or ‘Anzio’, the name alone conveys its meaning. One of the bloodiest battles in history, consuming over a million lives at a conservative estimate, it was also one of the most important, signalling a genuine watershed in the conflict: what Churchill called a ‘climacteric’.

Unusually, Stalingrad’s significance was clearly evident even at the time. For the Soviets its defence was as much symbolic as strategic. As well as controlling the approaches to the oil-rich Caucasus and sitting on the western bank of the mighty Volga river, one of Russia’s most formidable natural obstacles, it was the city that bore Stalin’s name. For propaganda reasons alone, therefore, its surrender was unthinkable.

Militarily, too, the battle for Stalingrad was profoundly significant. Where the Red Army had struggled to come to terms with the German doctrine of Blitzkrieg over the previous two summers, at Stalingrad it launched an audacious Blitzkrieg of its own, sending armoured columns deep into the Axis rear, hitting at the more lightly defended flanks of the salient – where the Italians, Hungarians and Romanians held the line – and cutting off the German Sixth Army in a shrinking pocket to the west of the city, effectively besieging the besiegers. It was an astonishing reversal, finally and conclusively demonstrating the truth of Stalin’s optimistic assertion from July 1941 that no army was invincible. After this success, the Wehrmacht’s spell was broken and the Red Army’s generals hardly looked back. To paraphrase one of Churchill’s neatest aphorisms: before Stalingrad the Red Army scarcely had a victory, after Stalingrad it scarcely had a defeat.

The Germans, too, were well aware of Stalingrad’s importance. The city lay on the high-water mark of Axis expansion and its loss heralded an ebb-tide that would sweep Soviet forces, with few interruptions, all the way to Berlin. The associated loss of the Caucasus was also a grievous blow, denying Hitler access to the vital Soviet oil-fields of Baku, Maikop and Grozny, without

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which, he had earlier confessed, he would be unable to continue his war.¹ Stalingrad, therefore, was highly significant both as a strategic and a military turning point in the wider history of the Second World War.

Far from being concealed from the German people, as is so often assumed, or wished away with a propagandist's flourish, the defeat at Stalingrad was acknowledged for the catastrophe to Hitler's ambitions that it was. The news was announced on German radio to the accompaniment of the sombre *adagio* to Bruckner's Seventh Symphony, and three days of official mourning followed. Two weeks later, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels would give his response to the crisis. In his famed 'Total War' speech in Berlin, he cited the defeat at Stalingrad as a wake-up call to the German people; opening their eyes to the 'true nature' of the war against the Bolsheviks, and to their 'historic duty' to defend Western civilization. It was a duty whose importance would brook no half-measures, no compromises; instead, he declared, 'total war' was the demand of the hour.² In the aftermath, Nazi Germany would belatedly adopt a war economy, sacrificing most of the remaining civilian comforts for a strict prioritisation of the war effort. Too little, it would prove, too late.

Yet, aside from the propaganda and the posturing, Stalingrad's profoundest consequences were human. The true death toll of the battle – military and civilian, Soviet and German – will never be known for sure; such was the slaughter that the proper retrieval, identification and burial of the dead was simply impossible. In total, it has been suggested that as many as two million people died in the battle. In addition, for the 90,000 or so Axis soldiers taken captive by the Soviets, their torments were not yet at an end. Condemned to punitive hard labour in the infamous camps of the Gulag, few would survive. Barely 6 per cent of them would ever see their homelands again.

All sides suffered, of course, but this book concentrates our attention specifically on the experiences of German soldiers. Its editor, Reinhold Busch, has spent many years collecting, collating and evaluating first-hand accounts of the battle, primarily with an interest in the history of the medical units involved. The accounts assembled here are a by-product of that process, the myriad eyewitness testimonies of German soldiers of all ranks, all faiths and all political affiliations – a cross-section of German fighting men. More than any other volume, perhaps, this book gives a voice

1. Quoted in Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London, 2000), p. 514.

2. Quoted in Roger Moorhouse, *Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital, 1939–1945* (London, 2010), p. 338.

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to the German soldiers of Stalingrad: it tells their grim story of the battle, in their own words.

There is much here to satisfy the enthusiast for the tactics or technology of the Second World War. At times, indeed, it is rather like eavesdropping on a convention of Stalingrad veterans as they swap stories, reminisce and remember their comrades that did not make it home. It is certainly not a book for the faint-hearted or the squeamish, therefore. It can be breathless stuff, recreating the confused frenzy of military action by dropping the reader into a narrative often with little by way of context or introduction. Some of the accounts hold little back, relating searing, terrifying episodes of combat; the urban 'Rattenkrieg' or 'Rat War', which some veterans described as being 'worse than hell'. It is all here; from the hideous cacophony of the Katyusha rockets – the infamous 'Stalin Organ' – to the visceral horror of facing an onrushing T-34 without anti-tank weapons; from the unseen death at a sniper's hand to the brutal reality of hand-to-hand fighting.

In the lull between battles, there were other tribulations. The extreme cold took a heavy toll that winter. In temperatures as low as -30°C and lacking adequate winter clothing, German soldiers were at the very least prey to frostbite. Many simply froze to death, often prone ready for action, or curled up, showing the burrowing impulse that is distinctive of hypothermia. For many of them, just falling asleep constituted a death sentence. The bodies would be stacked en masse for burial, as not even a makeshift grave could be hewn from the frozen earth.

The shortage of food was another constant, as the already measly ration allocation dwindled to nothing by the final days of the siege. Once the stores and iron rations had been exhausted, the spoiled remnants had been consumed, and the horses that had carried the army eastwards had been slaughtered and eaten, all that was left was gnawing hunger, made all the more insistent by the Soviet tactic of shouting across the frontlines offering hot soup and bread as a seductive inducement to defect.

As if all that were not enough, all of the men, it seems, suffered infestations of lice, many also had scabies, diphtheria, jaundice, dysentery, or the mysterious Volhynia fever. Wounded men, too, were ubiquitous, from those silently awaiting death to those still fighting on the frontline – all of them suffering from the inadequate medical care that was available. Even among those that survived Stalingrad, few emerged without a scratch. One soldier, who was one of the last to escape the siege, came home with over forty wounds; his family were told to prepare for the worst.

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This is a truly remarkable book. Informative and enlightening, it can be by turns horrifying and uplifting, showcasing not only man's inhumanity to his fellow man, but also the indomitability of the human spirit. There are vignettes here that will stay with you for a long time. The young infantryman, for instance, eager for combat, who pushed his way to the front of the queue to be transported to Stalingrad, only to rue his keenness when he realized that he had hastened into a murderous trap. Or the NCO rescued unconscious from a pile of the dead and dying because his comrades spotted his familiar regimental collar tabs. Or the gravely injured soldier who is given a blood transfusion, and to his astonishment sees that the donor is his Russian doctor.

This book does not sentimentalize or over-dramatize events, rather it gives readers a genuine sense of the horrors, the sights and the smells of the battle for Stalingrad; the stacked piles of the dead, the distant rattle of the T-34 and the stench of putrefaction. It can be harrowing, certainly, but that should in no way be construed as a criticism; it is more accurately a tribute to the skills of the editor in bringing together such a compelling selection of quite excellent first-hand accounts of one of the Second World War's most climactic military confrontations.

This is a truly valuable addition to the available English-language literature on the Battle for Stalingrad. And, as such, it is a book that deserves to be read by anyone with an interest in the war on the Eastern Front, or indeed in the Second World War in general – albeit with the tiny caveat that it might induce the occasional bad dream.

Roger Moorhouse, 2014

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Seventy years after the German Sixth Army surrendered at Stalingrad, this highly dramatic event has lost none of its allure. The fascination which the battle for the city has exercised for decades, and continues to exercise, on people of all continents – be they historians, military men, politicians or philosophers – is astounding. To take one example, one needs only to read the lively internet discussions in various forums, in which even young people talk about details of the battle and look for the biographies of those involved. Tens of thousands of German soldiers are still missing: their families have no closure. New graves are found daily in the tortured ground of the former encirclement. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, German veterans of Stalingrad or their relatives regularly make the journey to Volgograd, as the city is now called, to visit the new military cemetery at Rossoshka or to meet Russian veterans. The list of books on the subject is longer with every passing year.

Since 2003 I have been working on a series of books with the title *History of Medicine – The Surgeons of Stalingrad* of which, to date, seven volumes have appeared in German and the series is continuing. It has been my purpose to publish the memoirs of former members of the Sixth Army medical units and to reconstruct the story of the field hospitals and main dressing stations at Stalingrad. This subject has been almost totally neglected in history even though by the end of January 1943 the majority of the men within the encirclement were unfit through frostbite, wounds or illness, and froze or starved to death, or vegetated with other units, in cellars, emergency hospitals and dressing stations.

In my research for previously unpublished material there has come into my hands almost as a by-product well over a hundred interviews, manuscripts, diaries and privately published books together with articles published in magazines or Stalingrad veterans' circulars which were only available to a limited readership and which I evaluated for my history of the medical units. Because I considered the greater part of it suitable for a book, I spoke to Ares

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Verlag of Graz, Austria and I am grateful to its publishing director, Herr Dvorak-Stocker, for agreeing to publish my collection of eyewitness reports. I based these reports on the following criteria: preference was given to personal experiences, neither too long nor too short, and which in particular did not dwell on the military situation. No accounts by German medical corps personnel are included, since these are the foundation for my book *The Surgeons of Stalingrad*. I was also anxious to include as wide a range of ranks as possible, from the private soldier to general, and to look for accounts which reflect the drama of Stalingrad in a particularly impressive manner. Where they occur, the italicized potted biographies which provide the lead-in and epilogue to each report, and in most cases the title, were provided by myself as editor.

The book embraces essays by soldiers who were either captured at the surrender and returned home after the war, or did not experience the end of the battle by reason of having been transported out previously sick or wounded, and the pilots or aircrew who flew into the encirclement. For those readers who are not familiar with the events at Stalingrad I have prepared a short preface omitting any assessment of motivation and especially moral judgement. Many of the authors in this book have adopted this or that stance, from which the reader himself can draw his own picture.

PREFACE

After the setback at the gates of Moscow in the winter of 1941, Hitler decided against a major offensive in the area of Army Group Centre and turned his military planning to operations in the southern sector. Here the Soviets had suffered a serious defeat at Kharkov in May 1942, and this strengthened the prospects for more military victories.

Against the advice of his generals, Hitler wanted to achieve two objectives at the same time: to close down river traffic at Stalingrad on the Volga and with it the transport of strategic war materials from central Asia and the Caucasus; and to capture the Caucasian oilfields. To extend the frontline to Stalingrad meant having a flank 700 kilometres long. Fifty divisions would be required to protect it, not to mention the difficulties of keeping them supplied. The entire operation could only succeed if the Soviet fronts were all to be collapsed completely, that is to say, if the Red Army was prepared to risk everything on preventing it. Instead, their units fell back into the hinterland. When the spearhead of XIV Panzer Corps approached the city and reached the Volga between 19 August and 2 September 1942, Soviet troops were holding out in the ruins along a stretch of the river from where they could not be expelled. In the months which followed, the German units sent to eject them bled out in the waves of attacks made to clear the ruins of houses and factories of Soviet forces. During this time the city was reduced to rubble and ashes.

On 19 November the Soviets began a major offensive from north and south against the weak flanks, which were protected by inadequately-equipped Romanian, Italian and Hungarian forces. Within only four days the spearheads of the two Soviet armies met at Kalatch east of the Don and thus encircled the Sixth Army. This also threatened to cut off Fourth Panzer Army, well forward in the Caucasus. Strategically, now was the time to swiftly withdraw the twenty-two German and two Romanian divisions while it was still possible, or to order the break-out from the Stalingrad Pocket in order to shorten the front. The Commander-in-Chief, Sixth Army, General Friedrich

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Paulus,¹ therefore telexed Hitler with a request for freedom of manoeuvre. All Hitler's military advisers were convinced that it would be impossible to supply the 280,000 men in the encirclement from the air. Thus it was understood at Sixth Army that preparations should be made accordingly when, on the morning of 24 November – against the advice of his experts – Göring boasted that the Luftwaffe could do it. This fell in with what Hitler wanted, to hold the city at all costs, leaving Paulus appalled and his commanders resigned. Only General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach² rebelled and in a memorandum of 25 November called for an immediate withdrawal. Paulus did not have the courage to oppose a Führer-order, and, in his eyes, such an act of disobedience threatened to destroy all authority. Seydlitz-Kurzbach gave in.

Nevertheless on 12 December 1942 Operation 'Wintergewitter' ('Winter Thunderstorm') began. This was an attempt to break out of the encirclement with insufficient forces. Seven days later the relief divisions were only 50 kilometres from the south-western edge of the Pocket when the operation came to a halt in the face of increasing Soviet counter-attacks. Thus another round of preparations to break out was brought to a standstill. By then, however, their chances of success had become doubtful: the first men had starved to death. At this late stage it was at last clear that there would be no relief and the fate of those in the Stalingrad Pocket was sealed, especially since the main German frontline was falling ever farther back from Stalingrad and not even 10 per cent of the supplies required by Sixth Army were arriving.

1. Friedrich Paulus (b. Breitenau-Gershagen, 23 September 1890, d. Dresden. 1 February 1957). Joined Army as ensign 1910: 1911 Lieutenant, 1918 Captain. End of 1920s Staff, 5th Division, Stuttgart, and Staff Training Leader. 1938 Chief of General Staff XVI Army Corps, 1939 Chief of General Staff, Army Group 4, Leipzig (later renamed Sixth Army). 1940 Lieutenant-General General-QM I and Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff: worked on the concept of Operation 'Barbarossa'. 5 January 1942 General, C-in-C Sixth Army: 31 January 1943 Field-Marshal. After the attempt on Hitler's life entered BdO (Bund deutscher Offiziere), witness at Nuremberg. 17 November 1953 released from Soviet captivity, lived out his retirement in Dresden.

2. Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach (b. 22 August 1888 Hamburg, d. 28 April 1976 Bremen). 1908 entered Army, WWI 1917 Captain, 1930 Major, 1936 Colonel, 1941 Lieutenant-General. 1 June 1942 General of Artillery, 4 May 1942 Commanding-General LI Army Corps. 11 September 1943–3 November 1945 in Soviet captivity president of BdO: 8 July 1950 sentenced to death for alleged war crimes, commuted to 25 years' imprisonment, 6 October 1955 released from Soviet captivity.

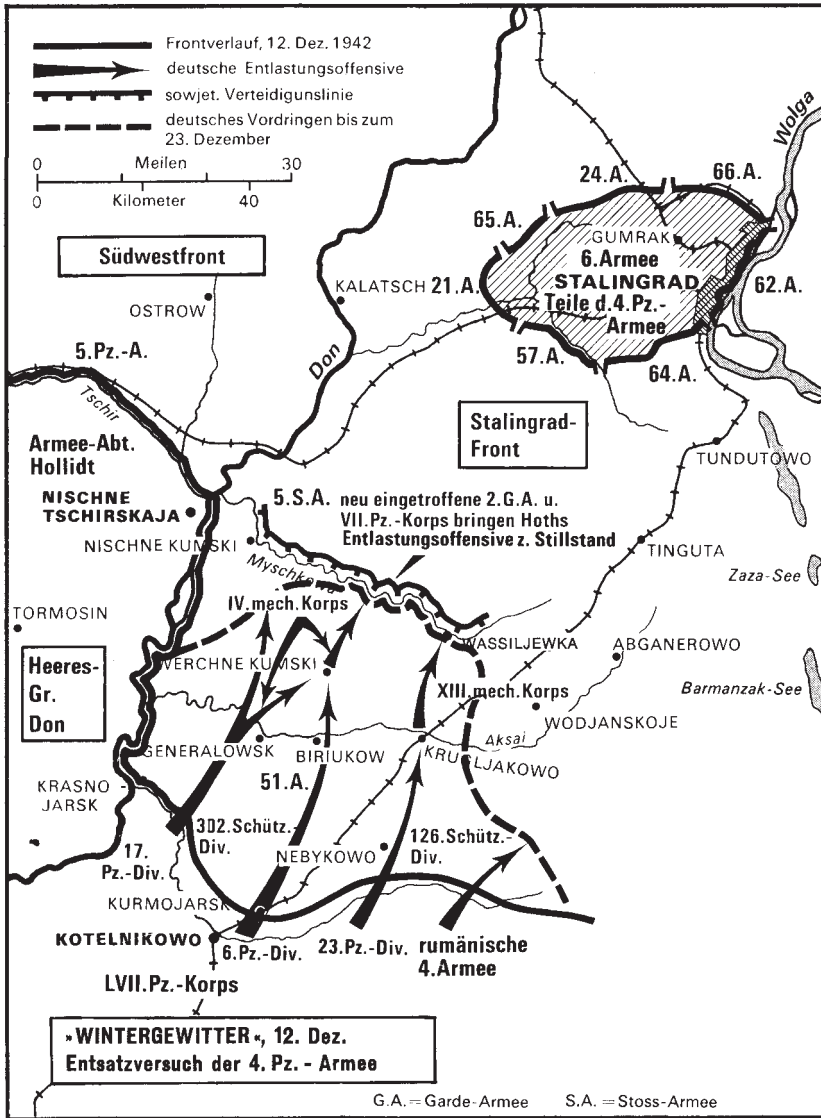
PREFACE

From this point on the objective was to organize the defence within the Pocket and tie down as many Soviet forces at Stalingrad as possible. At the beginning of December 1942, the Soviets launched massive attacks at the western perimeter of the Pocket and the so-called Northern Boundary: the Germans held both positions but with heavy casualties. An ultimatum to capitulate was declined by the recently promoted General Paulus: this was followed on 10 January 1943 by a major Soviet offensive against the Pocket, now being slowly squeezed from west to east. With grim determination the last defensive forces mobilized into 'fortress battalions' formed from dispersed units and the men from the rearward services.

The loss of the last airfield, Stalingradski, in the western suburbs of the city on 23 January signalled that the last hope of salvation was gone. The remnants of Sixth Army made a more or less hasty retreat into the ruins of the city. On 26 January Paulus and his Staff occupied a cellar of the Univermag department store on Red Square. The remnants of the 297th Infantry Division were the first to lay down their weapons and accept captivity. Despite the desperate situation, diminishing ammunition and provisions, and no prospect of relief, Hitler ordered those in the encirclement at Stalingrad to fight to the last round. Seydlitz-Kurzbach ordered his corps to fire off what was left of their ammunition and cease fighting, at which he was relieved of command and consideration given to placing him under arrest. On 27 January the Pocket was divided into two halves, north and south, which continued the struggle independent of each other.

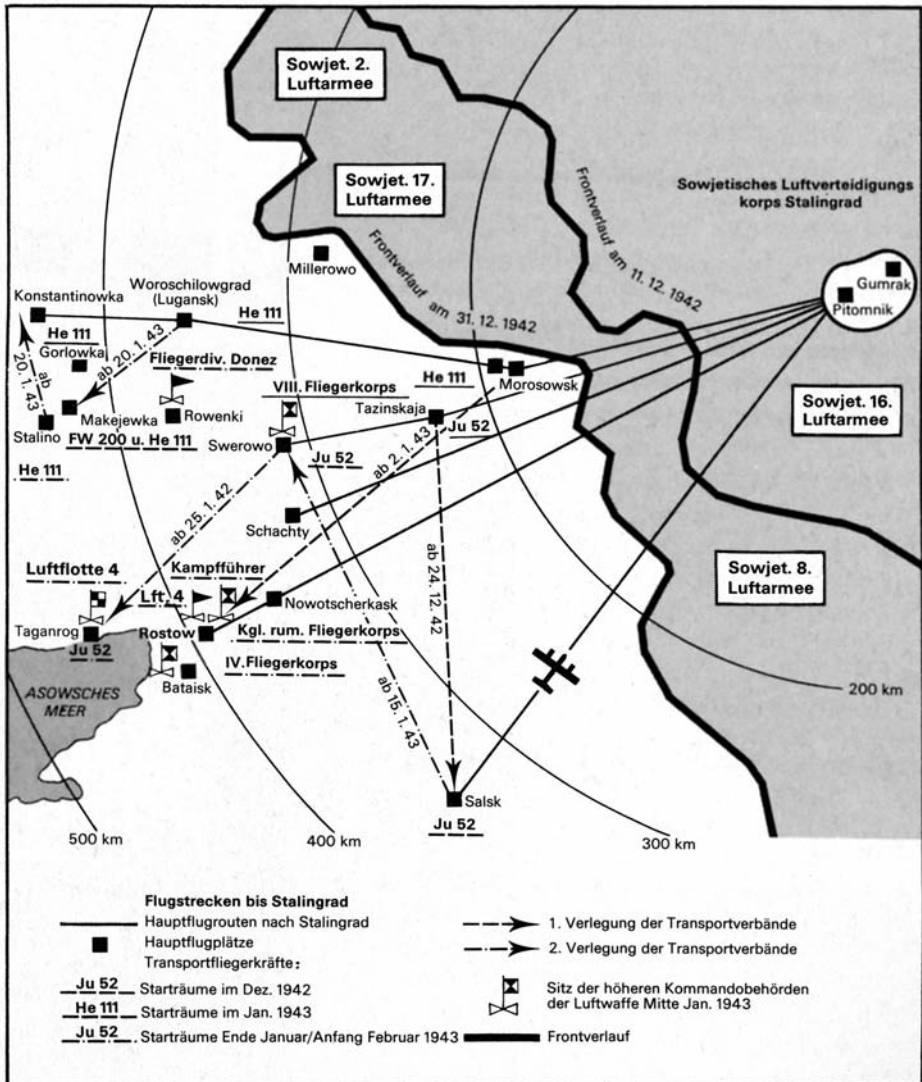
On 31 January, Paulus, newly promoted the previous day to the rank of field-marshal, led his Staff and headquarters escort 'personally' into captivity without signing a formal instrument of capitulation. He informed the Soviets that he would not order the northern Pocket to surrender, and so the latter fought on until 2 February. About 90,000 mostly wounded, sick and half-starved soldiers, many with frostbite, went into captivity: around 140,000 had fallen, and approximately 35,000 were flown out. Most of the prisoners died on forced marches across Russia or in the death camps around Stalingrad: only about 6,000 lived to see their Homeland again.

MAPS

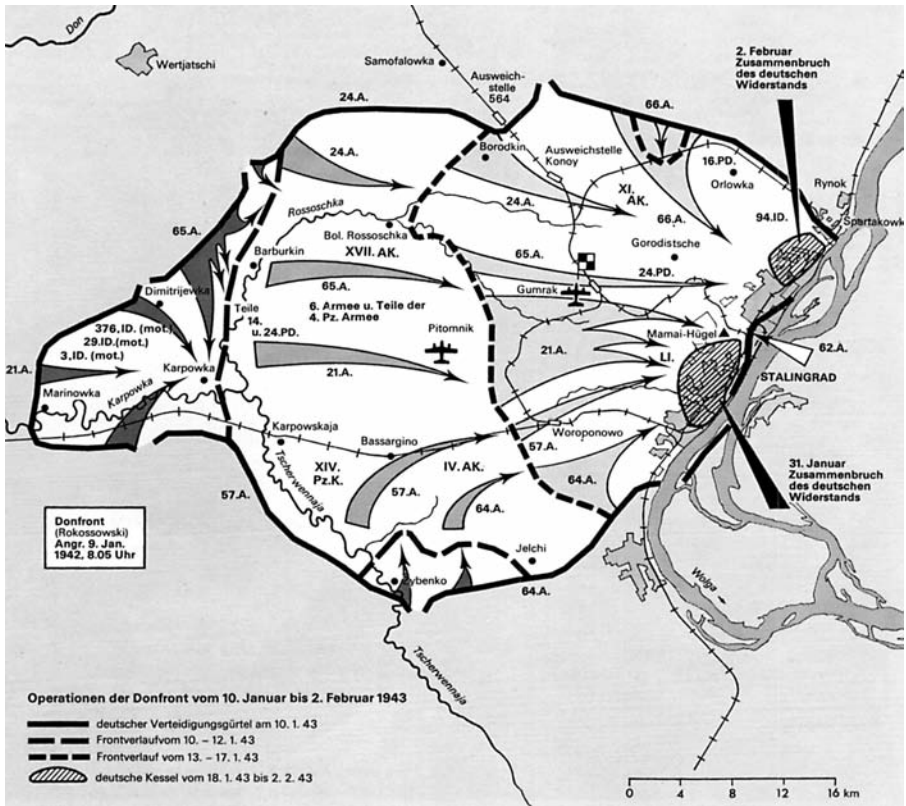


Map 1: 'Operation *Wintergewitter*, 12 December, Relief Attempt by 4. Pz. Armee'. The relief attempt by Army Group Hoth gave hope of rescue briefly, but was condemned to failure by the numerical superiority of the Soviets. (See Chapter 3). Key, top left: Front line, 12 December 1942; German relief offensive; Soviet defensive line; German advance up to 23 December.

MAPS

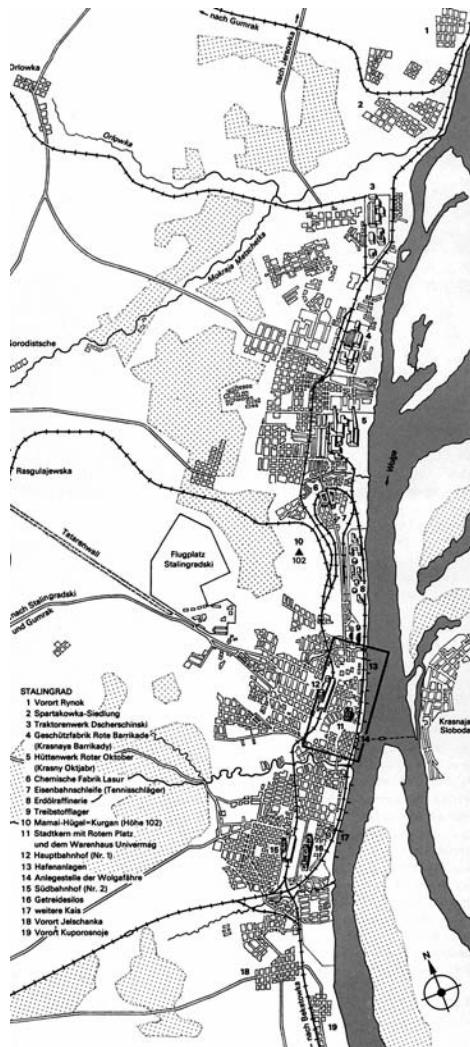


Map 2: Flight paths to Stalingrad. Key, bottom left: Main flight routes to Stalingrad/Main airfields/Transport aircraft; Ju 52 take-off areas in December 1942; He 111 take-off areas in January 1943; Ju 52 take-off areas end of January/beginning February 1943. Bottom right: arrows showing transfer of transport groups; base of the Luftwaffe Higher Command authorities, mid-January 1943; route of main front line.



Map 3: The situation in the Stalingrad Pocket between 10 January 1943 and the final capitulation on 2 February 1943.

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Map 4: Map of the Stalingrad inner city marked with principal combat locations. Key: 1. Rynok suburb. 2. Spartakowka settlement. 3. Dshershinski tractor works. 4. Red Barricade ordnance factory. 5. Red October metal works. 6. Lasur chemical factory. 7. Railway loop ('Tennis Racquet'). 8. Oil refinery. 9. Fuel dump. 10. Hill 102. 11. City centre with Red Square and Univermag department store. 12. Main railway station (No.1). 13. Port installations. 14. Mooring quay for Volga ferries. 15. South railway station (No.2). 16. Grain silos. 17. Other quays. 18. Yelshanka suburb. 19. Kuporosnoye suburb.

1. GOTTFRIED VON BISMARCK:

*I Flew into the Pocket*¹

Gottfried von Bismarck was born on 8 January 1921. After obtaining his school-leaving certificate in 1939 he performed his compulsory RAD labour service, and during the Polish campaign was a soldier training in civil engineering. From October 1939 he did his basic military training with the 9th Infantry Regiment at Potsdam before being drafted to the 176th Regiment in the 76th Infantry Division. After the French campaign he attended the War Academy and obtained his commission in January 1941. Afterwards he served with a training unit in Romania, and the Russian Front.

... That meant for us infantrymen a march on foot of about 950 kilometres through dust, or after the slightest rainfall, deep mud, weighed down with all our battle gear: 70 kilometres daily!

Many of us were able to sleep while marching, taking a position in the middle of the column and being pushed in the right direction on the bends. I could even sleep running. Because as platoon commander I had to lead from the front I used to hold the tail of the company commander's horse to remain on course.

The Russians offered heavy resistance only at the river crossings. Thus we reached the Donets basin rapidly – too rapidly – and were surprised there by the early onset of winter, stifling our advance. In that Russian winter of 1941 bitter defensive fighting alternated with periods of relative quiet. Both were hard to endure, for unlike the Russians we had no winter clothing, and temperatures could fall to -30°C. Casualties due to frostbite were substantial, and so those who survived this winter were awarded a medal which we called 'The Order of the Frozen Meat'.²

1. Privately printed in connection with the presentation of documentation by the Military-Historical Institute entitled *Stalingrad. Ereignis – Wirkung – Symbol*. With the kind permission of Frau Ehrengard von Bismarck, Aachen.

2. This was the 'Ostmedaille' awarded for the 'Winter Battle in the East, 1941/42'.

In the spring of 1942 we left our winter positions and after great long marches and some bitter fighting to break out of encircling movements we reached the Don. On 21 August our 178th Regiment broke through the northern bridgehead over the Don at Wertyatshi, and then our panzers – despite the stiffest Russian resistance – got through to the Volga north of Stalingrad in a few days.

In September, my 76th Division had settled in the so-called Northern Boundary between the Don and Volga in steppe country with deep gorges, and dug in laboriously. A double-trench system enabled us to reach all command positions from the bunkers. In front of our lines we laid six rows of minefields and barbed wire, and dug in behind them immobilized Russian T-34s with working turrets for defence against tanks. We had the feeling: here we are safe, here the Russians cannot touch us.

In Stalingrad itself the fighting began man to man and house to house for every square metre – a struggle on the western banks of the Volga, where the Russians had dug in and were clinging to a slope 300 metres wide which fell steeply down to the river. Because the area being fought for was so narrow there was no question of using heavy weapons here. In the end we never took this strip because we never managed to prevent the Russians keeping it supplied – and it was a struggle which often involved grotesque situations. Thus once I visited a company commander I had befriended in whose sector there was a house where the Germans were in the cellar and first floor and the Russians on the ground floor. Fearing the approach of winter nobody wanted to demolish the house, but nobody wanted to give up the positions held. During the day there would be bitter fighting, but with humane features. Thus at night there was tacit agreement that a kind of truce would exist so that the wounded could be brought out and the fighting men supplied with rations.

A serious problem for us as a horse-drawn unit was how to accommodate the horses out of the cold and provide their fodder. In the bald, barren steppe – no trees, no bushes – this was not possible, even the wood to construct our underground bunkers had to be procured from hundreds of kilometres away on the other side of the Don. Our horses had to be sent back over the river, except for the small number needed for the supply carts. The catastrophic outcome of this measure was that later when we were building up the Pocket and had to pull in the flanks we lost nearly all our heavy guns because we could not move them without the horses.

In November 1942 in our sector on the Stalingrad flank it was relatively

quiet, and the Army lifted the ban on furloughs. So now there was leave! We drew lots and I got Christmas, but then an elderly reserve officer came and asked me to change with him. He had almost immediate leave, but had just received news that his daughter was getting married at Christmas. I was quite prepared to change, as a practical soldier I said to myself, 'You have what you have. Who knows if this leave-taking will last until Christmas or whether you will be still alive to see it? Therefore – OK, and off home!' Two days later, on 15 November I sat in the leave train at Kalatch, last station on the Stalingrad line: the railway bridge over the Don was still down. On 19 November, only four days later, the Russians launched their major offensive, and on 22nd they bottled up the Sixth Army. I had a wonderful, peaceful four weeks of leave on our estate. It was the last time that I knew my Pomeranian home.

Because the press and radio were silent on the situation in Stalingrad, neither I nor the lower military command centres, and certainly not the German people, had any hint of the catastrophe that was building there. Had my reserve Battalion at Potsdam, which I visited before I left for the front, even heard it rumoured about the true situation, they would definitely have tried to hold me back, but they had no reason to do so because of the lack of information. Therefore when my leave ended on 14 December I took the eastbound train from Berlin.

When the train stopped at Kharkov, the order came: 'Officers and men of the Sixth Army alight! Officers to the Führer-reserve!' We had no hint of what that meant, but word gradually got around that 'something was not right' at Stalingrad. We accepted it with the stoic calm of the veteran soldier: that the Sixth Army could be encircled was unimaginable! After a few days at Kharkov we moved to the Führer-reserve at Rostov on the Don, where rumours of a Pocket at Stalingrad were rife. I was given orders to act as liaison officer with the Romanian Army. Together with about forty other officers with orders to report to the most far-flung command centres, we were sent off by train from Rostov to the east; I had to find the Romanian Army. I was unable to find out exactly where their Army Staff was located. As I discovered later, at this point in time it no longer existed, not to mention Romanian forces! All Romanians – except for those trapped in the Pocket – had fled west in panic leaving all their weapons and equipment behind.

At Tshir, about 280 kilometres from Stalingrad, we received orders that the men aboard this present train were to form a battlegroup to defend the town. The ratio of men to officers in this battlegroup was about 6:1; the officers – all made platoon commanders irrespective of their rank – carried the heaviest

weapons we had, namely our pistols. The NCOs and men had only their sidearms. The men were mainly members of the Sixth Army supply units: bakers, ostlers, drivers; therefore soldiers without any combat experience, which made the whole exercise senseless. That was on 23 December.

Next day also we camped in the, thanks be to God, heated train at the station platform because nothing else was available and from there we defended Tshir. No enemy showed up. We had no inkling of the overall military situation, but it was clear to us that not even here, 280 kilometres this side of Stalingrad, was there a functional defensive front. We got confirmation of this from an ambulance train heading westwards on the neighbouring track. It was 24 December – Christmas Eve – and none of us had thought of it! These were the last wounded flown out of the Pocket to Morosovskaya and loaded in goods wagons there, just a few hours before the Russians captured the airfield.

When I saw the haggard and wounded, fed only the barest essentials, on the straw in the goods wagons I suddenly remembered my Christmas tree, which my mother had given me to celebrate Christmas on the steppe and which I had brought along with me in a large sack, contrary to all common sense. It was cold with a biting frost but no wind, and so we quickly set up the Christmas tree on the station platform and lit candles on it. Soldiers and the walking wounded gathered around it at first hesitantly, others opened the doors of the goods wagons. Some began to softly hum ‘Silent Night, Holy Night’, others joined in. It was a rough-hewn, very moving choir. Afterwards it fell quiet, very quiet. We were all alone with our thoughts, far, far from here. Then someone started up with another well-known German carol and all joined in almost fervently. Despite everything, hope gleamed eternal. Seldom before had a Christmas evening and the Christian message moved me so deeply and filled me with so much confidence as on that night.

Over the next few days we played at soldiers, so to speak, simply to sort out who was who. I recall two reconnaissance patrols, four officers in an Opel P4 in an ice-bound street. Armament: four pistols. The other was in a locomotive with a Russian driver, Russian fireman and three officers scouting the railway line ahead to the east. This was also totally ridiculous and not a little dangerous because the Russians used to fly over by night in their ‘sewing machine’, a slow fighter-bomber. We always had two tanker wagons full of fuel on these runs.

On 30 December I got new orders: I was to return to Army Group Don at Novotsherkassk and report to the registry which had received a request from

my division in the Pocket, where practically all officers of the original permanent company were casualties. After the turbulent to-and-fro of recent days I was happy to return to my own unit even if it was encircled for the moment. The idea that the situation could become critical or even hopeless did not occur to me because I assumed that officers were continually being flown in.

My flight was scheduled for the next day. Looking through the composition of the Staff I noticed that a cousin of my sister-in-law, Alexander Stahlberg,³ whom I knew well, was personal adjutant to Manstein. I rang him and he said, 'Come at once, the Field-Marshal is having his midday nap.' We had just started our happy family chat when suddenly – unexpectedly early – Manstein appeared. I reported myself: he asked who I was and where I was bound. To my reply, 'From the so-called defensive front on the way to Stalingrad' he cut in: 'What do you mean by "so-called" defensive front?' To my rather forward response, 'Do you wish to know exactly, Herr Field-Marshal?' he ordered me to take supper with him and his Staff to make my report. It was the only time that a mere second lieutenant had been invited to dine within this noble circle. Manstein mentions this evening in his book *Verlorene Siege* as does Stahlberg in *Die verdamnte Pflicht*. Stahlberg wrote that it was my 'Prussian devotion to duty' which motivated me to return to the Pocket. That sounds good, but is untrue. I was a soldier, had my orders and had to carry them out.

Next morning I was taken to the airfield and shown an He 111 bomber. The bomb-bays were crammed with bread and ammunition and the wings full of fuel for the vehicles in the Pocket. The airfield was a simple meadow without a runway. Because of the unevenness of the terrain and the gross overloading the undercarriage collapsed shortly before take-off and the aircraft slid hundreds of metres on its belly. By some miracle it did not burst into flames: the three-man crew and I were unhurt. So, back to the flight office for the next attempt. There I met a Luftwaffe officer I knew. He said: 'You're crazy, flying into the Pocket! I've got a courier flight to Berlin. Come with me, tonight we'll have a coffee at Kranzler's.' This was the first time my

3. Alexander Stahlberg (b. Stettin, 12 September 1912, died Schloss Bloemersheim, 9 January 1995) was the adjutant to Reich Chancellor Franz von Papen in 1933. In 1938 he was commissioned as a Lieutenant in the Wehrmacht and became Manstein's adjutant. He was a cousin of Colonel Henning von Treskow, a member of the military resistance. His final rank was Captain. After the war he became a businessman.

'Prussian devotion to duty' had been put to the test. I declined and arrived punctually for the second take-off attempt.

It was a flight of three machines without fighter escort. None of our fighters was available. We were attacked by Russian fighters and the other two machines were apparently hit. They did not attempt to land, but discarded their cargoes. Our aircraft put down. As soon as one of our machines arrived, the Russian artillery would bombard the airfield. There was therefore no time to lose. Quickly out, unload, wounded aboard, and then take off again. It was very dangerous to be anywhere near the airfield, many men had been hit by cargo jettisoned from the air – even bread is pretty hard when frozen solid. I hastened to get away from the place. I think I was one of the last officers to be flown in. A few days later the Russians captured this airfield.

I was taken to my Division, reported to the commanding officer and passed him Manstein's message as I had been instructed, namely that the situation was 'a miserable one, but not hopeless'. He gave me strict orders not to make this judgement by the commanding general known. I replied that I could not keep it quiet. I considered it unreasonable and psychologically wrong to pretend to the fighting troops that the situation was other than what we knew it was.

That night I was taken to my regiment at the front where, 30 kilometres west of Stalingrad in the steppe, they had set up a provisional defensive line. The regiment still consisted of only two battalions each with two battlegroups. Apart from the regimental adjutant I never met an officer of the original core staff. There were just the six of us when our strength should have been forty-five. I took command of a battlegroup with about thirty men; my predecessor had been seriously wounded the day before. I met nobody from my old pioneer platoon, they had all fallen. It was difficult to lead a squad whose members I did not know and with whom I only had contact at night because they were located in dribs and drabs in trenches on the flat, snow-covered steppe. One could only move about when the moon was not visible or under thick overcast. Food – when there was any – was brought up by night to the battlegroup command post, a hole covered over by aircraft parts, illuminated by diverting a telephone cable. Our well-constructed positions were now occupied by the Russians while we on the other hand were on the open steppe, where we had had to scrape out holes in the frozen ground from under a metre of snow and in temperatures of -15 to -20°C.

What was the situation in the Pocket, what had changed in Stalingrad during my absence over the last six weeks? The army was now starving, there were no reserves of provisions. Nowhere near enough could be supplied from

I FLEW INTO THE POCKET

the air. Gradually the rations got less and less until finally one had to scavenge for food. The increasingly desperate situation worsened the plight of the wounded and sick. Even the most basic medical materials were lacking: bandages, medication, narcotics, not to mention warm bunkers. The wounded and sick in the Pocket had almost no chance of survival. Therefore every wounded man who could crawl tried to seize a place in an aircraft, if necessary by brute force. This led to ghastly scenes at the airfield. The fuel the aircraft brought in was not even enough for the couple of still-operational panzers to get back into action. There was no fuel for the ambulances. As far as possible, the wounded had to be retrieved and transported by sledge. The last of the horses were useless as carriers and insufficient in numbers as a reserve for food.

Yet the worst of all was the lack of practically any ammunition, either for light or heavy weapons. Such artillery as there was required the approval of the divisional commander for every round fired. The chances of beating off a Russian attack in these circumstances, something with which we had to reckon daily, were very slim.

That, then, was Stalingrad on 4 January 1943: no possibility of getting a bit of warmth, no chance of survival for the wounded, no ammunition, no weapons to fight off Russian tanks, no prospect of relief from outside the Pocket. It was and remains a marvel that the men were still willing to fight on under these circumstances!

On 8 January I was twenty-two years of age, and on 10 January the end began. The enemy launched a massive attack from the north. We succeeded in holding our trenches for a whole day, then the Russians near us broke through and in order not to be cut off we had to pull back in the face of a strong enemy force. Night by night a little bit further east, closer to Stalingrad. By day one half of my squad slept: the other half had to try to keep the advancing Russians at bay. On the marches to the rear each night, every vehicle found immobile was ransacked for anything edible. If we were lucky, and something was found, it would be shared around. The trouble was, whenever something to eat was found, my battlegroup would suddenly grow in size to over 100 men. In the darkness it was difficult to pick out my own. We towed the wounded on makeshift sledges through the deep snow. Otherwise we could do nothing, our own strength did not extend to anything else.

Each night we discussed if and how one might make his way through to the west. I knew how far away the nearest German troops were and therefore condemned every idea – alone or in groups – as totally hopeless. Hundreds of kilometres of snow-covered steppe, hardly any chance of hiding oneself, no

chance of finding anything to eat, and because of the months of hunger no reserves of strength to endure a forced march of that length. We gave up the idea. Some tried it all the same, but none made it. Meanwhile it was clear to us all that every man of us who survived had to reckon with being made a prisoner of the Russians, but it was never spoken of openly. We could all remember the dreadful sight of the endless columns of half-starved, apathetic, resigned Russian prisoners of war, and none of us could or would imagine the tables being turned on us like that. Meanwhile the Pocket had been divided up into three parts. We had no airfields any longer and accordingly no line of supply. By night aircraft dropped containers of food. Whoever found one kept it. A large number of these containers fell into the hands of the Russians.

On 31 January the southern Pocket under Paulus surrendered. The day before he had been made a field-marshal and had called upon us to 'fight to the last round'. We in the northern Pocket held out. It was a macabre thing to sit in the cellar of a wrecked house in the ruins of Stalingrad listening to our obituary. This was Göring's famous eulogy in which he compared us with the Spartans who had knowingly sacrificed their lives defending a strategically decisive isthmus against a superior Persian force in order to halt them. When Göring in concluding his speech quoted the last message of the fallen Thermopylae warriors: 'Wanderer, come to Sparta and tell them you have seen us lying dead as the law required', then we knew that we had finally been written off. A whole army – sacrificed for nothing! We could not credit it! The embitterment was boundless . . .

On 2 February it was all over. The shooting stopped. Prisoners were taken quietly without any excesses by the conquering troops. Tacit understanding for the defeated enemy? Both sides were sick to death of it and happy that it was finally, finally, over.

At the end of December 1949 in a mock trial on trumped-up charges, Gottfried von Bismarck was sentenced to twenty-five years' labour camp. The basis of the arraignment was the fact that Soviet prisoners of war had been required to work on his family estate in Pomerania. He spent the next five years' in hard, forced labour underground. In 1955 after almost thirteen years of captivity he was freed as a result of the efforts of Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. In vain, together with others, he attempted to have the West German Federal Republic recognize those condemned to forced labour to be 'victims of Stalinism' and compensated financially: 'It hurts that this should fall on apparently deaf ears amongst our politicians!' He studied at the Essen School of Mining, worked as a blaster with Thyssens, sinking shafts, and finally set up his own business exporting to the East. He died on 8 January 2001.