THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE OF THE 7th GUARDS ARMY'S STAND AGAINST ARMY DETACHMENT KEMPF

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an alarm to the 15th Guards Rifle Division to send Lieutenant Colonel I.A. Usikov's 44th Guards Rifle Regiment to the "Solov'ev" collective farm and the "Batratskaia Dacha" State Farm. At 2300, before reaching its indicated jumping-off sector (1 kilometer east of the "Solov'ev" collective farm and 2 kilometers east of the "Batratskaia Dacha" State Farm), the regiment from the march bumped into and attacked a large group of submachine gunners which was caught advancing in the direction of Nikol'skoe. The fighting continued all night; the reconnaissance battalion's operational area was firmly sealed, but there was no success in destroying it or actually pushing it back from its hastily-occupied positions. At dawn E.I. Vasilenko reported: "By the morning of 8 July the regiment reached the line: Hill 202.3 and Point "K" in the area of the Batratskaia Dacha State Farm, where it went over to the defense."

The 7th Panzer Division command was actually viewing its reconnaissance battalion as both an outpost for holding the "Batratskaia Dacha" State Farm and as an auxiliary force for the possible encirclement of the 73rd Guards Rifle Division's forces. Thus throughout the day of 7 July it supported the reconnaissance battalion with artillery fire, and for the next day was planning to augment its firepower.

Hünnersdorff's 6th Panzer Division achieved even more substantial results on 7 July. By the end of the day, after three days of the heaviest fighting, having overcome the line of the 81st Guards Rifle Division, it was the first of Army Detachment Kempf's divisions to break through the boundary line on the right flank of the 7th Guards Army and reach a line now belonging to the 6th Guards Army, and enter combat with its troops and those of the 69th Army. Thereby III Panzer Corps had seized a springboard for the capture of the tactically-important corridor between the Northern Donets and Razumnaia Rivers. Control over it would give it the possibility to plan the encirclement of Soviet forces (the 69th Army's 48th Rifle Corps) that were defending on the joint flanks of the Fourth Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf in the interfluvial area between the Northern Donets and Lipovyi Donets Rivers. Heavy fighting was still going on in Sevriukovo when von Oppeln's panzerkampfgruppe launched an attack out of Iastrebovo in the direction of Melikhovo. Behind it, panzergrenadiers of the 19th Panzer Division (Lieutenant Colonel Helmut Richter's Panzergrenadier Regiment 74), bypassing Blizhniaia Igumenka, were moving along the Belyi Kolodez' ravine toward Dal'niaia Igumenka; a bit later it began to force a crossing of the ravine in the Postnikov area. Approximately between 1400 and 1500 the kampfgruppen of the 6th and 19th Panzer Divisions, having fully overrun the 81st Guards Rifle Division's sector, emerged on the left flank of Colonel P.D. Govorunenko's 375th Rifle Division (of the 6th Guards Army) at the boundary between the 6th and 7th Guards Armies. Already in Operational Summary No.238 at 1500, the chief of staff of this division Lieutenant Colonel Lozhko reported that a rifle company and two platoons of submachine gunners were exchanging fire with Germans in Dal'niaia Igumenka. Considering the time it took for the information to travel from the regiment to the division, at a minimum the enemy submachine gunners had made their way through the 81st Guards Rifle Division's defenses to their entire depth at least an hour and half before this and had joined combat with outposts of the left-flank regiment of Govorunenko's 375th Rifle Division.

Even though the commander of the 1241st Rifle Regiment Major N.A. Karklin had in fact been briefed previously about the possibility of an enemy breakthrough out of the Blizhniaia Igumenka - Sevriukovo area, the appearance of German tanks on the regiment's left flank (or more accurately, almost in the division's rear) came as a complete surprise to him. At this moment the 375th Rifle Division was occupying a defense along the following line: woods, east of Visloe – Hill 209.5

65 TsAMO RF, f. 1526, op. 1, d. 8, l. 158.
66 TsAMO RF, f. 375 sd, op. 1, d. 36, l. 237.
BREITH’S III PANZER CORPS REACHES LINE OF 69TH ARMY 341

Shopino (West) — ravine, 1 kilometer north of Hill 211.6 — Pokrovka — Dal'niaia Igumenka, and had been repulsing heavy attacks by units of the SS Panzergrenadier Division Totenkopf and the 168th Infantry Division along its entire line. Combat had also taken place on the front of the 1241st Rifle Regiment, which was holding the (excl.) Belomestnaia — (excl.) Cherniaia Poliana sector. After the report arrived from the 1241st Rifle Regiment, P.D. Govorunenko realized that the 81st Guards Rifle Division was no longer able to hold its entire sector of defense, and that the 35th Guards Rifle Corps' 92nd Guards Rifle Division had not yet arrived in this area from the march, so he could only rely on his own inherent forces. Therefore at the alarm he got his reserve moving toward the positions of the 1241st Rifle Regiment — a company of the 137th Anti-tank Rifle Battalion. Thus, in the afternoon hours, while the panzerkampfgruppen of the 6th and 19th Panzer Divisions had been breaking through to Dal'niaia Igumenka and Melikhovo, there were only weak forces on the left flank of Karklin's regiment along the "Main Fruit and Vegetable" State Farm — Postnikov — Dal'niaia Igumenka line: an anti-tank rifle company, a rifle company, and two platoons of submachine gunners. The situation began to change for the better only around 1600 when the 92nd Guards Rifle Division's 280th Guards Rifle Regiment began to assemble here; at approximately 1530, one of its rifle companies began to take up positions in Dal'niaia Igumenka.

The march of Colonel V.F. Trunin's 92nd Guards Rifle Division had been difficult. At 1900 on 6 July, Lieutenant Colonel N.I. Novikov, the commander of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment, had summoned his battalion commanders and informed them since the morning of 6 July, an enemy grouping numbering up to 300 armored vehicles with infantry support had been continuing to develop an attack on the boundary between the 81st Guards Rifle and 73rd Guards Rifle Divisions, striving to break through to the Belgorod – Korocha highway. The division commander had received an order from the 35th Guards Rifle Corps to move out quickly and occupy the Blizhniaia Igumenka – Hill 216 – Svruiiko line. Next Lieutenant Colonel Novikov turned to issuing orders. His regiment was to become the division's forward detachment, and by 1600 on 7 July it had moved up to the indicated line in order to screen the deployment of the rest of the division. When issuing this order to the regiment command, the division commander had particularly emphasized that the operational situation was changing very quickly and it had to be ready to meet enemy tanks. Thus Colonel Trunin had transferred Lieutenant Colonel I.I. Shapovalov's 197th Guards Artillery Regiment (minus the 2nd Artillery Battalion) and one battery of the 99th Separate Destroyer Anti-tank Artillery Battalion to N.I. Novikov's operational control. Given favorable conditions, the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment was to occupy the designated line and wait for the rest of the division's approach, and in the event of an enemy breakthrough in the direction of the Belgorod – Korocha highway, it was to repel the attack on the Dal'niaia Igumenka – Razumnaia River line and dig in there.

Immediately after receiving the order, the regiment headquarters sent out a reconnaissance and lead forward detachment (1/1st Rifle Battalion and a battery of 1/197th Guards Artillery Regiment), which given the enemy's appearance was to occupy (or seize) the line running from the western outskirts of Dal'niaia Igumenka through the woods, 2 kilometers west of Melikhovo, to Shliakhovoe. The regiment commander, considering that the march would be conducted partially in the evening and nighttime hours, strove to gain time and ensure the unhindered movement and deployment of the main forces. Thus he decided to conduct the march in a single march column, but before moving out he sent a strong advance guard (the 1st Rifle Battalion (minus one company, which had departed earlier, and the rest of 1/197th Guards Artillery Regiment) to the Blizhniaia Igumenka – Svruiiko – Andreevskie line, capable of securing the deployment and subsequent wide maneuvering with the main forces. In addition, the Lieutenant Colonel issued an order for the immediate formation of a mobile anti-tank reserve out of artillery and sapper elements (a battery of the regiment's anti-tank battalion and a squad of combat engineers), which were to follow behind the advance guard in readiness to deploy on the southwestern outskirts of
The regiment would have to make a march of 35 kilometers. Considering that the column would have a length of approximately 13 kilometers, it might be subjected to attacks from the air, so N.I. Novikov directed for there to be an interval of 500 meters between the battalions in daylight hours, and 300 meters once the sun had set. All of his decisions would play an important role in the subsequent events.

Just as the division commander had anticipated, the situation was very fluid and at the moment the regiment’s vanguard was approaching Melikhovo, von Oppeln’s panzerkampfgruppe was already nearing its southern outskirts. At 1620, reconnaissance patrols that were located in the woods northeast of Andrevskii and to the south of the “Kalinin” collective farm reported to the regiment about the enemy’s appearance south of Melikhovo. At the same time, the regiment’s chief of staff received word from a reconnaissance aircraft about the approach of an enemy column of tanks to within just 3-4 kilometers from Melikhovo. These messages were quickly passed by N.I. Novikov to the division headquarters, which allowed it to move out the division’s anti-tank reserve quickly from Kazach’e to the “Comintern” collective farm (northeast of Mazikino). At the moment, there was not the necessary strength and means to hold the defense along the Dal’niaia Igumenka – Melikhovo – Sheino line. Only artillery units were located in these villages; in particular, the 161st Guards Cannon Artillery Regiment was in movement from Iastrebovo to Sheino, while the 1st Artillery Battalion of the 193rd Cannon Artillery Regiment was deploying on the northwestern outskirts of Dal’niaia Igumenka under the cover of a small quantity of rifle elements (including of the 375th Rifle Division). Further to the northeast, there were no Soviet forces at all in the 17-18 kilometers between the Northern Donets and the Razumnaia River that separated the 375th Rifle Division and the positions of the 69th Army’s 305th Rifle Division, if you exclude the 92nd Rifle Division’s 276th Guards and 282nd Guards Rifle Regiment that were in the process of moving up.

At 1620 the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment’s lead mobile detachment ran into grenadiers of the 6th Panzer Division on the southern outskirts of Melikhovo. The regiment’s vanguard commander (the commander of the 1st Rifle Battalion) decided to take the heights south of the village and thereby pin down the enemy with combat until the arrival of the regiment’s main forces. For this purpose he gave an order to the commander of the attached 1/197th Guards Artillery Regiment Captain D.A. Prokop’ev to deploy his battery quickly and to open fire at the enemy infantry and the sector where the enemy armor was concentrating. Meanwhile, he ordered the commanders of the 2nd and 3rd Rifle Companies to attack and drive the enemy from the heights 2-3 kilometers south of the village under the cover of the artillery fire. A short time later, a howitzer battery that was deployed north of Shliakhovoe opened up concentrated fire that hindered the deployment of Colonel von Oppeln’s panzerkampfgruppe into a combat formation for the attack, while two batteries of 76mm guns of l/197th Guards Artillery Regiment, which had moved up to within close range opened fire at the German tanks.

It must be recognized that the breakthrough by von Oppeln’s panzerkampfgruppe to this area was an unpleasant surprise for the Soviet command. In contrast, the rapid advance made by General Hünersdorff’s kampfgruppen generated optimism in General Breith. He therefore attempted to squeeze as much advantage as he could out of the situation, and decided to crush the center of resistance as quickly as possible in order to push the panzerguppen as far as they could go into the depth of the Russian defenses. The Soviet command was also quickly reacting to the situation. The 6th Panzer Division’s panzerkampfgruppe hadn’t yet jumped-off on the attack toward Melikhovo, when aircraft from both sides appeared in the skies above this area. At 1620 eight Ju-88 bombers pounced on the Russian howitzer battery, but the artillerymen avoided serious losses. Just a half hour later, a squadron of Il-2 ground attack aircraft struck the German tanks with anti-tank bomblets and rockets.

N.I. Novikov, who arrived in Melikhovo with some of his command staff, approved the decision taken by the vanguard commander and ordered to carry out the designated plan at whatever
the cost and cover the deployment of the regiment's main forces. For reinforcement he gave the commander of the 1st Rifle Battalion operational control of the 148th Separate Tank Regiment's 3rd Tank Company, which had just arrived from the 94th Guards Rifle Division at the order of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps. Having received the asset, the battalion commander decided first of all to interfere with the enemy's deployment of his main forces. Thus, anticipating that the Germans would attack from the south, he immediately directed the 3rd Tank Company into the woods southwest of the village. The tankers received an order: with fire from fixed positions, and in the event of an attack with a maneuver onto the German flank, to prevent the Germans from reaching the outskirts of Melikhovo or from bypassing the village to the west. So Prokop'ev's artillery battalion and the company of T-34 tanks promptly set out to carry out the vanguard commander's scheme, which could not be said about the rifle companies. Their commanders, fearing to come under enemy tank attack on a level piece of ground that hadn't been prepared for defense, were in no hurry to attack the heights south of Melikhovo.

I will remind the reader that according to N.F. Vatutin's order from back in April, a number of the larger villages in the system of the army-level defensive belts had been converted into fortified areas, including Dal'niaia Igumenka as well. In the 6th Guards Army's 23rd Guards Rifle Corps, the village was referred to as "Battalion Strongpoint 7", and it had an outer ring of fieldworks. It was being defended by the 2nd Battalion of the 375th Rifle Division's 1241st Rifle Regiment, 15 T-34 tanks and 10 anti-tank guns. Next to it on its outskirts, three lines had been dug for the deployment of the 375th Rifle Division's anti-tank artillery reserve. Two kilometers to the southwest was the anti-tank strongpoint of Postnikov, in which positions had been prepared for an anti-tank gun battery and 14 T-34, as well as a network of trenches for a rifle company. Melikhovo hadn't been so well-prepared for defense as far as fieldworks, even though the village and its outskirts had a network of trenches sufficient for a rifle battalion, emplacements with ramps for 15 T-34 and positions for 10 anti-tank guns, and some, but not all, of the tank-vulnerable ground in front of it had been mined. However, the village had no outer ring of fieldworks, nor did it have serious anti-tank obstacles like anti-tank ditches and scarps, which would substantially reduce the defensive strength of the village and make it easier for the enemy to take it. Thus, the Germans would be able to take Melikhovo already on 8 July, while the fighting for Dal'niaia Igumenka continued for an additional 24 hours.

However, let's return to the events on 7 July. Already at 1700, despite the attempts made by the Soviet side to disrupt the attack with artillery fire, after a 10-minute preparatory artillery barrage, a kampfgruppe of the 6th Panzer Division went on the attack in two directions: 18 tanks and up to two companies of infantry attempted to bypass Melikhovo on its eastern side, and 17 tanks and up to a company of infantry attempted to outflank it on the west. It should be noted that the firepower of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment's vanguard was equal to the assigned task; they almost simultaneously entered combat (the tanks opened fire first) and secured the deployment of the regimental columns that were arriving from the march. The tankers, getting a jump on the enemy, had taken up advantageous positions in the woods southwest of Melikhovo and opened a heavy fire on the enemy. Almost simultaneously, the two batteries of 1/197th Guards Artillery Regiment opened fire over open sights at the enemy's group that was advancing somewhat to the west. Emboldened by the friendly firepower, the vanguard's 2nd and 3rd Rifle Companies also stepped off and began to take positions on the heights to the south of the village.

The 280th Guards Rifle Regiment's reconnaissance and intelligence service was working well, so N.I. Novikov received timely information that up to a battalion of halftracks escorted by several tanks was attempting to breakthrough out of the area northwest of Sevriukovo. This was Major F. Quentin's Reconnaissance Battalion 6 of the 6th Panzer Division, which had received an order to launch a reconnaissance-in-force through Sheino in the direction of Mazikino.
Bitter fighting flared up along the entire front stretching from Postnikov, Dal'niaa Igumenka and Melikhovo to Sevriukovo and Miasoedovo. The entire horizon became enshrouded with smoke and ashes from the burning woods, and all around there was the howling of shells and booming explosions. The regiment commander understood that the situation was precarious. The enemy was operating with large groups of panzers on a broad front, and judging from everything, the regiment had no continuous line of defense on the left flank. In the meantime, the main efforts of its units were focused on defending Melikhovo. There was still adequate force in order to hold the village and allow the division to deploy, but the situation regarding the enemy group that was attacking out of Sevriukovo (Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion 6, but the regiment commander didn’t know this) was totally unclear. The ground toward which it was presumably attacking was supposed to have been occupied by the 280th Rifle Regiment’s left-flank units and units of the 94th Guards Rifle Division, which were marching toward the front side-by-side with the 92nd Guards Rifle Division. However, at the moment the enemy’s attack stepped off, it wasn’t clear whether or not the neighbor had come up (in fact, the 94th Guards Rifle Division’s 288th Guards Rifle Regiment was already fighting on the northern outskirts of Miasoedovo, but no shoulder-to-shoulder contact had yet been established between the 92nd and 94th Guards Rifle Divisions), but the battalion of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment was still on the march toward this area.

It was obvious that both enemy panzer groups that were operating south of Melikhovo and north of Miasoedovo were striving to expand the gap between his regiment and the 73rd Guards Rifle Division (or possibly that of the 94th Guards Rifle Division if it had come up) and break through Shliakhovoe and Mazikino to the line of the large villages of Nizhni Ol’shanets and Zaiach’e. The regiment commander decided to prevent this and organize a semi-ring of fire out of artillery units in the path of Quentin’s reconnaissance battalion and von Oppeln’s panzerkampfgruppe. As soon as the regiment’s anti-tank artillery reserve arrived from the march in the area of Shliakhovoe (approximately after an hour of fighting), N.I. Novikov sent it to repulse a possible attack from Miasoedovo toward Mazikino. The artillerymen and combat engineers deployed east of Melikhovo (2 kilometers southeast of Shliakhovoe). Around the same time Lieutenant Colonel Novikov created an anti-tank barrier in the regiment’s rear. Striving to preclude any advance by German tanks along the road to Shliakhovoe and further on toward Lomovo, in case the Germans broke through the vanguard’s line, he ordered the commander of the 197th Guards Artillery Regiment to get in touch with the 2nd Artillery Battalion and to deploy it on the southern fringe of the woods southwest of the “Comintern” collective farm (5 kilometers northeast of Melikhovo) with the assignment to block the Shliakhovoe – Lomovo road. Meanwhile, the division’s anti-tank artillery reserve that had come up was immediately sent to the Hill 222 – southern outskirts of Gremiachii line with a front to the southwest, in order to block the path of the German tanks in the (excl.) Shliakhovoe – Zaiach’e sector. In addition, Captain S.S. Smorzh’s 3/197th Guards Artillery Regiment was sent to Dal’niaa Igumenka with the task to prevent the Germans from crossing the Belyi Kolodez’ ravine and taking that village.

While the regiment commander was putting together his anti-tank defenses on the directions of a possible breakthrough by the 6th Panzer Division, the regiment vanguard was holding back the onslaught of von Oppeln’s kampfgruppen with great difficulty, because of the Germans’ numerical superiority. Even though the first attack left 16 tanks smoking on the battlefield, its pressure didn’t cease. At 1830 Colonel von Oppeln-Bronikowski shifted his kampfgruppe’s main efforts to the southwest of Melikhovo (into the sector of the 148th Separate Tank Regiment’s tank company) and attacked here with 30 panzers simultaneously. At the same time from the south, 20 panzers were moving toward the village through the line of the vanguard’s rifle companies.

Only a regiment could withstand such substantial forces, not a single battalion, even a reinforced one; however, the 280th Rifle Regiment’s 2nd and 3rd Battalions were still on the march. Thanks
to aerial reconnaissance, the enemy knew that a column of Russian troops was approaching the village, so with the start of the panzer attacks, 12 German bombers appeared above it. With great difficulty and suffering losses, between 1830 and 1930 both battalions finally began to assemble in Melikhovo, and a new problem arose in front of N.I. Novikov: how to provide covering fire for them while they took up positions south of the village; after all, all of the artillery had already been activated in the combat with the German tanks. Striving to prevent high casualties as the battalions were deploying, the regiment commander ordered the approaching battalions to split quickly into platoons while they were still on the march, after which they gradually began to move into the lines of defense, including the network of trenches.

Judging from the archival sources, both battalions took up their positions without any particular difficulties over a period of about 2.5 hours and entered the fighting. The arrival of Novikov’s entire regiment in Melikhovo substantially strengthened this line of defense. Nevertheless, persistently launching several successive panzer attacks against one and the same sector, the enemy managed all the same to break through the regiment's defense. Already late in the evening, several times von Oppeln’s tanks passed through the combat positions of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment and were even reaching the outskirts of Melikhovo. However, under heavy anti-tank fire, they would again fall back to their jumping-off positions, but now in fewer numbers. By the end of the day, the units of the 94th Guards Rifle Division’s right flank using artillery fire also managed to thwart the attempt by Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion 6 to break through to Mazikino.

In several publications of the Soviet era, the meeting battle for Melikhovo was presented as a model of the organization of a rifle regiment’s march in anticipation of a battle, and also as an example of its commander's professional approach to planning and shaping the battle in unfavorable conditions when engaging with a major enemy tank grouping. Indeed, Lieutenant Colonel N.I. Novikov demonstrated exceptional professional skill and fine organizational abilities in this battle. On 7 July his Guardsmen accomplished a very important job: they were able to hold the 6th Panzer Division’s panzerkampfgruppe south of Melikhovo, thereby allowing the command to bring forces up to the corridor between the Northern Donets and Razumnaia Rivers, and in the process inflicted substantial damage to the enemy.

The events that took place in this sector of the Voronezh Front haven’t yet been studied in detail by domestic scholars; only the recollections of participants in the fighting have been left behind, in which it is difficult to find connection between times and locations where the events took place. Unfortunately, the authors of these memoirs as a rule describe their own individual perceptions of endless attacks and a series of heroic feats by their comrade peers. Thus it is extremely difficult to lay out the course of combat actions in detail. Only owing to the few preserved archival documents is it possible to understand how the events were unfolding at one or another moment of time. For example, in some publications one encounters the assertion that the timely arrival of the two other regiments of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division helped the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment withstand the German attack and hurl the Germans back from the village. However, this doesn’t correspond with reality. I will refer to the account of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps about the combat operations on the Belgorod axis:

Pursuant to orders, the 92nd Guards Rifle Division ceased to relieve the 89th Guards Rifle Division’s units and set off in the direction of Staryi Gorod with the assignment to take up a defense on the line: woods 1 kilometer northeast of Chernaia Poliana, Staryi Gorod, Bliizhniaia Igumenka, (excl.) Sevriukovo, tying in with the line of the 94th Guards Rifle Division, and to prevent a breakthrough by enemy tanks and infantry on the indicated line.

The division, moving with the 276th Guards and 282nd Guards Rifle Regiments along the Shinino – Staryi Gorod route and the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment on the Shliakhovoe – Melikhovo – Bliizhniaia Igumenka route at 1900 became engaged with the vanguard battalion
of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment in combat against up to two battalions of enemy infantry accompanied by 35 tanks on a line 2 kilometers south of Melikhovo.

Having driven back two enemy attacks, the vanguard battalion enabled the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment to deploy and tank up a defense on the line: ravine east of Dal‘niaia Igumenka – patch of woods south of Melikhovo.

The 276th and 282nd Guards Rifle Regiments, having lost contact with the division headquarters, by [the following] morning reached the area of Staryi Gorod, where at the directive of the 81st Guards Rifle Division’s commander they took up a line of defense on the line: “Main Fruit and Vegetable” State Farm, Staryi Gorod, Blizhniaia Igumenka with a front to the west and southeast.67

The Voronezh Front received word about the German breakthrough to the sector of the 6th Guards Army and the main results of the fighting at Melikhovo approximately around midnight. However, the messaged contained no detailed information about how this had happened, because only the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment of Trunin’s entire division reached the Melikhovo area, and the location of the other two regiments was unknown. When the situation finally became clear, it became understood that the division commander and headquarters had lost command and control over their units, and the sector had been held only because of the decisive and intelligent actions of the 280th Guards Rifle Regiment’s commander; this prompted N.F Vatutin to rebuke the corps commander S.G. Goriachev for his weak oversight when moving out his troops to the forward edge. The commander of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps knew that Colonel V.F. Trunin was a young division commander who had just assumed his post, and moreover had little experience as a combat commander.68 At the end of June 1943, when characterizing him, S.G. Goriachev

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67 TsAMO RF, f. 35 gv. sk, op. 1, d. 44, ll. 1, 2.
68 Vasilii Fedorovich Trunin, Colonel. Born on 12.02.1906 in Tula Oblast's village of Mar’tem’ianovka; a Russian. After completing seven years of schooling, he worked in village cooperatives. From October 1928 to March 1931, he served in the Red Army, and after de-mobilization worked as a physical plant manager in the Thermal Engineering Institute. In October 1931, as part of a mobilization of Party members, Trunin was again called up into the Red Army and was directed into political work as a political instructor at the “Vystrel” ["Shot"] tactical courses. He worked in this post, then as a propaganda instructor of a battalion, until 1935. In October 1935 Trunin was assigned to enroll in the Lenin Military-Political Courses, but after one and a half months he was summoned before the Communist Party’s Central Committee for a review of his political documents. In April 1937 he was appointed as an instructor in the Political Department of the Stalin Military Academy of Mechanization and Motorization, and in 1938 he was selected as an independent secretary of the Academy’s Party Commission. On 28.06.1941, Trunin was appointed as a Party investigator as part of a Party commission of the Reserve Front’s Party Board, and from the end of July 1941, Trunin was appointed as a commissar of this Front’s Intelligence Department. On 13.10.1941 he was transferred to become a secretary in the 60th Reserve Army’s Party commission (subsequently this army became the Northwestern Front’s 3rd Shock Army). On 25.4.1942, he became the commissar of the 154th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. He took part in the fighting near Demiansk and Stalingrad (64th Army). In September 1942 after the brigade commander was wounded, he assumed command of the brigade. After the fighting in a suburb of Stalingrad and in Beketovka, Trunin was awarded with the Order of the Red Banner. Between 18.11.1942 and 10.01.1943, he served as the commander of the 64th Army’s 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade, and between 10.01 and 28.04.1943, Trunin commanded the 64th Army’s 93rd Separate Rifle Brigade. In this post he took part in the fighting to destroy the German Sixth Army, after which he for the second time was awarded with the Order of the Red Banner. On 28.04.1943, he was appointed as the commander of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division, which he formed out of two rifle brigades. On 13.07.1943, he was removed from his post for his poor command over the division by the 69th Army’s Military Council. On 29.08.1943 Trunin was sent to accelerated courses in the Frunze Military Academy. Subsequently he commanded the 71st Rifle Division, but once again he was dismissed from his post because of his professional incompetence and reduced in rank to deputy division commander. He ended the war as a commandant of the 208th Camp for Liberated
had written: "As one of the former political workers, his military training for the occupied post is inadequate. It is extremely desirable to give him more military training to assume a command post through short-term courses, after which he will make a fine general officer."

Because it was Trunin's division that was moving out to meet an enemy panzer division that had broken through, and considering the above-listed circumstances, the corps commander was obliged to oversee this personally, or at least to send to the division some operational group of officers to assist the 92nd Guards Rifle Division's command staff. During a discussion over the Baudot device that evening with the commander of the 69th Army Lieutenant General V.D. Kriuchenkin, N.F. Varutin had applied just one word to describe the situation in the 35th Guards Rifle Corps — "disgraceful". The General of the Army was different from the overwhelming majority of his service peers and a number of other Front commander-in-chiefs by his rather proper attitude toward subordinates, and the word "disgraceful" can be considered the penultimate stage of indignation before he would begin to get enraged, and with good reason. The corps command, in favorable conditions according to the standards of the acting army, had been unable to get two divisions moved into prepared positions within 14 hours. Moreover, one division en route had lost track of its units, and at a critical moment its headquarters didn't know where two of its rifle regiments were located.

I will note regarding V.F. Trunin that according to the documents available today, one can say that this man by his background and training was simply unable to command a division. Even a year later, after the colonel had received a certain amount of experience and knowledge, he continued all the same to make elementary mistakes, just like he did near Belgorod when he had paid no heed to advice and instructions from senior officers. Here is just one more example, from a memorandum written by the commander of the 13th Army's 24th Rifle Corps Lieutenant General N.I. Kiriukhin on 31 July 1944:

Despite a great desire to work, integrity and dedication in work, despite a number of other positive qualities as a man, Comrade Trunin doesn't have the necessary traits and knowledge of a general officer. The experience and knowledge to shape a battle and the ability to forge cooperation among different types of forces are lacking. This was particularly shown in the fighting for Kristopol' [sic - Kostopol] on 18 and 19 June 1944, in which his lack of cooperation with the 11th Tank Corps and his unskilled use of artillery means led not to success, but to heavy losses. The same situation took place in the fighting to force a crossing of the San River. His excessive egalitarianism and weak exactingness toward subordinates leads to the fact that his subordinates don't show any motivation or "personal drive" in work, and this leads to failure when carrying out a combat assignment. For example, despite the fact two days had been given to preparations, the division failed to form a forward detachment for seizing a bridgehead on the San River.

Forgetfulness regarding previously-issued orders and the successive issuing of orders that are completely contrary to each other [are characteristic for him]. During the march from the San River to the Vistula River, Comrade Trunin once again lost track and didn't know where the regiments were located from 2000 on 28 July to 29 July 1944, and this was despite the fact that I had personally warned him that it was necessary to make sure that he didn't let command and control lapse.70


69 Author's personal archive.

70 Author's personal archive.
The bitter fighting between the 92nd Guards Rifle Division's 280th Guards Rifle Regiment with the 6th Panzer Division's kampfgruppen and elements of the 19th Panzer Division ended before midnight, and by this time the tension had somewhat subsided. However, skirmishes in isolated sectors continued all night long. There is evidence that Lieutenant Colonel N.I. Novikov formed a combat raiding party out of two rifle companies, which on the night of 7-8 July was to infiltrate the German-held territory from out of the area northeast of Dal'niaia Igumenka and destroy an enemy headquarters in Miasoedovo. Moreover, subsequently the results of the work of this group were assessed as successful, but so far I haven't found any detailed information about this raid in the archives of the Russian Ministry of Defense. There is justification to assume that this attack was conducted somewhat later, because at the indicated time, Miasoedovo was under dual control: in the northern section were troops of the 94th Guards Rifle Division, and in the southern and southeastern sections was the 7th Panzer Division, and thus no one would have permitted the positioning of a major headquarters in such close proximity to the front.

However, let's return to the results of the fighting for Melikhovo. Considering the large significance of this village for the stability of the defense on this axis, as well as the fact that the fighting ended very late in the day, it is important to understand where the frontline stabilized. According to accounts of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division, by the end of the day its units had stopped the enemy, and then pushed the Germans back to the line: (excl.) southeastern outskirts of Dal'niaia Igumenka - southwestern slopes of the hills south of Melikhovo - Kalinin. In a report from the 7th Guards Army's artillery headquarters, an adjustment has been made as to where von Oppeln-Bronikowski's panzergruppe were stopped: "... By 2000 the group of enemy tanks reached the bend in the road (2 kilometers west of Kalinin)." However, if we check a map, the division's information and that of the artillery headquarters indicate one and the same place, even though they are giving it different names. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine the area where the 6th Panzer Division's panzerkampfgruppe reached by the end of 7 July with any great certainty. At that moment, not even Breith's III Panzer Corps had such information. The point is that Hünersdorff's panzer division, like incidentally all of III Panzer Corps' divisions that were locked in heavy fighting in the system of Voronezh Front's second army-level belt of defenses, had lost contact with its units. The information arriving at the corps headquarters from their headquarters was sparse and often contradictory. Moreover, mistakes in the reports were multiplying because of the highly fluid combat operations among other reasons. At times, a line that had been reported as captured was taken back by Soviet troops (as happened on the night of 7-8 July in Dal'niaia Igumenka). There were incidents when in the course of an attack, the troops of one division, having successfully found a weak spot in the Guardsmen's defenses, exploited it and conducted active combat operations in a sector of one of III Panzer Corps' other divisions. If in the process communications were spotty, then a division, in which for example there was a strongpoint that had been seized by a neighbor, would unintentionally report that it had been captured by its own forces (people are always thinking first about one of their own successes), and say not a word about its neighbors.

An analogous situation took place as well during the breakthrough by 6th Panzer Division's panzerkampfgruppe. I will remind the reader that exploiting the success of the 19th Panzer Division, which had first seized the center of Blizhniaia Igumenka, and then toward evening having completely driven units of the 81st Guards Rifle Division out of this village Colonel von Oppeln-Bronikowski had launched an attack directly to the north out of Iastrebovo. By 2000 his panzers had split the line of Morozov's division practically to its entire depth and reached the area 2 kilometers west of Kalinin (2 kilometers north of Miasoedovo). However, from Schmidt's 19th Panzer Division, information arrived at the III Panzer Corps headquarters that it was its...
panzerkampfgruppe that had scored such a notable success, and not the adjacent 6th Panzer Division. In the course of the fighting for Blizhniaia Igumenka, the commander of the 19th Panzer Division's Panzer Regiment 27, Colonel Becker, had received a wound and been transported to a field hospital; Westhofen assumed command of the panzer regiment. It is possible that the confusion was connected with this change in commanders. The situation was clarified only by the middle of 8 July. On a typewritten daily report to the headquarters of Army Group South there is a handwritten note that the supplied information was mistaken, and that the panzers that made this striking advance belonged not to the 19th Panzer Division, but to the 6th Panzer Division. It isn't clear who wrote this note, but most likely it was a staff officer in Breith's headquarters after a detailed analysis of the situation that developed in this area.

For the 81st Guards Rifle Division commander, it wasn't important to which enemy division the panzerkampfgruppe belonged that had cut off his division from its rear services and was surging toward his command post (the Germans were approximately 4 kilometers from the division headquarters in Sevriukovo). The threat of the encirclement of his entire division and the Germans' emergence in the rear of the 6th Guards Army's and 2nd Guards Tank Corps' left-flank forces had arisen. The situation of the 81st Guards Rifle Division sharply changed only toward midnight. At that moment, the two stray regiments of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division began to arrive in its sector. Later I.K. Morozov recalled:

By 2300 two regiments of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps' 92nd Guards Rifle Division arrived that were at my disposal. With one regiment [the 276th Guards Rifle Regiment] I reinforced the defense of the Dal'niaia Igumenka – Andreevskie – Postnikov sector with a front to the northeast with the mission to prevent an enemy breakthrough to Postnikov. The second regiment [282nd Guards Rifle Regiment] was placed in echelon behind the 238th Guards and 233rd Guards Rifle Regiments, in readiness to counterattack toward Belovskaia and Sevriukovo.72

Of course, having received operational control of two fresh rifle regiments, the division commander was elated. However, if the situation is assessed objectively, such a quantity of troops was already excessive for that diminutive area now being held by the 81st Guards Rifle Division, and no one had been expecting or preparing for their arrival. Therefore whereas the 276th Guards Rifle Regiment was quickly assigned a sector and rapidly (in the course of a night) and smoothly merged into the division's combat positions, the same could not be said for the 282nd Guards Rifle Regiment. From the account of this regiment's commander Lieutenant Colonel I.I. Samoilenko:

7 July and the night of 7-8 July were passing, when the vanguard and the main forces came under a bombing attack. At dawn on 8.7.43, the regiment arrived at its designated place of assembly and began to move out toward a defensive line. Mortar fire was opened on our combat formations. We took up a position: the northern outskirts of Staryi Gorod on the right, Point 12 on the road from Staryi Gorod to Dal'niaia Igumenka on the left, with the calculation of an all-round defense. We began to reconnoiter with reconnaissance patrols, with elements on foot and mounted scouts, and by means of observation, in order to locate where the enemy was and locate his firing positions. The area of the regiment's defensive sector had been previously mined without prior notification and without cleared passages, as a result of which there were incidents of needless sacrifices as a result of triggering our own
Throughout the day of 8 July the enemy conducted concentrated artillery and mortar fire on our right flank, because of which the regiment had losses of up to 10% of its men and equipment.\footnote{TsAMO RF, f. 282 gv. sp, op. 349903, d. 2, l. 39.}

Let’s dwell upon this in a bit more detail. In the operational summaries for 7 and 8 July, the 81st Guards Rifle Division’s command reported that the division was located in encirclement.\footnote{TsAMO RF, f. 81 gv. sd, op. 1, d. 7, l. 289.} Later this information migrated over into account material, and from there, already after the war, into the studies of historians. As a result, a legend about the operational encirclement of the 81st Guards Rifle Division near Belgorod arose, and then about its breakout from the pocket. It was also advantageous to the enemy to support the myth about a “pocket”, and the poorly organized evacuation from it by Morozov’s division on 10 July 1943 to a new line. The legend stipulates that a lot of weapons were left in the positions, and approximately two battalions of infantry of the 81st Guards Rifle Division and 92nd Guards Rifle Division were taken prisoner. Owing to this, the myth had a grip for a long time. However, in reality the events that unfolded in this area are far from that given in the majority of publications. If you look at the operational maps of the Voronezh Front, as well as those of the 6th Guards and 7th Guards Armies between 5 and 9 July inclusively, then the falsehood becomes obvious. In reality the main forces of Morozov’s division (the combat units) were in a difficult situation, and after the breakthrough by the 6th Panzer Division’s \textit{panzerkampfgruppe} on the evening of 7 July in the Blizhniaia Igumenka – Kalinin sector, they wound up isolated from their rear services. However, there was no complete encirclement; a path to the north through the combat positions of the 375th Rifle Division was open. Incidentally, the Guardsmen made use of it, when they were forced to abandon their positions and retreat to a new line beyond the Donets.

The authorship of this canard belongs to the commander of the 81st Guards Rifle Division. It was part of his nature as a person to exaggerate the achievements of his subordinates, which served to place himself in an advantageous light as an on the ball leader. Unquestionably, for five days of the hardest and bloodiest fighting the Guardsmen of his division had held on tenaciously. Thanks to their courage and heroism, the division fully carried out the assignment it had been given, and this in turn played an important role in the success of the plan of the defensive operation of the entire Voronezh Front. The real actions of the combatants of the 81st Guards Rifle Division speak for themselves, while the “heroic” fables only interfere with the exhibition of their genuine contribution to the overall cause of victory in the Battle of Kursk.

The breakthrough by the forces of III Panzer Corps to Melikhovo substantially complicated the situation of the Soviet troops on the boundary between the 6th Guards and 7th Guards Armies. Real prospects arose for a further exploitation of Army Detachment Kempf’s offensive in the direction of Korocha along the corridor between the Northern Donets and Razumnaia Rivers. In addition, the distance between the forces of Hoth’s and Kempf’s shock groupings had noticeably decreased. On the morning of 7 July, the SS Panzergrenadier Division \textit{Totenkopf} also began to show high activity; its attacks against the right flank of the 375th Rifle Division out of the Soshenkov – Visloe area in the direction of Gostishchevo noticeably increased. The SS troops were striving to seize this junction of dirt and railroads, in order to reach the highway that connected the major villages of Gostishchevo, Sabynino, Melikhovo and Dal’niaia Igumenka. By the end of the day, the 6th Panzer Division and SS Panzergrenadier Division \textit{Totenkopf} were separated by just 17-18 kilometers as the crow flies.
The fact alone of the breakthrough of the 25th Guards Rifle Corps' line by von Oppeln-Bronikowski's *panzerkampfgruppe* over a relatively short interval of time (between morning and 1600), and the haste with which the Soviet side was organizing a defense along the Dal'niaia Igumenka – Melikhovo line showed the German command that the most heavily fortified, and thus most difficult sector of the Russians' defenses had finally been overcome. In addition, the 81st Guards Rifle Division, the line of which was the cornerstone of Vatutin's plan to keep the Fourth Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf separate, had been placed in a very difficult situation. The movement into its sector of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division, a significant portion of the commanders of which (primarily of the units and headquarters) lacked a large amount of combat experience in command of the division and its units (their arrival at the front in a disheveled condition is a vivid confirmation of this assertion), was unable to strengthen the line reliably as had been planned by the Front command. It had been necessary to reinforce the 81st Guards Rifle Division, but in fact the "fragmentation" of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division, which eventually wound up struck by the spearhead of III Panzer Corps' attack, negatively influenced the strength of the defense on the boundary between the 6th Guards and 7th Guards Armies. Indeed, this became clear to everyone already on the next day, 8 July, but it was impossible to correct the situation. The supposition arises that the Soviet side (primarily N.F. Vatutin) simply didn't expect such a swift advance by the Germans on the operation's third day. In the opposite case, the 305th Rifle Division, which the Front Commander-in-Chief ordered only on the morning of 8 July to move out urgently in order to cover the boundary between the two Guards armies, might have already been positioned in the Dal'niaia Igumenka – Melikhovo – Shliakhovoe sector already on 7 July. Incidentally, N.F. Vatutin himself didn't pass along the assessment of the situation that came together northeast of Belgorod on 7 July, even though, for example, in a later conversation with P.A. Rotmistrov, he expressed his regrets about the decisions that were taken to launch a number of counterattacks on the Oboian' – Prokhorovka axis in the first days of Operation Citadel. From the archival documents, only one thing is clear: the General of the Army Vatutin believed that the command of the 92nd Guards Rifle Division and that of the 35th Guards Rifle Corps had proved to be unable to carry out an elementary task – to move troops to a designated area in a timely manner and without any snags or hitches.

In the situation that had developed by 7 July, the stubbornly defending 81st Guards Rifle Division was for Kempf like a bone in the throat. The unbending resistance of this division very much obstructed his troops from covering the Fourth Panzer Army's right flank. In the documents of the German divisions, the staff officers with plain irritation were calling its line "a wasps' nest". However, with each passing day it became ever more difficult for the Guardsmen to hold on, and a particularly hard situation arose on the evening of 7 July. Indeed, this was not only because of the large losses suffered thus far, although they were painful. By the end of the day, the division commander had been deprived of the possibility to use virtually any of his assets. Back on 6 July, under enemy pressure and because of large losses, the 265th Cannon Artillery Regiment had been transferred to a different sector. On the night of 6-7 July, because of the threat that the enemy would capture its howitzers, he withdrew the 161st Cannon Artillery Regiment from the area of Blizhniaia Igumenka to Iastrebovo. The 114th Guards Destroyer Anti-tank Artillery Regiment had been transferred to him in order to reinforce the Iastrebovo, Sevriukovo and Miasoedovo area of defense, but the 97th Guards Mortar Regiment was withdrawn from his operational control back on 5 July. In addition, virtually all of the tanks of the 262nd Separate Heavy Tank Regiment had been knocked out of action, while the 290th Mortar Regiment had lost half of its materiel. I will remind the reader also that one battalion of the 81st Guards Rifle Division's 173rd Guards Artillery Regiment had been completely destroyed on 6 July at the "Day of Harvest" collective farm. It is easy to imagine the situation of a division commander who'd been deprived of such a significant amount of heavy weapons and who was still facing the pressure of a superior foe.