

STORM AND STEEL



BRAD SMITH

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By Brad Smith

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Foreword

As with most of my stories, this one began with a game. “Superpowers at War” is an operational level wargame where the Warsaw Pact and NATO fight for the fate of Central Europe in a hypothetical World War III set in the mid-1980s. You can find it yourself by grabbing an old copy of the March/April 1985 issue of *Strategy & Tactics*. Designed by David Cook and Douglas Niles, the game features two scenarios – the first of which (“Drive on Munich”) this book was based on. During each play, I consistently found that the major problem with the Warsaw Pact was keeping lines of supply open all the way to Munich. The West German player's defense in the north always seemed to center around one key city – that of Landshut. This city also happened to be the headquarters for the 24th Panzer Brigade at the time in which this book is set, in May 1985.

There were a couple of other factors that led me to choose Bavaria as the setting for this book. The first was the terrain. Characterized by lush and beautiful rolling hills, valleys, and mountains, this area of Germany provides a unique challenge for modern tank warfare. Engagement ranges are far shorter than in the wide-open northern plain, somewhat balancing out NATO's considerable advantage in long-range striking ability. On the other hand, the high ground acts very much like a funnel for the Warsaw Pact, which must stick to the roads and highways in order to achieve military objectives in a demanding timeframe. To that end, it falls to the West German army (the “Heer”) to constantly delay and ambush the enemy as it drives relentlessly west.

The other factor that made this setting interesting for me was the idea of considering such a war from the perspective of the Germans. Although there are many excellent books about such a war might have been fought from an American (see “Team Yankee”) or British perspective (see “Chieftains”), there isn’t much out there about how the Germans themselves would have seen and felt about such a conflict. In this situation, their military would not be fighting for political goals or ideals but for the very sake of their family and friends. The Germans would be the center of a major conflict for the third time in less than a century. How would this one be different from the other two wars? The last time the Soviets and the Germans fought each other, civilians on both sides paid a horrifying cost. The sheer brutality of the war had a tremendous psychological effect on both sides and resulted in an enmity that characterized much of the Cold War era. An invasion of Western Europe remained a frightening possibility for so long after the Second World War ended not only because of the region’s considerable wealth and ideological opposition to the Soviet system but also because of the lingering sentiment that old scores had not been completely settled.

My aim here was to write an entertaining story. As a result, I’ve taken liberties. One of them was to use American instead of German rank structures in an effort to ease the burden on the reader of having to discern the relationships among characters. The other was to “accelerate” the upgrade timeline slightly for the Leopard 1 tanks in the story. Some of the technology, such as the fire control and the PERI systems, did not appear on the Leopard 1 tank until the 1A5 was produced in 1987, two years after the setting of this book. I chose to go with these upgrades because it helped to highlight the technological gap that existed between the two armies.

Secondly, the radio chatter is written in a much more conversational tone than any military would use. Codenames, grid coordinates, phase lines, reference points, all add to the authenticity of a book but the more I aimed for that authenticity, the more tedious it became to read. For that reason, I wrote to the “spirit” of the communication instead of using real military radio jargon and lingo.

Finally, I need to say that I don’t know what kind of tactics were being taught at the armor school in Munster in the 1980s. Mohr’s central problem at the start of the story is a hook meant to pull readers through the story. Although the specifics may be implausible for the story’s setting, the issue is one that many commanders have likely faced throughout history – the problem of stepping into the shoes of a beloved former leader who has ruled through charisma rather than ability. By the time the novel begins, Mohr has inherited a host of problems caused by the previous company commander and the chickens have finally come home to roost.

I based the book on real defensive concepts that were being discussed and practiced for in the defense of Europe at the time. The basic operations are dealt with in the book at the company level.

My major sources for this book are as follows:

Burt, J. & Meyer, Hank (Maj). “The Bundeswehr: Its Mission, Organization, and Doctrine”, CounterAttack. October 1987.

Cook, David. “Die Bundeswehr: The Shield of NATO”, Strategy & Tactics. March/April 1985.

Dauber, Peter F. (LTC). “The German Armored Combat Troops”, Infantry. May/June 1983.

I debated whether or not to provide maps in the book or links to the locations I have mentioned. In the end, I chose to omit these not out of laziness but out of concern for copyright violations in the former case, and text readability and presentation in the latter. Maps of these places can be easily found online through Google Maps or Google Earth but I have tried to provide enough description so that it’s not vital to consult them. Those who do enjoy checking maps will notice that at a micro level, the fictional world in the story does not adhere exactly to the real-world geography at times. Some of the hilly terrain around Aiterhofen, for example, is actually much further south than depicted. For dramatic purposes, I have had to make these adjustments to better synchronize events that are happening in the story.

Storm and Steel



Chapter 1

Kurt Mohr was fumbling with his unlit cigarette when he heard Hoffman stumble towards him.

“Do you really think it’s going to happen?”

The tank driver who posed the question stood ten feet away in the dark forest clearing. Though it was night, the full moon illuminated the young man’s face, the light catching his wet eyes.

Captain Mohr understood the young man’s distress. He had been on alerts many times before but something about this one just felt different. For one, the nearby town had been quietly evacuated the evening before. That was new. There were concerns that the other towns and cities to the west would be evacuated too but the rumor going around was that the German government didn’t want to provoke the Soviets further now that NATO had raised its alert level.

After a short internal debate as to whether it was better to tell a comforting lie or an unhappy truth, Mohr decided to go with honesty. “I don’t know. But we’d better be prepared for it,” he said. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a busy day. War or no war.”

Private Hoffman nodded and turned away, walking slowly back through the clearing towards the dark outline of the Leopard tank. At a geriatric pace, he slouched under the camouflage netting, mounted the hull, and slid through the driver’s hatch.

For the first time since yesterday morning, Mohr was finally alone with only his thoughts to keep him company. How absurd it was to have his daily routine ripped out from under him while politicians debated and men he had never met prepared to kill him.

Less than eighteen hours ago, he had been wolfing breakfast down at the officer's mess hall in Landshut, eighty kilometers to the west. Instead of the usual friendly banter among the men of the 24th Panzer Battalion, there was only grim silence as they watched the ARD morning news report. The lead story showed the grainy footage of an American destroyer on fire and sinking near the coast of Bahrain. It was followed by President Ronald Reagan speaking from the Oval Office. The American leader accused the Soviets of the "terrorist" act and showed satellite imagery and naval intercepts that proved a new Alfa-class submarine had been ordered to fire its torpedoes at the ship. The provocation was characterized as a serious escalation of the month-long buildup of tensions between the superpowers over the proxy wars being fought in the Middle East.

Before Reagan's speech was over, the brigade general walked into the mess hall and announced all leave was canceled immediately. NATO's colored alert level was now Orange. Such an alert indicated a high probability of an enemy attack within 36 hours. Everyone sat there stunned. Mohr stubbed out his cigarette and picked up the ink-smeared sheaf of papers that detailed his marching orders east towards the border with Czechoslovakia. His tank company was only a small cog in the big wheel of the 1st Mountain Division, but he was determined that it would do its part to keep West Germans safe from the Red Army.

By 0800, the entire 244th Mountain Tank Battalion was heading straight down Route 92 along with the rest of the 24th Panzer Brigade based out of Landshut. Their mission was to mount a mobile defense of the main roads and highways that would take the Czechoslovakian and Soviet tanks west over the Danube River, towards Landshut, and onwards to Munich.

By the time they had completed the eighty-kilometer march, Mohr felt completely drained. The men of the company were exhausted too and with not a few complaints, everyone began the drudgery of digging into their initial fighting positions near the small town of Grafling. The work continued through the evening and late into the night. Mercifully, an engineering team showed up after dark with a bulldozer to create the high berms from which the tanks could fire behind. Pits were also dug into the nearby hills for the Leopards to shoot from, their hulls afforded cover by the surrounding ground. The infantry slaved away among the pine trees, digging foxholes and trenches. All around him had been a buzz of activity throughout the day and night. Now he and his men and tanks were resting in concealed positions on a hillside, waiting for World War III to begin.

Mohr stood here with an unlit cigarette in his mouth, trying his best to relax. He gazed down the long gentle slope of the hill where he stood. Below sat the sleepy little Bavarian town of Grafling, just a stone's throw away from the Czechoslovakian border. If and when war came, he would experience his first taste of it here. Was he really ready for it? His hand shook as he fumbled with the lighter twice more before giving up. He tried to focus in on his thoughts and identify the main source of his anxiety. Maybe then he could eliminate it, just like shooting an enemy tank caught in

the crosshairs of his gunner's sights.

His mind drifted to the men who served under him. They were flawed human beings, just like he was. Despite what the Hollywood movies showed, enlistment in the military did not automatically bestow moral purity or quality of character upon those who signed up. For every resourceful and hard-working soldier he encountered, there were the shirkers and the idiots to balance it out. The vast majority of the Heer's members were simply average people who were content to do their jobs each day and go home like in any other organization. Each army was a cross-section of the society from which its members came. The great leveler among all these different people was the training they were given. This was what allowed an army to go about the business of killing and dying.

The tank crews in his company had plenty of training. They had conducted extensive maneuver and live-fire exercises in Shilo, Canada. They had also taken part in annual REFORGER exercises that allowed the NATO forces to work together and practice the tactics they would need to use in the event of a war with the Warsaw Pact. Of course, there were also the countless hours spent in the simulators at Grafenwohr, where the crews would run through drills again and again until each action was automatic. After the simulation ended, each decision was then analyzed. The instructors were brutally honest and unafraid to point out every mistake, constantly pushing the crews to work harder and more efficiently.

Morale was not an issue either. They all knew what was at stake. Germany was their home. Their families and friends were here. No one was being asked to fight for any abstract concepts like freedom or capitalism.

Fighting a defensive war here was a simple matter of survival – an assertion of the right to exist. They would all fight until they had either won or were killed. Mohr had absolutely no doubt of it.

The habits and tactics of the company were, however, an issue. Mohr was a new company commander who had transferred into the unit only six weeks ago. When he first embarked with the company on a field exercise, the results were less than encouraging. Instead of moving and firing, the platoon leaders simply parked their tanks on the reverse slopes of the hills near the enemy team's objective and sat there. When contact was made and the mock battle began, Mohr had screamed at his platoon leaders to move. No one had listened. /p>

One of the tank companies playing the part of the “red” side surrounded each of Mohr's platoons and picked the tanks apart. After it was over, the platoon leaders matter-of-factly placed the blame on Mohr. They were quick to point out how the men were used to doing things a certain way. The “certain way” was the result of years of coddling by the much-loved Captain Harting, the previous company commander. Harting had recently been promoted and Mohr was transferred in only six weeks ago to replace him.

From what Mohr could piece together from the platoon leader and battalion reports, Harting had taken a relaxed approach to the business of battle tactics. He had apparently thought the main purpose of a tank was to simply sit there and blast away at targets from long range. His concept of maneuver began and ended with getting the tank to and from the battlefield. These were not the type of tactics that Mohr had been taught at the armor

school in Munster. There, he had learned to use decisive and swift movement throughout the battle. The purpose of a tank, his instructors said, was to create not only destruction but total chaos. The former was caused by firepower and the latter was created by movement. Once the enemy commander was in a purely reactive state, you got inside his decision cycle and ripped him apart.

Mohr had explained these concepts to his platoon leaders and they had intellectually understood them but it was hard to overcome human inertia. Things had improved slightly over the next few weeks but the men stubbornly clung to the older and easier way of doing things. Mohr had no doubt that over time, 2 Company would be transformed into a tank force that employed the latest in armor tactics with great skill. But that time had run out and now they were about to go to war. How could he retrain a tank company in the middle of a war? Should he even try?

The question shifted slightly in Mohr's mind. Would the tank perform as advertised?

He turned towards his Leopard 1A4 tank sitting silently in the darkness. Designed by Porsche, it was a 40-ton steel beast that he had trained on for the last five years. The firepower of its Royal Ordnance 105mm main gun was impressive but the newer tanks were being upgraded to 120mm. There were loud debates among tankers as to whether the older tank's main gun would be enough to penetrate the armor of the new generation of Soviet main battle tanks.

The Leopard's thick steel armor was supposed to provide its crew a decent level of protection. It was of a previous generation and there were

serious questions about whether the armor would stand up to a 120mm enemy tank round. Mohr doubted his tank would survive a hit to the hull side or rear but the turret front armor might survive a round. Mohr hoped to never find out the answer.

The technology inside the tank had been modified throughout its twenty-year production span. Mohr's tank had recently been upgraded under the German army's accelerated modernization program. The new fire control system was a tank gunner's dream. The gunner's powerful ballistic computer could automatically adjust the main gun's elevation and movement to ensure a hit on moving targets, even while his tank was moving at the same time. The latest round of tinkering had resulted in a thermal sight being added, which allowed Mohr's tank to fight even at night.

The tank commander's PERI system worked much like a submariner's periscope. Mohr could sit safely inside the tank and look through its viewer to get a 360-degree view of the battlefield at two and eight times magnification. He also had a monitor that allowed him to see exactly what the gunner was looking at. Mohr could even override the gunner and fire the main gun himself. Although it was quickly becoming obsolete, the Leopard 1 was still a deadly killing machine designed with one mission in mind – destroying Soviet hardware.

Of all the doubts and certainties to consider, the one he worried the most about was himself. Was he ready?

This question could not be answered so easily as the others. He was an inexperienced company commander, having just finished a heavy load of demanding courses at the armor school in Munster. Brought in from I Corps

up north, he did not have enough time to get familiar with the terrain in Lower Bavaria or the men he worked with. During the short time he had been here, he encountered a mix of uncertainty from the enlisted men and thinly-veiled hostility from his platoon leaders. There was no way around his inexperience and Mohr hoped it wouldn't prove a liability here in the field.

Colonel Donner, the battalion commander had taken Mohr aside just after his transfer and confided in him.

"I need someone to shake up 2 Company a little," he said. "Make changes – but don't go too fast. I have faith in you."

Mohr wasn't sure if the faith was misplaced. Could he really lead this company into war? It seemed like a huge challenge for a kid who grew up without role models of his own. The fifth of seven children, Kurt Mohr had grown up in a turbulent home that lacked in everything but strife and hardship. Having an alcoholic father who never offered the guidance he so needed while growing up was somehow worse than being a child of acrimonious divorce. At least those kids never had to hide or make up stories about the bruises that materialized every so often. How was he supposed to be a father figure when he had had none of his own? The responsibilities of a company commander were enormous. Not only was he the commander of his own tank with its four-man crew but he was also responsible for leading four platoons of three Leopard tanks each.

As war approached, the complexity grew along with the added burdens. Just before the march east, Colonel Donner had swapped out one of Mohr's tank platoons in exchange for a platoon of panzergrenadier infantry. As if

that weren't enough, he gave Mohr a pair of Luchs scout cars, a flak battery of two Gepards for air defense, and a pair of Jaguar armored vehicles with HOT anti-tank missile launchers.

The weight of command bore down hard on Mohr's conscience. All those men out there in the dark were counting on him to make the right decisions. Some of those right decisions would involve sending them to their own deaths.

He pulled a poncho over his head and lit the last HB of the day. Inhaling deeply, he tried to find some peace within himself. As the small roll of tobacco burned down to its filter, he swore to himself that he would do everything he could to protect his homeland. If he only did that then nothing else mattered.

Mohr climbed in the tank, shut the hatch above him and slept like a baby.

Chapter 2

Mohr awoke to a series of hard taps on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to find Lieutenant Muller looking down at him through the commander's hatch, his face creased with the ravages of wearing a lifelong scowl. A 15-year veteran of the regular land forces, Muller had come up through the enlisted ranks. During the long span of time spent serving as an NCO, he had enjoyed a reputation among his subordinates as notoriously difficult to please. On the other hand, he put up with little nonsense from the junior officers and was quick to point out their shortcomings when the fate of his men was being placed into their soft hands.

One of the tank platoon leaders, Lieutenant Kessel, had confided in Mohr that he had never once seen the man smile in all the years he had known him. In fact, no one else had either. Apparently, there was a betting pool among the men in the battalion. Whomsoever could get Muller to crack a smile or laugh would win a handsome sum of money. The pool had begun at some point in the late 1970s and it had never paid out.

Private Lange, the tank's loader, sat in the turret to Mohr's left. He was running through his checklist. Pulling his attention away from the little green notebook in his hand, Lange glanced over at him. The private's words spilled out in a groggy haze. "Good morning, sir. The radio's been quiet."

"Get some sleep," said Mohr, before he climbed up out of the commander's hatch.

Stepping outside the quiet armored cocoon of the tank, Mohr's senses

were suddenly assaulted by the outside world. The sun's rays reached up over the hill to the east, blanketing the valley below. The rotors of a nearby AH-1 Cobra beat the air. Mohr stretched while the aroma of hot coffee permeated his nostrils.

Muller grunted and thrust a plastic cup at him. Mohr mumbled a thanks and did his best to avoid making eye contact.

"My men are dug in," said Muller, his voice hoarse. "We have trenches and foxholes dug all along the tree line. The Marders are positioned further up the hillside."

Mohr grimaced at the first mouthful of the black bitter drink. After the third gulp, his tongue was so burnt that he could no longer taste anything. He counted his blessings and pulled out a topographical map of the area, orienting the top of it to face north. As he smoothed out its tattered edges, two of his tank platoon leaders stumbled through the undergrowth. Lieutenants Kessel and Unger both wore their web gear and carried MP2 submachine guns.

Mohr looked around for any sign of the remaining platoon leader. "Where's Schmitt?"

"He said he was very busy, sir," said Kessel sheepishly.

Mohr sighed and began the briefing.

"Let's go over the plan again, shall we? Battalion intelligence indicates that the Russians will likely come down this way fast and hard down Route 11. They'll want to take the town of Grafling right here and then move down

the highway southwest towards the city of Deggendorf. Once there, any competent commander would seize a bridge over the Danube and rush across. On the west bank, Route 11 turns into Route 92, which runs straight west through Landshut along the north bank of the Isar River, and all the way to Munich. From there, it's just an hour's drive to Stuttgart. If the Russians get there, the US VII Corps will be outflanked and we can expect the war to end very soon."

Mohr looked around again and checked his watch. Schmitt was late. Very late. He continued.

"The battalion's 1st and 3rd Companies are protecting our flanks to the north and south. The other brigades in the division have taken up position along the east bank of the Danube. The 10th reconnaissance battalion is located to the east in the Bavarian National Park with elements of the US 2d Armored Cavalry from Camp May. The Russians will hit them first, giving us just enough time to get into position on the reverse slope of those two big hills on either side of the highway near Grafling."

"When the enemy comes, we'll fight a delaying withdrawal along the length of the highway all the way to the outskirts of Deggendorf. We are not here to hold territory. We are here to slow the enemy down until French and American reinforcements can arrive. That could be a matter of days or even weeks. So we will need to work very hard. Everyone following so far?"

There was only a chilly silence to answer. Mohr put down the map and gestured towards the highway that ran through the valley below.

"The enemy's main objective in this sector will be to push as many tanks

and men as they can down the highway and seize any one of the three bridges at Deggendorf. Their goal is not to fight or even win a battle with us. Nor will the enemy commander be concerned about the prospect of heavy losses. As a matter of fact, they are likely expecting our ambush. Like us, they have had forty years to study in great detail the terrain and the major routes to the west.”

“To achieve their objective, the enemy will rely on strength in numbers and the destructive power of artillery. The artillery’s purpose will be to disorient us just long enough to get as many tanks down the road as possible. Expect an initial heavy barrage followed by smoke and possibly even chemical weapons.”

“I have examined the terrain once again this morning. If we string our tanks along the roads and sit here holding our positions until we’re either destroyed or forced to retreat, the enemy will roll past us and achieve its objective. What we’ll be doing instead is mounting a mobile and well-timed series of defensive actions. We’ll be firing and moving constantly to keep them off balance. They will be shooting back at ghosts, all the while running through the kill zone of a mobile ambush.”

Mohr paused and looked at each man. Unger shook his head.

“You have something to add, Lieutenant Unger?”

“Captain Harting would have mined the road and set up a static ambush. When the enemy comes, we would just pour artillery down on them and be done with it,” said Unger. “What makes your plan any better?”

Mohr froze. It was damn rude of the man to word it like that, but he had

a point. If there was one thing the German military had learned from its past, it was that its soldiers should be able to ask questions. In fact, the armor school had encouraged its students to do the same. It was the sign of a good officer.

“Just as I explained, lieutenant. The enemy will call artillery down on our positions if we simply sit here,” said Mohr. “Once that happens, we’ll no longer be in control of the battle. If we keep moving and firing, we’ll be causing maximum confusion. By the time they fire at our position with artillery strikes, we’ll have already moved on. We’ll also seem like a much larger force than we really are. We keep the enemy off-balance and guessing as to our size, intention, and position. Schmitt and Unger’s platoons will be on the western hill leapfrogging each other all the way south. Muller’s infantry squads will be doing the same on the eastern hill.”

Unger folded his arms. “It’s a nice idea but what you propose isn’t easy to pull off – even in training.”

“That’s true, but I am sure you can do it,” said Mohr. “I’ll be on the western hill coordinating each tank platoon over the radio. If something happens to my tank, you’ll coordinate with each other over the radios. If the jamming prevents that, you’ll need to do it visually. Orient yourselves to each other.”

Mohr turned to Muller.

“As you know, it’s mostly thick forest near the top of the east hill. Perfect concealment for infantry. There’s a long firebreak running along the crest. You will park your Marders along the firebreak and move your

MILAN teams down the slope to concealed positions at the edge of the tree line about 100 meters apart. When I give the order, fire off your missiles downrange then go back up the hill and load up on the Marder. Move south along the firebreak to the next firing position. One team moves while the other fires. Constant fire and movement. Keep the enemy off balance. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. You want my infantry to race up and down the hill in MOPP gear carrying a full load of ammunition and weapons," said Muller, the quiet disapproval evident in his voice.

Mohr cleared his throat. "I would suggest pre-positioning ammunition and equipment in your firing positions. That way your men won't have to lug the missiles or the launchers up and down the hill."

Mohr pointed over to the west hill on the map and spoke to Unger. "When the main body of the enemy force arrives, Schmitt's platoon will roll over the crest, get into firing position, and start shooting down into the valley. After each tank fires, he will reverse his tanks back over the crest and move south. While that happens, your platoon will come forward to my right, get into position and then fire. Take out the closest tanks first. If the enemy manages to deploy infantry nearby, pop smoke and move away. We don't want to get tied down in a firefight engagement while the enemy tanks roll by us."

"That's all well and good," said the fair-haired junior officer. "But what if they come right for the hills instead of down the highway?"

"Like I said yesterday," said Mohr, trying not to grind his teeth. "I'll be

listening to the scouts to pinpoint where the enemy is heading. In the unlikely event they do come that way, we'll shift our orientation to meet them as they come over the hills to the north. We'll follow the same principle. Shoot and move back south. We'll just be firing at them from a different angle. You and Schmitt will orient your movement with each other."

Mohr pointed to the map and drew a single dark line on it, just west of Grafling's location. "Once we've inflicted enough damage, I'll give the order to pull back south. Come off the hills and move along the highway as fast as you can. The M109s will fire smoke rounds to provide some cover during the withdrawal. The company will cross over the center bridge through Deggendorf. Once you're across, count your men quickly because the battalion engineers will blow the bridge as soon as I give the order. Hopefully, we'll have given the first enemy wave a real bloody nose by then."

Mohr grinned and stared at the platoon leaders. If any enthusiasm had developed for his plan since yesterday, their faces betrayed no hint of it.

Kessel put a hand up as if he were a nervous schoolboy addressing a cantankerous headmaster. "Sir, I've noticed the plan is a little different from yesterday. Specifically, you've forgotten about my platoon." He looked at Unger and Muller with a slight grin.

"I haven't forgotten," said Mohr. "During the ambush, I want your men to move around the enemy flanks, hitting at their weak points. You'll harass and disrupt enemy movement during the initial stages of the battle. I want you to think like the fucking Vietcong. Hit them as hard as you can and then

pull back here. I want you to talk directly to the scouts. They'll find the soft targets and you'll kill them as fast as you can."

There was a long silence. The map fluttered in the early morning breeze.

"You'll have no reserve," said Muller softly. His tone made it sound like an accusation rather than a statement.

"You want to send Kessel's platoon on a hunting trip," Unger said sourly.

Muller's face looked like he had just swallowed an entire lemon. "What if they run into enemy air?"

"Hopefully, Kessel's platoon won't get that far away from us. I want a fast hit and then pull right back. If you do run into air, abort and get back here immediately," said Mohr, his frustration growing. "As for the reserve, I'll only send off Kessel's tanks if things are going well for us here. Muller will lend him one of his Marders loaded up with a squad of men."

Muller coughed. "I mean no disrespect," he said quietly. "But this terrain isn't favorable to tank tactics. I know I Corps is wide open for maneuver. But down here in Bavaria, these kinds of moves might not work so well."

Mohr's face grew red as he tried to hold back his anger.

"Gentlemen, this is the plan we are working with today," he said. "I appreciate your input and I have already factored it into my decisions. I have complete confidence in you and your men that you'll execute these orders to the best of your ability. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll have to go find Lieutenant Schmitt and conduct yet another briefing for his benefit. I

suggest you get back to your platoons for stand-to. Maintain complete radio silence. If the shooting starts, only then will we use the radios. In that case, keep your communications to less than ten seconds. The enemy has direction-finding equipment that they can use to pinpoint us.”

The platoon leaders glanced at each other before turning away and heading back to their men. Mohr watched them walk off and shook his head. “Well, that was pleasant,” he said to himself.

Alone again, Mohr’s self-doubt returned. He understood the men’s apprehension. The last-minute change to the plan created more stress and complications for everyone. They were used to a gentler hand to guide them, a kind fatherly figure who used charm and favors to coddle the men into complacency. But the price for that would be paid if they went to war. Parking a tank in a single spot and blasting away from a static position had a certain appeal. Given how the latest tank technology and armor seemed to perform modern miracles, it was easy to buy into the fantasy of an impervious steel beast effortlessly claiming its place as the king of the modern battlefield.

In Munster, he had been taught that a kind of technology fetish had infected the senior leadership of West Germany’s military over the last two decades. In place of tactics and training, the Bundeswehr had become too reliant on computers to solve their problems. Only in the last two or three years had this perspective slowly shifted.

During Mohr’s studied at the armor school, the younger teachers had led a quiet revolution of their own by breaking a long-held taboo. The men had studied Wehrmacht tactics used during Hitler’s war. Technology without the

use of solid tactics was useless, he had been told. Although he and the other students found it distasteful at first, the teachers had been careful to present only observable facts and empirical evidence to support their teachings. What they showed was that there was no way that West German's Heer could hope to win a war unless they learned from the past, as unpleasant as that past had been.

Mohr fought down the sudden urge to vomit. He poured out the thick hot sludge onto the ground and returned to his tank in a foul mood.

Chapter 3

Somewhere nearby, Private Hoffman hummed “99 Luft Balloons” while relieving himself against a tree.

Mohr strode over to “Two One”, his company HQ Leopard tank, and opened the commander’s hatch. Down inside the turret, Fischer sat at the gunner’s station eating a chocolate bar. The tank stank of hot farts, body odor, and half-eaten MREs. With four men sleeping, eating, and working together in its confines, the tank’s stench was more or less permanent. Only the intensity varied. This morning was especially foul and Mohr held his breath as Fischer stared back up at him, his angular jaw moving like a cow chewing her cud.

“I’m heading off to check on Alpha platoon,” said Mohr. “I’ll be back at 0600. Keep an ear on the radio.”

Fischer smacked his lips together loudly. “Yes, sir. But if Private Hoffman sings that goddamn song one more time, you may have one less member of the company when you return,” he said.

Mohr listened for a moment to Hoffman’s off-key rendition warbling from nearby. “Yeah...that’s okay,” he replied.

He walked through the trees and light brush that thinned out further down the slope and found his way over to Schmitt’s position. The sun had just come up over the hills to the east. Fighter jets high above raced towards the border and turned back west at the last second. Mohr watched them

while he walked, regretting it when his foot caught on a tree stump, sending him crashing to the ground. His knee stung painfully and he swore to himself as he got up and limped the rest of the short journey. “Fucking war hasn’t even started and I’m already injured,” he growled to himself.

Schmitt’s tanks were parked in among a small group of tall pine trees. Draped over them was the camouflage netting that concealed them from the air. Mohr stepped on a branch. Crack! There was panicked movement.

A stuttering voice called out from near the trees.

“Halt! Step forward. Identify and give the password,” it said in high-pitched terror.

Mohr froze, racking his brain and hoping he would not be killed this morning by a sentry whose voice sounded like a twelve-year-old going through a rough patch of puberty.

He jarred his memory then shook his head. “Password is Nena. It’s Captain Mohr.”

After a short pause, Private Berger stood up from his dugout, his MP2 submachine gun leveled at Mohr. “Oh! Captain Mohr,” he said smiling. “Pass forward, sir.”

“Good job, Private Berger,” said Mohr. “Now would you mind perhaps pointing your weapon away from me?”

The sentry looked down in shock at the weapon in his trembling hands. “Oh,” he said, before lowering it.

Mohr walked through the trees into the clearing. He found Schmitt standing in his turret. When he saw Mohr approach, the lieutenant ducked down into his tank. Mohr clutched his submachine gun tightly, wondering if the army would really try to prosecute an incident of fratricide just before the start of a major war. Two full minutes passed before Schmitt popped his head up again, like a gopher emerging from his hole.

“You have your men preparing their positions?” asked Mohr.

Schmitt pointed over towards the crest of the hill. “They’ve been up there half the night digging,” he said. “We’ll be ready.”

Mohr bit his tongue at this news. He wanted the men in his company to be fresh and ready for combat if it came – not exhausted from digging in. Schmitt had interpreted Mohr’s orders last night in such a way that his men were being treated like slaves. There was also the issue that the men were now out there on the exposed side of the hill. If the enemy saw them, their positions would be reported and they would lose the element of surprise.

“Well, I want you to pull your men off that detail immediately and rest them,” said Mohr. “Make sure they’re properly fed and relaxed.”

Schmitt shrugged. “I was about to do just that,” he said.

“Good,” said Mohr. “Can I see you for a minute? I’d like to talk to you about why you weren’t at this morning’s briefing,” said Mohr. “I’m sure you have a very good reason.”

Schmitt ducked back down inside his tank again.

Mohr's patience was at an end. "Lieutenant Schmitt! You come down from that tank right now. That is an order!" He climbed up on Schmitt's tank and flung open the hatch, half-surprised it wasn't combat-locked. Schmitt looked up at Mohr, his face clenched in silent rage.

"Lieutenant, dismount immediately. That's an order," said Mohr, trying his best to sound calm.

Schmitt slowly clambered up out of the turret. They both hopped down from the hull into the untamed grass. Mohr looked around to see several of the men in Schmitt's platoon trying hard not to stare at what was happening right before their eyes.

"Follow me," said Mohr. They walked away from the tanks and down the hill until Mohr was satisfied they were both out of earshot of the men.

"I was so busy that I forgot about the morning briefing," muttered Schmitt.

Mohr shook his head. "You'll see to it that from now on, you'll be at each morning briefing before the other platoon leaders arrive or I'll have you on report." He took out his map and unfolded it. "Now let's go over the plan together, shall we?"

Schmitt stood like a stone as Mohr gave the same briefing, word for word, as he had given earlier. By the time he had finished, his seething anger had subsided to a dull annoyance.

"Any questions?" asked Mohr.

“No sir,” said Schmitt. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get back to my platoon.”

“Dismissed,” Mohr told him. Schmitt gave a salute so crisp that it could only be mocking in its intended effect. Mohr nodded. “We don’t salute out here, lieutenant. The enemy might see that and decide it’s a grand idea to blow my head off.”

Schmitt smirked and walked back up the hill towards his platoon.

Mohr limped carefully back up the slope towards his HQ tank. Since arriving at the battalion six weeks ago, Mohr’s relationship with Schmitt had been tense but today marked a new low.

Colonel Donner had explained the situation after Mohr had already accepted the transfer and arrived at Landshut.

Lieutenant Schmitt had been a protege of sorts to Captain Harting and was being groomed to take over as company commander. A promotion was in the works and Schmitt’s application to the armor school had already been accepted. He had even been placed on a year-long waiting list to begin the course.

Donner had seen the problems stemming from Harting’s style of leadership and wanted to put an end to it. Bringing in a new company commander from outside the regular intake would circumvent Schmitt’s planned ascendancy to the position of company commander. Gradually, the reasons for Mohr’s sudden transfer from I Corps down to Bavaria were clear. Donner had set Mohr up as usurper to Harting’s throne. The company

would be transformed from a bureaucratic fiefdom into a well-led fighting force using the latest armor tactics.

Schmitt had led his own little quiet rebellion against Mohr over the last six weeks. He found subtle ways to embarrass and undermine the new company commander by intentionally failing inspections or raising awkward questions in front of the enlisted men. Mohr wondered if he should replace Schmitt but decided not to push too many changes too soon. Given enough time, maybe he would come around. But now war was coming and there simply was no time left to straighten the man out. They were stuck with each other, like a dysfunctional marriage.

What were his options? He could go to Colonel Donner, report the incident and ask for a replacement. He would get it. But it would mean the men in the platoon would be working under a brand new platoon leader on the verge of possible hostilities. He would also look like he was unable to control his own men. Either way, such a move would certainly make an already bad situation worse.

Mohr cursed and swore to himself as he made his way towards his tank. By the time he found his way back, he had made his decision. Schmitt would stay – for now.

He picked up a stick and hurled it as hard as he could at a tree trunk. Why did he decide to take this fucking command?

As if in answer, the sound of artillery rumbled off near the horizon to the east.

War had come.

Chapter 4

Mohr stood in the cupola, his ears glued to the battalion radio net. Even though his tank's newly installed digital radio was supposedly impossible to jam or intercept, Colonel Donner had ordered radio traffic kept to an absolute minimum while the companies were in their deployment areas. He had also made it clear that Mohr and the other company commanders would only hear whether hostilities had commenced or war had been averted. Unfortunately, the battalion radio frequency was filled with a jumble of squeals and white noise. Mohr shrugged. Judging by the scream of artillery shells and the accompanying blasts off near the border, he didn't need to hear from Colonel Donner about which of the two events had occurred.

As of 0600, the men of 2nd Company were at war. It was time to let his platoon leaders know.

The ground underneath Mohr's tank trembled like a fawn in winter. The thunder of explosions continued unabated for two minutes. The men sat silently in the tank until Fischer shook his head. "The American cavalry must be getting totally destroyed out there," he said. "My god. This is really happening."

Mohr finished his radio check and let out a sigh, relieved that he could at least contact his subordinates despite the battalion net being jammed.

"Alright men, hostilities have begun," he said over his tank's intercom. "Let's move with the rest of the company towards our positions and prepare the welcoming party."

Hoffman drove the tank out of the clearing and traversed along the reverse slope of the hill. Mohr called a halt when the tank was one hundred meters to either side of Schmitt's and Unger's platoons. Kessel's platoon pulled in at the very bottom of the slope. Mohr wanted to say something brave and inspiring but decided it wasn't worth breaking radio silence once again. The time for talking was clearly over. He hoped Muller's men on the other hill were ready for battle.

Mohr took deep breaths and listened for the scout teams to report back. As he waited, he shed the layers of doubt and worry that had consumed his thoughts less than six hours ago. Now it was all very simple. They would succeed or they would fail. They would die or they would live. His future had shrunk from an array of vast possibilities to a cold steel binary. After what seemed like a very long time, he received a radio call from his lead scout troop. "Charlie Two One. Spot Report. You've got incoming friendlies coming west along the highway. Two Mike Threes. One Mike One. ETA one minute."

Mohr was suddenly filled with embarrassment. The scouts were good but he needed to see for himself what was happening on the other side of the hill. Why hadn't he considered such a basic step when creating his brilliant plan? "Hoffman, I want you to drive up towards the crest," he said. "I need to see down there what's happening for myself."

The Leopard 1 bumbled up towards the long spine of the hill, stopping just short of where the ground abruptly flattened out for less than a meter before beginning its sharp decline. From here, the tank was still largely concealed from any enemies below. Mohr leaned forward in the turret to see

what was happening on the highway running along the base of the hill.

Less than sixty seconds later, Mohr watched as a pair of battered M3 Bradleys drove in reverse at full speed south along Route 11. One of the vehicles had a series of large dents along its sides. It resembled a soup can that had been hurled down a very long flight of stairs. Thirty seconds later, an M-1 Abrams tank screamed backward down the road. Draped over the hull and turret were several wounded men, clinging on for dear life as the turbine engine whined like a jet fighter.

“Okay, that’s not good,” Mohr said to himself.

A wave of panic suddenly enveloped him. The last window of opportunity to run out of here was rapidly closing. All he had to do was climb out of the tank and run as fast as he could.

No! He fought back against the animal instincts rising up from within. His senses sharpened as he swallowed down his emotions, banished the fear and panic back to the darkness from where they came. This was his home. These were his men. They would fight and die for it. There was simply nowhere left to run.

The next sign of the enemy’s impending approach came in the form of a gigantic series of blasts in the nearby town of Grafling. Mohr closed the hatch and watched through the PERI as the little shops and houses buckled and collapsed into piles of lumber, brick, and concrete. Another round of shelling followed, churning the remains into a morass of greyish matter from which the original form of its contents was indiscernible. A huge column of smoke rose up from the scattered remains. And just like that, someone’s

hometown was reduced to only a memory in the minds of its former inhabitants.

Silence.

The ground shifted under the tank and Mohr watched the trembling of the little screen in front of him subside.

“Is that it?” asked Hoffman as the baritone grumble of the artillery strike receded. “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Hang on,” said Mohr. “I don’t think that’s it.”

The air above the tank was suddenly filled with the ear-splitting screech of hurtling metal. The first blows came down like a fist on a drumset. The ground under the tank bucked like a horse as the artillery splashed down near them. The tank crew rocked back and forth and side to side as the rounds fell over and over again.

Shards of shrapnel slapped at the tank’s armor. The ground shook and Mohr felt like it might just open them up swallow the tank whole. He had never felt so vulnerable in a tank before. He tried to keep down the rising panic inside of him as the artillery exploded again and again all around him. At one point, his monitor flickered on and off and he was scared that the vehicle’s delicate electronics would be damaged, rendering the million-dollar tank completely useless without even the chance to get a shot off at the enemy.

Lange looked over at him, an expression of frozen terror on his face.

“Reverse!” shouted Mohr, coming to his senses. He switched over to the

company net. “Alpha! Bravo! Charlie! Get the hell back down the hill!”

Buffeted by the pulverizing force of hundreds of tons of explosive artillery shells slamming down all around them, Two One flew back down the slope before coming to a halt at the base of the hill.

Mohr had never experienced anything like it before and wanted so much to never go through it again. He suddenly had an entirely new and real appreciation for the English term “shell shock”. Worse than anything was the feeling of being totally helpless, denied even the dignity of shooting back at the bastards who were trying to kill him.

Through his vision blocks, he watched his other tanks emerge from the thick black wall of dust and dirt that the massive artillery rounds had kicked up. The volume of the blasts gradually receded. Mohr could no longer hear the sick crunching sound of nearby impacts. He waited quietly as the slope in front of him was pulverized into a moonscape.

At long last, the rain of fire mercifully ceased. Mohr felt like he had just been on the losing end of a bar fight. His thoughts came to him from a foggy haze. His heart hammered in his chest, a physical reaction to his terror-stricken mind. Sounds came over his headset but could piece none of them together into any coherent whole. Fischer stared at him, his jaw slack in a shocked stupor.

Mohr squeezed his eyes shut, trying to summon the willpower to coax his faltering mind back to life. It was like pulling on the recoil start cord of his old dirt-bike, the engine sputtering and dying each time. With one enormous yank, his brain finally turned over. Mohr keyed his radio and

asked the scout team for a situation report.

The reply was calm and cool. “Two One be advised. You’ve got three lead tanks – Tango Five Fives – coming your way straight south towards you down Route 11. I count at least twenty more behind them. Looks like a battalion.” The scout gave him further details with map coordinates, speed, and distance. Mohr let the information sink in and tried to take the good with the bad.

He took a breath and spoke simply and clearly over the radio.

“Get ready,” he told the platoon leaders. “They’re coming.”

Chapter 5

“T-55s coming down the road,” Mohr said over the intercom. The older tank model hinted strongly that it was the Czechs coming through first. No matter, he thought. He was an equal opportunity tanker and would gladly service any targets they provided him, regardless of vintage or nationality.

Mohr spoke into his intercom, hoping that his voice would pull the other members of the tank back to reality after enduring the storm of steel and fire of the past ten minutes.

“Alright men, I know you were hoping to fight the Russians today but it looks like we’ll have to be satisfied with the Czechs. Their equipment is a bit older but at the ranges we’re dealing with, they’re still dangerous. They’ll probably be using lots of inaccurate close-range volley fire. We’ll be well protected in our fighting positions so don’t panic if things get hot. Fischer, make each shot count. I want accuracy over speed. Hoffman, be careful not to throw a track on the loose gravel near the crest. Alpha will be covering us, so there’s no need to drive like you’re at the racetrack. I’ll be busy on the radio for the most part so everybody remember your training and work as a team.”

“Yes sir!” he heard the shouts of his men echo through the tank’s enclosure.

Mohr peered through the periscope. The landscape outside the tank was completely shattered. Where once the hillsides had been green and lush, they were now dotted with smoking craters and shell holes. The artillery had cast

up a pall of dirt and smoke that blotted out the blue sky.

“Pull forward over the crest into our firing position,” he told Hoffman. The tank rolled up the hillside, dipping up and down as it passed through the giant holes smashed into the ground. As they came over the crest, he saw that the forward slope of the hill was in even worse shape than the reverse slope. Traversing the forlorn landscape brought to mind the grainy footage of American astronauts driving around the desolate surface of the moon on their buggy. The tank nestled up close to a berm that hid its hull from view. The top of the turret and the main gun barely cleared its top edge, offering Mohr and Fischer a clear view of the valley below.

Mohr surveyed the remains of the dense forest that covered the hills on the opposite side of the road. The neatly ordered pines were now an obscene tangle of demolished timber. The trees that still stood were mere suggestions of their original form. They had become limbless poles with trunks hunched at ridiculous angles. What he was looking at was no longer a forest but a perversion. His gut clenched at the sight. What gave anyone the right to do this to his homeland? Was he worth so little in the eyes of others that he had no right to enjoy it?

Using the joystick, he slew the main gun to the left while watching through the PERI sight at full magnification. Far down the road, he saw the first enemy tanks approach. It was time to answer back to this desecration. He fumbled slightly with the hastily-installed digital radio before tuning it to the company net.

“Echo Two Four. Echo Two Five. Engage,” he said.

The pair of Jaguars rolled southeast from their concealed positions near the ruins of the town. Their path followed the gentle curving base of the hill upon which Mohr's tanks sat. A few seconds later, they came to a halt amidst the smoking rubble of a farmhouse. Mohr watched through the periscope as each vehicle unleashed a HOT missile. The missiles were flung outward, leaving a pencil-thin trail of smoke in their wake. Mohr watched as they raced meters over the flat ground, straight along the highway towards their targets. One of the missiles curved gently off to the right about midway through its flight and slammed into the side of the eastern hill. Mohr shook his head.

The other missile found its mark. The enemy tank erupted in a column of flame and the turret jumped a dozen feet in the air. The round hunk of metal made a lazy pirouette before landing ten yards away from the burning hull. Mohr allowed himself the slightest grin.

"Fuck yes!" shouted Fischer. "That tank is gone!"

Mohr watched as the remaining lead T-55s peeled off to either side of the highway. One of them fired wildly in the direction of the Jaguars. The shot hit wide of the mark, burrowing into the ground at least a hundred yards from its target. The Jaguars fired off their missiles again. This time, both of the HOT missiles struck home. The lead Czech platoon was reduced to crisp metal hulks. One of the tanks exploded over and over again, its ammunition brewing up and detonating under the extreme heat of its fiery fate.

"Okay, Echo, pull back immediately," said Mohr. The Panthers turned in a wide clockwise circle to the north. Once they met the highway, they turned

south on the road and ran straight south through Grafling. Both of the vehicles were tracked so had little trouble traversing the rubble of the town's buildings.

Mohr heard the squawk of his radio and the faint voice of one of his concealed scout teams deployed far to the east identified himself.

"Two One, I've got eyes on four platoons heading your way in column formation," said the scout. "They're heading straight down the highway. Be advised that some of the IFVs are carrying Saggers."

"Get ready," said Mohr over the intercom. "We have lots of bad guys coming this way. Gunner, hold fire. I want Alpha Platoon to deploy on our left flank and hit them first. I'll tell you when to fire. Be ready to move back over the hill as soon as we get a shot off."

"They aren't even going to lay down smoke first?" asked Hoffman, incredulous.

"Doesn't look like it," said Mohr. "Be ready though – they might decide to hit us with chemical weapons."

Mohr considered how badly a chemical strike would ruin his ambush plans. The infantry on the other hill would need to wade down through the thick vegetation towards their trenches and foxholes while wearing heavy and uncomfortable chemical weapons gear. Then they would need to set up their MILAN missile launchers, acquire targets, launch the missiles accurately while under fire, and then break down the launcher and walk again, this time up the slope. In the meantime, they would need to coordinate their fire and movement with each other while trying to

communicate through gas masks.

No wonder Muller was unhappy this morning.

In his mind, Mohr thought of how to simplify his plans. The battle had already started and suddenly he realized just how much he was asking of his men. They were highly trained, disciplined, and motivated. But in the end, they were only human. What looked good on paper now seemed decidedly impractical.

“I see multiple vehicles coming this way!” Looking through the gunner’s sights, he made out a large group of enemy tanks coming down the road, followed by smaller infantry fighting vehicles. Mohr knew from his training that these were BVP-1s, a Czech variant of the Russian-manufactured BMP-1s. As the column of tanks drove straight down the highway, several of the BVPs parked just off to either side of the road.

After increasing his magnification on the PERI scope, Mohr noticed the BVPs had a bulbous projection near their 73mm cannon. He felt a little chill run down his spine. These were undoubtedly the Sagger-armed IFVs the scout had warned Mohr about. With a range of three kilometers, the wire-guided missiles could badly damage or even destroy a Leopard tank if it managed to hit the side armor. They had to die – and die quickly.

Mohr slew the turret towards the BVP, until the gunner’s display matched his own. The crosshairs were fixed on the target and the laser rangefinder, which thankfully still worked, read out a range of just over two thousand meters. Mohr adjusted the crosswind velocity and handed control of the main gun over to Fischer.

“Gunner, target those BVPs while Alpha is firing on the enemy tanks. Make each shot count! Wait for my order to fire.”

“Understood,” said Fischer. Mohr heard the young man’s nervous stutter but didn’t know what to say. The time for talk seemed to be over.

Below him, the T-54s and T-55s rolled down the Route 11. The Czechs were driving as fast as they could go. As they approached the town, the lead enemy tanks tried to move into a wedge formation but the tanks on the highway would not slow down enough for the tanks running off the pavement. By the time they reached even with Mohr’s position, the enemy tanks were completely out of formation and were now just a collection of vehicles racing towards Grafing like salmon in a rush to spawn.

Mohr keyed his radio set. “Alpha! Engage immediately!”

Seconds later, Schmitt’s platoon rolled over the crest of the hill just to the left of Mohr’s position. The first of the tanks rolled right past its defensive firing position and settled inside a small blast crater. The other tank sat on the crest doing nothing. Silhouetted against the sky, the enemy tanks immediately honed their fire in on it. The ground in front and to the side of the vehicle erupted with the impact of each high velocity round.

The third tank managed to reach its firing position and sat there, its turret slewing left and right as if slowly shaking its head “no”.

Mohr tried not to despair. He flipped to the intercom and spoke to Fischer. “Gunner! Engage at will! Kill those BVPs!”

The Leopard rocked back as the main gun fired off an anti-tank round.

Seconds later, Mohr heard Fischer shout in excitement. “That’s a kill! Loader! SABOT!” Lange jumped into action, removing the expired shell remnants from the breach and shoving in another armor penetrator round.

“Up!” Lange shouted. The Leopard fired again immediately.

Mohr watched through his PERI as Alpha platoon sat in its tattered formation. Schmitt’s tanks began to fire wildly back at the enemy tanks below.

“Alpha! Fix your formation!” shouted Mohr over the radio.

On the opposite hill, Muller’s men still had not managed to fire off a single shot. They were probably still hiking their way through the forest towards their firing positions, thought Mohr.

There was a metallic slap on the outside of the turret, shoving Mohr backwards into his seat. The screen in front of him flickered slightly and then returned to life.

“We’re hit!” shouted Hoffman.

“It’s okay,” said Mohr immediately. “We’re alright. Just do your jobs.”

“Two One, Spot report,” the lead scouts reported. “I have two enemy tank platoons diverted off to the west side of the highway. They’re coming over the hills directly towards your position.”

The main gun fired again. Fischer claimed another hit on the BVPs. Despite that, Mohr could feel everything going wrong. The ambush was supposed to cause total shock among the enemy. Instead, it had started out

clumsy and confused. Schmitt's men were performing poorly and Muller still needed time to get into position. They were about to be outflanked unless he directed Kessel to the north. How quickly things were falling apart!

It was time to change things a little. Mohr got on the radio again.

"Okay, Bravo, I want you to roll out to my right. Alpha, get ready to pull back," he said. "Charlie, I want you to move to our left flank. We have incoming enemy tanks."

Mohr heard the sound of an explosion to his left. Looking through the PERI, he saw one of Schmitt's tanks burning near the crest of the hill. Acrid smoke poured from its turret hatches. He swiveled the periscope to the right, watching Unger's tanks come over the crest of the hill in unison. The tanks reached their firing positions at almost the same time and began firing immediately. All three shots hit their targets. A platoon of Czech tanks on the outskirts of Grafling was reduced to flaming scrap in a matter of seconds.

Over to his left, Schmitt's two remaining tanks raced backwards up the slope and disappeared over the hilltop.

"Bravo, move one hundred meters south and get into position. Slow down and find your targets."

Mohr started to wonder if Kessel had heard his order in all the chaos. He nearly keyed his radio again when he heard back from him.

"This is Charlie. I'm in position right now," reported Kessel. "We're

engaging two platoons of T-55s at close range.”

A minute later, Schmitt’s tanks barreled over the crest once again. This time, the pair of Leopards found their firing positions and immediately opened fire. One of the tanks actually managed a hit while the other sat there like some stupid hulking animal trying to find a scent. What was the matter over there? He gave the order for Bravo to pull back. Unger’s tanks reversed back up the slope together in neat line formation.

Just as he began to wonder what had happened to Muller’s men, Mohr caught sight of a puff of smoke from the hill opposite of where he sat. A second later, one of the remaining BVPs exploded as the MILAN missile struck and penetrated the vehicle’s thin armor.

“Fischer! How are we doing on those tanks?” asked Mohr.

The tank rocked back from the Leopard’s 105mm main gun firing downrange. “On the way,” said the gunner. His voice sounded more controlled. Mohr felt a touch of pride in his crew, calmly performing their tasks as a coordinated unit after having survived the initial panic and excitement of battle.

“Still lots of them out there, sir,” he heard Fischer say calmly.

“Driver! Reverse. Let’s get back behind the hill.”

The Leopard’s engine roared to life and the tank began pulling back quickly from its firing position. Suddenly the tank jerked to a sudden stop. Mohr rolled his eyes, waiting for the next round of bad news to arrive. Hoffman gunned the engine again and the tank jittered and shook as it tried

to back up the hill. Instead of the sensation of backward motion that he expected, Mohr only felt and heard the road wheels grasping for traction and the drive sprocket spinning uselessly.

“Looks like we’ve thrown a track!” shouted Hoffman.

Something hard hit the turret again. The tank rang like a bell, the vibration of a non-penetrating hit sending shivers through its interior.

“Fuck!” shouted Fischer. “Should we get out?”

Mohr breathed out hard before he spoke, trying his best to sound calm and collected. It wasn’t the absolute worst thing that could happen to them. They could be dead or wounded. But throwing a track in the middle of combat came a close second. “Calm down, guys,” he said. “Hoffman, see if you can coax it back into the firing position. We’re too exposed here. Gunner! See if you can find who’s shooting us and fire back!”

The Leopard staggered forward back near the berm. Its hull sat at a forty-five-degree angle to the slope of the hill. Looking out through the PERI, he could see that the tank was only partially hull down. The forward half of the tank hull jutted out beyond the protective barrier, leaving it dangerously exposed. At such a close range, an enemy tank round could penetrate the side armor of the Leopard. Should he order the driver to try and move the Leopard tank again? That would risk the tank sliding completely out of the firing position.

“Driver. Stop!” he shouted.

He heard Alpha and Bravo firing down at the enemy below. By the

sound of their main guns, Mohr's tank platoons were getting farther away from his position as they withdrew south. Mohr suddenly realized he had not heard the tank gun firing.

"Gunner! I told you to fire back at the enemy. Engage at will!" he said.

Mohr tried to think of a way out of their predicament. If they stayed here, they would die. It was that simple. They could abandon the tank and try to run back up the hill. It was less than one hundred meters to the hill crest but the prospect of running uphill under enemy fire the entire way did not sound enticing. The only thing left to do was bring Kessel's men back and hitch a ride in the Marder.

"Charlie, we're immobile right now and need a lift out," said Mohr. "Bring your men back here near our position. We need to bail out. Use our tanks as cover and bring the Marder in as close as you can. Get the ramp down and be ready for us. Be advised we're taking enemy fire here so you'll need to suppress."

Kessel replied over the company net immediately. "Hang on. Nearly done here. We'll be right there."

Looking through his PERI, Mohr watched the carnage on the valley floor below. At least half the enemy's tanks were burning. None had gotten past the town. Several of the surviving tanks were firing back at where Muller's infantry positions had initially begun to engage them. Mortar rounds splashed into the treeline from where Muller's men had initially begun firing from. Unbeknown to the enemy's forward observer, the intended targets were no longer there and had long since moved south.

Nearly five hundred meters to Mohr's right were Alpha and Bravo platoons, firing and moving together. They would soon reach the last firing position and the ambush would, by necessity, begin its withdrawal phase. Mohr didn't want to think about what being left behind would feel like.

Behind his Leopard, Mohr heard Kessel's tank firing in unison as they raced over the hill crest. He watched the tanks come within ten meters of his vehicle and take up hull-down positions in the crevices and shell holes around him. The Marder raced towards Mohr's tank and turned neatly before reversing and coming to a halt less than two meters away.

The ground near his stricken tank erupted up as a nearby enemy tank round exploded. It was time to get out.

"Alright men, that's enough!" said Mohr. "Bail out immediately and get into the Marder behind us. I want you to move as fast as you can! Now go!"

Mohr flicked a switch on his commander's console, releasing the four smoke grenade dischargers. Almost instantly, the outside of the vehicle was bathed in a cloud of thick gray fog. The hatches flung open and the men clambered to get out of the vehicle. Mohr got on the battalion net and ordered the M109s to fire the smoke barrage that would cover his company's retreat. He waited for the tank to empty before grabbing a white phosphorous grenade and swinging open the commander's hatch. He heard one of Kessel's tanks fire from less than ten meters away. Despite his ear protection, Mohr's head rang and he felt like his eardrums were being stabbed.

The enemy machine gun rounds slapped at the armor of his turret.

Through the haze, he spotted the Marder sitting right behind his tank. All he had to do was cover a meter or two of open ground. Lying on his side on the rear deck of the tank, Mohr summoned the will to do one last thing before sliding off the turret and running for dear life. He pulled the pin on the white phosphorous grenade and threw it down the open hatch. He rolled towards the rear of the tank, the dull thump of the grenade going off within the belly of his beloved Two One.

Mohr tumbled towards the ground and felt an immediate sting of pain. He knew right away he had hurt his ankle. He tried to get up and run towards the Marder but fell down immediately. Two of his tank crew rushed past him and up the ramp. Mohr crawled on his hands and knees towards the troop carrier. Everything moved in slow motion. Finally, one of Muller's infantrymen ran down the ramp, grabbed hold of Mohr's arms and dragged him into the vehicle. He sat on the floor, gasping for breath as the carrier raced back up the slope. In the hurry, there was no time to close the ramp so it bounced comically up and down over the uneven ground.

Once they arrived on the other side of the hill, the Marder slowed down and two of the grenadiers managed to pull up the ramp. Kessel's tanks formed up with them and they raced along the reverse slope towards the south. By the time Mohr caught his breath, he noticed he was short one crew member.

"Where's Fischer?" he asked.

"Dead," replied Hoffman.

Lange's tears fell down his filthy face and he began sobbing. Everyone

else in the Marder pretended not to notice.

There was one other issue Mohr had to take care of. “What’s the status of Alpha’s knocked out tank?” he asked.

“No survivors,” said one of the grenadiers.

Chapter 6

As the Marder sped south down Route 11 and into Deggendorf, Mohr felt a mix of pure adrenaline that he had just survived a real combat situation and an intense guilt that he was alive and Fischer had died. As the excitement wore off, the grief gnawed at him. He summoned the inner strength needed to banish the raw emotions. It was time to lead his men again.

The Marder halted near the center of the city. Mohr took command of the vehicle and poked his head through the hatch. In front of him, the Territorialheer had opened up a roadblock for his men and tanks to pass through. They wore faces of grim determination as they waved Mohr's vehicle forward. Armed with antique weapons from the last war, they would prove little match for the advancing enemy tanks and they knew it.

Mohr felt his heart drop as he watched the pleading faces of civilians in the windows of homes and shops. The looks of hopelessness in their eyes burrowed into his conscience. Some of them were packing their vehicles out on the street in a hurry, trying to get out of town before the enemy arrived. Along several side streets, long lines of civilian vehicles sat at the roadblocks, honking madly at the police and auxiliary forces who were trying fruitlessly to turn them around. "Go home!" they shouted. The traffic stood still and the engines snarled like distressed animals.

The four-lane bridge was just up ahead along with the rest of his company. As the Marder reached the halfway point across the bridge, he

heard the loud cracks of the demolitions going off to the north and south. The bridges on either side of him plunged downwards, a sure sign that 1st and 3rd companies had just pulled back across the river. “His” bridge – the Deggendorf–Mitte Bridge, was the only one left intact.

“All platoons check in,” he called out over the radio. He waited to hear back, hoping that everyone else had made it across. Although they had left the Czech regiment in ruins behind them, the second echelon would arrive soon enough. If the bridge was still up when they got here, they would be in a world of hurt. To Mohr’s relief, his platoon leaders radioed back over the company net. Schmitt sounded shaken and confused. All of his remaining vehicles were on the west bank. The two scout vehicles were just behind them.

The Marder in which Mohr rode reached the western bank of the Danube in Fischerdorf. Mohr watched as the company’s pair of Luchs scout cars reached halfway across the bridge. The scout teams had done an excellent job of reporting the enemy’s position. Had it not been for their spot reports, his company’s flank would have been ripped into by the enemy’s tanks. He considered it a lesson nearly learned the hard way. He had based his plans on the enemy’s intentions while ignoring the enemy’s capabilities. His instructors back in Munster would not have been pleased. It was only luck that they hadn’t taken more casualties than they had.

Through his binoculars, Mohr spied the low buildings they had just passed alongside on their way through Deggendorf. Plumes of smoke from the town billowed upwards into the blue sky as the enemy’s artillery began to shell it. Time had run out – the second echelon was about to arrive. His

gut tightened as two dark specks emerged from the wall of smoke to the north. As they approached, he made out the bulbous shape of the helicopters.

“I’ve got inbound air!” shouted Mohr. “Helicopters inbound! Bring the Gepards back!”

The two helicopters flew in fast and low towards the bridge, firing off a quick salvo of rockets. The bridge shuddered with the impact near its mid-point. The scout vehicles were enveloped by an explosion. As the smoke cleared, only two fiery husks of metal sat in their place. One man emerged from the turret of the lead car, engulfed in flames. He slid down to the road and lay there unmoving as the fire consumed his body.

One of the Gepards reversed back down the highway, laying down a thick stream of 35mm fire from its twin autocannons. The helicopters swung back around to the north, dropping altitude in an effort to avoid being shot down. A minute later, they disappeared again into the smoke from which they had first appeared.

“They’ll have reported back about the bridge,” said Mohr to himself. “We need to blow it now.”

He watched in horror as two men crawled out of the other scout car. One of them dropped to the ground as he took his first desperate step towards the west side of the bridge. Mohr watched helplessly through his binoculars as the other man picked him up and swung him over his shoulder in a fireman carry. They were a hundred meters away. The man carrying his friend stumbled forward and fell. Mohr shook his head. They would never make it. He ducked down into the Marder and got on the radio, contacting Unger’s

platoon. “We’re heading back onto the bridge to get those two men. If we don’t make it, tell the engineers to blow it immediately!”

“Reverse! Get us back on to that bridge,” he said. “There are two men out there we need to pick up.”

The driver nodded.

Mohr heard Donner shouting over the radio. “There’s a second echelon heading straight towards you. Blow the bridge! Do it now!”

He swore and shouted at the driver. “I told you to reverse!”

The vehicle sped backward over the cracked pavement. The enemy tanks would be here any minute now. The Marder jerked to a halt just a few meters short of the scouts. Several of the grenadiers rushed out of the hatch and grabbed them both. The driver jammed his foot on the accelerator once they had piled on board. The screech of shattered metal filled the air as an enemy tank round bit into a nearby steel archway. Mohr ducked down into the Marder as the shards rained down upon them. When the shower finally stopped, he brought his head back up out of the hatch and looked to the far bank. To his horror, a pair of T-55s sat on the roadway, the sun glinting off their turrets.

Mohr screamed down into the hatch at the driver.

“Drive! Drive!” he shouted.

The little Marder rushed down the bridge. Two of the Leopards on the west side provided covering fire, blasting at the T-55s on the east bank. The Marder, caught in the middle, pressed forward in a straight line towards the

safety of the west bank. One of the T-55s on the opposite bank stopped and shuddered as one of the Leopard rounds sliced through its front hull armor.

As the Marder's treads touched the pavement on the western side of the river, Mohr looked behind him. A stream of enemy tanks surrounded by civilian vehicles was driving straight down the bridge. The throng of harried panicked traffic was nearly halfway across. At least two platoons worth of T-55s drove among them, like wolves running among a flock of sheep. Mohr's Leopards stopped firing at the tanks, afraid to hit the fleeing refugees.

Mohr bit his lip and hoped god would forgive him. The fate of the innocents on the bridge was sealed when he uttered a single codeword into his radio.

"Herod," he spoke bitterly.

Five seconds later, there was a series of detonations as the charges went off around the bridge's four large concrete support beams. The middle span collapsed completely, plunging into the water below. The spans at either end crumbled slowly, the huge solid chunks of twisted iron and roadwork neatly disintegrating. The civilian vehicles and tanks that attempted to cross the bridge fell thirty feet down towards the surface of the river, splashing down into the water below before being swallowed up by the Danube.

The dust of the explosion mingled in the air, turning the sky to a dark grey. The company continued driving down Route 92, driving past the large cloverleaf intersection and interchanges. Mohr buried his face in his hands, thinking of the civilians he had just sent to their deaths. How would he live

with himself? He made a silent promise that some day, if given the chance, he would do what he could to make up for it.

As they drove, Mohr's mind began to swim, coping with the events of the morning. He finally understood just how different the training and exercises were from real fighting. He was amazed at how complex it was to lead men under fire. The fact that the company had managed to complete its objective at all seemed like a small miracle. He finally had a good idea of where and with whom the strengths and weaknesses of his company lay. Kessel and Unger were solid performers. Schmitt had some cleaning up to do. His coordination of the men during the battle was awful. They had moved slowly and their actions as a platoon had been sloppy. Mohr would ask for a replacement as soon as possible.

Chapter 7

The company's tanks sat parked around the tree-lined perimeter of a large grassy area near Plattling's city center.

Mohr watched as one of Muller's Marders pulled up. Without a word, the ramp lowered and a pair of men dashed out of the back with a tarp that was wrapped around two poles to form a crude canvas stretcher. They loaded up the two wounded scouts from the bridge and rushed them towards the back of the armored fighting vehicle. One of the wounded men screamed over and over, his skin crisp and black from suffering through the horrible burns inflicted by the death of their Luchs.

Lieutenant Unger appeared suddenly and thrust a clipboard full of papers at the company commander. He was covered in the grease and filth and the dirt of his tank. His fatigues were soiled and his expression no longer held the contempt on display before this morning.

"Sir," said Unger. "I can't believe you went back and got those scouts. I saw it all."

Mohr watched the Marder speed off into town in the direction of the local hospital. "What's our status?"

Unger spoke slowly as if he were forcing the words out. "Seven of nine Leopards are still working. One was knocked out in Schmitt's platoon. Muller's infantry came back with a couple of wounded. Mohr held up a hand and leafed through the report, trying his best to make sense of Unger's

shaky handwriting.

Most of the company's tanks had sustained some kind of damage in the last battle. Some of it was as minor as a broken antenna or a malfunctioning smoke grenade launcher. One of Kessel's tanks had even taken a hit to its main gun during the battle on the north side of the hill. Mohr looked over to see the 105mm barrel bent to the right at a ninety-degree angle. The company's mechanics stopped to admire it before getting down to the arduous job of replacing it.

Over a dozen of Mohr's men were dead. Fischer, his gunner, had been riddled with heavy machine gun rounds as he bailed out of the tank. One of Schmitt's tanks was blown to pieces, most likely by an anti-tank missile from one of the BVPs. None of these would be easily replaced even though active reservists would step in to plug the holes.

The sheer amount of ammunition they had expended was staggering. The company was nearly depleted of its stock of armor-piercing tank rounds. The anti-tank missiles were almost totally gone too. What was estimated to have lasted them several days had barely gotten them through this morning. They were in desperate need of resupply.

"Where's everybody? I want the other platoon leaders here now," said Mohr. Unger disappeared and returned with Kessel and Muller. No sign of Schmitt.

Mohr was livid. Twice in one day was two times too many. There was no time for the political games and playing nice that had been the norm up to this morning. He felt a fierce fire building inside of him and he no longer

had the patience nor the desire to hide it anymore.

“Lieutenant Unger, did I not just order you to bring ALL of the platoon leaders here?” he said.

Unger’s eyes went wide. “Uh...yes, sir. You did.”

Mohr thrust the clipboard back at Unger, the hard plastic edge hitting him squarely in the chest.

“Then where in the hell is Lieutenant Schmitt?” he asked. Unger stared at the ground in silence.

“Never mind. We will all go over to where he is. Let’s go,” said Mohr.

They trudged together towards Schmitt’s two tanks. The lieutenant stood in front of one of them, watching his men help the mechanics with repairs.

“Lieutenant Schmitt,” said Mohr as he got closer. “Bring your men over here. We’re having a meeting.”

Schmitt didn’t budge. Mohr shrugged and turned to Unger. “Get Schmitt and his men over here. You have thirty seconds.”

Unger took off running around the tank, waving at the men to stop their work and shouting at them to go over to where Mohr and the platoon leaders stood. Schmitt wandered up and stood face-to-face with Mohr, his arms folded.

Mohr spoke slowly and deliberately. “Lieutenant Schmitt, your performance over the course of this morning and the last several weeks has consistently failed to meet my standards,” he said. “Not only that, but you

have failed to obey orders in a timely fashion. You have undermined the company's ability to carry out its mission. For these reasons, I am hereby immediately relieving you of your duties." He turned to the platoon sergeant. "Sergeant Hauptmann, you will immediately take command of this platoon. If you feel you are not up to carrying out this task, say so immediately."

Hauptmann nodded.

Suddenly, Schmitt exploded in rage.

"You fucking asshole!" he screamed at Mohr. "You blew that bridge when there were civilians on it. You fucking...murderer!"

He lunged forward and grabbed Mohr by his throat. Surprised by the sudden ferocity of the attack. Mohr fell to the ground. As he gasped for air, the commotion around him grew. Kessel and Unger yanked Schmitt backward, managing to tear one of his hands away. Mohr tried to breathe but nothing came. As he reached towards Schmitt, the world around him began to dim and blur.

He wanted to laugh at the irony of surviving the first battle of World War III only to be murdered by one of his platoon leaders less than an hour later. He felt the tears burn his eyes and willed himself to stop resisting. After all, Schmitt was right. It was he alone who had made the call, sent the code word to blow the bridge, and thereby sentenced hundreds of innocent Germans to die in the river. Whatever Schmitt did was pale in comparison to that. This was correct, somehow. Let him do it, he thought. Let him kill me.

Pinned underneath his assailant, Mohr stopped fighting and watched as

the other men pulled Schmitt off him. Mohr gulped in the air as the world slowly returned to focus. He took Kessel's offered hand and stood up slowly. By the time Mohr was back on his shaky feet, the lieutenant was still writhing and screaming. Looking down at the raving junior officer, Mohr shook his head. No matter how much Schmitt foamed or ranted or physically attacked, he would never be able to match the amount of disgust and vitriol that Mohr felt for himself since blowing the bridge.

One of Schmitt's men got the attention of a pair of nearby medics, both of whom rushed over to help sedate the former platoon leader.

Mohr wandered away from the scene and walked into the woods by himself. He sat there on a large rock shaking as the tears flowed down his face.

He relived the moment once more in his head. Ran through the decision-making process again. Did he really need to blow that bridge? Were there any other choices? Or was Schmitt right - he had murdered the civilians on the bridge without trying to find another way first. He took great big gasps of air, trying to calm himself down. Reason slowly returned and with it, came a reassuring stillness. It was Kessel who came to him finally and sat down again next to him, saying nothing.

After a long moment, Mohr stood up.

"Alright, let's get back to work then," he said quietly.

He walked over to the clearing to find his platoon leaders waiting for him, standing at attention. Unger passed the reports to Mohr again, the pages ripped and torn after being flung to the ground during the altercation with

Schmitt. Mohr found the map of the local town with the supply area circled on it. His voice was hoarse and old. "I want all the vehicles to go in pairs to fuel up and restock ammunition. Do it quickly and cleanly. Oh! Make sure all your men get their wounds looked at. No matter how small. That's a direct order!"

As he was about to walk over to the pair of tanks that constituted the remains of Schmitt's old platoon, Mohr heard Private Lange shouting for him.

"Colonel Donner wants to talk to you right now!" he said.

"Where's the radio?" asked Mohr.

"What? Radio? No. He's right over there, sir." Lange pointed to a Wolf jeep that sat directly in the center of the clearing. Mohr gulped. It was a beautiful bullseye for any enemy pilot who might fly over them at any second.

Mohr rushed over to the jeep, glancing up at the blue cloudless sky in alarm.

"Sir, I don't think it's safe to -."

Donner reached back and swung the door open. Mohr dived into the jeep and the driver gunned the engine. The sudden turn combined with the acceleration sent him sprawling. They sped out onto the road without pause, causing one of the local police officers to jump out of the way so as not to get run over.

"Problems," grumbled Donner. "All I have today are problems. I need

people who will give me solutions. People like you, Captain Mohr.”

Mohr sat in the back, saying nothing. He had known Donner a short time, but he already understood that this was leading somewhere. Someone had dropped the ball and Mohr would have to try to pick it up.

“They’re coming across,” Donner said. “They secured a crossing site near Straubing. The 245th battalion tried to hold them but they didn’t have enough men to stop them. The Czechs sent in an airborne brigade. They dropped right in the town and grabbed the bridge on us.”

There was a long silence. Mohr wasn’t quite sure which bastards his commanding officer was referring to but he knew better than to ask.

“We’re pulling back again soon,” Donner said gruffly. “How are your men?”

“We’re ready to move with the battalion,” he answered. “I’ll need some replacements from the active reserve battalion.”

“You’re not pulling back with us,” said Donner. “I need you create some space for us. Give us time to lay down some defenses. The old man wants to shuffle the rest of the division around. Plug some holes.”

The heavy slow-moving traffic thinned out as they drove into the abandoned suburbs. The prim and well-kept little homes served as a stark reminder of a state of normalcy that had ceased to exist as of six o’clock this morning. Mohr started to worry about his siblings back home in Dusseldorf and wondered if they were okay. He shook his head and brought his mind back to the here and now. Thinking too much about the people he loved was

dangerous.

A few minutes later, they arrived in the parking lot of a junior high school. It was a three-story building on a little hill in the southwest of the town. Only two days ago, it was full of laughing children with the future opened up wide before them. Now it was where planning took place to help cut short the future of others. Mohr followed Donner down the dim halls, brightly decorated with paintings and crafts. Donner's aide pushed open the double doors that led to the sports hall. Radio operators sat at school desks that were too small for them. People of all ranks and services ran back and forth. As they walked in, the clerks and technicians in clean crisp uniforms parted like a bad haircut for Mohr, who was covered in sweat and grease and filth.

"This is all for the battalion?" Mohr asked.

"We're sharing this space with the division," Donner grumbled. He pointed to a corner of the hall where the rest of the company commanders sat snugly in desks meant for adolescents. Mohr felt suddenly at ease among their grease-stained faces and tattered fatigues. He hunched down on a child-sized plastic seat and pulled out his notebook and pen, ready for the day's lesson.

The battalion intelligence officer, Captain Beck, stood impassively in front of them with a map of II Corps area of operation in southern Germany. There were dozens of pins on the board, each of them showing the rough position of each friendly battalion and enemy regiment. Atop the pins were taped small colored pieces of paper with numbers to denote the nationality and battalion or regiment number. Mohr shook his head as he looked at the

number of red pins west of the German border. It was obvious that if NATO was going to win this war, they would need a hell of a lot more blue pins.

“As I’m sure you’re aware, NATO forces along the inner German border made contact with the enemy as of 0600 this morning,” began Beck. “In the south here, the 1st Mountain Division conducted defensive operations meant to delay the enemy force’s advance to the west until NATO reinforcements can arrive. The initial forward position of our brigade’s operations was along the Regensburg - Passau axis. Our battalion, responsible for defenses forward and to the flanks of Deggendorf, managed to deal significant damage to the 2nd Czech Mechanized Division, halting their advance at the Danube. Division was quite happy with our performance.”

“However, things didn’t go as well in the rest of the division’s sector. The 242nd Panzergrenadier and 243rd Panzer Brigades near the town of Cham were hit very hard by the Soviet 48th Guards Mechanized Division supported by rocket artillery and attack helicopters. Although our sister brigades inflicted considerable damage on the enemy, both the 242 and 243 were forced to retreat southwest. The 48th Guards Mechanized Division continued straight down Route 20 towards Straubing, sending a motorized rifle regiment along Route 16, feigning an attack on Regensburg to the west. The 22nd Panzergrenadier Brigade near Straubing was ready by that time and had set ambushes all along the highway. It should have been enough but there was one very big problem.”

“Elements of the 22nd Czech Airborne Brigade had already landed in Straubing before dawn and secured two smaller bridges over the Danube. They captured the nearby engineers and defused the demolitions on the

bridge support structures. Instead of waiting for reinforcements, the commander of the Panzergrenadier Brigade ordered half his men off the planned ambushes to go retake the bridges in the city. When the 48th Guards Mechanized Division arrived on the outskirts of Steinach to the north, they outflanked our grenadiers. The grenadiers had no choice but to pull back south across the river.”

“The remnants of the three West German brigades are now deployed defensively around Aiterhofen, approximately 20 kilometers to the north of us. We’ve been sending air up all morning to help them but it’s been largely ineffective due to the presence of enemy air defenses. So far the enemy has halted in the town and is reorganizing there. Once they reinforce and resupply, they’ll come south down Route 20 so they can advance west along Route 92 towards Munich. By then, it’s a sure bet the Czechs will have started amphibious river crossing operations near Deggendorf. If we don’t pull back from here, we’ll be trapped. With the Isar River to the south, there will be nowhere left to go.”

Captain Franke, the commander of 1 Company, cleared his throat. “The 10th Panzer Division is directly south of us. Can they not send up some reinforcements to help us?”

Beck pushed his glasses up on his nose and answered in his monotone voice.

“The 4th Czech Army sent several divisions south through Austria early this morning. The Austrian Army pulled south into defensive positions in the mountains, preferring to keep their military and their neutrality intact. Elements of the 10th Panzer Division to the south of us made contact along

the Austrian border about thirty minutes ago near Salzburg and Burghausen. The 10th is pulling back its divisions slowly but they're spread thin. The main effort seems to be a drive straight west along Route 94 towards Munich. As you can imagine, they have no one to spare. Everyone is waiting for the French to arrive. The 10th is strung out along Highway 299 from Altotting in the north all the way to Traunstein in the south. Our brigade is pulling back and forming a new defensive line with the rest of the division that covers Dingolfing in the north down to Altotting in the south. The Americans are rushing an infantry and a tank brigade to cover the area to the north of that."

Donner stood up and handed out a ream of typed paper. On it were the march orders for the battalion. The rest of the brigade was apparently already moved back to Dingolfing and Landshut and preparing defensive positions. Mohr flipped through the neatly typed pages and found the table that showed the battalion's companies and assets and departure times. Beside his name, Mohr found only an asterisk instead of a number. He knew instantly that such a tiny asterisk would mean plenty of work for him and his men.

The rest of the company commanders filtered out of the gymnasium and out into the bright early afternoon. Mohr stayed behind to find out more about the asterisk.

"Excuse me, sir?" he said to Donner. He held up the sheet to Donner and pointed to the ink-smeared star.

Donner stepped forward with Captain Beck at his side. The middle-aged battalion commander smoothed his thick mustache and cleared his throat.

“Mohr, the rest of the battalion is moving west as of right now. As I mentioned, we need time to get our defenses set up in and around Dingolfing. You’ll take your company north along Route 20 towards Aiterhofen. The enemy is securing the area for follow-on forces to advance down along Route 20. Intelligence indicates the 30th Motorized Rifle Regiment is on the way down south as part of the second echelon attack. We want you to get up there and help reinforce the defenses being put by whatever’s left of the 242nd Panzergrenadiers. ”

Mohr lit up a cigarette and fell down again into his tiny chair while Beck hovered above him. He pulled out a map book with a topographical map of the ground around Aiterhofen.

“Colonel Heinrich has reported the enemy advance stalled just south of the city,” said Donner. “His panzergrenadiers are holding the enemy around Aiterhofen. When the 30th Guards arrives, we expect they’ll go on an all-out offensive. Without reinforcements, Heinrich’s men will not be able to hold.”

“I thought you were throwing in air?” said Mohr.

“We are putting in air but taking tremendous losses,” replied Beck, as if to a child. “Air defenses are built up all around the enemy sector. We’ve lost three Tornados to heavy anti-aircraft fire while dropping cluster munitions in the area.”

Beck dropped a black and white photograph taken from the air showing dark circles on dark shapes located in and around the town.

“The enemy has deployed SA-8 surface to air missiles in and around the

town,” he said. “The civilian population wasn’t evacuated in time. If we hit them from the air, we’ll kill the civilians in the town. If you do happen to find a way to take out the SAMs and the AAA, our aircraft can get inside the enemy’s area of operations and do significant damage. I wouldn’t count too much on it though. We’ve been having a hell of a time repairing our airfields after the chemical attacks on them this morning.”

Mohr reeled back in his chair. “Civilians!? You’ve got civilians in there?”

“There wasn’t enough time to issue a warning,” said Beck. “The remnants of both Heer brigades were ordered to take up defensive positions in the town. As soon as they arrived, they found the civilians already there and refused the order to fight for Aiterhofen. It would almost certainly have meant the destruction of the town and the death of its occupants. Instead, they fell back into the countryside to the south. Some of the civilians evacuated in time but reports on the ground say there are still about a thousand people in and around there. Most of them woke up to Soviet tanks outside their homes.”

“Sir, I’m not sure we’re going to make much of a difference up there. We’re only a tank company,” said Mohr. “They’ve got an enemy regiment there right now and a division coming up behind them.”

Donner nodded. “That’s correct, Captain Mohr. As you can see, the area directly south of Aiterhofen is quite flat except for a few small hills. Perfect for tank operations. Your performance near Grafling this morning has me convinced that you and your men can make the difference.”

“The primary mission is to delay the enemy,” said Beck. “Just like this morning near Grafling.”

Mohr put out his cigarette in the nearest ashtray and immediately lit another one. “What can I have for this task? I’m short two tanks and two scout cars already.”

“You’ll get two replacement Leopards and crew members,” said Donner. “We’ll take them from 3 Company. I want you to keep Muller’s men and the Marders for this mission too. I have a Bo 105 you can use for reconnaissance. I’m going to need one of those Gepards back from you to help beef up defenses.”

Mohr sighed. What good would the helo do with air defenses in the area? This was completely fucked. There was so much being asked of him and so little to do it with. He peered at the topographical maps in front of him. There was little cover for a tank though there were a few low hills to the southwest of the town. He didn’t even want to think about the loss of a Gepard. If the enemy threw air at him, he would have only one vehicle and the infantry’s hand-held SAM launchers to help him out.

“Where exactly are Heinrich’s men right now?” asked Mohr.

Beck pointed to the south of the Danube River near Straubing and drew a large horseshoe-shaped line on the map. The bottom of the “U” was about nine kilometers south of the river. “They’re holding out in several small towns situated on the highways and roads leading south. He has a battalion’s worth of mixed infantry and tanks protecting the major routes south. There's about a company each in Rain and Perkam to the west, Salching and

Oberscheding directly to the south, and Strasskirchen to the southeast. Signal intercepts show that the enemy's main advance is aimed straight south down Route 20.”

“You could let the enemy come down south and then try to hit their flanks,” suggested Mohr.

Donner nodded and patted Mohr on the back. “That sounds like an excellent idea, captain. Why don’t you get out there now and start moving your men? Heinrich’s men have taken heavy casualties. They’re tired and low on supplies,” he said. “They know you’re coming so they’re counting on you at this moment.” Beck shoved Mohr a crumpled and torn piece of paper with the radio callsigns and frequencies of units operating in the area.

Mohr nodded. So this is how one is given a suicide mission, he thought. No one barked orders at anyone or attempted to recite any patriotic nonsense. You just got pulled aside quietly, handed a map, thrown a leg of hope, and patted on the back before being thrust back out there to die.

He walked out of the school silently. The orderly drove him back towards Plattling in the jeep. On the way, he dedicated his attention to the task at hand, examining the maps as they sped through the narrow streets of the town.

When he arrived, he found the replacements he had requested. The battalion’s mobilization company was drawn from other units in the brigade to help fill out depleted companies. A new tank was found for Schmitt’s old platoon. Mohr received a Leopard company HQ tank and a new gunner in place of Fischer, a nervous boy named Vogel. Unfortunately, the scout cars

were gone for good.

An hour later, the men of 2 Company were driving north up Route 20.

Chapter 8

They drove north in a long column along the two-lane highway of Route 20 towards the town of Oberschneiding. The thunderous clap of exploding artillery rounds grew louder and more intense as they approached. Despite a recent dose of painkillers, Mohr's ankle still stung and he preferred to sit down rather than stand up in his cupola. Down inside the steel turret, he felt more like a passive bystander than a company commander. Still, he could see everything he needed through the vision blocks and the PERI.

Despite numerous attempts to contact Colonel Heinrich, there was no response. Mohr considered the possibilities. Either the colonel was already dead or enemy jamming was simply throwing up too much electronic fog for his digital radio to penetrate. Occasional bursts of static and high-pitched squeals filled the radio net as they got further north. Mohr gave up after the hundredth failed attempt to reach him. If he wanted to talk to the man, Mohr would have to do it face-to-face. Unfortunately, Beck's intelligence was hours old and he wasn't even sure where the friendly defensive positions were situated – or even if there were any friendlies left.

Mohr made a call to the helicopter pilot that circled low above the rear of the column. Thankfully, the company net worked just fine at such short ranges and the little Bo 105 shot forward of the column, making two very low passes to the south of what was left of Oberschneiding. As it pivoted to return towards the company, anti-aircraft tracers from somewhere to the north skimmed inches over its rear rotor. The pilot banked hard and dipped the bird near to ground level before sprinting back south towards safety. Its

skids nearly tapped Mohr's turret as the 105 raced over his tank.

Ten seconds later, the scout pilot calmly radioed back the coordinates of the panzergrenadier defensive positions. They were located just to the north of Oberschneding. Without radio communications, however, there was no way to know the colonel's exact location. In order to talk to the colonel and coordinate the defense around Aiterhofen, Mohr would have to get out of the tank and track him down. To say he didn't relish the task was an understatement. Enemy mortar fire fell in drips and drabs over the fields to the north. A mix of friendly and enemy wrecks littered the ground ahead.

"Are you really going to go out there, sir?" asked Lange.

Mohr put his combat helmet on and fished out the submachine gun. "Unless you have any better ideas, then yes," he said. "Make sure you give me a nice burial, okay?" He hastily deployed the rest of the company into a vee formation behind a slight elevation near the roadside. He dug out the map and showed Hoffman the coordinates that the helicopter scout had pointed out. "Let's get this over with," he ordered. Hoffman put a heavy foot forward and the Leopard tank bumbled over the uneven ground.

Mohr peered through his PERI as they passed through the chest-high rubble of Oberschneiding. The town was a shattered mockery of its former self. The beautiful old homes were nothing more than burnt-out shells, mere suggestions of their original form. A gas station, of all things, remained unscathed. "Hey captain, should we fill it up?" shouted Hoffman. Mohr didn't bother to reply.

The tank continued on into the fields to the north, passing among the

destroyed vehicles. Bodies of West Germans and Russians were strewn like litter over the flaming metal heaps. Mohr had the distinct feeling of walking through a graveyard. The eerie silence was broken by the firing of a main gun somewhere off to their right. The fiery remnants of a Marder less than two meters away burst as the enemy tank round sliced into it.

Someone was out there. And they were not friendly.

“Shit! That was close,” said Hoffman. The Leopard’s engine hummed as the tank picked up speed.

Before he could tell his driver to slow down, Mohr felt the forward section of the tank drop suddenly. The engine groaned and he was overcome by a sick horror as the ground rose up towards him.

“We’re going in a ditch!” shouted Hoffman.

The tank paused and teetered backward on the lip before the hull bowed again. Mohr smacked his head on the panel in front of him, relieved he had already put on his combat helmet. The tank twisted slightly and then slithered down the hidden embankment. Their progress down the slope was slowed by Hoffman stamping on the pedals to reverse the vehicle. Mohr slew the turret to the side. He hoped it would be enough to keep the main gun from getting impaled in the soil at the bottom of the trench. Finally, the tank came to a halt, nearly ninety degrees from level ground. The tank was standing almost straight up with the turret cranked to the right and the tracks resting on the steep slope.

Hoffman pressed the gas but the tank sat in place as the tracks fought for traction. Mohr closed his eyes and prayed. If he lost this tank, it would be

two vehicles gone in one day. He wasn't sure how he would explain this to Colonel Donner, or the rest of his company for that matter. "Driver! Get us moving!" he shouted.

The driver let out a blood-curdling wail and the tank lurched forward. The tank pivoted and settled down, its tracks resting on the solid ground of the ditch. Mohr looked straight back and ahead through the vision blocks to find a way out. Behind and in front of him, the ditch curved slightly. He had no idea how they would get out of here. The walls of the ditch were just slightly higher than the top of the turret.

"Fuck it," said Mohr. "Driver, go straight. Just go very slow."

Hoffman gingerly accelerated the tank through the ditch with mere inches of clearance on either side of the vehicle's hull.

Mohr gave out a painful grunt as he stood up to look out of the hatch. Just ahead of the tank, he spotted a group of soldiers lying in the ditch, side by side in neat rows. He called out to them but none moved. Mohr looked through his binoculars and saw that several of the soldiers were covered in blood-soaked bandages while others had tarps or blankets covering their heads.

"Maybe one of the wounded can tell me something," he grumbled to himself.

"Cover me with the coax," he told Vogel.

Mohr crawled out of the tank. The painkillers he had been given back in Plattling were working well now. He could barely feel anything as he limped

over to where the wounded men lay. About halfway between his tank and the men. Mohr saw a flash of movement to his right. He turned with his submachine gun at the ready and squeezed the trigger. The weapon made a stubborn little clicking sound.

The man who crouched above him looked at him with pure terror in his eyes. “Christ! Don’t shoot! I’m a medic! On your side!”

Mohr turned back towards the tank waving his arms, afraid that Vogel would cut the young man down. When he was satisfied that his gunner wouldn’t shoot, Mohr waved the medic into the ditch.

“I’m looking for Colonel Heinrich,” said Mohr. “Do you know where I can find him?”

The young man went to work immediately, replacing the blood-soaked tourniquet tied just above a grenadier’s elbow, the lower half of his limb completely missing. “Not far,” he replied. “About one hundred meters northeast,” he said. “Look for the jet. He should be there. If you can’t see him, just follow the shouting.”

Mohr nodded and turned to go back to his tank before pausing. “Do you know how I can get my tank out of here?” he asked.

The medic pointed to his left. “The ditch ends over there. There’s a little ramp. It comes back out into the field.”

Mohr nodded. “Um...Would you mind moving your wounded so I can get the tank through?”

The medic rolled his eyes.

Mohr turned back to the tank and waved. The men climbed out and began the job of helping to move the wounded. The absurdity of it all was not lost on him.

As Mohr clambered up out of the ditch, his senses were assaulted by the sheer destructive forces on display around him. To the northeast, a Tornado fighter jet lay crumpled on its side, having apparently augured into the field at a shallow angle. The passage of the wing through the soil had cut a deep trench into the ground. He saw a pair of soldiers squatting in the trench. He watched with incredulity as a Pioneer tank with a blade attached to the front pushed a heap of soil near the top of the trench in an effort to improve the position. Enemy tank rounds flew past the tracked engineering vehicle, landing just short or slightly to either side. Whoever was continued their task as if being shot at were the most natural thing in the world.

He took a deep breath and belly-crawled towards the trench, cursing the radio jamming. The automatic weapons fire chattered just ahead of him. One of the men in the trench turned around to see Mohr and waved. Certain that he was heading to the right place, he scrambled forward. To his left were the bodies of several panzergrenadiers, splayed lifelessly over the top of a berm. After what seemed like forever, he finally reached the trench. A filthy colonel with grey hair and a dark mustache held a radio headset cradled between his shoulder and his ear. Beside him lay the headless body of a panzergrenadier corporal, his skin burnt to a crisp.

The battalion commander put down his headset as Mohr introduced himself. Over the din and rattle of automatic weapons fire and explosions, he had to scream to be heard.

“You’re from 244 Panzer Battalion? I’m Colonel Heinrich. Thank god you’re here!” the battalion commander shouted. “They sent nearly a whole battalion towards us an hour ago and they fell back. By god, we killed them! They’ve been probing our positions since then. ”Keep your battalion here. I’ll ask my other two companies to cover our flanks to the northwest and northeast.”

Mohr took a deep breath. The Pioneer tank pushed another load of soil up along the lip of the trench. As it reversed, one of the enemy tank rounds finally found its mark. The big vehicle shuddered to a stop. Mohr watched as the four crewmen climbed out of the tank, only to be cut down by automatic weapons fire.

“Sir, there were no battalions sent up here,” said Mohr. “There’s just my company. How can I help?”

Heinrich’s grin melted. “Company?” he spat. “They only sent a tank company here? Are you fucking kidding me?” He turned away in disgust and resumed talking on the radio, cursing and screaming. “Hold goddamn you! I said hold! Target that goddamn tank!”

Mohr risked a look around the edge of the berm. A hundred meters straight north of them, a weapons team in a shallow foxhole fired off a MILAN anti-tank missile. The wire-guided missile leaped out of the launcher and curved gently to the left in a graceful arc before the operator corrected its trajectory. A half-second later, a T-72 nearly a kilometer away flashed as the warhead impacted its turret and burrowed through the tank’s armor. Jagged shards of metal scattered away from where it had hit. As if to

broadcast its death, a column of flame leaped through the commander's hatch.

"We'll need to fall back soon," said Heinrich. "Our scouts have reported two regiments on the way down here. You might make yourself useful by cutting into their flank as we move south."

Mohr nodded and pulled out his map then scanned the terrain with his binoculars. There was a series of low tree-covered hills to the south that might offer enough concealment for his tanks.

"What if you pull your men down here just south of these hills along Route 20? We'll hit them as they come down?" Mohr suggested.

Heinrich snatched the map away from him, gave it a cursory glance and then nodded. "You do whatever you see fit, captain. Either way, you've got about ten minutes before we call in smoke and pull back!"

Mohr checked his watch with Heinrich and nodded. Ten minutes was an impossibly short amount of time. He would have to hurry.

Chapter 9

Mohr crawled back over the hundred meters of muddy ground and burning tanks with the smoke grilling his lungs and watering his eyes. He avoided looking at the bodies around him everywhere though in truth he wasn't sure he felt much of anything anymore when he saw them. That scared him more than the bodies did. He slid back down into the ditch and found his tank. His men had just finished moving the wounded and dying out of the way. Mohr grunted a thanks to the medic, who was too busy to even acknowledge the company commander's return.

Mohr climbed down into the tank and sat there trying to picture how the upcoming battle would go. If he were the enemy, where would he go? What would he do? The area to the west of Aiterhofen was hilly and the roads narrow. The way east took them away from their objectives. The flat ground to the south straight down Route 20 was the only logical choice, wasn't it? First, they would send the remaining Russians down and try to breach the defenses. Then they would pour the fresh troops straight down into the hole and wreak havoc. The enemy wasn't hard to predict but that didn't change the fact that Mohr and the ragtag defenders were outnumbered and outgunned.

When the other three men had slid into their positions in the tank, he closed the commander's hatch and sunk down in his seat.

"Alright, we need to rejoin the company right now," said Mohr.
"Hoffman, move back southwest as fast as you can. Don't stop for anything.

This time, watch out for sudden drops.”

The tank ran up the slope and out of the ditch. The sounds of battle outside seemed dim from within the metal cocoon of the tank’s thick armor. The tank traversed the bumpy fields and arrived back at the company’s main position a few minutes later. By that time, Mohr had formulated a basic approach to what they would do.

After quickly summoning his platoon leaders, Mohr briefed them on the deteriorating situation up north on Route 20.

“Our friendlies are close to collapse and there are signs that a second echelon is about to come rolling through here to attack again,” he said. “We’ll take on the first echelon, which should give Heinrich enough time to prepare his own defenses further south.”

Mohr pointed to the nearby low hills.

“I want Hauptmann’s platoon up there on the east side ready to ambush the Russians as they come south along the highway. The two Jaguars will pull back about a kilometer away. As the first echelon comes down, fire off your missiles towards the rear vehicles when we start shooting. Hauptmann’s tanks will take out the vehicles in front. Hopefully, they’ll come running south after us.”

Mohr pointed to Kessel and Unger. “Remain concealed on the west side of the hill. When we start pulling back, swing around towards the north in a clockwise fashion. You should be able to hit their rear as they move forward. We’re the anvil. You’re the hammer. Got it?”

Kessel and Unger both nodded.

“Once the first echelon is taken care of, we’ll see if we can advance up to Aiterhofen before that enemy division arrives and try to take out the air defenses in the town. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Unger stood there with his arms crossed, looking down at the map. “Is there something you wanted to add?” asked Mohr.

“The first echelon shouldn’t be the problem, sir,” he said. “They’re likely tired and their ammunition is depleted. It’s all the fresh troops coming right after.”

Mohr shrugged. “That’s true. If we can hit the air defenses, that should go a long way to balancing the odds.”

“And if not?” asked Unger.

“Then we fall back with Heinrich’s men and make a last stand, lieutenant,” said Mohr.

There was a grim silence as each man realized they wouldn’t be coming back home.

Mohr climbed into his Leopard. The high pitched whistle above them signaled the arrival of the first friendly artillery rounds to the north of his position. The grey wall of smoke plumed upwards towards the blue sky, covering the battlefield in fog. This is it, Mohr thought to himself. Heinrich’s infantry are retreating. It’s up to us. First comes the entree. After that, we’ve got an entire enemy division on its way down here. Pace

yourself. Breathe.

He watched through the little TV monitor in front of him as the friendlies retreated. Slaved to the gunner's thermal sights, the monochrome view revealed the locations of each of Heinrich's remaining men falling back south along the highway. In small groups, they sprinted back towards the steep ditch that Mohr's tank had nearly gotten stuck in. Once there, Muller's Marders pulled up near them. The wounded were loaded on first and then the rest of the infantry boarded. All the while, each of the squads took turns firing back through the thick smoke. One of the MILAN weapons teams actually managed to kill a T-72 at three hundred meters as it made lazy circles around the open field to the north. The lone hapless tank had probably charged forward too quickly into the smoke and had become hopelessly lost and vulnerable as it tried and failed to find the enemy.

Mohr hoped that other enemy tanks would appear in this sights. If they wanted to try something so incredibly foolish as a blind charge to the south, he and the tanks in Alpha would lay a pasting on them. A minute ticked by, however, and there was nothing going on but the harried loading of men into Marders and moving south at great speed. When the smoke finally began to thin out, all Mohr could see was the empty charred landscape. Unsure of who or what was coming towards him at the moment, he radioed Kessel in Charlie platoon, hoping they had reached their positions.

The Bo-105 sat behind the hill where Mohr's tanks lay in wait. Slowly, the helicopter floated upwards until the pilot could barely see over the crest of the hill.

"Spot report. I have eyes on enemy tanks and BMPs," said the pilot. "I

count two tank platoons and several BMPs heading straight south down the highway approximately a kilometer northwest of your position. You should be able to see them in about a minute.”

Mohr broadcast the warning to Alpha. “Affirmative,” replied Hauptmann. His voice sounded steady and controlled over the radio. Mohr felt a huge relief that Schmitt was no longer in charge of Alpha. He had a calm hand in the way he moved his tanks around. Mohr had not even had to suggest a deployment formation or firing cover. They had simply driven up the hillside, found the nearest hull-down positions on the ridge, and sat there echelon right, ready to shoot and move if needed.

The smokescreen had largely dissipated by the time the lead enemy tanks arrived in Mohr’s line of sight. The white outline of a T-72 moved through the crosshairs of his PERI, followed by two more of the enemy tanks. Mohr knew all his men had practiced this scenario a million times in the simulator. Everyone would hold fire and wait for the main body to arrive. Yesterday, he would have prayed that no one got too excited and fired off too early. Now they were all battle hardened. He didn’t even consider picking up the radio. Mohr just held his breath as the tanks came even with his position, seven hundred meters away. Little flashes of white lit up their turrets as they rolled forward, firing at the fleeing panzergrenadiers.

The next three tanks rolled into view followed by three BMPs. One of the infantry carriers traveling near the highway failed to spot the steep ditch and drove straight into it. The front end slammed into the ground with its rear in the air. The tracks spun in a futile gesture to leave the trap. Moments later, the infantry began to climb out of the back. Mohr chuckled to himself

and then brought the turret over to the lead tanks.

“Gunner. Target front. Tango Seven Two. Engage the target and then take out the lead tanks,” he said.

Seconds later, the main gun fired and a T-72 stopped suddenly. The Leopard’s armor-piercing round punctured the side of the turret. A series of short sharp flashes lit up near the ammunition compartment as the enemy tank’s rounds started to explode. None of the crew left the wrecked vehicle.

The Jaguars began firing at the rear vehicles. The HOT missiles sprinted several meters over the flat terrain and then slammed down into the thin top turret armor of each main battle tank that trailed the main body. After four shots were fired, the Jaguars pivoted and raced back down south. Mohr’s tanks fired a volley and raced backward off the hill.

The trap entered its next phase. The remaining enemy tanks and BMPs chased after Hauptmann’s Leopards as they sped south. The return fire, inaccurate to begin with, went wide of the mark as the T-72s fired wildly at moving targets in front of them. Mohr watched the three tanks of Alpha platoon score hits on the move from ranges of five hundred meters. Unlike this morning’s shitshow, the crews were taking their time to line up their targets. By the time the rear vehicles arrived within range, the Soviets began to use clumsy but slightly more effective leapfrog tactics.

It was too little, too late.

Bravo and Charlie platoons rounded the west side of the hill and sped north, wheeling out behind the advancing enemy. Kessel and Unger sliced through the rear tanks, moving around them in a lazy clockwise circle. The

two platoon leaders showed excellent coordination with their tanks, firing from a long echelon right formation. One platoon fired while the other moved forward a hundred meters. Their fire pattern worked neatly from the outside in, bracketing the enemy vehicles with accurate short-range fire. Two of the tank crews realized what was happening and turned west, attempting to flee towards the nearest hill. Mohr ordered Hauptmann's men to move along with the T-72s to prevent their escape. Both enemy tanks were killed as they made a futile run up the long slope.

At the sight of the lead tanks getting systematically pulverized, the BMPs pulled back north in a panic. One of them reversed its course back through the field near Oberschneiding. It fell rear-end first right into the same ditch that Mohr's tank had dived into earlier. Mohr nearly laughed at the sight of it. The ditch had scored two more vehicle kills than most of the enemy tank gunners had that entire morning. He wanted to thank whatever farmer had decided to build such an extensive drainage system. Kessel and Unger hit the unfortunate BMP with a pair of shots that nearly split the vehicle in two. The black smoke curled upwards from the wreck.

Before Mohr could rest, the Bo 105 pilot came back on the radio with a spot report. "Looks like you're clear all the way up to Aiterhofen," he said. "No sign of enemy activity to the north yet."

"This is our chance," Mohr told his platoon leaders. "Let's get up to the town, take out the air defense systems and see if we can get the civilians out too."

Hauptmann and his men drove north back up Route 20. Having a good familiarity with the drainage ditch by now, Mohr reminded his driver to

avoid its location. A few minutes later, they were less than a kilometer south of the town. On the outskirts of the town lay a scattering of small older houses amid newer developments. The major thoroughfare was simply a line of small shops on either side of the highway.

Five hundred meters south of the town, Mohr ordered the tanks to turn east and run through the open fields while scanning the streets and roads for any sign of enemy presence. He desperately wished he hadn't lost the two scout cars earlier in the day. Right now, they were losing valuable time as the enemy came towards them from the north. He could risk his tanks and go in the town but without infantry support, they would be extremely vulnerable to any garrison left behind. Mohr cursed to himself. Why hadn't he insisted on bringing some of Muller's men up here? It was too late now. They would need to recon around the town and see if they could spot the SAMs and AAA vehicles from here.

It didn't take long until they found one. Private Vogel stopped his scan and declared in a triumphant voice. "Got it," said the gunner. "SA-6. Sitting right near a gas station."

Mohr ordered the tank halted. Peering through his PERI as it was slaved to the gunsight, he saw the target right in the crosshairs. Between a pair of fuel pumps, three surface-to-air missiles sat in the carrier rack of a tracked vehicle chassis.

"Okay, let's hit it," said Mohr. "Loader. SABOT. Gunner. Target that SA-6. Take your time and line up the shot."

Mohr rocked back slightly from the round's firing. The shot hit the

chassis, causing the vehicle to tumble on its side and erupt in flames. The gas pumps exploded, sending an angry red fireball up into the air. There was no time to celebrate. The Bo 105 pilot came back on the radio with an updated report.

“I’ve got what looks like two entire tank regiments moving towards here from the north,” he said, a quiver in his voice. “Estimate contact with lead elements in three minutes.

Mohr shook his head. All too soon, the next echelon had arrived. Aiterhofen could not be saved.

“Okay, it’s time to go then,” he said. “Let’s pull back south.”

Mohr’s platoons wheeled around and drove back south down Route 20. His heart sank. So much of his plan had depended on taking out the air defenses and rescuing the civilians trapped in the town. Now he felt suddenly foolish for even attempting it. As his tank pulled into the rear position of the column formation heading south, he felt a stinging sense of failure. What could he have done better? He was learning all the lessons too slow. Each time he did something right, an obvious misstep showed itself. He had trained with and learned from the best but there it was – the gap between training and real-life experience was always there.

As they crossed over the drainage ditch a third time, Mohr heard his radio come alive. “Helicopters! Six o’clock!”

Chapter 10

Mohr's tanks scattered as the ground nearby erupted from the impact of rockets. The pair of Mi-8s behind them were in hot pursuit, swooping down over Aiterhofen and coming directly south for them. Lange threw the hatch open and fired back with the MG3 light machine gun. With little cover in the area, Mohr's only hope was to make a run towards Heinrich's infantry where he had left the Gepard. He cursed himself for sending the anti-aircraft gun south along with the Muller's grenadiers. In this war, the speed of technology and machinery pelted humans with more decisions than anyone could rationally process in a reasonable time. So far, the war had been a chaotic jumble of fire and death rather than the precision battle he was trained to expect.

"Make yourself a hard target for that helo," said Mohr to Hoffman. The young driver grunted an affirmative and swerved the tank left and right, hoping to throw off the pilot's aim.

Through his PERI, he watched as one of the Mi-8s came to a halt and hovered before firing off a Swatter missile from under its wingtip.

Mohr screamed out. "We got a missile incoming!"

The Swatter appeared as a little dancing light in the sky, quickly covering the distance between the firing helicopter and its target. Hoffman's driving grew erratic, jolting the crew from side to side. Mohr lost track of the missile's path and closed his eyes shut, bracing for impact. The explosion thundered just behind him. He turned to look out of the vision

block. One of Hauptmann's tanks erupted in a shower of flame and smoke.

"Keep the fire up at those helos!" shouted Mohr to Lange. The light machine gun on the turret clattered off a dozen rounds in less than a second. The chances of taking down a helicopter were slim but the fire might be disruptive enough to throw off the pilot's aim. Flying in pairs, one helicopter would herd them with rockets and machine-gun fire while the other took its time, lining up their aim carefully for the manually guided anti-tank missiles to find their targets.

Mohr watched the other helicopter settle into a hover. "There! Fire at that second helicopter. It's going to shoot!"

The Hip fired off a pair of missiles but this time, the enemy helicopter had been too close to the tanks. The pilot was forced to swing the helicopter away from the stream of machine gun fire from Mohr's tanks. Both missiles dove towards the ground, hitting short of their targets.

Mohr looked outside and saw the gentle rise of the hills that marked the new defensive phase line where Muller and Heinrich's men were digging in. "Go straight!" he told the Hoffman. "Drive straight down the highway."

The Leopard's treads suddenly found traction as they reached the pavement. Perhaps sensing the trap that lay in wait for them, the enemy helicopters circled far away, trying to get more distance from their prey before firing again. As Mohr's tanks rolled between the tree-covered slopes, both Hips settled into a hover. From a kilometer away, they were little more than black dots against the pale blue sky.

"This is it," Mohr muttered to himself.

“Get as close as you can to those trees and pull into cover,” he told Alpha.

One of the missiles landed near Hauptmann’s command tank while the other hit the nearby trees, sending jagged wooden splinters crashing through the nearby woods. The helicopters turned away to the north. Mohr wasn’t sure if they had run out of anti-tank missiles or if the pilots had spotted something they didn’t like. Either way, the danger seemed to have passed. The sweat poured from Mohr’s face and he felt the tension in his muscles let go.

Mohr watched as the grenadiers further up the hill fired a pair of missiles at the departing helicopters. The Redeyes leaped out of their launchers and ignited like a huge firework fuse. They shot upwards, reaching Mach speed by the time they were halfway to their targets. The Hips broke off their formation. Now it was time for them to swerve crazily back and forth in an effort to stay alive. The one on the left released a series of bright flares from the sides of its fuselage. The missile ignored the decoys and exploded moments later, the brilliant fireball consuming its target.

The other helicopter dove towards the ground in an effort to avoid the oncoming missile but the Redeye continued on its course, following along with its target. The missile detonated only a meter away from the rear rotor, sending thousands of fragments into the tail section of the aircraft. The helicopter spun crazily as it went into an uncontrolled descent. With a sick crunch, it hit the ground hard and the rotor blades sliced into the ground before breaking off. No survivors emerged from the wreck.

Mohr was worried. Had the Hips radioed back their position on the hill? It had to be assumed. His Leopards had survived only at the expense of leading the enemy right to Heinrich's defensive positions.

He radioed for Muller and Heinrich. Both men appeared, red-faced and barely able to contain their own anger.

We have to assume they know where we are now," Heinrich said. "We'll have to move quickly. There's a smaller hill to the south of here. It doesn't offer much cover..." He pulled out a map and stabbed his finger to show the position to the south.

Mohr got the message loud and clear. He knew he had fucked up but what else could he do? Did Heinrich expect him and his tank platoons to just give up and die out there?

Both Heinrich's and Muller's Marders began the task of loading up with troops. Mohr watched as fighting vehicles with men riding both inside and outside reversed down the slope and headed for a small town flanked on either side by a pair of low hills. Just as they arrived, the hill they had pulled away from was hit by a tremendous burst of artillery fire.

He radioed over to the Bo 105 pilot operating over to the west, asking for any sightings. "I've got at least a regiment across the bridge right now," he said. "They have another regiment waiting to cross. I count forty-three Tango Seven Twos heading south down Route 20. They will be at your position in approximately five minutes."

As the hill to the north was pulverized under a sheet of high explosive

firepower, Mohr's radio hissed to life with the voice of the battalion commander, Colonel Donner, wanting a situation report.

Mohr read out a code to indicate their approximate grid location. "We've taken casualties," he said. "Have reports of enemy forces incoming."

"Hold on for as long as you can," he said. "Be advised, we're sending in air to hit Aiterhofen to suppress local air defenses. We'll hit the enemy as they come over the bridge."

"Negative, there are civilians still in the town," said Mohr. "I repeat, there are civilians still trapped in the town. You'll kill them."

Mohr's heart sank. He had failed to take out the enemy air defenses in Aiterhofen and the people there would be punished for it. The town would be pummeled from the air. He heard a pair of Tornado jets come in low from the south, their engines screaming. As they got to the outskirts of Aiterhofen, he braced himself for the town to be turned into a fireball. Instead, the jets split off from each other and circled back south. A pair of SAMs followed one of the jets and it dropped a series of bright yellow flares while twisting and turning at low altitude. The missiles slammed into the side of a hill as the Tornado skimmed over its crest and then dipped back down to treetop level, hugging the terrain as it disappeared south.

"What's happening out there?" said Mohr. "The pilots turned back!"

Ten long seconds passed with Mohr waiting on the radio for a reply. Finally, a deep and commanding voice came over the radio. "The pilots have refused orders to hit the town," it said calmly. "You're going to have to do your best to buy us time."

“Who is this? Identify yourself,” said Mohr. No answer came. He was stunned. Just what in the hell was happening back at battalion headquarters?

Mohr looked at the map and tried to think hard. He had missed something in all the terror and bloodshed and exhaustion.

They were all sitting there waiting in ambush, assuming the enemy would come straight towards their kill zone. Just like he had this morning near Grafling. He had miscalculated, however, and nearly lost his company as a result when the Czech commander sent a small tank force through the hill instead of down the highway. The problems started when he had based his plans on the enemy’s intentions rather than their capabilities. Could they send a second force down through the narrow roads and hilly terrain to the west of Aiterhofen while at the same time trying to punch down Route 20 to the south? Certainly! The commander had two entire regiments at his disposal.

Mohr pulled out his binoculars and looked at the sudden rise of terrain marked by the low jagged rocky hills to the west. It was perfect for hitting the enemy as he came down the narrow roads and tight curves that characterized the area’s geography.

If the enemy didn’t come down that way, the twisting road led right back up to Aiterhofen. They would come out on the enemy’s flank as the Russians drove southward. There was no question it could be done. The only issue was how many tanks would be needed to pull it off? Mohr shouted over to Hauptmann, who stood there in the commander’s hatch of his tank, scanning the northern horizon.

“Hauptmann, stay here with Alpha,” he shouted. “I’m taking Unger and Kessel west of here. I might be able to hit their flanks.”

Hauptmann nodded. If the young man was confused or shocked by the captain’s sudden decision, he showed no sign of it. Mohr felt more than ever he was making the right decision. He switched on the intercom on and spoke up. “Driver, I want you to reverse immediately and head southwest through the fields. You’ll hit a road. I want you to get on it and go as fast as you can.”

Kessel and Unger’s six tanks immediately pulled back off the slope with Mohr and headed in the same direction, using the hills as cover from enemy recon units that were undoubtedly positioned somewhere to the north. Once the tanks had traveled two kilometers along the rough patches of farmland, Hoffman found the road and the tank got up to speed.

Less than ten minutes later, they had found the perfect spot for an ambush. It was a high ridge that overlooked a long flat stretch of road with high steep hills at either end. After quickly explaining the new plan, Unger and Kessel got into their tanks and waited. They didn’t have to wait long. While the lead Soviet regiment reached Muller’s kill zone five kilometers to the east, the Bo 105 pilot reported that another regiment was being sent over the hill to the north of where Mohr and Unger’s men waited.

From the cover of the ridgeline, Mohr watched as the enemy artillery crashed into the woods on the valley floor. “Come on you bastards,” he said to himself.

Chapter 11

Captain Mohr stood in the cupola of his Leopard tank, watching the enemy artillery fall into the woods to the south. The Soviet commander had made a good guess as to where the Germans were hiding but he had obviously underestimated the long-range accuracy of western tank guns. Had the battle occurred thirty years earlier, Mohr would have had no choice but to put his tanks there.

“Wait for it, gentlemen,” he said into his headset. “I want you to drive forward when I give the signal. But don’t fire until I give the order.”

Unger’s tank platoon sat behind him completely still, like predators patiently waiting for their prey to arrive. The enemy barrage pounded the trees at the end of the valley, smashing into them again and again. The ground trembled with each impact and the booming sound echoed off the nearby hills, like a giant amphitheater.

After several minutes, the enemy artillery ceased. The dust and smoke thrown up by the churning earth and trees slowly began to clear. What had been a small green peaceful copse of pines and light brush only a few minutes ago was now a sick collection of charred splinters of burning wood. Mohr found barely enough relief to replace the sense of revulsion at the destruction of his homeland. After all, if his tanks had been in among the trees, they would have been completely pulverized.

The German company commander held his breath and waited for the enemy tanks to show up. He abhorred the thought of his tanks sitting up here

on a ridgeline and shooting at the enemy. It reeked too much of Captain Harting's tactical style to make him comfortable. On the other hand, he had to admit that there were rare times when maybe it wasn't such a bad idea for a tank to remain stationary and blast away at the enemy from long range, if the opportunity provided itself.

Watching through the PERI at eight times magnification, he could make out the crest of the large steep hill that stood two kilometers to the north of where his tanks were positioned. He scanned the crest, trying to catch any sign of movement.

Moments later, the first platoon of three T-72s passed over the crest of the far hill. They rumbled down the slope in column formation and hit the valley floor at top speed. The passage of their tracks over the land kicked up a cloud of dirt up from behind them. When they met the small narrow road, the tanks found a grip on the pavement and sped south towards where Mohr and his men waited.

The squat T-72s sped along the road, their turrets traversing left and right as they scanned for targets. Mohr slewed the turret to follow his target. As the Leopard tank's main gun rotated slowly to the right, Mohr pushed a button on his PERI controls to show Vogel, his gunner, exactly what he was looking at. Satisfied that his target was acquired, he flipped his radio to the intercom and spoke.

"Target! Tank. 10 o'clock. Range two thousand. Track it and wait for my order to fire."

Vogel gazed through the sight and replied, the words spilling out just a

bit too fast.

“Roger. I have the target. Waiting.”

As the lead tanks came nearly even to where Mohr’s Leopard sat concealed among the scrub and brush of the ridgeline, two more columns of T-72s descended the slope to the north. The BMPs came next, speeding behind the main battle tanks. Without any anti-tank missiles, the smaller vehicles posed little threat but the T-72s could indeed do some damage if they managed to coordinate their fire on his position.

He keyed his microphone and spoke to Unger sitting by in the nearby Leopards.

“Platoon Bravo, on my order, take up position beside me on the ridge in line formation. Hit the MBTs first then go for the BMPs.”

The teeming mass of enemy tanks rolled across the floor of the valley. Just as the lead enemy tank column had nearly made it around the curving road that snaked south, Mohr spoke calmly into his radio.

“Now. Move.”

The Leopards behind Mohr’s command tank roared to life. Seconds later, there was one tank to his left and two more to his right. The latter was just a little too far forward, the front of its hull undercarriage jutting over the ridgeline. Mohr guessed that the driver had gotten too excited. He thought about correcting him but there was simply no time.

“Fire!,” Mohr shouted.

“On the way!” Vogel replied.

The Leopard’s main gun belched and the tank rocked slightly with the recoil. Seconds later, the round found its mark, punching into the enemy tank’s hull side. The T-72 shuddered and stopped in its tracks. Mohr heard the Leopards beside him join in as they fired their main guns.

“Gunner! Engage at will!” shouted Mohr. “Work your way around the perimeter to the interior.”

He ducked back down into the tank. It was time to talk to Kessel. He changed frequency on his radio, hoping that the jamming wouldn’t be too bad.

“Delta Three One, bring your tanks around to the north and then swing east behind Hill 221,” he said. “You should find the command group somewhere there.”

The radio crackled and buzzed before Kessel’s reply burrowed through the static.

“Delta Three One to Two One. Acknowledged.”

The reply sounded faint and distant but Mohr felt assured that Kessel’s three Leopards would perform as ordered. If not, he would probably not live long enough to know about it.

Mohr’s tank jerked as its main gun fired again. He was about to open the commander’s hatch to get a better look at the enemy position when he heard a loud metallic clang on the turret. “Gunner! Target whoever is firing at us!”

He opened the hatch and peered out at the carnage on the valley floor. Smoldering and burning tanks and APCs littered the ground as if a careless god had simply flung heaps of flaming metal trash to the earth. The Russian tanks took cover behind the wrecks and fired back. Mohr nodded. It was time, he thought.

He pulled out his map and dialed in a new frequency. “Fire Mission! Fire Mission!” he called over the radio. “Request Fire Mission Alpha!”

Mohr smiled a little, knowing that the Heinrich’s 155mm self-propelled artillery guns about ten kilometers to his rear would soon be firing on the pre-plotted coordinates. Twenty long seconds later, the barrage of dual-purpose chemical munitions rained down in the middle of the enemy formation.

The effect was instant. The BMPs and T-72s began to light up and explode as the artillery rounds sliced through the top armor of the enemy vehicles. Caught under the onslaught of the fire, several of the enemy tank crews panicked and attempted to bail out of their vehicles. As they did, the munitions caught them in the open, ripping them apart limb from limb with fragmentation or incinerating them outright in the blast.

Mohr shook his head in disbelief at the carnage.

“Missile! Incoming!” It was Unger in the tank to his left, screaming over the radio. Mohr watched the missile trail emerge from somewhere near the hilltop from where the Soviet tanks had first come.

“Reverse! Get back!” shouted Mohr. He felt the tank jolt as Hoffman

slipped the tank into gear, hoping to dodge the incoming missile.

The Leopard to his right didn't budge. Mohr saw the treads spin uselessly at the earth, unable to find a grip. The tank turned into a ball of flame. The heat from the nearby explosion felt like it was searing Mohr's face.

"I saw it. The missile team is over by that clump of trees near the top of Hill 221," reported Unger.

Mohr checked his map and picked up his radio. "Fire Mission! Shift fire to coordinates..." He realized he was shouting but he no longer cared. One of his tanks was gone and he could barely keep his emotions at bay otherwise. Should he pull his men completely back off the ridge? If so, he would be giving up a valuable firing position. On the other hand, there was a missile somewhere out there that knew where his men were.

What else could hit them? At least there was no enemy artillery...yet. If Kessel's tanks didn't hurry up and take out the enemy command vehicles in the rear, Mohr would have to move off the ridge.

"Let's roll up slowly again to the edge," said Mohr. "Keep an eye on that AT position on our left. If you see anything, call it out and we'll pull back right away. Keep firing on the enemy tanks in the valley."

The DPICM artillery fire ceased as Mohr's tank and Unger's two tanks returned to their previous firing positions. The valley had become a sea of fire and death. He scanned carefully for targets hidden amid the hulking remains of burning and exploding vehicles.

Vogel found another target and fired. The soil on the face of the ridge below Mohr's tank burst from the impact of an enemy tank round.

Mohr ducked down into the tank. "Platoon Bravo, report your position, over."

There was no answer – only static and interference as he called again and again.

Ten seconds later, Lieutenant Kessel responded.

"We are on the east side of Hill 221 now. Engaging multiple targets," he said. "I think these are the command vehicles."

"Good work, Bravo," answered Mohr. "Keep working your targets. Watch for enemy AT missiles. When you're done back there, swing around and help us clean up the remaining troublemakers down in the valley."

Mohr ducked up from the hatch, his head spinning. In the space of thirty seconds, he had felt anticipation, excitement, despair, and elation. He lifted up the binoculars and watched the hillside to the north. A faint wisp of smoke puffed up from a clump of trees.

"AT missile again! Get back!" shouted Mohr. Unger's tank reversed from the edge of the ridge. Mohr's tank didn't move. He keyed his microphone frantically.

"Driver! Pull back now!" he shouted. The wire-guided missile was almost halfway to his position now. Mohr's brain screamed at him to get out of the tank.

His Leopard jolted forwards and back, clearly stuck in the soft soil below. Hoffman screamed back at him. "I'm hung up on something!"

Vogel slew the turret left in the direction of where the missile had been fired. It was nearly two kilometers away but the tank's round hit squarely among the small clump of trees where the crew was concealed.

The incoming anti-tank missile made a corkscrew trail then plowed harmlessly into the base of the ridge. Mohr's Leopard finally found the traction it needed and moved backward.

Over the top of Hill 221, Mohr saw movement and raised his binoculars to get a better look. He was greeted by the beautiful sight of Kessel's three tanks pouring fire down from the top of the hill at the surviving enemy tanks below. With their rear exposed to Bravo, the Leopard's sabot rounds easily cut through the T-72 armor.

A few minutes later, he surveyed the battlefield. An entire Soviet motorized rifle regiment lay in complete ruins before him.

The valley, so very serene and peaceful before today, was now a ribbon of black pockmarked earth. A thick blanket of dark smoke clung low to the ground. The occasional explosion marked the sound of ammunition cooking off in dead tanks.

He keyed the radio and called Kessel for a situation report.

The signal was a little clearer this time and the response was clear enough. "We're clear of targets. No casualties."

Mohr sighed and leaned back against the cupola. He took off his helmet and nodded at Unger standing in the hatch of the Leopard to his left. The two men nearly nodded at each other. No bright smiles. No victory cheers. Mohr suddenly felt very tired.

The radio chirped with Hauptmann's voice. Mohr could barely make out the message before it cut off completely due to interference.

Chapter 12

Mohr called over to Unger in the nearby tank, explaining the latest development. Just a minute ago, he had heard Hauptmann's voice fighting back the panic as he shouted to be heard over the noisy chaos of heavy close combat.

"Heinrich's pulling his men back south," Mohr said. "It looks like they got hit by two regiments instead of just one. They've taken heavy casualties. Hauptmann's lost a tank. Heavy casualties. They can't hold."

Kessel's tanks arrived back at the ridgeline. The short squat lieutenant leaned out of his hatch, a far-off look on his face. "We killed them all," he said. "They tried to run when we came around the hill but we gunned each and every one of them down."

Mohr nodded. "It's time we moved on their flank. Heinrich is pulling back fast. His men are nearly broken."

The six tanks swung up the little road, back towards Aiterhofen.

Near the town, they found them. Several 2S1 self-propelled artillery vehicles were parked in the barren fields. Their 122mm howitzers were elevated skywards. Mohr wondered if these were the vehicles that had fired into the trees on the valley floor just ten minutes earlier.

"Gunner! Target those S1s! Fire!" he said.

Vogel fired, followed by the other tanks accompanying Mohr. The armor

penetrating rounds making short work of each of them. In the ensuing fire and confusion, the enemy artillery vehicles pulled backward and forwards to try and escape the certain death that awaited them. Mohr's tanks fired again. Every shot hit. Every hit was a kill. By the time they had finished, the group of mobile artillery pieces was nothing more than hot burning metal.

There was one major road leading into town from the west. Once it reached the outskirts of the little town, it split off into three smaller streets. Mohr shook his head, knowing that any infantry in the town could pose a huge problem for him. But there was no other way.

“Kessel, you take the north. Unger, go south,” he ordered. “I guess I’ll take my tank right up the middle. Go as fast as you can.”

The tanks sped into the town, rolling along the narrow streets. Mohr watched as his tank whisked past the rustic little homes with neatly kept lawns that sat on either side of them.

“I’ve got a jeep straight ahead!” shouted Vogel.

Mohr put his hand up to shield his eyes from the sun. In the middle of an intersection were four men with rifles slung over their shoulders. They were standing by a Russian GAZ jeep, smoking and laughing. None of them seemed to pay any mind to the 40-ton tank quickly approaching them. As Vogel adjusted the main gun to line up the shot, one of the men finally noticed that the large lumbering vehicle coming their way was definitely not friendly. He turned to say something to the other nearby soldiers just before the 105mm gun fired. The jeep disintegrated as the HEAT round slammed into it. The four men lay scattered on the ground amidst the pieces of

charred metal debris that lay scattered on the roadway.

Mohr heard several other explosions from further east in the town. His tank continued forward, shoving the burning jeep's chassis out of the way without even pausing. To his left, he watched as several Russians took cover behind the corner of the brick town hall. They squatted together in shock and terror as a tank from Unger's platoon fired its coax machine gun at them from somewhere up ahead. Mohr ordered a halt. The tank sat less than thirty feet to the left of the Russians.

"Vogel, get the coax on those men near the building! Come on!" he shouted.

The tank's 7.62mm machine gun spat out nearly a hundred and sixty rounds in less than ten seconds. The enemy soldiers were cut down quickly before they had even time to react. The bodies lay heaped together in death as Mohr's tank rolled forward.

Something whizzed by the top of Mohr's tank. The second floor of the nearby bank burst outwards and the building's facade rained down on the street. Mohr turned the PERI around and spotted a flash of movement thirty meters down the street to the rear of the tank. Mohr zoomed in at twice magnification and scanned the intersection. A few seconds later, A helmeted head appeared from around the corner of a nearby flower shop. The figure leaned over and propped up an RPG on his shoulder. Mohr used the joystick to bring the turret around and selected the coax. The first rounds slammed into the brick facade of the building, knocking chunks of it to the pavement. Before Mohr could adjust his aim, the enemy soldier ducked back around behind the corner of the building. "Goddamn it!" he shouted. Mohr keyed

the radio.

“I’ve got an RPG team taking cover down the street,” he said. “Anyone have a sighting on it?”

Mohr waited with the turret turned towards the corner. Hoffman accelerated the tank, pulling further down the street. Mohr’s view of the corner was blocked by a bus stop.

“We’ve got HEAT loaded!” shouted Vogel. “You want me to shoot him?”

Mohr thought about the civilians in the town. The last thing he wanted to do was fire a 105mm main gun in the middle of a populated area. There was no telling who or what he would hit. For the second time in the afternoon, he cursed at himself for not bringing an infantry team with him into town. They were tempting fate sorely by bringing a tank-only force into a built-up area.

“Negative,” he told Vogel. “Hold your fire with the main gun. Engage only with coax. I’m handing it back over to you.”

Mohr released his grip on the joystick, watching all around with the PERI. A moment later, he heard one of his tanks fire.

“I’ve got a pair of ZSUs here on the east end of town,” shouted Kessel. “We’re engaging right now!”

Mohr ordered Hoffman to circle around the block, hoping to catch the RPG team before they caught him. It felt like a game of cat and mouse and Mohr was definitely the cat. Without being able to fire its main gun, however, the tank felt more like a cat that had been declawed by its owner.

“Lange, you’re not doing anything useful,” he told the loader. “Get up there on the MG.”

They turned the corner and drove slowly down a quiet street. Mohr felt the frustration sink in as his PERI gave him a very limited cone of view. Angrily, he threw open the commander’s hatch for a better view around him. The tank passed by a small supermarket on one side and a three-story apartment building on the right. Over the rumble of the tank’s engine, he heard a short sharp whistle from above. Looking up, he saw an older man lean out his window and frantically point in the direction from where they had come. Mohr swung around in his cupola and slapped Lange, who brought the machine gun around.

There, not less than fifteen meters away, two men crouched in the middle of the street. One of them had an RPG launcher resting on his shoulder, ready to fire.

“Shoot! Shoot!” screamed Mohr. Lange tried to fire but forgot to rack the bolt.

The rocket shot out of its launcher, skimming just along the top of the street towards the rear of Mohr’s tank. It went inches wide of the Leopard and struck a street light ten meters to the tank’s front, knocking the metal pole to the ground over onto the street. Lange fired the MG, spewing a hail of rounds at the team as they ran off towards the corner to cover. Within seconds, the pair of Russians lay on the ground in pools of their blood. One of them spasmed violently for a few seconds before he stopped moving. The RPG gunner’s hands clenched and unclenched as if he were trying to grasp

for the weapon that lay just out of his reach. Gradually, the clenching slowed, the man coughed out a stream of pink blood, and then died.

Mohr looked around the deserted streets for any signs of enemy activity. Nothing stirred. Glancing up at the windows above where his tank sat, the curious faces of the town's citizens appeared, eyes fixed on his Leopard tank.

Suddenly, his radio sprang to life with the measured crisp sentences of the Bo 105 pilot who circled far to the north. "Be advised you have another regiment heading south across the bridge towards your current location. I am low on fuel and RTB."

Hauptmann came over the radio next. "Heinrich's ordering the M109s to hit Aiterhofen as the follow-on forces arrive," he said. "You'd better get the hell out of there!"

Things were happening too fast again for Mohr. Not only was he dealing with an oncoming regiment but now he had an impending artillery strike that would kill every civilian in the town.

"I'm near the highway," reported Kessel. "I have eyes on enemy supply trucks heading south on the road. Do you want me to engage?"

"Negative! Get back here!" Mohr answered. "We need to get these civilians the hell out of here."

Mohr looked up at the faces of the families that peered at him from behind the windows of homes and shops. He wished he had a megaphone to call out to them. Instead, he waved towards them and shouted. "You need to

go! Get out of here! Head southwest.” After a moment of hesitation, the door of a nearby shop opened up and an elderly couple hobbled out towards them. Seconds later, the people in the town came out into the street. Many of them were carrying hastily-packed suitcases that they threw into nearby parked vehicles. He called over to Kessel. “It’s time to move out. Disengage! We’re escorting the civilians southwest, back on the road we came from.”

Mohr got down from the tank and found a young adult couple, piling their belongings in a Volkswagen Golf. After a short shocked greeting, Mohr laid out the basic plan for them. “Follow my tanks southwest,” he said. We’re going to Landshut. Don’t stop for anything.”

Unger’s voice came over the radio next. “I’ve got more tanks coming south from across the bridge!”

“We’ll need time to get these civilians out of here,” Mohr said. “Do what you can to delay those tanks from coming down here.”

He knew his orders were being followed when he heard the short sharp blast of a main gun firing to the east.

Thirty seconds later, Mohr and Kessel’s tanks were scrambling southwest along the narrow hilly roads. They passed by the flaming remnants of the Soviet regiment that he and his tanks had destroyed less than an hour ago. The cars veered carefully around the wreckage. The going was incredibly slow in places where there simply was no room to maneuver. Kessel’s tanks had to pair up and push the destroyed vehicles to the side of the road before the civilian convoy could continue.

Unger reported in. “It looks like we’ve got an entire regiment coming down here again,” he said. “I’m down to one tank here. I don’t think I can hold out much longer. Call in some air. Let’s take out that bridge.”

It was the last transmission Mohr ever heard from the man.

Minutes later, a pair of F-4 Phantoms screamed over Mohr’s head, heading north towards Straubing. The laser-guided Paveways they carried found their target, leaving two giant gaps near the center of the structure. Its steel beam supports were twisted from the force of the explosive power and the southern section of the bridge heaved under its own weight and then gradually collapsed utterly. It was too late, Mohr knew. The enemy was swarming straight down Route 20, now reinforced by whatever force had made it across the bridge in time.

As Mohr and the civilians proceeded several kilometers to the south, he heard back from Hauptmann. “We gave them a hell of a fight. But we’re in full retreat now,” he said. “Heinrich is dead. We’ve less than a platoon of grenadiers. I’ve lost both my tanks. The Gepards are still here.”

Mohr sighed. The battle was finally lost and the enemy was streaming down Route 20. His only hope was that they had delayed the enemy long enough for the battalion to secure the defenses around Landshut. With only five total tanks remaining, his company was less than half its original strength. There seemed little point in taking more losses. It was over already. The only thing that kept them from utter destruction was this little thin corridor of road nestled between a series of high hills. They were cut adrift and caught behind enemy lines.

Chapter 13

As the convoy snaked through the hills, Mohr stood up in the cupola and scanned around him. The civilian traffic was moving slowly in some parts, quicker in others. As soon as one bottleneck was resolved, another appeared up ahead. It was tedious work and turned what would normally have been a short thirty-minute drive southwest into an agonizingly frustrating and glacial effort.

The men in the tank were exhausted and, except for Hoffman's occasional grumbling about the civilian drivers, unusually quiet. Knowing that an entire enemy division was moving all around them was enough to make Mohr keep a constant vigil on the nearby hilltops. If they were spotted by anyone, he wasn't sure how he could respond. He really didn't want to get into a shooting match while his tank waded through the midst of civilian cars packed with families. The skies began to clear above him as afternoon turned to dusk. He leaned back against the cupola and let his senses take a break from the constant state of vigilance he had enforced upon them since this morning.

All around him, he watched as the flock poked its way southwest, away from the enemy. The two small children who sat in the backseat of the little car in front of his tank smiled and waved at him. Mohr looked back at them, a little stupid grin forming on his face. He had always liked kids but was too scared of having his own. After going through the hell of his own upbringing, he worried that his father's propensity for drink and physical abuse was partly genetic in nature. For that reason, he had avoided

commitment of any kind and simply stuck to himself for the most part. Now, however, were these sweet little kids he was protecting and the thought washed over him that maybe someday, when the war was over, he would settle down and make a family, avoiding all the mistakes his father had made with him.

As he sat there daydreaming, the car next to him blared its horn. The traffic around Mohr's tank suddenly accelerated. An old battered truck slammed into the back of a newer sedan, turning the hapless vehicle on its side as it spun towards the edge of the pavement. The couple in the front seat crawled out and rushed to the side of the road, out of the way of the surging traffic. The civilians were enveloped in near-panic, trying to squeeze their vehicles through the gaps between cars in front of them. The once orderly procession was quickly spinning out of control now and Mohr had to wonder if any of the drivers even knew why they were all suddenly panicking.

Then he saw it. Two hundred meters to his left, Mohr caught the source of the commotion. Perched on the crest of a nearby hill were the silhouettes of three combat vehicles, the sun at their rear. Alarmed, he brought his binoculars up to get a better view. The turret of his tank traversed towards where he was looking. Vogel spoke up. "Unknown vehicles! Three o'clock. Engage?"

Mohr squinted to try and identify what kind of vehicles were up there. Finally, he made out the shape of a Marder and a Leopard tank.

"Negative," said Mohr. "I think that's Hauptmann and whatever's left of Muller's men."

Vogel took less than ten seconds to confirm it.

Mohr switched over the radio to talk to the remaining tanks in his company. He confirmed that he was indeed looking at Hauptmann's men and then told everyone else to stand down. Unfortunately, there was no way of telling the civilians that the tanks on the hill were friendly. The panic only seemed to increase as Hauptmann's vehicles made their way down the slope towards the convoy.

"Pull back," ordered Mohr. "Get your tanks back and join in at the back after all the cars have gone. You're creating a panic down here."

Hauptmann did as he was ordered and brought the vehicles back up the slope and reversed over the crest. By the time the panic had quelled to a manageable level, the damage had already been done. The traffic was completely stopped, locked together as cars jostled for space to move on the narrow road. Mohr was forced to send Lange and Vogel into the sea of cars to try and direct the vehicles and get moving again.

"What a nightmare," said Lange. "This is going to take hours."

The two men got to work. Mohr scanned up ahead for the major bottlenecks and found one a hundred meters ahead.

Three cars and a large truck had collided. The cars were badly mauled along their sides and the truck was overturned. An overweight man with a gash on his forehead rushed towards Mohr's tank, beckoning him to come. Mohr got down from the tank and ran through the tightly packed traffic. As he neared the site of the accident, he heard the awful screams of people

trapped inside and pinned underneath the big vehicle. Kessel climbed down from his tank and stood in front of the accident scene, surveying the wreckage. Mohr shook his head. If the enemy caught them here, they would all die very quickly. The more time they took getting down the road, the more likely their discovery became.

“We need to get things moving again,” Kessel shouted.

Mohr pointed to the wreck. “Well, we can’t just leave them here.”

The truck reminded Mohr of a giant wounded beetle stuck on its back. As they approached, the shouts of agony grew louder. The stench of gasoline filled the air and chunks of metal lay scattered on the highway surface. Mohr and Kessel walked around the truck. The roof had caved in but he could see through a little twisted opening into the cab. Two small terrified eyes peered back at him. He flicked on his flashlight and to see a little girl with abrasions on her forehead and chin. Beside her was a woman who was obviously in shock, crying out her husband’s name.

“For the sake of your child, please calm down,” Mohr said to the woman. “We’ll get you out of there soon.”

He surveyed the little hole between the crushed roof and the door frame. There was not enough space for even the child to crawl out.

“Come on! Let’s try to open these doors!” he shouted. Several of the tankers started pulling at the truck doors, yanking on them with their hands. The little girl inside the cab began to panic and scream. Mohr shook his head in frustration as the damaged doors refused to budge.

“Let’s try something else,” he turned to Vogel. “Get the tow cable out. We’ll hook it up to the doors and pull them off with the tank.”

His gunner nodded and ran off towards the Leopard. Mohr scanned the skies, a deep pit growing in his stomach as each minute ticked by on the road.

“Sir, we really need to get going,” said Kessel. “If we get caught out here...”

Mohr sighed. “Yeah, I know, lieutenant. Get back to your tanks. If something happens, drive like hell with the civilians.”

Kessel disappeared and Mohr watched as his Leopard worked its way around the wreckage of the accident and then backed up towards him. Lange clamped one end of the tow cables to the Leopard’s rear deck. Vogel fastened the other end to the truck’s door. Mohr motioned for Hoffman to drive forward. The cable became taut and the door swung open with a yawning screech before separating completely from the vehicle’s body.

Carefully, the crewmen of both Leopard tanks hauled the family out. With the help and direction of a pair of nurses in a car behind them, they triaged and began to treat the family. The child had only a few scrapes and bruises while the woman’s arm was clearly broken. The father, however, was dead, having suffered severe trauma to his head. Once it was clear that there was no more that they could do, Mohr got back into his tank, ready to resume the journey.

Just as Mohr’s Leopard moved forward, he heard the sound of a high—

pitched whine coming from above. Far ahead of the convoy, a fat ground-attack aircraft flew low and slow over the convoy and then turned back west over the hills. Mohr caught a glimpse of the red star on its tail. He had the distinct gut-gnawing sensation of a mouse that had just been caught by the biggest and baddest cat in the neighborhood.

Mohr scrambled to put on his headset and keyed the radio. "I just sighted it. Su-25. I'm pretty sure it spotted us," he said. "Get ready for it!"

Chapter 14

The enemy aircraft popped up over the hills again, this time at the head of the convoy. It turned north and dove at a shallow angle towards the ground, a stream of rockets spewing out of the pods slung underneath its wings.

Mohr ducked down inside the tank as the blasts ripped through the civilian vehicles. The explosions flung them through the air several meters like cheap plastic toys. The aircraft's 30mm main cannon bit deep into the vehicles and the pavement all around him. One of the rounds pounded into the top turret of the Leopard tank, causing it to ring like a bell. A series of small fires started inside the vehicle. Mohr felt the urge well up within him to bail out but reached for the fire extinguisher instead.

Hoffman shouted in anguished panic and reached to open up the driver's hatch.

Mohr shoved his shoulder with a kick to stop him.

"Calm down everyone!" he shouted. "Stay focused."

He yanked the pin off the extinguisher at the same time that the automatic fire suppression system kicked in. The fog of chemicals filled the tank up and Mohr couldn't see his hand in front of his face for a moment until the venting system did its job. As the air cleared inside the vehicle, Mohr could see the fires were out. The stench of burnt electronics and wiring filled his nostrils. It was better than being dead – but not by much.

He peered through the PERI system, amazed that the delicate electronics still worked. At the back of the convoy, the Gepard was unleashing a torrent of anti-aircraft fire at the Soviet aircraft. The tracers reached up and punched at the Su-25 as it veered slowly to the right. Mohr was sure he could see a couple of holes in the aircraft's fuselage but it was still evidently flyable.

With some measure of relief, he opened the hatch to find Lange still manning the machine gun.

"Lange, get ready! That thing's coming for another pass. I'm sure of it!" he shouted.

The loader aimed his weapon towards the whining sound of the engine as it flew behind the hills to the east.

"Heading south again," said Lange. "He's gonna take another pass from the same direction again."

"Shit," said Mohr. The pilot had apparently figured out that their anti-aircraft gun was stuck at the back of the convoy. At the front of it, they were completely defenseless. He tried not to pay any mind to the collection of burnt vehicles all around him. The truck occupants they were helping only seconds later were gone – wiped off the earth, along with the good people who tried to help them. And for what purpose? They were non-combatants. Many of them were children or the elderly.

"Those fucking bastards," said Mohr to himself.

His tank was awash in a sea of burning civilian vehicles. Behind him, he

could see the rear of the convoy. The Marders were in ruins, their thin top armor punctured by the hail of cannon rounds. Hauptmann's tank sat there motionless beside the Gepard. His loader manned the machine gun, ready to fire. Far up ahead, Kessel's tanks tried to pull back under the supposed safety of the Gepard's air defense umbrella. Mohr doubted that they could shoot it down on its third pass. The aircraft already had two holes in it and it seemed to be performing just fine. What difference would two or three more holes make?

"There," said Lange, pointing far up ahead. The Su-25 pilot was apparently taking his time to line up his approach straight down the middle of the convoy. He had given himself plenty of room to adjust his angle of attack for precision firing. Mohr took a deep breath. So this was it.

The plane's nose lit up as it came thundering in again down along a straight path that started at the front of the convoy. Kessel's tanks hammered away at it, the aircraft passing straight in front of the wall of tracers being thrown at it. The Gepard at the rear of the convoy came rushing forward, smashing through the crush of wreckage of civilian cars and trucks to get closer to its target.

It was like watching two gunslingers in the old western movies. The plane caught a long burst from the Gepard's 35mm autocannon and wobbled slightly as it reached the halfway point of the convoy. The rockets poured out again from under its wings but this time, they landed far to the rear of the mass of vehicles, smashing into the hillside.

The Gepard continued its firing. Its autocannons whirled, sending 550 rounds per minute up at the incoming plane. Finally, the Su-25 veered away

just as the Gepard's autocannons began loudly clicking as it emptied its ammunition. There was a loud bang to Mohr's rear and he looked over to see the Gepard burning. The Frogfoot swerved drunkenly at low altitude, the pilot obviously having lost control of the aircraft.

The plane traded speed for altitude as it tried to climb over the nearest hill but stalled as it reached the crest. The pilot ejected moments before the aircraft pancaked hard against the side of the hill, the impact throwing up a cloud of dirt. The wings broke off the fuselage as it spun and tumbled down the hill. Eventually, the main body came to a rest after broadsiding several large trees. Mohr waited for the explosion but none came.

The road all around them was awash in death. Mohr and his men surveyed the wreckage, saying nothing. The car in front of him was engulfed in flames. He scrambled out of the tank, calling for Lange to bring an extinguisher. Inside the car, the two children he had waved to earlier sat screaming and crying. The smoke curled up over the insides of the car, obscuring their faces. Mohr felt the intense heat as he stepped forward to smash the nearest window. The flames licked at him and he took a step back as he coughed. Lange emptied the extinguisher at the base of the fire but it only served to slow the fire's spread.

The windows on the car began to crack and shatter as the frames melted and the heat grew more intense. He reached a hand in past the flames, the fire-resistant gloves melting off his hands. Feeling around, he managed to catch hold of a limp arm. Before he could grasp and pull on it, the heat forced him to step back from the car. The interior of the car was completely consumed by the conflagration. Mohr tried a third time to approach the

vehicle. Lange pulled him back. “Sir! No!” he shouted. “We need to get out of here. It’s too dangerous.”

Mohr tried to shrug off Lange’s grip but the big man held him there in place before dragging him away towards the tank. As they got to the rear of the tank, the car exploded.

“Goddammit!” shouted Mohr, tears in his eyes. “What the hell gives them the right?”

Hoffman emerged from the driver’s hatch pointing over to the east.

“Sir, I’ve got eyes on that Su-25 pilot,” he said. “He’s high up on that hill.”

Mohr grabbed his binoculars and aimed them towards the white billowing canopy of the parachute that lay near the top of the steep hill. The pilot was nearby on the ground. He slowly got up and collapsed back in the dirt.

“He’s injured. Let’s get up there,” Mohr said.

The tank pulled away from the road and slowly worked its way up the steep hill. No one said anything as they got closer to where the enemy pilot crawled in the dirt.

“Hoffman, take out the pilot,” said Mohr quietly. “Don’t waste any ammunition.”

The Soviet pilot lay on the dry gravel, his eyes fixed in wide horror at the tank as it thundered straight towards him. As it became clear that the

German tank wasn't going to stop after all, he scrambled backward on his hands and feet, begging and screaming. Mohr looked down at him and watched the pilot's expression as the tank kept rolling forwards. For a fraction of an instant, Mohr could have sworn he saw the face of his own father just before the man let out a single primal howl and then disappeared under the treads. The tank traveled a few more meters and then halted.

"This fucking war," muttered Mohr. He sobbed.

The radio crackled to life with a transmission from Colonel Donner. "We've got several regiments on Route 92 near Dingolfing moving west towards Landshut," he said. "Get back here as fast as you can."

Mohr pulled his headset off without acknowledging the order and threw it in the tank.

"Let's get down there and find out if there are any more survivors," he told his crew.

Night had fallen by the time the tank crews managed to pick through the wreckage, finding mostly charred bodies. Their gruesome work was rewarded only once when they found a family of three alive, wandering dazed near the rear of the column. The small boy clutched at his mother's chest, screaming over and over. The mother's eyes were glazed over with a faraway look locked inside them.

The father of the child, a man in his early twenties, stood mute. "Are you okay?" Mohr asked the father. The man responded by pointing to where his car had sat, in between two pickup trucks that were charred and smoldering. The station wagon was crushed in the panic and the family had managed to

crawl out through the rear of their vehicle and run away from the carnage.

“Your car?” said Mohr. The man stuttered and mumbled a response, his voice quaking with emotion. He finally gave up trying to speak and simply nodded.

“You need your things?” asked Mohr again. The man simply pointed again and nodded.

“It’s okay now. You’re safe,” he said. Mohr sat him and the rest of the family down on the ground then rushed over to the family’s wrecked car, picking through the remains and twisted metal to see what he could find for them. He managed to dig out some blankets and a few sodas for them then he dropped them off and ran over to Hauptmann.

“Any of the Gepard crew make it?” he asked.

Hauptmann shook his head and gestured over to the side of the road where three body bags lay fluttering gently in the breeze.

“I saw what you did back there,” said Hauptmann. The words came out like a dirge, soft and slow.

“What do you mean?” asked Mohr.

“That pilot. I saw what you did,” he repeated, a little louder.

Mohr winced and looked away. “We need to get moving soon,” he said. “It’s not safe here.”

One of Kessel’s tanks was heavily damaged from a 30mm round slicing through part of the turret, killing the commander and loader instantly. The

driver was shaken but still alive with only minor injuries. The remaining ammunition was redistributed among the surviving tanks. Once everything was to Mohr's satisfaction, they said a quick prayer for the sea of dead below them. He wanted to apologize to each of them for not burying them. There simply wasn't the time or manpower to do it.

When it was finished, Mohr checked that the crews were ready to go, saying quiet words of encouragement to each member. He returned to his tank and raised the battalion commander over the radio. Donner would certainly be wondering where the hell he and his men were by now. Mohr thought about making some excuse about radio interference or jamming but in the end, he decided he just didn't care enough anymore. They were here doing their best. He was a world away in his headquarters. That was that.

"We've been overrun at Dingolfing," said Donner. "We're falling back to Landshut."

Mohr checked his map. The narrow road he was on took him southwest right between the two cities.

"We could go west towards Route 15 and then go straight south to Landshut. But if we go straight down this road, we may be able to hit their right flank as they come down Route 92," said Mohr. "It's worth a try."

Kessel nodded. "What do we do with the civilians?" he asked. "We can't just leave them here. They have nowhere to go."

Mohr checked the map again. The location of the tiny village of Mengkofen was marked a few kilometers southwest down the road. He pointed to it. "We drop them off there if the place isn't already wiped off the

map,” he said.

They got in their tanks. Mohr felt the exhaustion of the day wearing away on him. He was filthy, covered in grease and dirt and blood. It was hard to believe the war had begun fourteen short hours ago. In that time, he had been through so much along with his men.

The four remaining tanks of Mohr’s company continued along the dark road. Along a curve, they spotted the lights of Mengkofen, a small one-road village surrounded by the first vestige of flat farmland that they had seen all evening. The four tanks idled in the road. Mohr ordered the gunners to scan the town for any signs of enemy vehicles. The few lone streetlamps in the center of town stood like silent glowing sentinels of a way of life that no longer existed. Nothing stirred in the darkness.

“Look. The lights are still on in some of the houses too,” said Lange.

Mohr nodded. “They must have left in a damn hurry.”

The tanks rolled through the quiet street and came to a halt. Kessel and Hauptmann took their tanks through the village, checking for any signs of life. A few minutes later, he heard back over the radio from Hauptmann. “I...found something. You better come and take a look at this.”

They drove to the outskirts of the small town to find Hauptmann standing at the side of a large ditch. He stared at Mohr, his face grim. Pointing into the ditch, Mohr came over and peered down with a flashlight. Inside were dozens of bodies of civilians. Entire families had simply been gunned down and tossed here. Several of the women were in a state of undress. Mohr picked up one of the nearby spent rounds and looked at it.

“It’s Pact,” he said, flinging the brass away in disgust.

“Fucking bastards,” Hauptmann said. “They passed through here and raped and killed everything along the way.”

Mohr swore quietly to himself and looked at the young family that sat perched on the tank’s hull. He had hoped to find some other people who could help them out. Instead, all they found was an empty shell of a town, its inhabitants slaughtered. Suddenly, the perversity of it all fell into sharp focus. He knew instantly how things would have to end and why.

He turned to the young sergeant who commanded the Marder and the remaining half-squad of panzergrenadiers from Muller’s platoon.

“We’re moving south towards Landshut,” he said. “You take the family. Keep them safe. Keep moving west.”

The sergeant looked confused and shook his head. “What good would that do? We need to get back towards Landshut with you.”

Mohr shook his head. “I have something else in mind,” he said. “You need to go now. Someone has to be left after all this is over. Someone has to say what they saw here. What happened. Even what I did back there with that pilot. Someone has to live to say it.”

The sergeant nodded. Mohr watched them drive off west through the darkness. Mohr’s tanks rolled south along the winding road. He checked his map and listened to the battalion net. It was completely quiet until they reached within three kilometers of Route 92. The radio transmissions made it clear that the rest of the brigade was coordinating its defenses around

Landshut and getting pushed back hard. Massed enemy artillery attacks were laying waste to the defenses. The city was being pounded into submission.

Lange turned to Mohr. “You really think four tanks can make a difference, sir?”

“No, I don’t,” he replied. “But it’s enough to stand up against what’s happening here. Even if it’s hopeless. There is a good chance we won't make it. Tell me now if you don't want –.”

Lange put a hand up. "Don't say it, sir. Don't you dare say it."

Chapter 15

The four Leopard tanks were parked no more than five meters from each other in a copse of trees at the base of a gently sloping hill. More than a kilometer to the south, past the bumpy uncultivated fields that lay untended, was Route 92. The wide strip of highway ran towards Landshut, terminating in Munich. The jeeps and trucks of the Soviet army raced west along the road shuttling supplies vital to the Warsaw Pact's offensive.

Mohr sat in his tank scanning the highway with his thermal sights set to white hot polarity. The outlines of the trucks engines glowed brightly on his little screen as the large vehicles bumbled along towards the front. The scene in front of him was a tank commander's dream. The soft targets would be easily destroyed by the high explosive rounds fired by the 105mm main gun. Even the 7.62mm coaxial machine gun could slice through the thin armor. Why the air force hadn't swooped in and bombed the hell out of such an obvious target wasn't exactly clear.

Then he saw them. The camouflage netting around the vehicles made them a little hard to spot at first but Mohr observed them until he could discern their shape and identify them.

On the north side of the highway were five tracked vehicles arranged in a circular pattern, each of them about 100 meters apart from the next. The four vehicles on the perimeter were mobile SA-6 launchers, each of them with three long white-tipped surface-to-air missiles.

In the middle were the brains of the entire anti-aircraft site, the radar

vehicle with its curved rectangular dish pointed towards the western sky. It sat on a raised berm, giving it a field of view over the trees and low hills to the north of the highway. Several large Russian trucks sat near the site, one of which had a crane for lifting the surface-to-air missiles into the launchers.

Each SA-6 launcher vehicle was well-protected from air attack, surrounded by sandbags and hastily-constructed earthworks. They sat silently, waiting for targets to appear. In the night sky above him, the screaming of a single-engine jet grew louder. The radar vehicle swiveled a few degrees to the right, like a dog sniffing out a rabbit. Seconds later, a missile on one of the SAM vehicles ignited and leaped up towards its target. A half-second later, there was a flash in the sky as the missile exploded. The sound of the jet's engine grew suddenly silent and a little ball of flame fell earthward. Mohr tracked the little ball of flame visually until it disappeared beyond his field of view, its impact unobserved as it descended among the hills to the north.

He turned to Hauptmann, who stood outside of his own Leopard, surveying the highway.

"I'll get the radar and the trucks," he said. "You take the SAMs. Watch your ammo. Kessel stays in reserve in case we need him."

Both men ducked into the turret. Looking through his periscope, Mohr spotted the nearest target and checked the range. "Loader! Load SABOT!"

He waited for the loader's response to indicate the armor-piercing ammunition was loaded into the main gun's breach and ready to fire. "Up!"

shouted the loader.

Mohr felt his skin crawl. The old familiar tingle of danger sent a shiver down his body. He was ready. He knew his men were too. He keyed the intercom.

“Gunner, target radar vehicle, 2 o’clock. Range 920. Wait for my signal.”

Mohr stood up in his cupola. A second later, Hauptmann also emerged from his tank. They looked at each other and nodded in unison. One. Two. Three.

“Fire!” shouted Mohr.

At the same time, both Leopards rocked backward as their main guns roared. Mohr ducked back down inside the tank and watched the monitor in thermal mode. A second later, the radar vehicle erupted into a sphere of brilliant white light as the tank round detonated within it. The dish spun off the top, hurled like a discus towards the traffic on the nearby highway. The vehicle’s chassis had a gaping hole on its side.

Four hundred meters to the left of the burning radar vehicle, Hauptmann’s main gun round had tunneled into the hull side of an SA-6 launcher. Its missile rack was bent over at a ninety-degree angle, pointing straight down at the ground.

Hauptmann’s turret rotated to the left slightly, finding the next hapless target.

Mohr watched as one of the SAM site’s supply trucks drove up the hill

towards the highway. “Load HEAT,” he said calmly.

Beside him, Lange slid the round into breach and slammed it forward. “Up!” he shouted.

Mohr’s heart was thumping now and he knew this was the most dangerous time. If he showed too much excitement, his men would forget their training and make mistakes. He took a deep breath, telling himself to calm down. He spoke the words slowly into his intercom.

“Gunner. Target. Truck. 12 o’clock. Wait for it!”

The truck ambled up onto the highway, jammed full of supply trucks and light vehicles. It nearly tipped over as it joined the panicked procession.

“Fire!” shouted Mohr!

“On the way!” he heard.

The truck exploded as the round impacted, the missiles inside detonating along with it. A flash of light engulfed several vehicles on the highway and a ball of fire swept along the length of the road.

“Dear god!” mouthed Mohr, as he surveyed the utter destruction. A truck carrying tank rounds spilled over on its side and tumbled down the steep sloping bank that ran along the highway. The silver casings shone brilliantly under the early afternoon glare.

He watched the chaos and confusion around the SAM site. It was teeming with men who were scrambling out of their vehicles in desperation.

“Gunner! Get the coax on that SAM site!” he shouted.

The machine gun spat out the rounds at a rate of a thousand per minute. The exposed crewmen and infantry near the site scrambled for cover or fell where they stood. The rest of Mohr's tanks fired at the remaining vehicles and men until finally, the last SA-6 was a pile of burning scrap.

As Lange and Vogel hosed down the target area with automatic weapons fire, Mohr heard Hauptmann's tank reverse from their position. He turned to see the sergeant's tank stop and fire a high explosive round into the jumble of wreckage and vehicles near the highway. Mohr commanded his own driver to start moving and the four tanks began leapfrogging backward over the hill to their rear.

Just as his tank neared the crest, Mohr heard a deep belching sound from far ahead. He looked up to see a pair of cross-shaped A-10 Warthogs dive towards the highway, smoke bursting from the nose of each plane where the 30mm cannon was located. The cannon's shells, each taller than a long-necked bottle of beer, drilled easily down through the top of the supply trucks and lightly armored vehicles on the pavement.

They leveled out at no more than a couple hundred feet above the highway and followed it for a few seconds before dropping the cluster munitions from their wings. All the way back to the highway junction near the city, the road lit up like a huge torch, the conflagration engulfing the mass of hapless men and machines.

A sudden panicked thought came over Mohr. "They don't know we're friendly," he said to himself. "They might come for us next!"

Mohr watched in horror as the A-10s suddenly peeled off their attack

run and turned towards them. With each passing second, they grew larger. Mohr ducked down inside his tank. "Move!" he shouted. "Driver! Zigzag backward as fast as you can go!"

He felt the massive tank change direction as it reversed over the crest and slalomed downhill. Ten seconds later, he heard the thuds and bangs on the outside of the tank as the 30mm rounds landed nearby. Mohr's ears rang and sparks flew from the electrical components around his cupola.

The jets roared past Mohr's position and turned back west. Relieved, Mohr commanded his tanks to continue heading south towards the highway. "Let's keep this going," he said. "Get going along the road. Hit as much as you can and don't let up."

The four tanks took an echelon left formation and drove beside the wreckage of the highway. Vogel brought the main gun over, firing at the dazed survivors of the bombing run. Lange added to the confusion with his own machine gun. Nothing fired back. Nothing survived. Everything alive was merely cut down as the tanks drove together, shooting at anything that moved.

Five hundred meters on, they found the first intact enemy vehicles that had not been completely obliterated by the A-10 pass. Before the enemy could react, Mohr's tanks quickly found and destroyed three enemy tanks providing rear security. Mohr spotted the jeeps and trucks surrounding the large canvas tents concealed just off the road in a small clearing. Several of the vehicles had long antennas attached securely to their roof.

"I've got a command post of some sort," said Mohr. "Let's take it out."

As the nearby enemy tanks burned, the infantry scattered across the road and into prepared positions. An RPG round slammed squarely into Mohr's front turret, the Leopard shuddered to a halt. Automatic fire slapped at the outside of the tank as Mohr watched Hoffman try to get the tank moving again. Behind him, the other three tanks began to fire at the command post. The HEAT rounds slammed into the tents and the thin-skinned vehicles. At last, Mohr's tank reversed away from the danger. Hauptmann swung his tank over to the left and started firing at the infantry on its flank. The bodies of Russian soldiers lay everywhere while their comrades scattered into the trees.

Mohr ordered his tanks to keep going along the highway, pushing on towards the west. He wondered how long it would take before the Russians realized what was happening and react to it. The tanks rolled along the pavement in pairs, driving among the oblivious supply trucks and troop trucks. Mohr watched as the nearest UAZ was ripped apart by a high explosive round. The other drivers, veered off the highway, several of the larger trucks overturning in the scramble to get away from the nearby enemy tanks. For Mohr, it felt like running into the middle of a flock of pigeons over and over again.

As they sped down the road west towards Landshut, Mohr spotted the cooling tower of the Isar nuclear reactor. Crowding around it were dozens of artillery pieces and what looked like several tanks. He shook his head as they approached. Of course, the Soviets would mass reserve troops and howitzers near a nuclear reactor – no one would dare hit it from the air.

“Okay, we go for everything around the reactor,” he said over the radio.

“Hit everything you can around there.”

The artillery guns near the reactor fired off their shells to the west. Mohr pulled off south of the main road with the other tanks and began shooting. Unlike the attack on the command post minutes earlier, the enemy seemed prepared for them. The first sign of their forewarning came when Kessel’s tank was struck by an anti-tank missile. A dozen meters to Mohr’s left, the vehicle simply burst apart, a brief and brilliant flash in the night.

Mohr spoke to Vogel. “Keep firing on the artillery pieces,” he said. “Don’t worry about the enemy firing back.”

Hauptmann’s tank drove west along the highway, hitting the enemy vehicles parked around the perimeter of the main buildings and the cooling tower.

Several of the T-72s began to fire back in Mohr’s direction. Hoffman reversed, trying to find a spot where the hull wasn’t exposed to the incoming rounds. As they pulled back, Vogel fired the main gun at the 122mm howitzers. The targets were grouped together so closely that one round was often enough to destroy two of them at the same time.

Something slammed hard into the tank. The lights inside the vehicle flickered and died. Mohr’s monitor faded to a blank screen. He looked into the inky blackness of the PERI optics and shook his head.

“I’ve lost my rangefinder!” shouted Vogel. “Switching to manual.”

“Keep firing,” said Mohr. “Just keep shooting.”

Mohr threw open the hatch and watched as Hauptmann’s tank was

destroyed by a pair of T-72 rounds. The first shot dug through the hull side, leaving a glowing half circle to mark where the armor was pierced. The second round hit a few seconds later, caving in the side of the turret where it struck and penetrated. No one got out of the tank.

Turning around, Mohr watched as several T-72s came screaming down the highway, their main guns firing in near-unison. The only remaining tank under Mohr's command was destroyed as it fired back at the oncoming enemies. Hoffman drove over the hump of the road while Vogel kept firing into the mass of troops, vehicles, and artillery around the nearby reactor. The first T-72 round hit Mohr's Leopard somewhere around the armored skirts near the treads. The tank stopped moving and Mohr released the smoke grenades, hoping they would give his men just enough cover to abandon the tank.

"Everyone out," he said. "Show's over."

Lang climbed down from the hatch while an enemy round whizzed over the Leopard. He slid down the tank while Hoffman scrambled out and ran for the cover of the nearby woods. Mohr watched as Vogel fired the main gun again.

Mohr scrambled up out of the tank. He slid over the turret as the machine gun rounds sliced through the air all around him. Something struck him in the shoulder hard and he fell to the ground, surrounded by darkness and smoke. Above him, he heard Vogel climb out and jump down on the other side. Mohr tried to get up and as he slowly reached out to lift himself up with his good shoulder, a sharp pain cut into his chest. Everything went black as he went down for the last time.

The Leopard sat abandoned on the side of the road at dawn the next morning. The remnants of the 24th Panzer Battalion drove east past it, continuing on its push against the 48th and 30th Guards Tank Divisions, which were left in tatters by their failed assault on Landshut. Colonel Donner jumped out of his Wolf jeep to witness the destruction in and around the highway. The nuclear reactor, still intact, was awash with the detritus of the previous night's battle.

“My god, what happened here last night?” he said to himself.

The bodies of the West German tank crews had been found earlier, placed carefully alongside the road and wrapped up in plastic sheeting. Wolf bent down to find the blank face of Kurt Mohr staring back up at him. He thought about the reports he had heard earlier of chaos in the rear followed by the sudden halting of the Russian offensive in and around the town. The artillery that had reduced the city to near rubble and threatened to break the back of the NATO defenses had slackened and stopped. Judging from the swath of death that surrounded the area and stretched back nearly half a kilometer, Donner knew who the debt was owed to. He said a quick silent prayer, boarded the Wolf, and drove east.

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