



# Storm Over the Steppe

*Hans Wijers*

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Few would disagree that the loss of 6th Army at Stalingrad represented the turning point of the Eastern front, indeed of WWII in Europe. Heroic as the efforts of the Luftwaffe's air and ground crews were, the defenders could never have been adequately supplied by airlift alone. Could the relief attempt mounted by General Hoth's 4th Panzer Army ever have reached the cauldron across 150km of wintry steppe? Once the panzers had punched a corridor through, 800 lorries loaded with 3,000 tons of supplies were to restore 6th Army's fighting strength and evacuate the wounded; von Manstein intended that Paulus then initiate the breakout, spearheaded by his own remaining armour (some hundred-odd tanks). By Christmas Eve, the relief attempt had stalled on the defences recently manned by the 2nd Guards Army on the banks of the Myshkova river, less than fifty kilometres from the siege lines but still impossibly far for the defenders to have reached even had Paulus willed the abandonment of the city. By then the tank strength of the LVII Panzerkorps had been worn down by twelve days of bitter fighting and the men of its constituent 6, 17 and 23 Panzer-Divisions physically exhausted by constant combat in snow and cold, without any shelter on the open steppe. Finally, the gallant and self-sacrificial relief attempt was doomed - even as the fighting for Vyerkhnye-Kumskiy approached its climax - by the Russian 'Little Saturn' onslaught (16th December) against Armeekorps Hollidt and the Italian 8th Army; as the latter collapsed and Russian tank brigades threatened to overrun the airfields supplying Stalingrad, the strongest formation, 6 Panzer-Division, was urgently required on the far side of the Don. On Christmas Eve, with tears in their eyes, the troops saluted their comrades in the cauldron - now doomed to death in combat or the slower agony of the camps, the fate most feared of all.

Dutch researcher Hans Wijers has assembled eyewitness accounts from five veterans of this operation, previously chronicled, even in German, from a seriously incomplete perspective and in English only peripherally: a tanker, Oberleutnant Helmut Ritgen of Panzer-Regiment 11, who as von Hünersdorff's adjutant was at the heart of the tank actions; two anti-tank gunners, Leutnant Günter Höffken and Oberfeldwebel Friedrich Bösch of Panzerjäger-Abteilung 41 (41st Anti-Tank Battalion); a medical officer, Dr Eugen Fritze of Panzer-Nachrichten-Abteilung 82 (82nd Signals Battalion) and an infantryman, Oberleutnant Dr Hans Soest of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 4, provide complementary accounts from the perspective of the principal formation - 6 Panzer-Division.

In addition, three of the survivors of the Stalingrad cauldron: Leutnant Joachim Stempel of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 103; Funker Ernst Panse, a tank wireless operator of Panzer-Regiment 24 and Hauptfeldwebel Alfred Simmen of Grenadier-Regiment 669; describe their feelings, first of hope and confidence, then of disillusion and despair, as the waning fortunes of the relief operation became known to them. Finally, this volume reproduces some of the key documents involved, including the draft of the never-issued order to break out, signed by Paulus, and records some of the radio messages and telexes crucial to an understanding of this historically remarkable event.

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