

MS NO. D-079

VOR- UND DURCHSTOSS DER 6. PANZER-DIVISION ZUR BEFREIUNG
UND RUECKFUEHRUNG DER IN UND WESTLICH WILNA EINGESCHLOS-
SENEN KAMPFGRUPPEN 15. UND 16. JULI 1944

The Advance and Penetration of the Sixth PANZER Division
for the Liberation and Relief of Encircled Fighting For-
ces West of VILNO on 15 and 16 July 1944 (525 MISGp Title)

Advance and Breakthrough of the 6th Panzer Division on
15 and 16 July 1944 (Wilna) (Historical Division Title)

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" The Advance and Penetration of the Sixth PANZER Division
for the Liberation and Relief of Encircled Fighting Forces
West of VILNO on 15 and 16 July 1944 "

By No. 304

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- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Pz - PANZER | Div - Division |
| Batl - Battalion | Kdr - Commander |
| Mot - Motorized | Mech - Mechanized |
| Inf Rgt - Infantry Regiment | Abt - Section, Group |
| Pi - Engineers | MTW - Armored Personnel Carrier |
| LKW - truck | |

I. Development of the Situation in the Area around

VILNO from 23 June 1944 to 15 July 1944

The major Russian attack against the German Army Group (central sector) on 23 Jun 44, and the forced break-through at BORISOV resulted in the Army Group being encircled in a number of pockets by the Russians. During the course of the Russian break-through, the main attack of their strong armored units was aimed toward the North, passing MOLODETSCHNO and advancing to VILNO and KOVNO, at which time a German PANZER division guarding the MOLODETSCHNO corridor was bypassed.

Therefore, the Russians had already reached VILNO on 7 Jul 44 and had declared it a permanent base of operations. On 8 July, VILNO was encircled from the West, North and East. Northwest of VILNO, the Russians were feeling their way toward the VILJA River, and 27 kilometers southwest of VILNO, Lithuanian partisan groups were situated at POLUKNIA and along the railroad near SZKIARY.

The garrison of VILNO consisted of the following: The garrison headquarters, the 24th Airborne Engineer Battalion, a battalion of the 16th Airborne Regiment, a heavy anti-aircraft section, a composite anti-aircraft section, a self-propelled artillery section, several regional defense sections and service troops; a total of approximately 4000 men.

There were no German units northeast or southwest of VILNO strong enough to be taken into account.

At the beginning of July 44, Combat Command 1067 was activated for the reinforcement of the garrison at VILNO. It was composed of non-motorized FELDMARSCHBATAILLIONEN (TN-Equivalent unknown), and was transported by rail from GRODNO to VILNO. However, all troops had to evacuate the troop train in RUDZISKI because the enemy was blocking the railroad lines near SZKIARY.

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The commander of the Combat Command, who rode in a vehicle at the head of his unit, succeeded in having a meeting with the commandant of VILNO, after which he returned to his unit. On 9 July the Russian had, however, encircled VILNO from the South and had halted at a stream near LUDVINOVO, making it impossible for Combat Command 1067 to reach VILNO.

By order of the Third PANZER Army commander, who also commanded the garrison units of VILNO and Combat Command 1067, the Combat Command blocked the road and railroad leading to KOVNO. The blockade, facing east, was on a line behind the lakes northwest of LANDVOROV. Reinforcements, consisting of two battalions of the 16th Airborne Regiment, and a heavy horse-drawn artillery section, arrived on 10 July. In addition, the 24th Airborne Engineer Battalion from VILNO succeeded in breaking through and reaching the Combat Command.

The Russians were also receiving constant reinforcements, had made their main advance south of VILNO towards the West, and had completely closed in on Combat Command 1067 which was, however, still in contact with the Third PANZER Army by radio and with VILNO by cable. On 15 July 44, VILNO and the encircled German troops northwest of LANDVOROV were confronted by Russian troops composed of a PANZER corps, a mechanized corps, and Lithuanian partisan units.

II. The Movement of the Sixth PANZER Division to KOVNO;

Order and Preparation for the relief of VILNO

After the encirclement, in the spring of 1944, of the First PANZER Army and Sixth PANZER Division, the latter, which participated in heavy combat and was the first division to accomplish a breakthrough of the enemy's encirclement at BUDZADZ, was pulled back into rest camps in the LUENEBURGER HEIDE in June and July 1944. On 11 July, orders were received that half of the division

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reserve and was to follow on an undetermined date. On 12 July, the first troop trains rolled East, and at noon of 14 July, the first train reached the final destination, KOVNO. The division, which was under the Third PANZER Army, received orders to push ahead towards VILNO with the troops that had arrived by 15 July. The troops were to assemble East of KOVNO, and relieve the encircled troops located West of VILNO. The division was to cover their return on 16 July. The division commander was informed of the situation and told that the garrison at VILNO had been ordered to evacuate the city during the night of 14 - 15 July, to accomplish a breakthrough towards the west, and to make contact with Combat Command 1067.

On 15 July, the commander of the Sixth PANZER Division had the following troops at his disposal to perform his mission:

The Ia (TN -presumably G2) and parts of the division staff.

A division security company.

Parts of the division intelligence section.

The 114th Armored Infantry Regiment (one motorized and one personnel carrier battalion).

One section of a light armored artillery regiment.

One anti-tank section.

One armored engineer section.

The following units were also attached:

One section of Panthers (TN -German heavy tank) from the armored regiment GROSSDEUTSCHLAND.

One battalion of paratroopers from the 501st Airborne Regiment.

(TN - The expression "section" is a literal translation; size and corresponding term unknown.)

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short, as follows:

The division was split up into an assault party and a covering party. The assault party, consisting of the GROSS-DEUTSCHLAND Panther section, the personnel carrier battalion of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment, two thirds of the anti-tank section, two thirds of the armored engineer section, forward observers from the armored artillery section, and parts of the intelligence section, under the command of the division commander, was to fight its way through to Combat Command 1067, and was to pick up the VILNO elements, covering their withdrawal to KOVNO. The covering party, consisting of the motorized battalion of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment, one battalion of the 501st Airborne Regiment, one section of the armored artillery regiment, one third of the anti-tank section, one third of the armored engineer section, and parts of the intelligence section, under the command of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment commander, was to follow the assault party and the truck columns, to secure the KOVNO-VILNO road, and to hold it open for the withdrawal of the truck columns which were to follow directly behind the assault party until Combat Command 1067 was reached.

The march order of the advance was as follows: Assault party, truck columns, and covering party.

The march order of the withdrawal: Truck columns, covering party, and assault party.

The Ia, with parts of the division staff and the division security company, was to establish a command post for the division commander halfway between KOVNO and VILNO, for the purpose of establishing communications with the assault and covering parties, and relaying reports to the division commander who was with the assault party.

The division orders were drawn up in accordance with this plan, and unit commanders were given a short briefing on the plan.

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The division orders were drawn up in accordance with this plan, and unit commanders were given a short briefing on the tactical situation and the execution of their orders on the night of 14 July.

III. Advance, Breakthrough, and Relief of the Liberated
VILNO Troops on 15 July 1944.

On 15 Jul at 0600 hours, the assault party left RUMSISKE (15 kilometers east of KOVNO) and started the advance on VILNO. The march order was as follows: The GROSSDEUTSCHLAND Panther section, the commander of the Sixth PANZER Division with parts of his intelligence section, one third of the armored engineer section, the personnel carrier battalion of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment, one third of an armored engineer section, and two thirds of an anti-tank section.

At first, the advance proceeded smoothly and without enemy action, passing through ZYZMORY at approximately 0700 hours. At 0800 hours, near KOKIENISZKI, the GROSSDEUTSCHLAND Panther Battalion quickly broke up the first enemy opposition (tanks); four Russian tanks were destroyed. As the advance continued, enemy opposition increased considerably, particularly at the creek section between the wooded areas 2.5 kilometers west of KIERMANEZYSZKI. The road bridge there had been prepared for blasting by the Russians, but fortunately the charge had not been set off; in order to force a passage, however, the personnel carrier battalion of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment had to be brought into action on both sides of the road. The battalion suffered some casualties through enemy anti-tank guns; a direct hit was scored on the division commander's vehicle, wounding the radio operator. The action of the personnel carrier battalion broke the enemy opposition in its sector; the advance continued, although the route of advance was now under enemy fire from artillery positions on the north bank of the VILJA. The German artillery section of the covering party later fought this Russian artillery so effectively that its effect on the road was lessened. Enemy opposition consisted, apparently, of Lithuanian partisans.

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advance element of the assault party reached the Combat Command 1067 command post at BEZVODNA.

Three Russian defense lines had been broken, and contact with the encircled Combat Command 1067 had been established.

The covering party, following the assault party, reached JEWIE with its advanced elements. The bulk of the troops was held ready for action in the area around MIGUCIANY; security troops were posted along the line of lakes to the south and the railroad line to the north of the road. Small reconnaissance patrols were sent out beyond these points. The command post of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment was at MIGUCIANY, and the Ia of the Sixth PANZER Division also moved its advanced command post there.

The VILNO garrison, which had been ordered to make a breakthrough towards the West during the night of 14-15 July, had only succeeded in crossing the VILJA east of GUDELE with half the garrison, and in fighting its way along the VELJA as far as VOLY Height (TN-HOEHE VOLY). There, on 17 July, from 0900 hours, VILNO troops, armed only with individual weapons, arrived continuously and, again crossing the VILJA, joined Combat Command 1067. The crossing was particularly difficult, since the troops had to swim across the river and repulse Russian attacks at the crossing site at the same time. Swimming was made necessary due to the fact that only one small boat was available. The VILNO combat commander, arriving late in the afternoon, took care that the wounded and non swimmers were ferried across first, an operation that lasted until late into the night.

The Sixth PANZER Division ordered all available PANZER engineers to build rafts and aid in the crossing. They also took over the defense of the south bank of the WILJA.

At about 1300 hours, the first truck column had arrived

1067 command post at BEZVODNA.

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At about 1300 hours, the first truck column had arrived

in BEZVODNA. It was immediately loaded with sick and wounded from Combat Command 1067 and the first of the VILNO wounded. Care and loading of the wounded was supervised by the division surgeon of the Sixth PANZER Division. At 1400 hours, the first truck column started the return journey to KOVNO.

The Russians, who must have been informed of the surprise attack of the Sixth PANZER Division, which had not yet been active in this area, made all efforts to advance from LANDVOROV to the road to KOVNO. However, their attacks were completely shattered by the "GROSSDEUTSCHLAND" Panther section, the anti-tank section of the Sixth PANZER Division, and Combat Command 1067; several enemy tanks were destroyed. A favorable turn of events for the German troops was the fact that the bulk of the Russian armored and motorized corps first occupied the abandoned town of VILNO and celebrated their easy victory there. In the late afternoon, however, the commander of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment reported stronger enemy pressure on the advance security units to the south. Movements of enemy infantry were also observed north of the railroad line.

On the basis of the estimate of the situation, the commander-in-chief of the German Third PANZER Army ordered the commander of the Sixth PANZER Division to begin the return march to KOVNO with the rear guard not later than 2400 hours 15 July, and to form the division in a defense line 15 kilometers east of KOVNO. There were three major actions to be taken by the commander of the Sixth PANZER Division by 2400 hours:

1. If possible, ferry across all of the VILNO combat troops arriving at the crossing site by 2300 hours.
2. Bring back safely to KOVNO the columns with the VILNO men and the Combat Command 1067.
3. Repulse the enemy attacks and, on 16 July, withdraw from

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2. Bring back safely to KOVNO the columns with the VILNO men and the Combat Command 1067.
3. Repulse the enemy attacks and, on 16 July, withdraw from the point of contact with the enemy's encircling movement.

By 2300 hours, the combined forces of the armored engineers and the engineers of the 24th Airborne Engineer Battalion succeeded in ferrying all the VILNO combat troops who arrived at the crossing site across the river. An armored engineer detachment remained until 0100 hours 16 July in order to recover stragglers. At 2100 hours, the second truck column was loaded and able to commence the return to KOVNO. At about 2200 hours, the animal-drawn(TN-BESPAANTEN) units of Combat Command 1067 were on their way, and shortly before 2400 hours the assault party of the Sixth PANZER Division, carrying the fighting elements of Combat Command 1067 on its combat vehicles and tanks, began the return march.

IV. The return march of the covering party on 16 Jul 44

Many incidents occurred during the night of 15-16 July because the covering party was unable to protect the route of withdrawal completely(this being a length of approximately 80 kilometers from south to north) with only two battalions of motorized infantry. Small enemy units were continually successful in reaching the road and blocking it. This created many delays for the columns, and the road had to be cleared constantly. Here, the energetic and capable actions of the German subordinate commanders fully proved their worth. At dawn of 16 July, the columns were out of reach of known enemy artillery fire; this only increased the pressure of enemy infantry and armored forces on both sides of the route of withdrawal. The commander of the 114th Armored Infantry Regiment proved his worth here by employing his combined motorized forces--the 114th Personnel Carrier Battalion of the assault party was under his command again on 16 July--flexibly; they were always at the right place at the right time--where enemy pressure was the strongest. Consequently, he prevented an enemy breakthrough at KIETOVISZKI, and attacked the Russian motorized troops south of ZYZMORY so that enemy action on

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the route of withdrawal was neutralized. This, of course, did not keep single units from being involved again and again in small engagements. Even the division staff, which, for a short time during the night was cut off from the division near MIGUZLIANY, had to fight its way to the main road.

The assault party was subjected to heavy rear guard action, especially during the morning hours of 16 July. The enemy was in close pursuit with tanks and motorized units on the VILNO-KOVNO road until German engineers of the rear guard set off the charge that the Russians themselves had placed, and blew up the road bridge, two and a half kilometers west of KIERMANCZYKI, under the noses of the Russians.

The motorized columns and horse-drawn vehicles reached KOVNO on the afternoon of 16 July, and were lead into the prepared maintenance and rest areas. The Sixth PANZER Division, acting on orders, occupied a defense line just east of RUMSISKE.

Summary

The Sixth PANZER Division, with only half of its troops, had succeeded in breaking through the Russian encirclement, and in liberating the entire Combat Command 1067 and approximately 2000 men of the VILNO garrison. In spite of superior enemy forces (one Russian armored corps, one Russian mechanized corps, and Lithuanian partisan units) that tried to block their return march, the Sixth PANZER Division succeeded in bringing the previously mentioned troops safely back to KOVNO with comparatively light casualties.

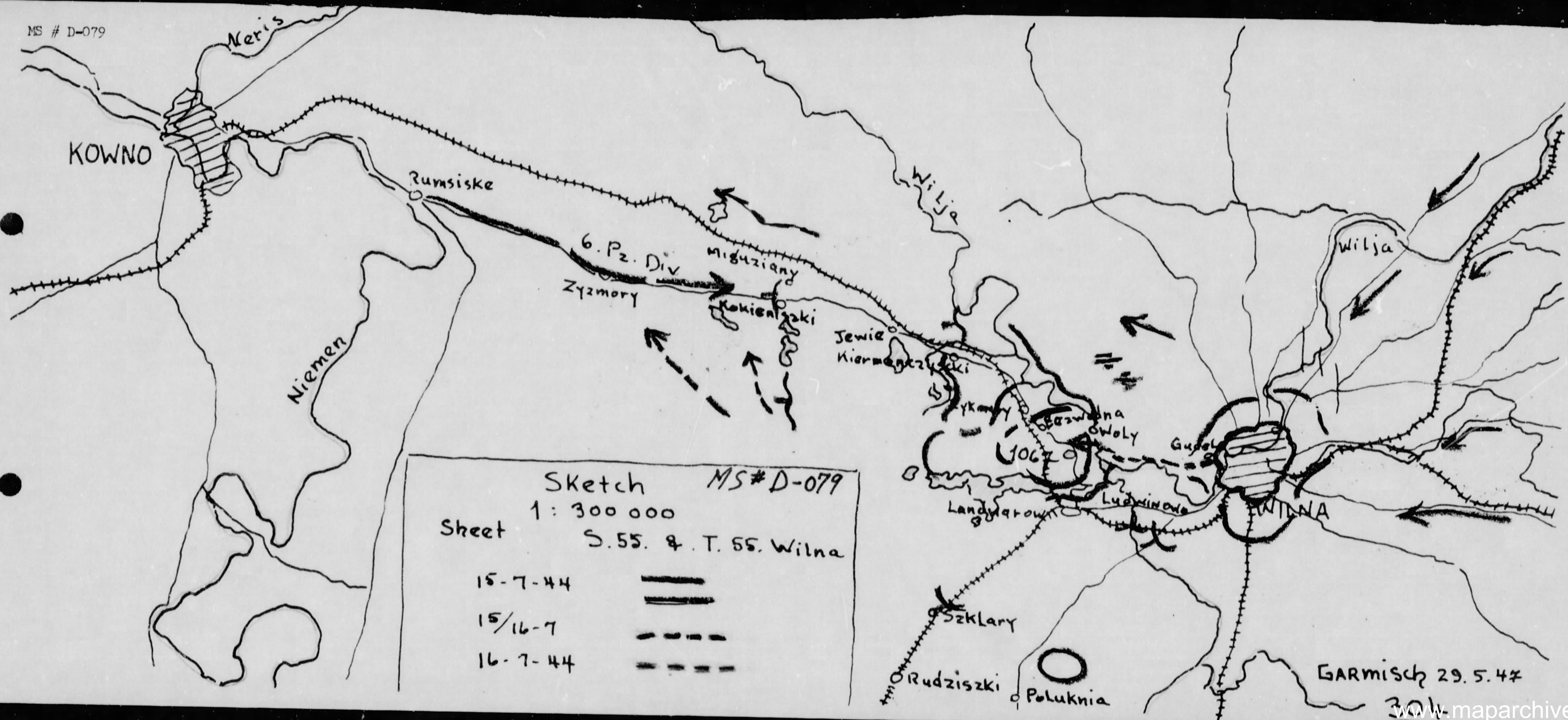
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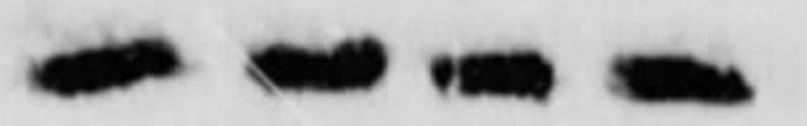

The motorized columns and horse-drawn vehicles reached KOVNO on the afternoon of 16 July, and were lead into the prepared maintenance and rest areas. The Sixth PANZER Division, acting on orders, occupied a defense line just east of RUMSISKE.

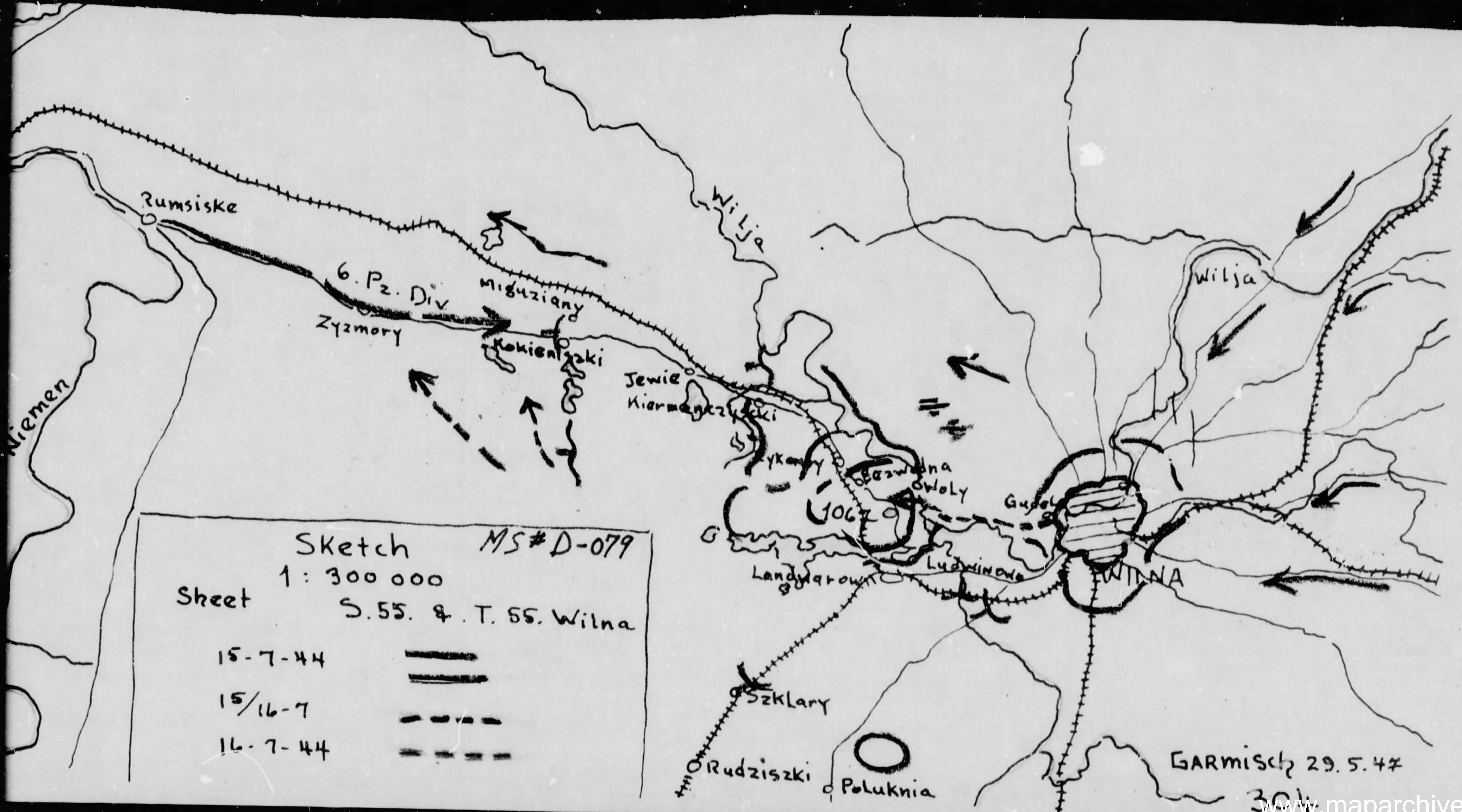
Summary

The Sixth PANZER Division, with only half of its troops, had succeeded in breaking through the Russian encirclement, and in liberating the entire Combat Command 1067 and approximately 2000 men of the VILNO garrison. In spite of superior enemy forces (one Russian armored corps, one Russian mechanized corps, and Lithuanian partisan units) that tried to block their return march, the Sixth PANZER Division succeeded in bringing the previously mentioned troops safely back to KOVNO with comparatively light casualties.



Sketch MS# D-079
 Sheet 1: 300 000
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 Sheet S. 55. & T. 55. Wilna
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GARMISCH 29.5.44