

Department of the Army  
Office of the Chief of Military History  
Washington 25 D C

MS #D 080 A

THE COMMAND DECISION

DRAFT TRANSLATION

Originally prepared for Headquarters, European Command  
Office of the Chief Historian

~~RESTRICTED~~

Restricted Classification  
Removed Per  
Executive Order 10501

## The decision.

Some thoughts out of personal experiences under special consideration of the Eastern Operations.

by General Oberst Lothar Rendulic.

### SUMMARY.

Decisive part of military leadership is to come to a decision. Basis for the decision: the assigned mission, estimate of the situation and the area.

The mission can be an order or a directive.

Estimate of situation extends to the own situation, the enemies and the general situation.

Importance of reconnaissance. Influence of the area (in the Eastern Theatre many surprises, especially for armored cars and mechanized troops by unexpected terrain obstacles).

Influence of reports of subordinate commanders.

Important fact seems not to be disturbed by influence of the own staff. Different personalities have miscellaneous characters. Biggest mistakes are stubbornness and a sense going too far in analytics. Best temperament have those leaders with a cool sense and a hot heart, trained by operative and tactical thinking and criticizing. Our tactical manuals were based on the experiences of the past wars, especially of world war I. They were written very generally. The German Field manual "Truppenführung" has been a good expedient for education. Therein were mentioned only two stabil numbers, i.e. the frontage of a division ~~and~~ attack (3-4 km) and in defense (6 km). These numbers were just check points. At the Eastern Theatre we were often forced, to attack with a frontage of 10 or more km. and to hold a defensive line of 40 - 50 km with a single division. Many leaders were influenced by the training in peacetime manoeuvres with those stationary numbers. In doubt the bolder decision is the better.

Further important points are:

- 1.) To have always the initiative of acting.
- 2.) To have the longer breath within the last 15 min.
- 3.) To maintain a strong reserve.
- 4.) To form always a point of main effort.

Sometimes it may be suitable, to lead regarding to the area, but this is not always correct.

A great advantage is, to know the enemy as well as possible.

The suppositions for forming the decision con

by General Oberst Lothar Rendulic.

SUMMARY.

Decisive part of military leadership is to come to a decision.  
Basis for the decision: the assigned mission, estimate of the situation and the area.

The mission can be an order or a directive.

Estimate of situation extends to the own situation, the enemies and the general situation.

Importance of reconnaissance. Influence of the area (in the Eastern Theatre many surprises, especially for armored cars and mechanized troops by unexpected terrain obstacles).

Influence of reports of subordinate commanders.

Important fact seems not to be disturbed by influence of the own staff. Different personalities have miscellaneous characters. Biggest mistakes are stubbornness and a sense going too far in analytics. Best temperament have those leaders with a cool sense and a hot heart, trained by operative and tactical thinking and criticizing. Our tactical manuals were based on the experiences of the past wars, especially of world war I. They were written very generally. The German Field manual "Truppenführung" has been a good expedient for education. Therein were mentioned only two stabil numbers, i.e. the frontage of a division ~~and~~ attack (3-4 km) and in defense (6 km). These numbers were just check points. At the Eastern Theatre we were often forced, to attack with a frontage of 10 or more km. and to hold a defensive line of 40 - 50 km with a single division. Many leaders were influenced by the training in peacetime manoeuvres with those stationary numbers. In doubt the bolder decision is the better.

Further important points are:

- 1.) To have always the initiative of acting.
- 2.) To have the longer breath within the last 15 min.
- 3.) To maintain a strong reserve.
- 4.) To form always a point of main effort.

Sometimes it may be suitable, to lead regarding to the area, but this is not always correct.

A great advantage is, to know the enemy as well as possible.

The suppositions for forming the decision contain always many unknown factors. In spite of all the decision must be found, also when you have to act wholly uncertain. The decision therefore is not mathematics, but a productive action. Intuition and a fine feeling for

all the unknown factors are playing an important role.

The forming of the decision is a secret, about which even the leader himself mostly cannot give an account.

Encl.: Samples to the Topic: The Decision.

Attack and defense at Bogachew July 1941 ( 267<sup>th</sup> Inf.Div.)

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

A. The Command Decision

Thoughts based on personal experience with  
particular reference to warfare in Russia\*

The most difficult but also most crucial part of a commander's varied duties is the making of a decision.

Every decision is based on a number of given facts which are more or less clearly defined. The decision represents the culmination of a series of thoughts which the mind has turned over for longer or shorter periods of time. Again, it may be born in a split second. The decision always reflects the will of the commander.

The commander will consider the following basic factors in reaching a decision:

In many cases the mission he has received

In every instance the estimate of the situation and the terrain

The mission may be defined in a clear-cut and concise order that leaves the commander only little leeway in arriving at his decision. It may, on the other hand, also be couched in rather general terms which allow full freedom for personal initiative. Generally speaking, the more unequivocal and concise the order, the more easily the decision is reached. But

---

\*My statements apply not only to Russia. Characteristics peculiar to that country will be so labelled.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

even if an unequivocal and concise order has been received, situations which call for independent decisions will repeatedly arise during combat. In such situations the original, binding order becomes but a guiding principle. In Russia, orders very frequently had to be composed in rather broad terms, mainly because of the vastness of the combat areas, and frequently also because maps were not very accurate.

The estimate of the situation includes our own situation, the enemy situation, the situation of the adjacent units, and -- increasing in the same ratio as the freedom of action of the respective commander -- also the general situation.

Our own situation: Prior to a military operation, our own situation usually is clear so long as the troops are stationary. Whenever troops are on the move, an advance estimate as to the time in which they will have covered, or will be able to cover, certain distances, might play a major role in the decision. Because of the lack of highways in Russia, and the serious effect of rain on the unimproved roads, it is not always possible to arrive at as accurate an estimate as in other parts of Europe. This is particularly true so far as motorized units are concerned.

During actual combat it is frequently very difficult to gain a clear view of our own situation fast enough. The troops themselves need a certain amount of time to evaluate their own situation and, even on a small scale, it is often not a simple matter to arrive at the correct picture. From corps level on down, quick appreciation of our own situation is particularly important because there is usually a need for immediate action,

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

and the respective commander has only a limited amount of time to make his decision.

Experience has shown that the troops again and again postpone the dispatch of reports on the situation because of the understandable desire to wait until they have compiled data which are as accurate as possible. As division commander, I therefore ordered my units to report -- even negatively, if necessary -- every two hours during offensive as well as defensive operations. These reports were to be submitted irrespective of the normal situation reports. Whenever a situation was not clear, it was usually the artillery which submitted accurate reports with the greatest speed, even about events involving other arms of the service. Insistence on frequent reports, however, must never be allowed to convey an impression of nervousness to the troops.

In Russia, tactical air reconnaissance reports are difficult to formulate because the terrain usually is flat and appears monotonous to the air observer. There are but few characteristic terrain features, and only isolated villages or hamlets. In Central and Northern Russia, on the other hand, there are vast expanses of forest.

Particularly during defensive operations is the situation very frequently not clear; most of all whenever enemy penetrations have occurred. In such instances it is extremely important that the true situation be determined as quickly as possible. Here, one must not rely exclusively on reports. There might not be anyone left to send a local report, or it may be impossible to dispatch one because of enemy fire or because all

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

communications equipment has been destroyed.

While I commanded a division, I therefore ordered the regiments, and later on in my capacity as commanding general of a corps, the divisions, to hold officer patrols in readiness. These patrols were to join their respective units in case of an enemy attack. They had to be prepared to reconnoiter our own situation whenever necessary. As soon as the enemy launched an attack, I dispatched liaison officers to the divisions. These officers were equipped with a radio transmitter and motorcycle messengers, so that they might assist the divisions in the transmittal of reports whenever communications between the divisions and corps headquarters were interrupted. All of these measures proved successful.

The enemy situation: Data for the estimate of the enemy situation are collected by the various well-known intelligence and reconnaissance agencies. Most important are data on strength, composition, and, at times, physical capabilities and intentions of the enemy. Whenever we faced the enemy for sometime on a well-stabilized front, we were usually able to obtain very detailed information about the forces in the front line and often also about those in the rear areas. Prior to enemy attacks it was also possible to determine the enemy's strength and his point of main effort with a fair degree of accuracy. The situation began to be obscure during the course of combat, during our own or enemy penetrations, and during counterattacks or break-throughs. Entirely new situations arose in those instances. In Russia, tactical air reconnaissance of the enemy situation was faced by the same handicaps as have been mentioned above in connection with reconnaissance of our own situation.

- 4 -

~~RESTRICTED~~



~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

In mobile warfare, division and corps headquarters generally had very little and sometimes no information at all prior to the actual clash with the enemy. In most instances, even higher headquarters had only very little background information on which to base their briefing of subordinate commands. The picture became somewhat clearer only after the clash. Whenever stabilized fronts developed into mobile warfare -- be it that the enemy was thrown back or that we were withdrawing -- the initial situation was much more easily determined because we knew the enemy forces which faced us then, and which would face us in the immediate future. Air reconnaissance usually spotted approaching reinforcements in good time, except in the vast woodlands and during bad weather.

The terrain (topography, type of soil, vegetation, watercourses, roads) plays a great role in every command decision. Certain terrain features may be crucial factors. Type of soil and vegetation may decide where the main effort is to be made. Watercourses may call for special measures. In Russia, the presence or lack of roads may decide major operations. Maps are the key to terrain features. Maps of Russia, however, were not so detailed as those of other parts of Europe. Military commanders could not rely on them with equal faith. For tactical purposes, the available maps were frequently altogether inadequate. The troops, and especially the Panzer and motorized troops, often were confronted by the unexpected. In Russia, it is more or less a prime requisite that information found on maps

- 5 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

be complemented by air and ground reconnaissance of the terrain.

Some uncertain factors which enter into a decision have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs. There are, however, numerous other elements which may influence a commander in arriving at a decision. Their influence may be due either to their intangible nature, or to the difficulties which they entail.

One of the intangible elements in the attack is the uncertainty as to what success may be expected from the execution of planned measures. In the defense, intangible elements are the uncertainty about the effectiveness of the enemy attack and the ability of our own troops to contain it and, particularly, the extent to which other sectors may be weakened in favor of the sector in which the main effort is being made. Command and making of decisions would be very simple if it were possible to gauge these factors.

Moreover, difficulties arise whenever there are several alternatives for the decision. This is especially true whenever there is greater certainty of success on one hand, while on the other hand there is less certainty but, provided the action succeeds, promise for infinitely greater success.

It is a truism that the influence of the superior officer may bolster the initiative of the commander. However, his influence may also have the opposite effect. A later example will illustrate this point.

Another factor worth mentioning is the influence that reports from subordinate headquarters may have. These reports constitute one of the

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

sources from which a picture about our own and the enemy situation is formed. In important cases which bear decisively upon the decision, a correct evaluation of the reports presupposes a thorough understanding of the character of the person making the report. In such instances we must know whether the reporting subordinate has a tendency to exaggerate either in an optimistic or pessimistic sense -- a tendency which is frequently encountered -- or whether his reports and the opinions expressed in them are matter of fact and reliable. In this connection, I should also like to point out the reprehensible practice whereby attempts were occasionally made at influencing the superior commander in his decision by wording reports in a certain manner. Personally, however, I never encountered this practice.

It is important to keep the mind free from environmental influences. The staff performs the preliminary work for the commander's decision by assembling and preparing the necessary data. This work must be done in an assembly objective manner. Not every officer in the general staff is capable of exercising the required discretion.

Many a man has a tendency to attribute undue importance to influences originating from various sources, particularly in difficult situations. This is especially true whenever such influences tend toward preventing the execution of a daring plan or toward the evasion of danger. In such cases, there always exists the promise of being able to avoid difficulties and of being relieved of a burden.

The personal traits of a commander may handicap him in reaching a decision, and may be responsible for errors of judgment on his part.

- 7 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

There is many a man of weak and vacillating character who is unable to stand on his own feet. Even attempts at self-improvement have hardly any effect in such cases. At times, I encountered too much of an analytical mind in men of very high caliber. That type breaks given premises down until finally theses and antitheses balance and cancel each other. Others, engulfed by the sea of uncertainty, cling to slogans such as "attack at any cost." Still others confuse stubbornness and obstinacy with firmness. Some people are particularly careful by nature and crave to be prepared for every eventuality. These will hardly be able to struggle through to a decision. They will always play safe, but will seldom be successful. Finally, a particular danger lurks in preconceived opinions. Unless earlier experiences that are not applicable to the situation at hand play a role in them, they are usually formed on the basis of isolated facts contained in the mass of collected data.

There are, however, also personal traits which greatly aid the commander in reaching a decision. Spiritual power, strength of character, maturity of mind, and personal experience are particularly valuable assets in this respect. Self-appraisal and unceasing efforts at self-improvement are imperative for a commander. An important aspect of any personal experience is the fact that, during its course, the commander has had an opportunity for self-analysis. Out of the great variety of different temperaments and characters, the man with a cool head and an aggressive spirit has the best prerequisites for success. The other way around, things would work out badly.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 030 A

A thorough education in strategy and tactics will equip the commander with a valuable foundation. It is not so much a matter of acquiring actual knowledge, as it is one of training the mind along lines of strategic and tactical thought and judgment. Such a training of the mind, therefore, must be made the goal of education.

Our service regulations on strategy and tactics are the crystallization of experiences gathered during past wars. They are, more specifically, crystallized experiences of always the most recent war, which in each instance are applied with a view toward a future war. In every new war, however, there always are phases which it has been impossible to foresee. I only need to call to the reader's mind the value attributed to the French fortifications and the failure of the French doctrine of command and combat, the difference between the vulnerability of flanks in France and Belgium in 1940 and in Russia in 1941, and, finally, the importance assumed by aviation, tanks, and mines. Service regulations on strategy and -- in their broad, fundamental outlines -- also those on tactics, can and must for this reason be put only into rather general terms.

The German manual on strategy entitled "Truppenführung" (operations) was written along very general lines. As a result, not many of the principles set forth therein can be said to have been completely superseded by events of the late war. Whenever we opened a manual at all during the war, our interpretation of its context changed from year to year because we always read it in the light of current experiences. In peacetime we studied manuals from an altogether different, less knowing viewpoint. They were, however, good training aids. The operations manual mentioned only one

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

definite figure, i. e., that a division in the attack deploys over three to four kilometers, and in the defense over six kilometers. These figures probably were due to the mental after effect of the war of position of 1915 to 1918, despite the fact that the manual had been expressly written for a war of movement. I had the opportunity of talking to one of the authors still prior to the outbreak of the late war, and asked him why these figures had been included in the otherwise very broad directive. He replied that, "these figures are nothing but basic references. We had to include some fundamental indication on which the application of the principles set forth in the manual could be based. Otherwise, somebody might conceive of attacking a front of from ten to fifteen kilometers with only one division."

It is easy to understand that such indications soon assume the character of a compelling concept, especially since during the course of his basic and advanced training every German commander had to execute many problems and exercises, all of which were consistently based on these indications. However, the war in Russia required a different method. The vast expanse of the area and the numerical superiority of the enemy forced us to apply methods of mobile warfare in which a division attacked on a front ten and more kilometers wide. In September of 1941, my division had to cover a sector of fifty kilometers width on the DESNA. In the defense, individual divisions had to be assigned a stretch of front of up to 40 kilometers (as, for instance, each one of the four divisions of my corps in the OREL area in 1943). Many of the commanders -- and, gradually, certainly

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

most of them -- quickly adjusted themselves to these requirements.

Some, however, were unable to reconcile the glaring contradiction between these figures and those which they had learned and worked with for such a long time. To many, a mission in which an area by far greater than one indicated by the figures in the manual had been assigned, appeared to be doomed to failure or to be outright impossible, even though they were well aware of the fact that these figures did no longer apply in practice. The result, at any rate, was uncertainty. These commanders were greatly limited in their ability to make decisions. Such is the effect which may be brought about by including figures in a service regulation.\*

Although service regulations can never prescribe how decisions are to be reached, there are, nevertheless, certain principles which, in my opinion, can be applied in almost all situations and which make it easier to reach a decision. It is always necessary, however, for the commander to ascertain with great care whether the situation permits or precludes their application; otherwise, they assume the character of slogans. This reminds us of the old principle that, "in case of doubt, the bolder decision is the better one." But this applies only in the case where a real

---

\*Answers to the following questions should result in an interesting and instructive study:

How adequate were the operational and tactical directives of the large armies in view of the war in the East, and what changes should have been introduced?

What does a war in the East require as regards future directives, especially in view of technical progress?

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

doubt exists as to which of two or more possibilities should be adopted. Whenever there is a certain possibility which, however, does not fully apply to the situation at hand, then not even its greater boldness constitutes a recommendation in its favor. As a matter of fact, in such an instance there can be no real doubt. More explicit details will be given in an example.

Another guiding principle to be followed in making a decision is that, whenever possible, the initiative of action must be ours; that is to say, our own intentions must be considered paramount to the observed or suspected intentions of the enemy. Never should a decision follow the trend of the enemy's measures. We must not permit enemy measures to divert us from our goal, unless they constitute a serious threat. During the course of a military operation, the key to success is frequently an unwavering adherence to our own purpose along the general line of the final decision. One must, however, avoid crossing the border line from firmness to inflexibility.

Closely related to the above guiding principle is an element which must be present in every decision, an element which I should like to call the "axiom of the longer breath in the last quarter-hour." War is not only a contest of weapons, but also a contest of will power. The contest of will power mounts relatively to the contest of weapons. Wherever the contest of weapons has reached a climax and the issue is about to be decided, or whenever all reserves are spent and the operation is about to enter a critical phase, the climax of the contest of will power must not always be allowed

~~RESTRICTED~~



~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #B 080 A

to coincide with that of the contest of weapons but must frequently be carried further. At the moment when the contest of weapons has reached its climax, the impact of influences originating from the situation and from other sources upon the commander is most severe. It is then -- so to speak, during the last quarter hour -- that the commander must remain firm to the last, calm, and resolute. The fact that the German Supreme Command of the Army failed during "the last quarter-hour" of the battle of the Marne in 1914 was the reason for our losing that battle and probably the war as well. During the late war, too, many an operation was stopped by one side just as the enemy was about to reach an identical decision. I shall later on cite a small-scale example from the Russian campaign.

According to our doctrine, a commander best counteracts the factor of uncertainty in a given situation by retaining a strong reserve. No doubt, strong reserves are an excellent means for meeting in the most easy and speedy manner a situation which clarifies only during the course of actual combat. They are, moreover, an excellent hedge against surprises.

As a rule, however, a strong force can be kept in reserve only prior to the beginning of an operation, and not even then in every case. It may be possible to postpone the commitment of reserves until a given situation has been clarified to some extent. As a rule, the larger the scope of the operation, the easier it is to postpone the commitment of reserves. At the right moment, however, they will have to be thrown into action. The desire to have them decide the issue will then make it necessary to commit either

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

a major part or all. Ignored is the fact that hardly, if ever, is the outcome assured. In any event, fewer reserves will be available for the following phases of the operation and the newly arising unclarified situations. Just the same, the commander must be intent on creating ever new reserves. There can be no doubt about the fact that reserves constitute a safety factor. They facilitate the making of decisions. Nevertheless, we must not forget that there are certain situations in which even the last reserves must be committed, and new ones can no longer be assembled. These, however, are the very crises in which it is most difficult to reach a decision.

One of the most important fundamental principles underlying a decision is the followings. The foremost thought in every decision concerning a strategic or tactical situation must be the main effort. So long as the commander concentrates on the main effort, he will be confronted by a more or less clear-cut problem. He will more easily be able to formulate his decision along a certain line. However, his problems in reaching a decision will be solved no further than this. The extent to which his task is facilitated is minute compared to the difficulties which arise in building the framework of the main effort. The main effort is one of the elements which determine the very nature of a decision. First to be decided are the location and the direction of the main effort. Since the size of available forces is never unlimited, the formulation of the main effort necessarily must be based on the premise that other sectors have to be weakened in favor of the main effort and the creation of reserves. Of

- 14 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

course, there are limits to the extent to which sectors can be weakened. Consequently, there are limits to building the main effort. It is of the utmost importance that these limits be correctly evaluated. Here, the commander has a broad and rewarding field in which to apply the above-mentioned guiding principles pertaining to daring and personal initiative. Here, these guiding principles are almost always applied to advantage and will facilitate the making of decisions.

Terrain plays an important role in every decision. It is particularly important in commanding a tactical unit or a division, and frequently even a corps. In contrast to the rest of Europe, the terrain in Russia is rather monotonous. But here, too, there are -- at least so far as tactical considerations are concerned -- certain key positions, the possession of which is of far-reaching importance. In contrast to the only too frequently unclear picture of the general situation, maps used in conjunction with data collected by air reconnaissance and -- in the more immediate vicinity -- also by ground reconnaissance, impart a fairly accurate picture of at least the general character of the terrain. Both air and ground reconnaissance are particularly necessary in Russia. In view of the above-mentioned facts, there developed the practice of placing greater emphasis on reliable data in making a decision, and of ascribing almost all-exclusive importance to terrain whenever a situation was unclear. In this manner, many commanders developed the principle of "command according to terrain."\* There is no intention of stating that this principle is a poor one and should be rejected. In completely

\*Not to be confused with tactical use of terrain features for sight defilade, and for reducing the effect of enemy weapons as well as increasing the effectiveness of our own weapons.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

unclear situations it will frequently be impossible to do anything else prior to the encounter with the enemy. But whenever the situation is at least somewhat clear, it must be remembered in the attack that the enemy, too, will occupy key positions with particularly strong forces if he should reach them before we do, and that it cannot be to our advantage to direct our thrust against the enemy's very point of resistance which is strongest because it is based upon favorable terrain. We must break this main hostile resistance by means of other maneuvers. In defensive operations, we must remember before we decide about the disposition of our forces and about the zone for the reserves, that the Russians hardly ever attacked sectors which were strong by virtue of terrain and weapons, but that they frequently attempted break-throughs at unexpected points.

Finally, there is a great advantage in knowing one's enemy. Whenever the commander knows at least in a general way what he may expect of the command and the combat value of his opponent, it will be easier for him to make a decision. It is for this reason that the study of the enemy and of the individual traits of his commanders is so valuable.

If, in summarizing, we review the difficulties inherent in the very nature of mobile warfare, and the various situations which may confront the commander prior to the initial encounter with the enemy, as well as those developing during the course of combat, we shall have to state that the basic elements underlying a decision always contain numerous factors whose bearing and importance is unknown. The enemy situation is not clear enough, a fact which frequently is true also of our own situation. The

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 A

mission received by the commander will be couched in more general terms the more undetermined the situation. In addition, there are the above-mentioned handicaps which may spring from the nature of things and the personal characteristics of the commander.

And nevertheless a decision must be reached, even if it is fully realized that it will be but a shot in the dark.\* Clausewitz makes a statement to the effect that war is the realm of uncertainty, and that the only known quantities are the character and ability of the commander. As we have seen, this applies particularly to the making of decisions.

A decision, therefore, is not a problem of simple arithmetic, but a creative act. Even in instances in which a decision is not the outcome of lengthy deliberations, the way leading up to a decision involves a complicated mental process in which, among other factors, also the temperament of the individual finds expression. Intuition and a keen sense of perception play a considerable role. Even if the commander has a large quantity of reference material at his disposal, and even if he has sufficient time for careful evaluation of all known factors, it still remains true that the process by which a decision is reached is, in the final analysis, nearly always a secret which, in most instances, remains insoluble even to the person who has arrived at the decision.

\*An interesting and important topic is the following question: "Along what lines should the training of commanders be conducted in order to enable them to act in the face of uncertainty?"

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #2 080 B

B. Examples to the Study "The Command Decision."

(Attack and defense at ROGACHEV, July 1941).

On 14 July 1941, during the pursuit of the retreating Russians, two infantry divisions of the LIII Corps crossed the BERESINA at BOB-RUJSK. A third division -- the 52nd Infantry Division which I commanded -- crossed the BERESINA at SWISLOTSCH. Of the two divisions to the south, the 267th<sup>1</sup> had ROGACHEV as its objective, the other division aimed at SLABIN (about 50 kilometers to the south). The 52nd Infantry Division was to march at first in the direction of MOGILEW. Approximately 30 kilometers ahead of the division advanced the rear elements of the XXIV Panzer Corps. At noon of 15 July, while advancing on a broad front, the 267th Infantry Division had engaged the enemy about 10 kilometers west of the DNJEPR and its tributary,<sup>2</sup> but had been unable to dislodge him. In the evening the enemy in turn attacked at several points. By evening of 15 July the 52nd Infantry Division had advanced to within 15 or 20 kilometers of MOGILEW. Having marched 35 kilometers, it proceeded to bivouac for the night along the road to advance. At about 2,000 an Ordonnanzoffizier [junior adjutant] from corps brought an order, the gist of which was as follows: "West of the DNJEPR and its subsidiary, 267th Infantry Division has encountered strong enemy forces along both sides of the road to ROGACHEV, and is engaged in combat at that point. Left flank at A-village."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>I am not sure whether this is the correct number.

<sup>2</sup>I cannot recall the name of that river. In the following pages I shall call it the tributary.

<sup>3</sup>I cannot recall the name of the village.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #1 080 B

52nd Infantry Division will break bivouac at once, proceed to the area west of OSERANY, assemble there, and hold itself in readiness for a thrust on ROGACHEV along the east bank of the tributary. One infantry regiment will march directly to A-village to support the 267th Infantry Division."

After a night march covering between 12 and 20 more kilometers, the bulk of the division reached the area west of OSERANY in the morning of 16 July. The 205th Infantry Regiment -- the rear element of the division -- and one battalion of light artillery were branched off to A-village. The Russians held OSERANY. After a brief encounter the enemy withdrew to the eastern bank of the tributary. Now the troops had to have some rest, at least until noon, since they had covered up to 55 kilometers within the past 24 hours. Upon leaving the woods west of OSERANY, one engineer company was attacked by a Russian bomber squadron and suffered a few casualties.

There was, of course, no telephone communication with corps in BOBRUJSK. Radio communications, which until then, and later on, too, never failed, did not function. A large wooded region through which we had marched, extended from the north up to a point in line with OSERANY. To the south, the west bank of the tributary far beyond the BOBRUJSK - ROGACHEV road consisted of open, flat terrain covered with wheat fields. The following measures were taken next: Reconnaissance across the tributary in easterly direction and in the direction of ROGACHEV, then in southerly direction. Dispatch of an officer for establishing communications with the troops near A-village; the command post of the 267th Infantry Division was unknown. Dispatch of an officer with situation report to corps. Construction of a bridge

- 19 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

across the tributary at OSERANY by using a floating bridge which had washed ashore on the near bank of the river. Military bridging equipment was not available. The tributary was about 60 meters wide and only 1 meter deep at that point; that is to say, it could be forded.

The combat patrol which had been sent out beyond OSERANY encountered enemy forces about 3 kilometers east of that place. The patrol was unable to determine the enemy's strength in the woods, and advanced no farther. Soon thereafter an enemy battery opened fire on OSERANY. The combat patrol was reinforced and a light artillery battalion committed to action. At about 1000 the first reconnaissance report arrived from the unit in the south. It read approximately as follows: "Severe fighting at A-village. Hamlets B and C (situated east of A-village toward the river) occupied by enemy forces. No other hostile forces west of the tributary. From the eastern bank fire from several machine guns." Soon, thereafter, the liaison officer which had been sent to the troops at A-village reported as follows: "Violent fighting from A-village on to the south. Enemy reinforcing. Own 205th Regiment arrived just in time. Elements already committed in counter-thrust south of A-village." After 1100 a junior adjutant from the regiment of the 267th Infantry Division arrived and orally reported as follows: "Enemy pressure is constantly increasing. The situation is very tense. The regiment requests support. Its division has no more forces at its disposal." Strangely enough, hardly any battle noise from the south was to be heard within the 52nd Division sector, although the distance to the combat zone amounted only to from 12 to 15 kilometers. (Wind direction?)

- 20 -

~~RESTRICTED~~



~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

The Two Alternatives

It seemed to me that the situation no longer permitted a wait for orders from corps, particularly since the troops had had a minimum of the rest they needed. Noon rations were just being distributed. Naturally, I had been pondering over the situation throughout the morning. At first, my deliberations centered on that part of the corps order which indicated the intention of thrusting east of the tributary toward ROGACHEV. It was one way in which to relieve pressure on our forces fighting on the west bank of the subsidiary. It was, indeed, the "strategic" solution which, should it succeed, might have a very far-reaching effect; which, by its very nature, would make itself felt far beyond merely relieving the forces fighting in the south. The very first combat-patrol reports, however, revealed that success was highly problematic for the following two reasons: First of all, the undetermined enemy situation on the east bank of the tributary, which could be clarified only by throwing stronger forces into action. Secondly, the largely wooded terrain and the fact that under prevailing circumstances the division was not strong enough for such a far-reaching operation.

As the situation of our forces to the south continued to be clarified, I found my estimate confirmed. It became more and more apparent that the situation of these forces demanded a very early relief of pressure. For that purpose, the tactical solution presented itself. Calling for a direct thrust south, into the flank of the attacking enemy, it tackled the problem at its core with a view toward achieving a success more limited in scope,

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

but all the more certain. The first, "strategic," alternative played a considerable role in my deliberations for a rather prolonged period of time because it was the more daring, and because a unilateral deviation from what I knew to be the intention of corps was more difficult for me than an unprejudiced decision would have been. Nevertheless, the bolder and, if successful, more promising alternative had to be set aside in favor of the other because of the above-mentioned reasons. Barring the corps order and the intention it indicated, the final decision would have been so self-evident as to obviate any "genuine doubt" [quotes sig] about which alternative to adopt. Certainly, no such doubt could ever have arisen as late as shortly before noon. After all, the "strategic" solution conformed neither to the situation in the south nor to our own strength.

About noon, I therefore decided to gather all available forces and to thrust south into the flank of the attacking enemy, leaving the reconnaissance battalion at OSERANY as our rear guard and for further reconnaissance. Elements of the division were moved into assembly positions in such a manner that the advance could get under way at 1330.

Shortly before 1300 an officer arrived from corps, bringing me the order, dated 1000, immediately to launch an attack to the south. He had driven over the highway leading to MOGILEW, and then had used the road through the woods previously travelled by the division. On the latter stretch his vehicle repeatedly bogged down in the swampy ground.

Notwithstanding the repeated exchange of information and the fact that we were in communication with our forces in action, the attack was a venture

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

into complete uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> We only knew in general that a considerably superior enemy of unknown strength was attacking our own forces. We knew nothing at all about the situation in the nearby sector east of the tributary. The division was short one-third of its infantry and one-fourth of its artillery. And despite all this, I can hardly remember to have been more confident during any other of the many attacks I led.

----- o -----

I shall omit the details of the attack. By nightfall, the 52nd Infantry Division had broken through the defense front in the Russian north flank to a depth of from two to four kilometers. The only elements unable to make any progress were those attacking on the left flank in the vicinity of the tributary. They were being held up by exceedingly heavy flanking fire from machine guns, mortars, and guns emplaced on the eastern bank of the river, which could not be silenced. Still, during the night of 16 - 17 July the enemy situation became more clear. Statements made by prisoners belonging to three infantry divisions indicated that since the morning of 16 July the one and one-half regiments of the 267th Infantry Division north of the big highway were being attacked by two divisions. Since the morning of 16 July a third division had crossed the tributary by the northern bridge.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to original plans, however, this division was not employed in an attack to the west. Instead, as soon as the enemy discovered rather strong German forces west of OSERANY, it was diverted to the north flank where by 1700 it had just formed a defense front between

<sup>7</sup>Air reconnaissance was available neither on that nor the following days.

<sup>8</sup>The bridge and the troop movements over it could not be observed from the ground.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

A-village and the tributary, i. e., at a right angle to the attack front, when the attack of the 52nd Infantry Division got under way.

The attack was continued on 17 July and the 205th Infantry Regiment brought into action. Our forces advanced 12 kilometers to the south, but no longer in a flanking direction, and pushed the enemy back about 4 kilometers to the east. Now the 52nd Infantry Division had to take over the front from the tributary to about one kilometer south of the highway. The elements of the 267th Infantry Division had suffered severe casualties and had been unable to participate in the attack. They were moved to their division south of the highway.

The division prepared for the defense. It was spread along a line of sixteen kilometers. Neither terrain nor enemy situation offered any clue as to a point of main effort. Because of the far-flung line which the division had to hold, all three infantry regiments were employed. One of them was assigned a smaller sector, but had to provide one battalion as division reserve at the big highway. The engineer battalion, which was working in the lines during the day, was located halfway between the highway and A-village. An additional division reserve was stationed in the vicinity of A-village. It consisted of 3 bicycle companies<sup>9</sup> and the reconnaissance battalion less its cavalry troop. The reconnaissance battalion could be moved closer to the front because the enemy forces east of OSERANY

<sup>9</sup>The bicycle companies were an organizational experiment under which the 9th company of each infantry regiment was equipped with bicycles. Every company had one truck each for kitchen, ammunition, and baggage. The companies were usually kept together. Generally speaking, the bicycle companies proved their worth.

- 24 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

had disappeared and the area to the east was free of enemy forces up to the railroad line. Only in southerly direction, after an advance of about five kilometers toward ROGACHEV, did the patrols encounter hostile forces which they were unable to penetrate. The cavalry troop was left in OSERANY for security and reconnaissance missions. On 19 July one heavy artillery regiment with two battalions (150-mm. medium howitzers and 105-mm. guns, a total of six batteries) was assigned to the division. Air reconnaissance was still not available.

The Russian large-scale attack started on 20 or 21 July. The positions completed by that time consisted of simple trenches. There were no obstacles because wire was one of the unavailable items. Russian fire lasting for several hours had begun in the morning and covered the entire front as far as several kilometers south of the highway. The main target area, although cleverly screened by the enemy, nevertheless appeared to extend from a point southeast of A-village to several kilometers south of the latter. The Russians revealed themselves in possession of a surprisingly large amount of heavy artillery which fired very accurately. Ammunition appeared to be no problem.

During the first days of the fighting a news item which had appeared in the British press became known, according to which the Russians under the command of Marshal Timoshenko had launched an offensive aimed at the rear and the communications of the German Army Group advancing in Central Russia. A comparison of events and information received from other front sectors could not but leave the impression that the main effort of Timoshenko's offensive had hit the 52nd Infantry Division.

- 25 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

I shall omit the details of the fighting. The enemy repeatedly shifted his main effort within the area from a point about 2 kilometers north of the highway to the region southeast of A-village. Prisoner statements revealed that there were always three divisions on the attack within this area, and that all losses they suffered during the day were replaced during the following night. Some of the heavy batteries belonged to the Moscow School of Artillery which had recently arrived with 20 of its heavy batteries. At the points of main effort the Russian infantry attacked according to a system of waves, each from four to five ranks deep. Wave after wave appeared in order to keep the attack rolling -- a clumsy and expensive method, but one very likely consistent with the character of the Russian infantry. Not even during nighttime did the Russian artillery reduce its fire more than slightly. As a result, it was not always possible to get enough supplies to the infantry on the line. The weather was hot and sunny throughout the operation.

#### The Influence exercised by the Superior Officer

The battle continued with undiminished fury. On the fourth day, as on the preceding ones, the Commanding General of the Corps came to my command post at about lunch time. In the meantime, the situation of the division had developed as follows: The infantry had suffered severe casualties. Individual companies had been decimated to such an extent that they had to be dissolved. Most of them had lost from one-third to one-half of their men. One-third of the machine guns had been knocked out. Because of enemy hits or excessive wear and tear, not one of the batteries had all of its 4 guns left;

- 26 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 030 B

one-third of the batteries had only two guns left, two batteries had only one. The troops had reorganized reserves repeatedly, but all of these had been used up. I had just assigned for commitment the one company which had been detached that same morning from the regiment on the right flank. That regiment had suffered comparatively the least losses so far, and I had already withdrawn one battalion from it at an earlier time. In this situation the Commanding General told me (as to meaning): "If you believe that you cannot hold out any longer, I leave it up to you to decide whether you want to withdraw the division to a line running along A-creek or even to the BERESINA. In the latter case, BOBRUJSK will have to be held as a bridgehead. If your division is torn apart in this action, it will be useless for some time to come, and the approach to BOBRUJSK will not be covered."

I must admit that up to that moment the thought of requesting the withdrawal of the division had never entered my mind. Now I had been given the authority for its withdrawal without ever having asked for it myself, and together with that authority had been charged with added responsibility. I knew that all troops of Fourth Army already were east of the DNJEPR. It was, to be sure, not part of my responsibility to be concerned about who would cover the lines of communication of Fourth Army after a withdrawal of my division left them unprotected. Nevertheless, I was unable completely to dismiss that thought from my mind. Just the same, my mission called for covering the approach to BOBRUJSK under any and all circumstances if the present position should become untenable. I had to hold the BERESINA with a bridgehead somewhere between its east bank and my present position.

- 27 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

Considering the superior enemy forces, it was open to doubt whether the mission could be accomplished with a division that had been forced to yield ground in combat and was out of touch with its units.

I rejected the thought of a withdrawal. My decision was based on the confidence I had in my men -- badly weakened and completely exhausted as they were -- and their commanders, all of whom I knew well and had come to know even better during the recent fighting. Moreover, the knowledge gained about the enemy and his methods of attack played a role that lent me a certain amount of encouragement. These, however, were only two of the elements entering into my decision. For the rest, I would have been unable to justify my decision in all of its details. It was more a matter of conviction, impossible to prove, that the position could be held after all, and of unwavering determination to hold it. Quite possibly the decisive factor was, however, that indefinable feeling which in the last analysis we cannot rationalize. One fact, though, became clear to me: not easy to begin with, my decision became much more difficult upon the authorization given me.

The above-mentioned experience taught me that a superior must never communicate his apprehensions to a subordinate, and that he must never unload part of his own responsibility on him. Increased responsibility undoubtedly can bolster the feeling of self-reliance of a commander, and consequently also his strength. But such an involved psychological experiment, the outcome of which is never certain, must not be conducted in the midst of a critical situation.

- 28 -

~~RESTRICTED~~



~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

The "Longer Breath"

In the afternoon of that day a trench sector of more than 400 meters had to be abandoned. We were forced to make the best of it. During the night, small groups of from eight to ten men were being pulled out here and there by the battalions and regiments in order to form a reserve. The chance for forming a division reserve was long past. In conducting further operations I was limited to communicating with the regimental commanders and to adapting artillery fire to tactical situations. On the following morning the Russian attacks resumed with undiminished fury. By means of concentrated artillery fire we succeeded several times in breaking up enemy attack waves and enemy battalions in assembly position. We lost two more trench sectors of considerable length, and the enemy exploited his success of the previous day to a depth of one kilometer. During the course of the day, also individual commanders finally began to report with particular emphasis on the serious state of exhaustion of their men. These had not slept for days and, despite the brutal summer heat, could not even be regularly supplied with water. Gunners even fell asleep while servicing their pieces. On that day our planes finally flew reconnaissance missions. They spotted no new enemy forces east of the DNJEPR. That fact, however, would not necessarily have to mean anything very important since extensive woodlands covered the terrain and the Russians were masters at concealment from air reconnaissance. Up to that time, we had taken prisoners belonging to five infantry divisions. Three of those divisions had been

- 29 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 030 8

positively identified as totally committed; of the other two we had identified at least elements in combat.

In the late afternoon I found myself compelled to tackle the same problem that had confronted me the previous days. I had to make a decision. Only this time it was still more difficult. From the unit reports I was able to deduct that the enemy, who on that day attacked with particular disregard for his own losses, must have suffered a huge number of casualties. The air reconnaissance report, too, took on certain significance. Exhaustion and casualties among our own troops had further increased. Nevertheless -- I reminded myself -- there must, after all, be a limit also to the enemy's ability of sustaining the attack. I resolved to hold the position through the next day as well. From my point of view I was waging a contest of will power. I could do but little in furthering the contest of weapons.

I admit that I awaited the following day with great suspense. That day brought the surprise: Dawn broke and -- only slight enemy artillery activity; absolute quiet reigned in the enemy positions. The day passed without a Russian attack. And none came until, on 15 August, we ourselves resumed the offensive under different strategic circumstances.

My decision of the last evening of the defense battle proved that I had the "longer breath in the last quarter-hour."

o o o o o o o o o o o

The following remarks are not relevant to the subject matter of the present study. However, I should like to put them down just the same.

~~RESTRICTED~~

~~RESTRICTED~~

MS #D 080 B

The offensive and defensive engagements at ROGACHEV were conducted without Luftwaffe or Panzer support. The German troops fought strictly according to the principles laid down in their field service regulations, deviating from them only in the defense where -- because of the length of the front line -- they were unable to develop to more than a limited extent the prescribed echelonment in depth. However, the principles set forth in the field service regulations for operations were easy enough to adapt to those conditions whenever it came to co-ordinated operations on a larger scale with Luftwaffe and Panzer forces. Those principles proved their worth in the East up to the end of the war, and the Russian campaign failed to point out the need for fundamental revisions other than those based on the long distances.

Aviation, tanks, and motorized units called for new concepts only on the strategic level. To be sure, those new concepts already had been evolved during the war in the West in 1940, but they required a certain amount of adaptation to the Russian enemy and the terrain with its extreme dearth of roads.

Attached: 2 sketches

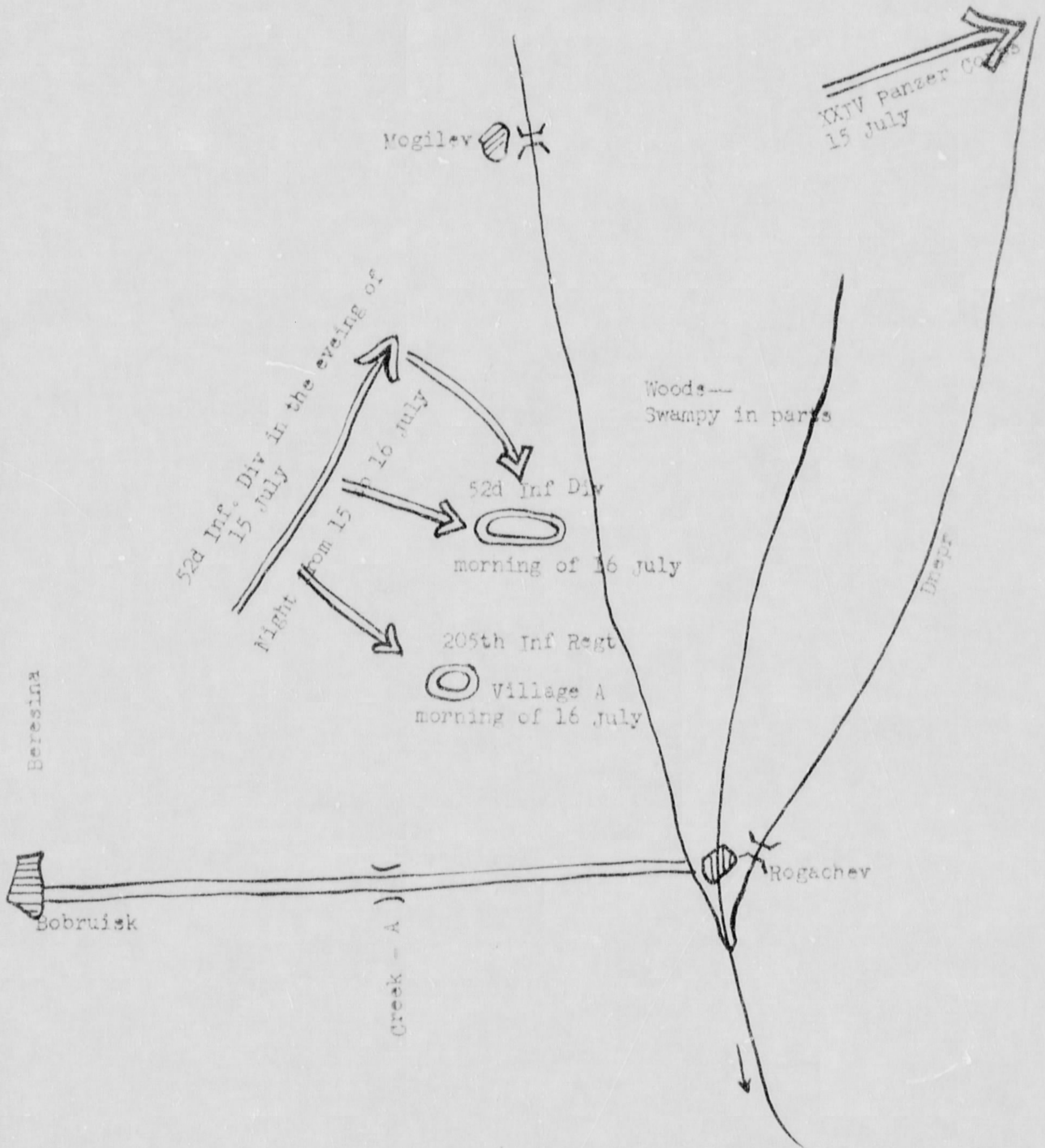
15 March 1947

- 31 -

~~RESTRICTED~~

D080a

No. 1  
Fourth Army



Russian Attacks      ≡≡≡  
Russian positions    ≡≡≡  
German positions     ( )  
For: Sketch 1 and 2

D080a

No. 2

