



History of the 6th Tank Army of the First Ukrainian Front and the 20th Guards Tank Brigade of the 5th Guards Tank Army

Mission of Tank Army: Once a breach in enemy lines had been made by other units (typically Shock Armies or combined-arms armies), the tank army would be inserted into the gap to drive deep into enemy territory, attacking rear areas and seizing major communications centers to disrupt the enemy reactions. Tank armies were expected to penetrate up to several hundred kilometers into the enemy rear.

History: The 5th Guards Tank Army was formed on 10 February 1942. It was considered an elite formation. In 1943, it played a significant role in the *Battle of Kursk*, being one of the formations tasked with the counter-attack at *Prokhorovka*. Early in 1944, it took part in the reduction of the *Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket*.

In June 1944, the 5th Guards Tank Army was used as the main exploitation force during the Soviet summer offensive, *Operation Bagration*. The formation was committed to an attack along and parallel to the main Moscow-Minsk road, following initial breakthroughs by the rifle divisions of 11th Guards Army, and was instrumental in completing the encirclement and liberation of *Minsk*. It was then employed in the follow up operation to liberate *Vilnius*.

Late in 1944, the 5th Guards Tank Army was committed against Third Panzer Army as part of the Baltic Offensive, pushing the German forces into a *pocket at Memel*. It was then moved south and took part in the East Prussian Operation as part of Konstantin Rokossovsky's *2nd Belorussian Front*; driving to the coast at *Elbing*, it successfully cut off the *Wehrmacht* forces in East Prussia in what became known as the *Heiligenbeil kessel*.

On 18 Jan, 1944 January, Manstein was proven prescient when General Nikolai Vatutin's 1st and General Ivan Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Fronts attacked the edges of the salient and surrounded the two German corps. The link-up on 28 January of **20th Guards Tank Brigade** with **6th Tank Army of the First Ukrainian Front** at the village of *Zvenigorodka* completed the encirclement and created the cauldron or *kessel* that became known as the *Korsun-Cherkassy Pocket*.

Trapped in the pocket were under 60,000 men, a total of six German divisions at approximately 55% of their authorized strength, along with a number of smaller combat units. Among the trapped German forces

were the 5th SS Panzer Division *Wiking* and the SS Sturmbrigade *Wallonien* (SS Assault Brigade *Wallonien*).

A force Led by the 1st SS Panzer Division, the attack soon encountered heavy resistance from four Soviet Tank Corps and began to bog down with a change in weather in the thick mud of the rasputitsa. The Red Army poured intense artillery and rocket fire on the area around the encircled troops, nearly every round finding a target. *Sturmoviks* of the Red Air Force bombed and strafed, only infrequently challenged by *Luftwaffe* fighters. Various unit diaries described a scene of gloom, with fires burning, destroyed or abandoned vehicles everywhere and wounded men and disorganized units on muddy roads

The geographic feature *Hill 239* was occupied by Soviet T-34's of the 5th Guards Tank Army. Despite energetic efforts to capture *Hill 239* now from the inside of the cauldron, the high ground remained in Soviet hands and had to be bypassed. "As more and more units ran up against the impregnable tank barrier atop the ridge dominated by *Hill 239*,"^[21] the German escape direction was pushed to the south, thus ending for the bulk of troops at the wrong position of the *Gniloy Tikich* stream with disastrous consequences to come. When daylight arrived, the German escape plan began to unravel. Very few armored vehicles and other heavy equipment could climb the slippery, thawing hillsides and the weapons had to be destroyed and abandoned "after the last round of ammunition had been fired.

General Konev, now realizing that the Germans were escaping, was enraged and then resolved to keep his promise to Stalin not to let any "Hitlerites" or "Fascists" escape *unichtozhenie* (total annihilation). Konev ordered all available armor and artillery to attack the escaping units, cut them into isolated groups and then destroy them piecemeal. Sensing that no anti-tank weapons were in the field, T-34s commenced to wade into unprotected support troops, and headquarters units.

The Red Army encirclement of *Cherkassy-Korsun* inflicted serious damage on six German divisions, including *Wiking*; these units were nearly decimated and had to be withdrawn, requiring complete re-equipping after this military disaster. The Soviet forces continued their steamroller drive westward with massive tank armies of T-34's, Kv-85's, and trucks supplied by their American allies under Lend-Lease.

Soviet historian *Vladimir Telpukhovsky* claims that the Red Army inflicted 52,000 casualties on the Germans and took 11,000 prisoners; other Soviet sources claim 57,000 casualties and 18,000 prisoners - with Soviet casualty numbers officially unpublished. General Stemmermann died fighting among his rear guard. Gen. Lieb survived the war and died in 1981. The commander of 2nd Ukrainian Front, Gen. Konev, was made a Marshal of the Soviet Union for his great victory.
