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TRANSLATION
OF
TAPED CONVERSATION WITH
LIEUTENANT GENERAL HEINZ GAEDCKE

12 APRIL 1979

NOVEMBER 1979

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<p>This is one of a series of taped conversations with German World War II officers.</p> <p>General Gaedcke had extensive experience in World War II and served as chief of staff to General Hermann Balck, a brilliant armor tactician, at the time he was commanding the Sixth Army in Hungary. After World War II, General Gaedcke was with the Bundeswehr's staff officer school and later served as commander of the German Third Corps at Koblenz.</p>			
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TRANSLATION OF TAPED CONVERSATION WITH
LIEUTENANT GENERAL* HEINZ GAEDCKE,

12 APRIL 1979

Introduction

The following translation attempts to preserve, as accurately as possible, both the detailed content and the style of General Gaedcke's conversation. In the interest of clarity, the questions have been consolidated and condensed; General Gaedcke's answers have been translated in their entirety, with the exception of some digressions and a few comments of minor interest.

This is the third in a series of taped conversations with German WWII officers. The first two were with General Hermann Balck and were published by Battelle's Columbus Laboratories, Tactical Technology Center, in January, 1979 and July, 1979.

General Gaedcke's experience and views are of particular interest for two reasons: First, his extensive experience on the Russian Front in WWII culminated in a tour as chief of staff to General Balck, a brilliant armored tactician then commanding the Sixth Army in Hungary. Secondly, General Gaedcke has extensive post-WWII experience with the Bundeswehr's staff officer school (Führungsakademie) and ending as commander of the German Third Corps at Koblenz. This gives him a relatively unique perspective from which to compare recent NATO practices in tactics and organization with those the Germans used during WWII.

* - German post-WWII rank -- same as U.S. Lieutenant General

Q: Can you give us a brief summary of your military career during WWII?

A: I started WWII as a captain in the Operations Department of the General Staff in Berlin. Next, I became the chief of staff* of the 25th Infantry Division, a straight-leg infantry division from Stuttgart. We took part in the French campaign, ending up at the demarcation line across the middle of France. From there we marched on foot back to the Stuttgart area and, within eight months, were converted to a motorized division using captured French vehicles.

In France, the 25th Division was part of the XVIII Mountain Corps which was one of the organizations in the Ninth Army. In Russia, the 25th Division was a part of the 6th Army under General von Reichenau. Within the 6th Army it belonged to Panzergruppe Kleist; within the panzergruppe, it was assigned to the 3rd Armored Corps commanded by General von Mackensen.

After the French campaign, the 25th Division took part in the thrust towards Kiev, turned south and was involved on the rim of the cauldron at Uman, moved on to the Saporussye area and covered along the Dnjepr, and then was drawn northwards up into the large encirclement at Kiev. There, our division sealed the cauldron by linking up with Panzergruppe Guderian which was thrusting down from the north. At this point we were still part of the 6th Army.

* The position was the division's Ia, which combines the U.S. functions of deputy division commander, operations officer and chief of staff.

After this great encirclement at Kiev -- which at the time appeared to be a great success, but which we now know to have been a serious operational mistake -- we participated in the thrust towards Moscow. But because of the frightful condition of the roads, we made only slow progress and became bogged down in the mud. Afterwards, when the frost came, we pressed forward into the region east of Tula. Then, due to the strong attack of fresh Siberian units, we had to participate in Guderian's withdrawal -- the withdrawal which, as is well known, led to his downfall. And then we wound up in position warfare along the Oka, north of Orel.

At this point, we were actually only a partially-motorized division. Most of our vehicles had broken down or become stuck due to the mud and the cold. Apparently the higher command had no intention of re-equipping this excellent division with vehicles and thus it became a static division.

Then followed a short period in 1943 during which I was a tactics instructor at the Kriegsakademie* in Berlin and at Hirschberg in Silesia. In this position, I was detached to the front three times to serve as acting corps chief of staff to temporarily replace officers who had dropped out due to sickness. The first two assignments were with the 24th Armored Corps south of Kiev and the 11th Infantry Corps. During this duty, which was supposed to last only four weeks, I had the misfortune of landing in

* This was the school that trained German General Staff officers.

the Cherkassy pocket. I participated in the frightful breakout from this encirclement but emerged in one piece. The commander of the corps was killed in the breakout.

My third temporary assignment was with the 4th Army in Lithuania, east of eastern Prussia. When I was finished there, I was permanently assigned as chief of staff to the 6th Army in Rumania. This was the second Sixth Army, which had been reorganized with new units after being annihilated at Stalingrad. The commander was General Fretter-Pico.

I arrived there on the 16th of August 1944; on the 20th the battle for Rumania began and on the 22nd it was already lost. The battle was fought with our backs to the Carpathian Mountains. The Sixth Army was destroyed for a second time at the Dniester River.

We then fought a series of withdrawal actions across the Carpathians and into Hungary. There we fought the so-called tank battles in the Puszta region, using armored units newly-introduced to meet the threat of Russian encirclement from the south. Next I participated in the fight around Budapest where, on Christmas Eve 1944, General Balck relieved my then-commander, General Fretter-Pico. We then took part in the armored battles around Lake Balaton and western Hungary. With the German collapse and the ceasefire, our fighting ended at the eastern border of Austria. There, the Americans appeared behind us, and it took us only a night and a day to cross over and capitulate to the Americans -- who, to our joy, accepted our capitulation to save us from Russian captivity.

Q: Can you give us a few examples of your experiences with air-ground cooperation?

*Little close
air support
received by
German forces
in WWII*

A: Even though I saw quite a bit of combat, the opportunities for cooperation with the Luftwaffe were rare. And that experience is actually quite typical for the German Army during WWII.

To give a few examples: The 25th Division of which I spoke had the difficult assignment of storming the Chemin-Des-Dames, already infamous from WWI days. The division was employed as the *schwerpunkt* of the attack and, even so, no air support was provided. Instead, we had only our own resources -- that is to say, division and corps artillery -- to help us.

Our attacks in the vicinity of Kiev and down into the Saporussye region were not such *schwerpunkt* attacks that, given the situation of the Luftwaffe, we could have demanded air support. That would have been asking too much. At the closing of the Kiev cauldron, I only saw the Luftwaffe in the distance. In any case, they didn't fling anything in front of our feet.

*No close
support in
Rumania and
Hungary*

The great battle down in Rumania ran its course without the slightest support for the Sixth Army from the Luftwaffe. The only thing we got from the Luftwaffe was a very limited reconnaissance effort which, even by the standards of that time, was quite inadequate. And in the armored battles of the Puszta, even for the most difficult attacks we had to undertake, I can remember no case where there was any significant air support.

In the vicinity of Budapest, I remember that the famous tankbuster Colonel Rudel happened to be passing through with two or three machines and did some independent tank hunting. But I can't call that air support of the ground forces.

*Simple methods
of air-ground
cooperation*

You know, the techniques of cooperation between air and ground have changed considerably since then, due to the changes in radio and communications. On the few occasions when air support was actually delivered, it used to be done according to very simple principles. The troops were told that they would have to reckon with air support between this hour and that hour, that they had to lay out their white and red recognition panels, and that they had to stay behind a pre-determined bomb line.

Q: And there were no air liaison officers at levels below corps?

*No forward
observers
or liaison
officers at
division*

A: Corps, that's right. We never had a liaison officer in our division. Every once in a while, someone would show up at division to discuss those things and report something to the rear. But corps and army were the ones who coordinated the employment of air and ground, using the relatively simple techniques I just told you about. Which didn't prevent us from dropping some bombs among our own troops, from time to time.

Q: It has been said that there are no bureaucratic solutions to the problem of air-ground cooperation. What's your view?

*Air-ground
coordination
problem
solvable
only through
people willing
to cooperate*

A: That's entirely correct. There were always people with whom you could work closely, people who could mutually understand and agree on what was desired and what was possible. And there were cases where the relevant man -- particularly Luftwaffe officers -- was always saying, "It can't be done. It won't work. We won't do it."

Q: Can you judge the effect of Russian air attacks against you? Were your movements often attacked and hindered?

*Effects of
Russian air
attacks
generally
were minor*

A: Our division staff occasionally suffered from Russian air attacks, but that was really only the exception. We had the impression that the Russian air force was mostly doing something like independent hunting for targets of opportunity. Wherever they saw something on the ground, such as vehicles raising dust or poorly-camouflaged assembly areas, they would roll in, strafe the area, drop their bombs, and perhaps occasionally cause some real harm.

*Soviet AF
mostly un-
coordinated
with ground
forces*

This was particularly noticeable in one instance early in the Russian campaign, that is, in July 1941 during the advance towards Kiev. The whole 3rd Armored Corps -- two armored divisions and one motorized infantry division -- under General Mackensen was moving up on a single road. Despite strict orders and traffic control, in their well-meaning hurry to get up to the front they got into a frightful traffic jam. As a result, they became a welcome target for the Russian air forces. The Russians, using relatively obsolete aircraft, strafed and bombed and

caused annoying losses -- primarily losses of trucks and equipment.

Q: Did they also suffer serious tank losses?

A: No. Mostly trucks for transporting troops or resupply.

In the Ukraine, dust plumes and lack of cover created the danger of enemy air attack

It's quite interesting that in the Ukraine -- where you had flat expanses with no cover and almost no opportunities for camouflage -- it was the ease of raising dust and the uninterrupted visibility that made these free-ranging Russian air forces a danger to us. They usually came with 3, 5 or 7 aircraft; when these dust conditions existed, the danger of being detected and attacked was quite high.

Rigidity of Russian air operations tended to nullify this danger

We observed them for a while from our division staff hiding places, normally a small wood or a village, and found that this air activity usually started around 6:00 in the morning. So we said to ourselves, "Aha, these lads don't get out of bed very early. So we'll always change positions between 3:00 and 4:00, camouflage nicely between 4:00 and 5:00, and by the time they arrive we'll have disappeared." Thereafter, during our entire campaign in the Ukraine, we never suffered air attack -- certainly none against our division staff, which was full of lots of vehicles and radio transmitters.

Q: On the average, did Russian air hinder your movements or were you mostly able to move as you wished?

*Russian air
added ten-
sion but
did not sig-
nificantly
hinder
movement*

A: Well, you can't say we were completely unhindered. After all, you had to reckon that these guys could appear in the sky at any time. You didn't know what air reserves they had and how often they could attack. The word of the hour always was, "Hurry up so we can get out of this wide-open terrain and find some place where we can hide -- after all, those famous blessings from above could drop on us at any moment."

*Night time
nuisance
attacks*

Another thing you may have heard of was this ridiculous biplane sewing machine, this night crow that all veterans of Russia remember with distaste. Although it didn't do much damage, you were always sitting up nights in your hole wondering when this guy was going to drop his eggs. It was called the U-2 -- not the famous American U-2. It seemed to be made of cardboard and you had the feeling that the U-2 pilot sat in the breeze and dropped the bombs out of his lap.

Because these lads annoyed us so much, one full moon night we set up 12 heavy machineguns on a height. I said, "When these guys arrive, for once we absolutely must shoot one down." It didn't happen. We began to suspect they were armored from beneath.

But these attacks were uncomfortable. Every once in a while we would suffer an annoying loss. That was because they flew in the winter and in the winter we sat in these Russian villages. They would fly over and wherever they saw the faintest light or movement, "Splat!", they would drop and maybe get a hit, maybe not.

Q: Did you find that your losses to air were decreased by the flatness of Russian terrain, by the fact that it was easy to get off the roads to evade air attack?

Maintaining spacing during movement avoided losses

A: It's clear that a densely-packed column that fails to maintain its prescribed spacings is a more lucrative target than one that's widely spaced where most of the shots fall between vehicles. This holds equally for traffic concentrations in front of bridges or narrow stretches or entrances to villages. With good traffic control at these points to make sure you didn't build up traffic jams, if an air attack happened to come, your losses were far smaller than if the bombs dropped in the middle of a big clot of vehicles.

Q: Was there more or less effect of Russian air later in the war? What was your experience with Russian air in Rumania and Hungary?

Massed Russian ground fire was the decisive element in the destruction of German troops

A: Of course, the major Russian attacks we discussed previously were supported by air. But massed Russian artillery, mortar and rocket fire was the decisive element in the destruction of our troops. After our troops had disengaged, or after the fight had broken up into isolated pockets, then the Russian air would attack and cause some losses -- at least as reported in the battlefield reports I read at army staff level. As best I can tell from my reading, these scattered Russian attacks were in no way comparable to the bombing "carpet" attacks unloaded by the U.S. on the Western Front or later in Vietnam.

Naturally, our troops complained about these attacks and were particularly reproachful in asking, "Where are our fighters hanging out? What happened to the flak?"

I've experienced this feeling dozens of times. You're sitting there feeling completely undefended while suffering a ridiculous attack by 7 aircraft. "Where are the fighters? Where is the flak?" That's when you get to hear some really professional cursing.

Q: When you were planning troop movements in Rumania and in Hungary, did you have to take into account the likelihood of division moves being hindered by air?

Even late in war Russian air never seriously delayed German units

A: No. I can't remember a single case where a division couldn't be employed or couldn't reach its objective due to a mauling from air attack. Where we could, of course, we moved at night. But where there was a need to move a battalion, a regiment or a division during the day in order to plug a gap, we were never forced to delay the movement until night in order to avoid air attack.

Q: Could you tell us some more about your experiences with the 25th Infantry Division in France?

25th Inf Division defeats an armored division

A: Perhaps the greatest achievement of the 25th Division in France happened a few days before I got there. That was the division's counterattack against a French armored division near Laon. Fighting as an infantry division, the 25th achieved its objectives against an armored division and, I would say, actually defeated the opposing division.

I saw the photos that were being passed around the division, photos of dozens of French tanks, mostly light tanks, knocked out by our troops. The division brilliantly proved its worth that day -- and that was its first taste of combat.

*Assault at
Chemin-Des-
Dames*

The division's second significant action in France was the attack on Chemin-des-Dames, south of Laon. In front of Chemin-des-Dames flows the Ailette, a small river that was said to have seen much carnage in WWI when the static warfare lines teetered back and forth across the stream. Up on the Chemin-des-Dames is the old Vauban fort of Malmaison.

When we faced the fort it was occupied by the French under orders from General Weygand to stop falling back and to defend the fort at all costs. Psychologically, the prospect of the attack weighed somewhat heavily on our division and, I must confess, on me too. I was a newcomer to the division fresh from an office job. In a proven and outstanding division, I was expected to be the principal advisor of the division commander.

Looking out from our positions facing Chemin-des-Dames, here we saw some old trenches from WWI, there a rusty gas mask, over there an old steel helmet. We asked ourselves, "How will it go?" But this division, composed mostly of Württembergers, was an exemplary division -- and because of that, was mentioned in the Wehrmacht dispatches that day.

I never prepared an attack order in this division that was not successfully carried out, usually by going beyond the stated objective.

*119th an
exceptional
regiment*

In any case, with remarkable élan, the division -- particularly the 119th Regiment from Stuttgart -- took the heights of Chemin-des-Dames in a frontal assault. The handling of the assault troops attacking up the slope was remarkably skillful. However, one of the regiments fought with less success; it wasn't so well led and got stuck.

*- and Grasser
an exceptional
commander*

But the 119th was led by a brilliant commander who later commanded the division. He led the assault smoking a cigar and carrying the cigar case and a walking stick. With his stick he would point out to his men where they had to attack next. His name was General Grasser; he died two years ago. Also accompanying the regiment in the attack was the corps commander, General Ritter von Speck. He fired up the regiment during the attack by calling out, "I've never seen a regiment fight like this!" You can imagine the effect on the men. Within 2½ hours they were on top and hoisted the German flag. Then there was a delay to build a bridge over the canal.

The subsequent attacks by the 25th Division across the Aisne and the Marne, which collapsed the remaining French resistance, were also praiseworthy.

*25th Division
proves itself
in Russia
also*

In Russia, the division sealed the reputation it had won in France. For instance, in January 1942 the Russians were attacking with hordes of fresh though inexperienced troops. At one point, 1½ battalions of the 119th Regiment were attacked by 7 Russian divisions. Not one Russian

broke into the regiment's positions. Our troops stood fast wherever they found themselves. You had to kill them to overrun their positions.

The division was badly burned, however, at the beginning of the Russian campaign. In its first engagement near Rovno, one battalion of the 35th Regiment got surrounded during an attack that the division undertook only reluctantly in obedience to orders. About half the battalion was captured. These captured soldiers were massacred in the most gruesome fashion. The news spread like lightning throughout the division. Thereafter everyone knew that if you surrendered or if you ran and were captured, you could meet the same fate as the 135 men near Rovno. Better to sit tight and keep on shooting or, if necessary, use the spade and the rifle butt to the end.

*25th Division
toughened
early by
Russian
massacres*

Not long after, the Russians using submachineguns ambushed two companies from the other regiment in a cornfield. Again, our wounded who were captured were horribly massacred. In all our regiments, these events were never forgotten and had an effect on all of our subsequent fights in Russia.

Q: In your successful infantry attack against the French armored division near Laon, what were the most important anti-tank weapons you used?

A: We really had nothing useful except the 3.7cm anti-tank cannon -- the one we later nicknamed, as enemy armor became thicker, the "Tank Door-Knocking Apparatus."

*25th Div
anti-tank
weapons at
Laon*

We also had some 13mm anti-tank rifles, a very long instrument that you rested on a little bipod, and that sometimes could be used to shoot up very light tanks. And, of course, there were the usual close combat methods [explosives]. Sometimes we knocked off a tank with direct fire from an artillery piece, where it happened to work out.

Q: What were the important improvements in anti-tank weapons that you received in Russia?

*25th Div
anti-tank
weapons in
Russia*

A: The next weapon we received was the 5cm anti-tank cannon, but this was already considerably heavier and less mobile. This was followed by the 7.5cm. But the most feared -- and from our side, the most valued -- instrument was the 8.8cm. Unfortunately, this was very immobile and as big as a barn.

*88's not
organic to
ground
forces*

The 8.8cm was found only in the flak units. These were Luftwaffe units and were not subordinated to our command. They were "assigned for cooperation" because Goering didn't want any part of the Luftwaffe subordinated to the Army. But at the lowest levels it worked famously.

Q: How much flak was normally assigned to your infantry division? About a battalion?

*25th Div had
1 Luftwaffe
AA Bn minus*

A: Yes, we got a battalion of flak but it was usually a heavily stripped battalion. I can remember that for substantial periods we had only a battery and that battery had to participate in ground fighting as well. The flak

was always well supplied with ammunition, their weapons had long range, and once they learned how to get hits in ground combat they were a most-feared arm.

Q: U.S. experience with anti-aircraft units in ground combat, even though they were under Army command, was not always outstanding. How did the combat tradition of the Luftwaffe flak units come about?

A: Before the war, when we saw the flak -- they came in their nice steel blue Luftwaffe uniforms with tie and collar, whereas the Army had only the high collar -- we always said, "Here come the gentlemen soldiers. What can we expect from them in wartime?" When the need arose to use the flak in ground combat, particularly against tanks, we Army soldiers quickly revised our too-hasty judgment. In fact, whenever there was a flak unit in the neighborhood, we always eagerly asked to have them join us.

*Luftwaffe
flak units
performed
effectively
in ground
combat and
were willing
to take
heavy losses*

They always performed excellently. They had high losses, particularly with the quad-20mm. This weapon worked well against the Russian mass attacks. For instance, in the winter of '41 - '42, the Russians brought in those Far Eastern divisions that attacked like herds of sheep. Here the quad-20mm flak weapons worked terrifically because of their high rate of fire. But they were a high, prominent target and were quickly recognized by the Russian artillery. As a result, they suffered very high casualties -- but they were always ready to go far forward to support the infantry. I can only sing their praise.

Q: What were the origins of the flak organization?

A: The origins of the flak organization lie in the post-WWI transportation battalions of the Army, the ones we used for resupply. From some of these battalions -- under cover at first, during the initial rearmament -- sprang the first air defense battalions. Then Goering grabbed the whole thing and said, "Anti-aircraft weapons belong with the air forces. They have to train together. Air defense has no place in the ground forces." That's how flak became part of the Luftwaffe.

*Goering
sized the
AA function
for the
Luftwaffe*

Q: Was this remarkable cooperation of the Luftwaffe flak due to special orders handed down to the combat flak units from the Luftwaffe higher command, orders requiring all-out cooperation with the Army?

A: Yes, I guess it was like that. But beyond that, it was primarily a matter of the cooperativeness of the combat-level Army commander and the air defense commander. If the two understood each other and if the air defense man had some insight into the combat needs of the regiment or division that he was supporting, why then everything went smoothly. I can't remember a single case of a flak commander who made difficulties about carrying out the wishes of the division he was working with.

*Remarkable
cooperation
of the
Luftwaffe
and Army
commanders
at the
combat level*

To some extent, the good work of the flak units was self-interest. For example, in Hungary, when Russian tanks broke through they would try to shoot up the artillery and

flak. Then, to save their own hide, the flak did that which was most in the interest of the Army, namely, knocking off tanks.

Q: What kind of tradition did the PAK troops^{} have?*

*PAK branch
originated
in Hitler's
rearmament*

A: Well, PAK was something new. The old Reichswehr started out with their well-known wooden guns. Then when the rearmament started and the first 3.7cm PAK guns arrived, they were greeted with joy. After all, the PAK cannons were the only real anti-tank weapons that the regiment and the division^{**} had -- if you ignore the ridiculous 13mm anti-tank rifle, the instructions to fire machineguns at the tank's vision slits, and the possibility of using balled-up explosives against the tank's tracks. In this respect, PAK troops were the favored children of this large family.

*PAK useful in
other direct
fire roles*

These little PAK cannons were used in ground combat even when there were no tanks to be found. We would put them in ambush positions and, when targets presented themselves, we would shoot them with HE rounds.

Q: How did the tactics of the more-or-less independent PAK "front" or PAK "belt" come about?

*Tactics of
the PAK "front"
evolved from
practical
need*

A: At some point early in the war, perhaps due to the lack of forces, someone probably said to himself, "Here on this flank (or this stream bed, or this hill) which I'm not able to defend with infantry, I may be hit by tanks while I'm attacking over on my other flank." So he had the idea to put his PAK there.

* In the German Army, anti-tank or PAK troops, while organic to infantry and armored divisions, were considered a separate arm and had their own insignia, schools, etc.

** In the German peacetime infantry divisions the PAK consisted of one company of 12 3.7cm guns for each infantry regiment plus one PAK battalion of three companies at division level. The third company of this battalion was equipped with 5cm PAK cannons.

His main attack may have been into a woods or a village so he knew he wouldn't face tanks there -- or he may have confirmed the absence of tanks by reconnaissance. And then he probably said to himself, "Back there on the other flank, the Luftwaffe reported some tanks yesterday. So let's cordon off that flank with a *PAK* belt." No doubt that often led to real success.

Some risk in using PAK alone

However, it's important to remember that *PAK* by itself is just a cannon with a crew. Now, if that *PAK* is attacked by enemy infantry, then it lacks infantry to defend itself against submachineguns, rifles, etc. So there's always a certain risk in using *PAK* alone.

The Russians also used PAK belts

The Russians also used *PAK* belts often. I remember countless cases where our armor reported, "We didn't get through here; we ran into a *PAK* belt." For this, the Russians frequently used their small compact 7.62cm anti-tank cannon -- the "Zap-Boom" we called it* -- which they had everywhere and which was much feared by our tanks. Many of our tank attacks were wrecked by these Russian *PAK* belts; of course, the reverse was true also. But you mustn't forget that *PAK* weapons standing alone are more or less lost if the enemy attacks with infantry. They need protection; otherwise, sooner or later they'll be overrun.

Q: Did you make much use of captured Russian guns?

* The name stems from the characteristic sound of a high velocity weapon. The actual German expression was "Ratsch-Bumm".

*Used captured
Russian semi-
automatic
rifles*

A: Yes, we particularly prized the Russian semi-automatic rifles. As you know, at the beginning of the war we had no semi-automatic rifle -- just the Gewehr 98, the 5-shot [bolt action] rifle. In the course of the Russian campaign we captured plenty of their semi-automatic rifles. These were issued to our line units; as a result, a number of German riflemen ran around with these Russian rifles.

*- and captured
Russian and
French artil-
lery pieces*

We also issued captured cannons, if they had enough ammunition, to our artillery -- particularly in places where we couldn't count on resupply to make good our equipment losses. For instance, an artillery regiment would lose 4 or 5 German field howitzers and would hear that they weren't likely to get replacements in less than a month. Then the division, on its own initiative, might issue Russian 12.2cm replacements. The 12.2cm was particularly good; it worked well, hit well and was easy to service. As long as the ammunition lasted and we could pull the gun, we blazed away happily with it. And, of course, we had plenty of captured French guns incorporated into our artillery -- particularly for static warfare, where it wasn't necessary to keep them mobile all the time. After all, the difficulty with a captured piece is that you have to be able to hitch it to your trucks. The coupling has to fit; you can't just take some wire and tie things together.

Q: What was your experience with the smaller anti-tank weapons such as the Panzerfaust? Was that an important weapon?

*The German
hand carried,
close-combat
anti-tank
weapons*

A: Sure. Of course, the Panzerfaust arrived relatively late. Before that, we had the balled charge. That was 5 or 6 grenade heads tied around one complete stick grenade.

When you pulled off the stick in the middle, then the rest would be detonated along with it. Or you could use engineer explosives -- bars of TNT tied together with a tear-off fuse. Hardened men jumped on enemy tanks, particularly from the rear, placed the charge on the tread or under the turret bustle, tore off the fuse on the stick and the tank would be blown sky high. These were the field-expedient close combat weapons for fighting tanks. Then there was the magnetic mine which was a shaped charge with a magnet which you simply clapped onto the side of the tank. That worked well until tanks came equipped with skirt plates.

These weapons, together with the Panzerfaust, were mainly used against tanks that had broken through.

German anti-tank weapon deployment

Up front we always tried to use *PAK*, flak and artillery to build a checkerboard system of tank defenses. Weaker weapons were emplaced forward with increasingly powerful weapons further back: first the 3.7cm, then behind it the 5cm, the 7.5cm, the flak and the artillery guns -- and, in so far as we had any, assault guns and tanks as a mobile reserve.

Close combat AT weapons used mainly in the rear to destroy tanks that have broken through

Then to the rear -- in villages, amongst supply trains, or at strong points supporting division command posts -- we would have our anti-tank close combat troops equipped with the Panzerfaust and the field expedients I described. These weapons were used, in the main, to knock off tanks that had broken through, that is, tanks typically in villages or woods and usually uncertain of where they were and whether to turn left or right. In this sense, the close combat weapons were quite significant.

Q: What was the experience with assault guns in combat?

A: When an infantry division could obtain assault gun support, they were delighted. Assault guns gave them a means to defeat machine gun nests with little danger to themselves. The guns were mobile, had a higher observation position and had a 7.5cm round that could wipe out a machine gun nest with one round. And, besides, the assault gun was a mobile weapon for knocking off any enemy tanks that might show up. But that [use against tanks] was not the original purpose of the infantry assault gun. The assault gun sprang from the idea that the infantry needed something to help push forward attacks against machine gun nests -- that which we were no longer able to achieve in 1918.

*Assault guns
effective for
direct-fire
support of
Infantry and
AT use*

Q: Assault guns were not organic to divisions -- you received them only from higher echelons, isn't that right?

A: Assault gun battalions were so-called Army units. They belonged to the OKH [Ground Forces High Command] and were allocated according to the needs of *schwerpunkt* attacks. When the attack assignment was accomplished, they were withdrawn. Thus, for us they were only a fleeting pleasure.

*Assault gun
bns not
organic to
divisions*

Q: When your 25th Division received assault gun support, what was the typical size of unit allocated?

A: In theory, an assault gun battalion was provided. This was considered to be the smallest employable unit. However, because of losses among the assault guns, we seldom were supported by units stronger than a battery.

Q: Were you ever in a position to compare the effectiveness of tanks versus assault guns when used in support of your division's infantry attacks?

Tanks vs. assault guns: No difference in effectiveness in infantry support

A: There was no real difference. We sometimes attacked with tanks in support and we were just as happy to have tanks as to have assault guns.

Q: What about the completely new German concept in rifles, the Sturmgewehr assault rifle with the reduced power cartridge?

Sturmgewehr assault rifle represented major advance

A: The Sturmgewehr was immediately welcomed by the troops. After all, it gave every man something like a small machine gun. Whereas before all he could do was fire 5 shots singly and slowly, now he had a 20-round magazine and the ability to fire bursts. Thus, the Sturmgewehr gave the rifleman a sense of superior firepower, of increased security that was most important. Very soon after the beginning of the Russian campaign many German soldiers were using captured Soviet sub-machineguns in an attempt to achieve this effect.

Q: We know that good formations went to considerable lengths to keep their rear area troops trained for infantry combat, in case of deep breakthroughs. Did this extra training prove successful in combat?

Organizing rear areas for defense against breakthrough

A: Yes and no. Armored divisions were more oriented towards such situations than infantry divisions. After all, they made very deep thrusts and the enemy would often shut the door behind them. So the armored divisions always appointed a battle commander for each local concentration of rear area units. The most senior officer of, say, the two or three service

units resting or provisioning in a town became the battle commander. He gave all the orders as to what to do in case of an enemy breakthrough to his village. I first saw that done at the breakout from the Cherkassy pocket and I was very favorably impressed.

Of course, there are limits. If you get overrun by 25 tanks and all you've got is a few of those little blowpipes, then it's not likely to work so well.

The armored divisions had it better because they could employ tanks that happened to be in rear area maintenance against enemy armor breakthroughs.

Q: Could you give us some comments on the balance between infantry and armored forces in a mobile defense such as the campaign your Sixth Army conducted in Rumania and Hungary?

The penalties of too little infantry to hold positions seized by mobile forces

A: I have written that our shortage of infantry in Hungary led to our defeat in the Puszta region. On the battlefield itself we won repeatedly, if I may exaggerate slightly, but we lost the campaign.

Let me explain. Let's say we were holding a series of strong points -- as always, with weak forces. Say the Russians attacked on the left flank and our position was only under light attack and holding firm. What was the thing to do then? At night, we would quickly shift the mobile forces across from the right flank position to the left flank, leaving behind two or three armored cars. In the morning, we would suddenly drive back the enemy on the left flank with the forces that we had shifted earlier in the night. So in this sector, once again we were the victor.

But in the meanwhile, the Russians with their much larger forces would recognize the opportunity on the right flank. Consequently we would have to pull back our weak right flank position and then rescue the situation by rapidly returning the mobile forces back to the right flank. So it went: step by step backwards out of the Hungarian lowlands until we had withdrawn all the way to the Tokay region.

This is a typical case of what happens when you lack infantry to hold positions grabbed by mobile forces.

Q: About how many armored divisions and infantry divisions did the Sixth Army have in these campaigns?

*Sixth Army
armor/infantry
mix*

A: The number fluctuated considerably, but it was approximately 5 armored divisions and about 3 very weak infantry divisions.

Q: What led to the relief of your first Sixth Army commander in Hungary, General Fretter-Pico? Did he have some misunderstanding with Hitler?

A: The relief of General Fretter-Pico came as a complete surprise to all of us. He was relieved the same day as his army group commander, Colonel General Friessner. Both were relieved without explanation.

*Reasons for
relief of
General
Fretter-Pico*

Later inquiries brought out that higher command was dissatisfied with his conduct of the battles in the Pusztta region and the subsequent withdrawal there. His repeated recommendations to not defend Budapest were also held against

him. He always said, "Budapest cannot be defended. If it is attempted, the city will certainly be destroyed. The 5 or 6 divisions we put there will be lost, together with our prestige as well. Therefore, give up the idea right from the start and don't needlessly sacrifice 5 divisions." He and Colonel General Friessner both advocated this view. I was a witness to their telephone conversations. Their recommendations were turned down.

Hitler didn't want such commanders. He wanted people who would say, "Yes indeed. We'll do exactly that. We'll hold right here."

*Balck
succeeds
Fretter-Pico*

So on Christmas Eve, 1944, General Balck appeared at our command post. I remember exactly what a gloomy and oppressive gathering that was because I was very attached to General Fretter-Pico, both as a soldier and as a man. But later I became equally attached to his successor, General Balck. By the way, I knew both men from before the war. They were both on the staff of the 1st Cavalry Division at Frankfurt-on-the-Oder and I was a lieutenant in an infantry regiment. We sat together often enough in the officer's mess.

Q: Could you sketch for us some of the most important leadership characteristics of your various commanders?

*Character-
istics that
successful
commanders
had in
common*

A: First, my good commanders did not lead from the rear. Secondly, they commanded on the basis of mutual trust. They had the confidence to leave all the detailed staff work to be handled by their chief of staff while they retired to the quiet of their tent or room. Some, like

General Balck, actually read a book to relax. But then at the decisive moment (for which they all had a sure feel) they would step into their airplane or vehicle and go to the critical point of action to see whether everything was in order -- or, occasionally, to really shake things up.

General Clössner, my first 25th Division commander and his successor, General Grasser, as well as Generals Balck and Fretter-Pico, were all commanders who led this way. They were calm, knew how to disengage, had the time to think ahead and to reflect on better ways to do things, and then, at just the right moment, would leave for the front. There, they'd form a picture of the situation, then come back and share their impressions, and then say, for instance, "The following orders need to be issued: So-and-so needs that. Here we have to pull out this unit. Over there we need a new commander."

I had a brief four week assignment as army chief of staff to a commander who I won't name. One evening as we retired at 10:00 the question was whether the Russian would attack on the left or the right of an isthmus. At 12:00 or 1:00, he attacked on the left. So I alerted the reserve armored division to get ready to move out to the left with orders to follow. Then I went to my commander, woke him, told him what happened and what I had set in motion. He said, "You don't have the authority to do that." I replied, "If I am not authorized to carry out such matters, then you better get a clerk but don't insist on a chief of staff." Since he himself was also a General Staff officer, he quickly backed off and said, "Yes, you're right."

*Proper
authority
of a chief
of staff
under the
German
system*

In the end, it just depends on whether the commander and his chief of staff fit together, whether it's a good "marriage." There was one well-known commander of an armored corps who absolutely couldn't work with his new chief of staff. He immediately asked for a replacement. In the meanwhile, things got so bad between the two that they communicated only by means of little slips of paper. And, of course, the entire staff and corps suffered.

Q: Could you give us some brief impressions of General Balck?

*Praises
Balck as
brilliant
and
innovative*

A: In my opinion, General Balck is a model field commander -- not just because he is a remarkable stayer -- but because he is a man of unconventional, brilliant ideas and inspirations. I have learned that this is a quality that needs to be much more prized than it is today.

*Character-
izes American
tactics and
operations as
too rigid*

If you will permit me to be a little critical, I have generally found that American tactical and operational command tends to follow a rigid pattern, a school situation. And, unfortunately, since WWII we Germans have imitated a good deal of this.

*Rigid and
artificial
tendency in
German post
WWII
maneuvers*

When I attend the maneuvers of our 3rd Corps here in Koblenz, or other maneuvers, it seems to me that these exercises are too rigidly conducted. First, one always is shown a big, beautiful situation map that is marvelously and most completely prepared. Then you get meticulously briefed on all the circumstances. You're shown our forces over here and over there is something labeled Objective Number One. What's

that? That's what we want to take. So what is it? It turns out to be some hill, some piece of wooded terrain, or whatever. What happens when we take that? Why, then we go on to Objective Number Two.

*Describes
fallacy of
pursuing
terrain
objectives*

There is no sign here of the idea that was bludgeoned into all of us old General Staff officers: Possessing the terrain doesn't matter; what matters is to shatter the enemy and then the terrain will fall into your hands by itself.

*U.S. rigidity
derived from
overwhelming
resources*

Perhaps the reason for your more rigid approach is that you had such overwhelmingly superior numbers, particularly in artillery and aircraft. Using these, Objective Number Two was just wiped off the face of the earth. Then came your infantry who took possession because nobody else was left.

We were always in a situation of insufficiency. We had to figure out how to grab the enemy with the fewest possible forces. Once we had achieved that, then we let the terrain objectives fall by themselves.

*Gives example
of Balck's
innovative
tactics*

A typical example is one I learned from General Balck, who is a mine of such ideas. Here is a river we are defending. The enemy attacks and quickly gains a bridgehead. Now comes the order to squeeze out the bridgehead through counterattacks. So our first thought is to undertake a pincer attack. One prong will pinch in on each shoulder of the bridgehead; they will meet in the middle and then we'll have the enemy in the bag. That the enemy also knows this and heavily reinforces both those shoulders is something we didn't happen to think of.

General Balck taught me to ask, "Where is the enemy strong?" He'll be strong at the forward point of the bridgehead and at the two shoulders. The weak points are the two stretches between the point and each of the shoulders. And where is the enemy commander? His headquarters will be between those two weak stretches. So I cut through the weak stretches, slice open the bulge from two sides, grab the headquarters and the whole bridgehead will collapse by itself without exposing me to heavy defenses. That's what I call innovative leadership, far indeed from the standardized, rigid approach.

Along this line, some people believe that the failure to collapse the bulge at Kursk was caused by the simple-minded concept of attacking just where the enemy was strongest. Also, of course, we continuously redeployed forces and waited endlessly for a few more tanks, so the Russians were given six months to prepare.

Q: In the Hungarian mobile defense campaigns, how did you manage to move the few infantry divisions you had in such a way as to prevent them from being encircled?

A: Nominally, they were on foot. Of course, they would have been quickly lost if they had remained on foot. But they were numerically so weak that, with trucks they scratched up out of the supply trains and rear areas, etc., they were able to drive off. Of course, they also "organized" any usable civilian trucks they found. So these divisions were, in actuality, partly motorized. Otherwise they would have never been able to keep pace with the armored divisions.

German infantry divisions moved with foraged transport

*More on
results of
the lack of
sufficient
infantry
in mobile
defense*

I remember countless conversations with our subordinate corps commanders that went something like this: Orders would be given, based on their own recommendations, to throw parts of a panzer division (after all, these were far from full divisions) over to the right flank. Then would come the question, "What are we leaving on the left flank?" The answer was usually, "Why don't you leave a couple of tanks there to overlook the terrain -- I don't have anything." "Sorry, we don't either." So the position would be left empty and, at the latest by 9:00 or 10:00 in the morning, the enemy held the heights we had abandoned during the night. That's how you lose territory step by step.

Q: What was your experience with the use of motorcycles and bicycles in infantry divisions?

*Motorcycle
infantry
effective in
Russia (not
in muddy
season)*

A: In the 25th Motorized Infantry Division we had a motorcycle infantry battalion. This unit was organized during the time between the French and Russian campaigns. It had a remarkably competent commander. As long as the ground was dry and firm in Russia, these motorcycles proved most valuable as high speed, mobile troops. This advantage was lost as soon as the roads turned to deep mud and these poor lads couldn't get their heavy motorcycles through.

*-potentially
more effect-
ive for
Central
Europe*

Naturally, these are circumstances we'll never have in Central Europe. In West Germany, France, Belgium and Holland, we have such a well-developed paved road net that motorcycle battalions, if we had them, could move well during all seasons. These units could be used successfully, particularly for quickly sealing gaps and so forth. The open question is the question of their anti-tank weapons.

Q: Did you use the motorcycle troops mainly for sealing gaps, or did they also do reconnaissance?

A: We used them also for reconnaissance, although that's a poorer use. You know, the man on the motorcycle has to watch the road; also, motorcycles were noisy back then. To observe and hear freely from a motorcycle is difficult. A bicycle is better for reconnaissance. Despite that, our motorcycle troops did good reconnaissance. They had an excellent battalion commander who pulled the division out of some nasty situations.

Q: Could you describe some other typical uses of motorcycle infantry in Russia?

A: Besides sealing gaps, for instance, we also used them for securing open flanks. When we had an attack against a fixed objective, we didn't employ the motorcycle battalion up front if we could avoid it. Instead, we used it as a fast, mobile reserve to take care of emergencies.

Moreover, motorcycle infantry are very inexpensive, easy-to-support units. All boys today ride motorcycles and would be full of enthusiasm to serve in a motorcycle unit. And, without doubt, one could give motorcycle troops good, lightweight anti-tank weapons.

I could see them used here in Germany for the so-called territorial defense troops. These are intended for use against enemy breakthroughs -- that is, armored breakthroughs, of course -- and are presently being equipped with cast-off M-48 tanks and similar equipment. But you might equip

*Motorcycle
has limita-
tions in
reconnais-
sance*

*Potential of
motorcycle
infantry
today*

these units with motorcycles and light anti-tank weapons -- things that are very inexpensive and that could be stored in any shed. It is, however, critically important that practical experiments be conducted to determine whether motorcycle units can be given adequate anti-tank capability.

Q: Did you still have motorcycle units as late as the campaigns in Hungary?

A: No. Almost all were worn out or had disappeared. Only a few messenger motorcycles could still be found. We stopped receiving replacement motorcycles around the time of the spring thaw in 1941. After that, our motorcycle battalion became more or less a dismounted infantry unit and, like the rest of the division, became a static warfare unit. They had a few motorcycles left but could no longer be viewed as a mobile unit.

Reason for disappearance of motorcycle units

Q: Did you find that you had more serious morale problems in infantry units than in armored units -- particularly late in the war as the infantry losses got very heavy and the danger of being encircled got much more serious?

A: It wasn't that. We had as we say in German, "such divisions and such other divisions." The 25th Division -- not because I was part of it -- was an absolutely steadfast, unshakable division. I know of no crisis-induced panic that ever occurred in this division. In contrast, on our left was a division from the Moselle region. The chief of staff was a good friend of mine from staff school. In this division, as soon as a hundred Russians had appeared on the horizon, the first soldiers would already be fleeing. I asked my friend, "What in blazes is wrong over there? Our men can see it -- a hundred Russians doesn't mean you have

Some divisions are inherently good and others inherently poor

to run!" "I am in despair because I can't change it; my commander is equally desperate. These people simply won't hold -- they have some kind of fright in their bones." So, as you see, there are "such and such other" divisions.

This is not a geographic question. It wasn't because these people were from the Moselle Valley. There was another division from the Moselle region, the 72nd Infantry Division, that was the spearhead for everything. They were every bit as steadfast as the 25th and, in fact, led the breakout from the Cherkassy pocket.

Q: What did you learn about night combat in the course of the war?

A: Principally that night training before the war, in the Reichswehr and the Wehrmacht, was badly short-changed.

*Inadequacy
of peacetime
night training*

Q: What was your experience with night attacks in the 25th Division -- did they, in fact, save casualties as has sometimes been claimed?

A: Let me give you an example. On the Oka River the Russians had established a typical bridgehead after a successful attack. Running through their position towards the river line were a series of balkas, that is, deep erosion gullies. The enemy was quiet in his positions and we had the order to push the bridgehead back to the river. Where was the enemy? He had built a series of fortified positions on high points around the perimeter of his bridgehead. His dug-outs, where he stayed most of the time, were

dug into the steep sides of these *balkas*.

Example of the remarkable advantages of night infiltration

Now came the question of how to finish this business without getting stuck. My idea was to infiltrate at night where the enemy wasn't -- using single files to move deep into the Russian position. Where was he likely not to be? We chose routes between the fortified positions and the *balkas* where he was sleeping in his dug-outs. So at 10:00 that night we moved two battalions in, quietly and in single file -- not a shot was fired. When they got to the river bank they turned around and spread out to set up positions to block the enemy's escape routes along the *balkas*. When he woke up in the morning, the door was shut behind him. At dawn, using a few individual tanks that were at hand, we shot up the fortified bunkers from the front. Then we used a few of our infiltrated men sweeping back from the river to capture the Russians remaining in the dug-outs. Our losses? One thumb shot off! Not a Russian got out.

Control in night movement requires company commander at head of the column

One of the key points is that when the men are moving in single file in darkness, the company commander must certainly be no further back than third man in his column. This is so he can control things, because of course it is strictly forbidden to shoot and you can't have people panicking and hosing around in the darkness.

Night operations need combat experienced soldiers

This kind of thing can only be done with combat-experienced soldiers. If you tried such an infiltration today in Central Europe, I'm sure somebody would come unraveled and start running like a rabbit or shooting at a bush.

Q: *It takes more than combat exposure to pull off this kind of operation. Someone has to train the troops to move at night, to keep a column together, to hold direction. How did you accomplish this during the war?*

25th Div kept up its skills by constant training while holding static positions

A: Even though the 25th Division was holding static positions, we never allowed the troops to just sit around lazily and warm themselves. Our good units were constantly in training for night patrolling, night shooting, night terrain orientation, care of wounded, and so forth.

Q: *What was the experience with night tank attacks? Were they as advantageous as night infantry infiltration attacks?*

WWII night tank attacks generally disadvantageous

A: In general, no. With tanks, we much preferred to get ready to move during the night and then move out in the first grey light of dawn.

Occasionally, if we found ourselves at night only 3 or 4 kilometers from a very critical bridge with a thoroughly confused enemy ahead of us, we might let 10 tanks move forward to add to the chaos and try to grab the bridge. But this was never done regularly.

In Hungary, we had a special night tank unit assigned to us briefly. They attacked at night with success. In fact, their first night tank attack greatly surprised the Russians. But this was certainly an exception during WWII.

-and still likely to be so today

In fact, the effectiveness of current small and light infantry anti-tank weapons will probably deter night tank

attacks just as much today. The new tank night sights are most likely to be used defensively, that is, to remain in position and to pick off the enemy if he decides to attack.

Q: What's your view of large versus small divisions?

*Mobility
and control
advantages
of "small"
divisions*

A: That probably depends on the type of war. For fighting here in Central Europe, where the countryside is so broken up by the dense development of housing and industry, large divisions with three regiments and lots of extra specialized units would be hard to lead and hold together. Small organizations are more easily handled and maneuvered in this built-up terrain and will be more mobile. That's why the Bundeswehr will be heavily streamlining its maneuver units over the next two years. There will be less people, less tanks and less trucks so that commanders can better control their people.

Q: Is the current German division staff organization similar to what it was in WWII?

A: No. It now has an American-style G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4 and a separate chief of staff.

*Deterioration
of German
staff organi-
zation, partly
under
American
influence*

When I see the enormous staff apparatus that we have now constructed, partly under your influence, I often ask, "My God, how is this going to work?"

Here is how we controlled our divisions in both the West and the East in WWII: My division commander and I would sit together in a half-track vehicle with the map

*Simplicity
and effective-
ness of C³ in
the WWII
German
division*

on our laps, exchange opinions -- "Should we go to the left or to the right, should we do it tonight or tomorrow at dawn?" -- then we'd scribble our instructions, give them to the driver next to us, and he'd pass the orders along to a couple of radio operators in the back of our vehicle.

*Division
staff now
requires a
"little city"*

Now we've built the division staff into a little city with operations centers, communications centers and whatnot -- with everything now in formal writing and transmitted by teletype machines.

*The absurdity
of today's
daily
command
briefing*

I must add that what we now understand the daily command briefing to be -- this assembly of 10, 12, or 15 experts ranging from weather to religion -- simply didn't exist in World War II. One man, the Ia or the chief of staff, would go with his papers to the commander who was perhaps at his cot or his morning coffee; the verbal report would be delivered quickly while the general sat there. There was no huge theater required. During unusual crises, a second staff officer covering supply or intelligence, for instance, might come along.

I just borrowed from our military archives the combat diaries and logs of our division during the initial Russian campaign. It was a most peculiar feeling to see the orders, all very simple, that I had written in pencil so that the rain wouldn't smear them -- and each had the radio operator's stamp to confirm that they had been transmitted. I said to myself that these distinguished gentlemen of today probably wouldn't believe that we could actually run our divisions this way.

Q: What was the attitude toward verbal versus written orders?

A: The general approach was that orders were given individually and verbally by telephone or radio directly to the recipient. Then, in the evening, when things were less hectic, a written, sealed version of the order would be issued to follow up and to provide a basis for the unit diary. To actually operate using formal written orders would have been far too slow. Going through the staff mill, correcting, rewriting and reproducing in order to put out a written order would have meant we would have been too late with every attack we ever attempted.

*Effective
combat
impossible
with
written
orders*

There are lots of other disadvantages to these huge staffs. You get far too many vehicles which are too hard to move and that attract the attention of enemy aircraft. The whole apparatus becomes sluggish and slow. All of that needs to have the fat thoroughly trimmed away one of these days.

*Other dis-
advantages
of today's
overgrown
staffs*

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